

**Enabling, Hearing and Giving Weight to Students'  
Views of Special Schooling in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Ireland:  
Do 'Dilemmas of Difference' Apply?**

**A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements**

**for the degree of**

**Doctor of Education,**

**St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin,**

**A College of Dublin City University**

**© Colman Motherway**

**May 2009**

**Supervisor: Dr. Therese Day**

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Education is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: Colman Matherway

ID No.: 54105765

Date: May 11<sup>th</sup> 2009

# Table of Contents

<b>List of appendices</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>List of tables</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>List of figures</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Abbreviations used in the text</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction – setting the scene</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Special education: ‘an enterprise in crisis?’	1
1.2 Children’s views: time to take notice?	2
1.3 About this study	4
1.4 Inclusive education: opening the debate	5
1.5 Inclusive / special education in Ireland: recent developments	8
1.6 Students with ‘mild general learning disabilities’	11
1.7 Location of study	15
1.8 Stating the research problem	17
1.9 Significance of and rationale for the study	18
1.10 Focus and purpose of the research	22
1.11 Methodology outline	23
1.12 Scope and limitations of the study	24
1.13 Research questions	25
1.14 Outline of remaining chapters	28
<b>Chapter 2: Developing a theoretical perspective</b>	<b>29</b>
2.1 Introduction: overview	29
2.2 Insider epistemology	29
2.3 Conceptions of the subject	31
2.4 Models of disability	32
2.4.1 Medical model of disability	33
2.4.2 Social model of disability	36
2.4.3 Social relational model of disability	41
2.4.4 Comparing models of disability	43
2.5 Proposing a theoretical model	44
<b>Chapter 3: Reviewing the literature – key themes</b>	<b>46</b>
3.1 Introduction: outline of themes	46
3.2 The ‘dilemma of difference’: special education under the spotlight	46
3.3 Special education dilemmas: identification, curriculum and location	48
3.4 Views of children and young people	50
3.4.1 A right to express a view: driving forces	50
3.4.2 Frameworks for analysis of children’s participation	52
3.4.3 Linking models of participation with the theoretical framework	58
3.5 Views of children with learning disabilities	59
3.6 Views of students about education: some relevant studies	63
3.6.1 Views of students in regular education settings	63
3.6.2 Views of students with disabilities	68
3.7 Summing up the selected literature	72

<b>Chapter 4: Methodology</b>	<b>74</b>
4.1 Introduction	74
4.2 Research design	74
4.3 Why qualitative research?	76
4.4 Ensuring credibility	78
4.5 Ethical considerations	80
4.5.1 Potential role conflict	81
4.5.2 Beneficence	83
4.5.3 Consent	84
4.5.4 Dissemination	86
4.6 Data collection	87
4.6.1 Proposed phases of data collection	87
4.6.2 Actual phases of data collection	88
4.6.2.1 Phase 1: class-based focus groups	90
4.6.2.2 Phase 2: interviews with school leavers	92
4.6.2.3 Phase 3: interviews with select group of students	93
4.6.2.4 Phase 4: 1 <sup>st</sup> year participatory focus groups	94
4.6.2.5 Phase 5: written and pictorial contributions	95
4.7 Data analysis process	97
4.7.1 Initial manual process	98
4.7.2 Participatory coding and sorting	99
4.7.3 Subsequent electronic process	101
4.7.3.1 Stage 1: opening casebook, storing data	102
4.7.3.2 Stage 2: preliminary coding and auto-coding	102
4.7.3.3 Stage 3: grouping by theme	103
4.7.3.4 Stage 4: coding on	103
4.7.3.5 Stage 5: generating proposition statements	104
4.7.3.6 Stage 6: testing proposition statements and distilling data	104
4.8 Summing up and moving on	105
<b>Chapter 5: Initial findings – what are the views of students?</b>	<b>107</b>
5.1 Introduction	107
5.2 Dominant themes: research question 1(a)	108
5.2.1 People	108
5.2.1.1 Staff	109
5.2.1.2 Fellow students	110
5.2.2 Organisation and environment	111
5.2.2.1 Physical environment	112
5.2.2.2 Break times and free time	113
5.2.2.3 School rules and discipline	114
5.2.2.4 Travel to school	116
5.2.3 Curriculum	116
5.2.3.1 Schoolwork and homework	117
5.2.3.2 Subject choice	118
5.2.3.3 Current class	119
5.2.3.4 Educational outings	120
5.2.3.5 Sports and activities	121
5.2.3.6 Work experience and future hopes	122
5.2.4 Bullying	123
5.2.5 Miscellaneous views about the school	124

5.2.5.1	Starting in the school	124
5.2.5.2	Fun	125
5.2.5.3	Suggestions to improve the school	126
5.2.6	Views on special schooling and disability matters	127
5.2.6.1	Disclosure	127
5.2.6.2	Language and terminology	128
5.2.6.3	Recommending the school to others	129
5.3	Comparing the school with other schools: research question 1(b)	130
5.4	Students having a say in matters that affect them: research question 2	133
5.5	Summing up and moving on	137
 <b>Chapter 6: Do ‘dilemmas of difference’ apply?</b>		<b>139</b>
6.1	Introduction	139
6.2	The dilemma of identification	142
6.3	The dilemma of curriculum	146
6.4	The dilemma of location	151
6.5	A fourth dilemma	156
6.6	Reconstructing and re-ordering the dilemmas	159
6.7	Concluding impressions: linking ‘dilemmas’ with the theoretical perspective	161
 <b>Chapter 7: Reflections, summary and closing remarks</b>		<b>164</b>
7.1	Introduction	164
7.2	Reflections	164
7.2.1	Reflecting on the data collection processes: lessons for the future	164
7.2.2	Reflecting on the data analysis processes: lessons for the future	168
7.2.3	Reflecting on the implementation of Article 12	170
7.2.4	Reflecting on ways ahead: suggestions for future research	173
7.3	Summary	175
7.4	Implications of the findings	178
7.4.1	Implications at local level	178
7.4.2	Implications at national level	179
7.5	Closing remarks	181
 <b>Appendices</b>		<b>183</b>
 <b>References</b>		<b>215</b>
 <b>Endnotes</b>		<b>227</b>

## List of appendices

<i>Appendix A:</i>	A note on terms - child / children	183
<i>Appendix B:</i>	Initial explanatory letter and consent form for students	184
<i>Appendix C:</i>	Initial explanatory letter and consent form for parents	186
<i>Appendix D:</i>	Initial explanatory memo for all staff in school	188
<i>Appendix E:</i>	Initial information posted on research notice board March 2007	192
<i>Appendix F:</i>	Schedule of Phase 2 interview questions	193
<i>Appendix G:</i>	Schedule of Phase 3 interview questions	194
<i>Appendix H:</i>	Sample of data created using participatory strategies in Phase 4	195
<i>Appendix I:</i>	Templates available to participants in Phase 5	196
<i>Appendix J:</i>	Sample of comments from Phase 1 posted on notice board	200
<i>Appendix K:</i>	Update for students after Phase 1	201
<i>Appendix L:</i>	Information update posted on research notice board October 2007	202
<i>Appendix M:</i>	Information update posted on research notice board February 2008	203
<i>Appendix N:</i>	Categories arising from initial manual coding exercise (Phase 1 data)	204
<i>Appendix O:</i>	Themes created following further manual analysis of initial categories	205
<i>Appendix P:</i>	Categorisation and sorting of data by participants – some examples	206
<i>Appendix Q:</i>	A section of the casebook, showing number of sources and references	207
<i>Appendix R:</i>	An example of the ‘coding on’ process	208
<i>Appendix S:</i>	Running a text search query	209
<i>Appendix T:</i>	Running a Boolean coding query	211
<i>Appendix U:</i>	Running a matrix coding query	212
<i>Appendix V:</i>	Final information update posted on research notice board January 2009	214

## List of tables

Table 1:	<i>Special school statistics – comparing 1993-1994 data to 2006-2007 data</i>	10
Table 2:	<i>Enrolment figures in the school 1997-2008</i>	16
Table 3:	<i>A comparison of models of disability</i>	43
Table 4:	<i>Summary of each of the phases of data collection</i>	89
Table 5:	<i>Data collected in Phase 5 – written and pictorial contributions</i>	97
Table 6:	<i>Students' views on subjects – frequency of references by individuals</i>	119

## List of figures

Figure 1:	<i>Layers of the research question</i>	27
Figure 2:	<i>Theoretical framework underpinning the study</i>	45
Figure 3:	<i>Hart's 'ladder of participation'</i>	53
Figure 4:	<i>Shier's model for enhancing children's participation in decision making</i>	55
Figure 5:	<i>Lundy's model for conceptualising Article 12</i>	57
Figure 6:	<i>Robson's framework for research design</i>	75
Figure 7:	<i>A negative comment about staff</i>	110
Figure 8:	<i>One participant's impression of the school</i>	113
Figure 9:	<i>Objecting to the yellow card procedure</i>	115
Figure 10:	<i>Conflicting views on travelling to school</i>	116
Figure 11:	<i>Samples of visual representations of sports and activities</i>	122
Figure 12:	<i>Expressing a view about smoking</i>	136
Figure 13:	<i>Dilemmas of difference – how they apply</i>	160

## Acknowledgments

I wish to convey my sincere thanks to the following for their assistance and support:

*My friends and colleagues in the Ed. D. class of 2004-2009;*

*Martin, Clare, Hannah, John and Ellen for support in many ways, especially since 2004;*

*The staff of St. Patrick's College who guided and nurtured me towards this point, in particular the staff of the Special Education Department;*

*All those who have contributed to the Ed.D. programme since its inception in 2004;*

*Orla nic Aodha, Assistant Librarian, Cregan Library, for invaluable support, especially 'from a distance';*

*Seamus, for putting me on the right track;*

*Ben Meehan, for invaluable training, guidance, support and encouragement with NVivo;*

*My dedicated, inspiring and supportive supervisory team of Dr. Therese Day, Dr. Jill Porter and Dr. Anita Prunty;*

*Anne Leahy and Ita Teegan who acted as proof-readers, 'critical friends' and encouragers at various stages of my writing;*

*The staff, Board of Management, parents, but most of all the students of my school, without whose assistance this particular work would absolutely never have been completed;*

*Don, for being the 'giant at my shoulder';*

*My parents Finbarr and Mai and sisters Mary, Niamh and Íde and their families for their support, understanding and goodwill through all my life;*

*Barry, Dara, Rory and especially Ina, for their love, support and patience, which I can never fully repay.*

To anyone else I may have inadvertently omitted, I apologise.

*In memory of Barry*

*28/02/1974 - 07/12/1990*



## Abstract

*Special schooling is increasingly under the microscope, with theory, policy and practice converging towards inclusive education, and Irish legislation enshrining the principle of inclusive education for children who have special educational needs. Central to current debate is the question of whether or not to recognise difference: this has become known as the 'dilemma of difference'. In recent years, another social movement has also come under the microscope, with increased emphasis and discourse on the concept of children's rights / views of children. Both of these themes are central aspects of this study.*

*This study aims to ascertain the views of students who attend one special school, and in particular whether 'dilemmas of difference' apply for them. Using a range of different strategies such as focus groups, individual and paired interviews and written and pictorial data created by participants, students' views on schooling are gathered and analysed. An overarching theoretical perspective combining an open thesis of insider epistemology, a relational theory of the subject, and a social relational model of disability is used to frame the study. The findings are that dilemmas of difference do apply for at least some of the participants, in particular in relation to identification, location and the status of the school. A dilemma of difference in respect of curriculum was found not to apply in this study.*

*This study is significant for the manner in which research is conducted with young people with special educational needs, and its findings have implications for policy makers and practitioners. While the movement towards inclusive schooling continues, it is apt to consider and to give due weight to the views of students, including those attending special schools.*

## Abbreviations used in the text

<b>AAMR</b>	American Association for Mental Retardation
<b>CAQDAS</b>	Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
<b>CSIE</b>	Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education
<b>CSPD</b>	Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities
<b>CSPE</b>	Civic, Social and Political Education
<b>DES</b>	Department of Education and Science
<b>DRC</b>	Disability Rights Commission
<b>EPSEN Act</b>	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act
<b>ESRI</b>	Economic and Social Research Institute
<b>FETAC</b>	Further Education and Training Awards Council
<b>IQ</b>	Intelligence Quotient
<b>JCSP</b>	Junior Certificate Schools Programme
<b>LCA</b>	Leaving Certificate Applied Programme
<b>Mild GLD</b>	Mild General Learning Disabilities ( <i>Ireland</i> )
<b>MLD</b>	Moderate Learning Difficulties ( <i>UK</i> )
<b>NCCA</b>	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
<b>NCSE</b>	National Council for Special Education
<b>NICCY</b>	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
<b>OCO</b>	Ombudsman for Children's Office
<b>OMCYA</b>	Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs
<b>SERC</b>	Special Education Review Committee
<b>SPHE</b>	Social, Personal and Health Education
<b>UNCRC</b>	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation
<b>UPIAS</b>	Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation

## Chapter 1: Introduction – setting the scene

*“Special education was born of controversy ... about who belongs in schools and how far schools need to stretch to meet student needs. The debate continues” (Byrnes, 2002, p. 12)*

### 1.1 Special education: ‘an enterprise in crisis’?

Special education has indeed been a controversial subject, rife with tensions and arguments over provision, placement, progress and philosophy. It is an enterprise which has been criticised by many who want to see the practice of special education deconstructed (Oliver, 1995; Skrtic, 1995b; Danforth, 2002) and special schools abolished (G. Thomas & Loxley, 2001; Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 2004) after “decades of segregation and incarceration” (C. Thomas, 1999, p. 17). It has been described as an enterprise ‘in crisis’ because of its adherence to “understanding disability within a functional and medical paradigmatic framework” (Reindal, 2008, p. 136). On both theoretical and practical levels, special education is faced with a major conundrum. This has been variously referred to as ‘the dilemma of difference’ (Artiles, 1998; Dyson, 2001; Norwich, 2002; Norwich & Kelly, 2005) or ‘the dilemma about inclusion’ (Wedell, 1995, 2005).

The ‘difference dilemma’ has been examined in relation to the wider education project (Gilligan, 2007), as well as in other areas of society such as housing and employment policies (Norwich, 2008) and medical treatment (Minow, 1990). The dilemma is “whether to recognise and respond or not to recognise and respond to differences, as either way there are some negative implications” (Norwich, 2008, p. 1). The specific implications are that

recognising difference can lead to different provision which might be stigmatised and devalued, but not recognising difference can mean ignoring the individuality of each person (Norwich & Kelly, 2005).

## 1.2 Children's views: time to take notice?

A 'new paradigm of childhood' has influenced sociology, research and policy in recent times (P. Christensen & James, 2000b; Davis, Watson, & Cunningham-Burley, 2000; Qvortrup, 2000), where each child is recognised as "the primary holder of knowledge about her or his life" (Waldron, 2006, p. 88). In this paradigm, children (see *Appendix A* for a note on the terms 'child' / 'children') are seen as "active participants in the construction and determination of their experiences, other people's lives, and the societies in which they live" (O'Kane, 2000, p. 136). Central to this paradigm are the concepts of children's rights and 'student voice', a broad term with various underpinning values (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). These concepts are interlinked in Article 12 (1) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC): "States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (United Nations, 1989, p. 4).

Although there is increasing interest in understanding children's experiences and perspectives of their lives (Tangen, 2008), it has also been argued that there is limited awareness of legally binding obligations under Article 12 (Lundy, 2007). In Ireland, the enacting of the Children Act (Ireland, 2001) has begun to have some impact on children's place in society, while in recent times the Ombudsman for Children Office (OCO) has been involved in innovative

work with children (Ombudsman for Children Office, 2007a). Recent Irish governments have shown commitment to children through the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs<sup>i</sup> (OMCYA), and the attendance of the Minister for Children at Cabinet meetings. The role and status of children in our society now generates increasing levels of discussion and debate in media and in society; recent debate on whether a referendum or legislation on children's rights is required is just one indication of how this subject has become part of mainstream political and public discourse (see for example Children's Rights Alliance, 2008; Shatter, 2008).

There is greater recognition now that "children are not invisible, but social actors involved in the construction and negotiation of social order" (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003, p. 2) and that they have opinions and views which are valid. One way of hearing and of taking notice of children's views is to include them in research projects, as "research on children's experiences and perspectives is needed and should be strengthened" (Tangen, 2008, p. 158). At a theoretical level, different perspectives on research involving children have been postulated (Hart, 1992; Alderson, 2000; Shier, 2001; Alderson, 2005a), with many advocating that children should be seen as active participants rather than mere subjects in the research process<sup>ii</sup> (Roberts, 2000; Scott, 2000; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000; Waldron, 2006).

More specifically in relation to education, seeking the views of students<sup>iii</sup> has brought research "closer to the everyday experience of the recipients of the educational system" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2007a, p. 5), those who are in many ways the 'primary stakeholders' in the education system and who are likely to be most affected by its policies and practices. In recent times many research projects have sought to present and

analyse the views of children and young people in relation to education and schooling (examples include Burke & Grosvenor, 2003; Certo, Cauley, & Chafin, 2003; Devine, 2004; Cox, 2005), while some have involved children considered to have disabilities (including Davis *et al.*, 2000; Kenny, McNeela, Shevlin, & Daly, 2000; Norwich & Kelly, 2005; A. Lewis, Parsons, & Robertson, 2007a). In Ireland students were invited to participate in the 'Your Education System' consultation process in 2004-5 (Department of Education and Science, 2005a), while large-scale projects commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) sought the views of hundreds of students as they progressed through the first three compulsory years of their post-primary education (Smyth, McCoy, & Darmody, 2004; Smyth, Dunne, McCoy, & Darmody, 2006; Smyth, Dunne, Darmody, & McCoy, 2007). Some of these studies are discussed in Chapter 3 in more detail, as is the theoretical debate which pertains around the full implementation of Article 12. At this point, it is appropriate to state that it is now not just good practice, but considered essential, for adults to hear and heed the views of children and young people.

### **1.3 About this study**

This particular study arises from the fusion of the two aforementioned social movements – inclusion / special education and children's rights / views of students – into one research project on one site. The site is an Irish special school which caters for students of second-level age (12-18 years) who are considered to have 'mild general learning disabilities'. This study attempts to comply as much as possible with the spirit and values of Article 12 of the UNCRC, so that the young people who participate feel at the very least that they have had their views listened to, but also that their views are given due weight *i.e.* their comments are taken seriously (A. Lewis, Parsons, & Robertson, 2007b). Where possible I have tried to give

participants the opportunity to influence the focus and direction of the project, and to choose to contribute (or not contribute) in a way that is comfortable and engaging for them. The evolution of this process is outlined in some depth in the methodology chapter.

The remainder of this introductory chapter contains a number of elements necessary to 'position' the work. Initially, some contextual information on the concept of special / inclusive education and on current policy and provision in Ireland is presented. Relevant information is provided about the characteristics of students referred to as having 'mild general learning disabilities'. Information is provided on the location for the study, and the research problem is stated. The significance of the study and a rationale for conducting it are presented, while the concerns and interests which have led me in this direction are outlined. I proceed then to clarify the focus and purpose of the research. A brief outline of the methodology, which is explained more comprehensively in Chapter 4, is followed by an indication of the scope and limitations of the study. The questions which the research sets out to address are outlined in the concluding section of this chapter, with a diagrammatic representation showing the concentric layers of the one fundamental question.

#### **1.4 Inclusive education: opening the debate**

While the concept of inclusive education has traditionally been associated with the inclusion of children and students considered to have disabilities or special educational needs in regular education settings, it is also recognised as having a wider application than special education. This view sees inclusive education as encompassing the increasing diversity of the school-going population (Topping & Maloney, 2005; Warnock, 2005; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2008), in particular, those that might be considered

marginalised or “vulnerable and at risk of exclusion from schools and other social activities” (Norwich & Kelly, 2005, p. 46). One advocate of inclusive education suggests that inclusion “is about a child’s right to belong to her/his local mainstream school, to be valued for who s/he is and to be provided with all the support s/he needs to thrive” (Rieser, 2006b, p. 168). UNESCO has defined inclusive education as the principle of enabling schools to serve all children (UNESCO, 1994) and more recently as an on-going process that enables schools to provide a good education to all pupils, irrespective of varying abilities (UNESCO, 2004).

In its strongest form, including *all* children has been referred to as “full non-separatist inclusion” (Norwich, 2002, p. 488), where all children in a locality, regardless of any form of difference or of ability, go to one large local school (Warnock, 2005) and are “in the same classrooms without any separate or specialist provision available” (Norwich, 2008, p. 29). In the context of this study, the concept of inclusive education is taken to refer to its more specific or traditional understanding, *i.e.* including children who are considered to have special educational needs. Inclusive education in this sense has been defined as “disabled and non-disabled children and young people learning together in ordinary pre-school provision, schools, colleges and universities, with appropriate networks of support” (Booth & Ainscow, 2002), and is about enabling pupils to participate in the life and work of mainstream institutions to the best of their abilities, whatever their needs (Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 2007b).

The concept of inclusion has been debated on many levels: principally as a pragmatic matter and within a philosophical / moral framework. From a pragmatic point of view, it is claimed that an increasing emphasis on raising academic standards, especially in secondary schools,



has made it more difficult to fit children with learning difficulties into the system (Warnock, 2005), although a counter argument to this is that inclusion should not be about making children fit in or join in on preset terms and conditions but rather should be about celebrating diversity (Jones, 2005). From a moral viewpoint, it has been argued that the existence of segregated special schools has caused widespread societal prejudice against adults with disabilities (Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 2002) as it perpetuates discrimination, devaluation, stigmatisation, stereotyping and isolation, conditions which these adults identify as barriers to respect, participation and equality (Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 2004). Others argue, however, that schools are not microcosms of society and that even if we believe that people with disabilities should not be segregated from society, “it does not follow that their life at school must be entirely within the mainstream” (Warnock, 2005, p. 8).

A related argument is that there has been far too much emphasis on the physical dimension of inclusion, to the detriment of the educational aspect (J. Lewis, 2000), that ‘being there’ has taken precedence over ‘learning there’ and that we risk losing sight of the critical issue, which is that students attend school, of whatever kind, to learn (O'Brien, 2000). It has been suggested that inclusion is “about much more than the type of school that children attend: it is about the quality of their experience; how they are helped to learn, achieve and participate fully in the life of the school” (UK Department for Education and Skills, 2004, p. 25), and is about “feeling that you are where you are at home. Only this sense of belonging makes it possible for a child to learn and enjoy” (Warnock, 2005, p. 9). Implicit in this belief is the understanding that for some children, ‘home’ may be a special school. This is one of the key questions which this study seeks to address: what are the views of students in a special school in relation to their placement (location), learning (curriculum) and belonging (identification)?

## 1.5 Inclusive / special education in Ireland: recent developments

Discourse and debate about inclusive / special education is ongoing in Ireland, as in other jurisdictions, with the last decade in particular seeing “an upsurge of interest in special education policy and practice” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p. 1). This period of intense debate and change in special education in Ireland can be said to have begun in 1991 when the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) was established by then Minister for Education Mary O’Rourke. The publication of the SERC Report two years later (Department of Education, 1993) is regarded as “one of the most important events in the modern history of special education” (Stevens & O’Moore, 2009, p. 21). One of the key principles arising from this report was that a “continuum of services should be provided for children with special educational needs” (Department of Education, 1993, p. 19), ranging from full-time residential care in a special school to full-time provision in a mainstream school. In 1994, Ireland endorsed the principles of the Salamanca Statement, which urged nations to “adopt as a matter of law or policy the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise” (UNESCO, 1994, p. ix), and the Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, whose guiding principle is that “schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions” (UNESCO, 1994, p. 6).

Changes in special education provision and policy continued to gather pace throughout the next decade. One of the most significant was the ‘automatic entitlement’ to special education provision introduced in 1998 (Stevens, 2007; Stevens & O’Moore, 2009), while in 2004, significant legislation appeared on the Irish educational landscape: the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* (EPSEN Act) (Ireland, 2004). This is the first Act in Irish law that specifically deals with educational provision for persons considered to have special

educational needs. One of the cornerstones of the Act is that it commits Irish educational policy from this point forward to the principle of inclusive education, as it states:

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

(a) the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act, or

(b) the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated (Ireland, 2004, p. 6).

This places the principle of inclusive education for children with special educational needs within a firm legal framework for the first time in the Republic of Ireland. Statistics indicate a gradual shift towards inclusive mainstream schooling with a decrease in enrolments in special schools, although the number of special schools has actually increased in the past fifteen years (see *Table 1* below). This increase arose as a consequence of legal action (*O'Donoghue v Minister for Education*, 1993) which forced the state to provide an appropriate education for all children, as per Article 42.4 of the Irish Constitution, *Bunreacht na hÉireann* (Ireland, 1937), including those with severe and profound general learning disabilities. New special schools were created as a result of this successful legal challenge. A total of 124 special schools currently operate, with enrolment decreasing from 8059 in 1993-94 to 6578 in 2006-07. This represents an actual decrease of 18.38%, or a decrease of 11.5% when adjusted as a percentage of national enrolment figures (Central Statistics Office, 2008; Department of Education and Science, 2008b, 2008a). More specific data about enrolment trends in special schools for children with 'mild general learning disabilities' are provided in the next section.

YEAR	NO. OF SPECIAL NATIONAL SCHOOLS	TOTAL ENROLMENT	AS A % OF NATIONAL ENROLMENT
1993-1994	115	8059	0.923% (of 873528)
2006-2007	124	6578	0.817% (of 805237)

*Table 1: Special School Statistics – comparing 1993-1994 data to 2006-2007 data*

Despite these indicators of falling special school populations, a 2006 press release appeared to consolidate the position of special schools in the country, with the announcement of a 30% increase in capitation rates paid to these schools, affirming a “commitment to supporting an important role for special schools” (Department of Education and Science, 2006, p. 1) by then Minister for Education and Science Mary Hanafin. This indicated a continuing role for special schools, in spite of concerns expressed by teachers working in these schools about the future of such schools (Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education, 2006).

This continuation of a dual model of provision (Stevens & O’Moore, 2009) raises many questions. One can reflect on the past and ask: how could one best describe the education students have received in these schools? One can focus on the future by asking what might lie ahead for these schools and the students who currently attend them. A further question, which is located in the present, is the focus of this particular study: what are the views of students who currently attend a special school about their education? Some background information is now provided on the profile of students who attend one type of special school in Ireland, those who have been categorised as having ‘mild general learning disabilities’.

## 1.6 Students with ‘mild general learning disabilities’

The use of terminology to categorise people can be problematic, as language and labels play a key role in perpetuating prejudices about difference, (Minow, 1990) and “the language used in relation to people with disabilities has almost always been negative and reflected their marginalised status within society” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p. 4). (A more detailed exploration of this ‘deficit’ approach is contained in Chapter 3). Even if we accept the need for categories, there are difficulties with differences in definitions and terminology as “definitions of, and terms to encompass, learning difficulty vary between countries and, when in different languages, may be distorted in translation” (A. Lewis, 1995, p. 10). In the absence of a universally agreed classification system, the term ‘mild general learning disabilities’ is used in this study as it applies in an Irish context, namely as a category of students whose Intelligence Quotient (IQ) has been assessed by a suitably qualified professional as being within the range 50-69 (Department of Education and Science, 2002b). Although IQ should be but one element used in an assessment of ability / disability – “cognitive, language, motor, social, and other adaptive behaviour skills should all be used to determine the level of intellectual impairment” (Biasini, 1999, p. 8) – the current practice in Ireland is that it is usually the dominant mode of assessment. For purposes of clarity, the term ‘mild general learning disabilities’ is abbreviated to ‘*mild GLD*’ for the remainder of this paper; this is in no way intended to ‘depersonalise’ any individual person who may fit the profile of someone with such a disability. Use of this term in this study does not imply acceptance of its validity or usefulness.

The term ‘mild GLD’ is comparable to the somewhat discredited term ‘mild mental retardation’ as specified in the *International Classification of Diseases*<sup>iv</sup> (ICD-10) (World Health Organization, 2007) and in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental*

*Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR)* (BehaveNet, 2008). The term ‘mild GLD’ would approximate also to the use of the term ‘moderate learning difficulties’ (MLD) in the UK, which itself has been adjudged to be comparable to the term ‘mild intellectual disabilities’ as used in New Zealand and Australia (A. Lewis, 1995). While ‘intellectual disability’ is now the preferred term for many national and international organisations, including some that have elected to use this term in place of previously-used terms such as ‘mental handicap’ (Inclusion Ireland, 2008) or ‘mental retardation’ (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2008), the term ‘mild GLD’ will be used in this study as it reflects the more common usage of this term in educational discourse and policy documents in Ireland at this present time.

Although any attempt to define MLD is considered contentious (Costley, 2000), students with MLD would be considered to have below average attainments in most curricular areas with “much greater difficulty than their peers in acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills and in understanding concepts ... associated speech and language delay, low self-esteem, low levels of concentration and under-developed social skills” (Department for Education and Skills (UK), 2003, p. 3). This is a group of students about which there has been less policy and practice focus, less research interest and less literature describing their experiences. As a group they are considered to lack a clear identity, and not to have as strong a voice in lobbying Government as other categories of children with special educational needs might have (Costley, 2000; Norwich & Kelly, 2005). It has also been suggested that these children “do not command the same degree of sympathy as do children with obvious sensory and physical handicaps” (Williams, 1993, p. 314).

Fourteen<sup>v</sup> different categories of ‘disability’ are currently utilised in the Republic of Ireland in special educational provision, with fourteen types of special school (St. Patrick's College Special Education Department, 2007). Of these categories, three are considered ‘high incidence disabilities’ (*i.e.* they are more common), one of which is the category of ‘mild GLD’ (Department of Education and Science, 2005b). A change in education policy in 2005 resulted in a new model of support for these pupils. *Circular SP ED 02/05* introduced a ‘General Allocation Model’ for mainstream primary schools, which provided these schools with additional teaching resources based on overall enrolment figures to “meet the immediate needs of pupils with high incidence special educational needs” (Department of Education and Science, 2005b, p. 1), independent of identification. This eliminated the previous requirement for pupils with ‘mild GLD’ to undergo a psychological assessment prior to accessing resource teaching (Department of Education and Science, 2002a; Stevens & O'Moore, 2009). It has been predicted that this new policy will lead to a continued reduction in the number of pupils being registered on the National Intellectual Disability Database with ‘mild GLD’, which in turn will “have long-term implications in terms of individual pupils’ access to disability services in the future” (Stevens, 2007, p. 42).

Recent research on the prevalence of ‘mild GLD’ shows some interesting results. The number of pupils attending special schools for pupils with ‘mild GLD’, at least some of whom are acknowledged to have additional or more complex needs, fell by almost 42% from 2,813 to 1,634 between 1996 and 2007 (Stevens & O'Moore, 2009). The percentage of pupils with disability in the 5-14 age group who had ‘mild GLD’ decreased from 54% to 37% in the same time span (Stevens & O'Moore, 2009)<sup>vi</sup>. The number of pupils in this category attending special schools decreased from 34% in 1989 to 13% in 2004 and to only 9% in 2007, with 64% of this cohort receiving additional help from a learning support or resource teacher in

mainstream schools in 2007 (Stevens & O'Moore, 2009), a provision that was unavailable in 1989. Thus it appears that the transition towards inclusive provision has been more marked for children in this category than in other categories. Finally, it was also found that 74% of pupils in these special schools in 2004 were over twelve years old, meaning these schools are 'top-heavy' (St. Patrick's College Special Education Department, 2007), and indicating that these schools are increasingly meeting the post-primary needs of pupils with 'mild GLD' (Stevens, 2007), although within primary school administrative structures.

There is a danger in selecting a cohort of children who have 'mild GLD' as research participants that the group is seen as homogeneous and each member becomes defined by the category of disability (Atkinson, 2002). The students in this particular study varied not only in age and gender but also in their cognitive functioning, language proficiency and in their range of interests and experiences, as might be expected with any group of adolescents. Unlike many schools, these students came from a very wide catchment area rather than one distinct community. What they share in common is that they all attend a special school which is designated for students of second-level age considered to have 'mild GLD'. At all stages, therefore, it is necessary to see each participant as a person first who has a story to tell or a meaningful and valid contribution to make. The category of school which they attend and the accompanying label which may be attached to the child are of much lesser import. The participants' views on schooling are influenced by their experiences of schooling, but neither their school nor their disability defines the person – they are aspects of their lives, albeit those which are the focus of this study.



## 1.7 Location of study

The study takes place in the school where I currently teach<sup>vii</sup>. The school is a co-educational special school which, when it opened in May 1958 with eleven pupils, was the first special school of its kind in the region (Teegan, 2003). During the course of the project, I became acting principal for two separate periods totalling seven months<sup>viii</sup>, before subsequently returning to the classroom, albeit to a different base class. It has a current enrolment of 107 students (72 male, 35 female) aged between 12 and 18, each of whom has been assessed as having 'mild GLD'. All of these students have experience of attending at least one other school, with the vast majority having attended at least one mainstream school (usually at primary level) prior to accessing special schooling. A small minority of students (six in the 2007-8 school year, nine in 2008-9) had spent some time in a different second-level setting, either a mainstream school or in other specialised provision. One of the key phases of the research focused on eliciting the views of the cohort of six from 2007-8 who had first-hand experience of some other form of second-level education.

Mirroring developments at a macro level, the school has undergone substantial transformation since 1991<sup>ix</sup>, in many ways. In keeping with national trends, enrolments dropped between 1997 and 2002, although in the past five years enrolments have stabilised at just over 100, as *Table 2* below shows. This appears to indicate continued demand for places in the school, despite the move towards inclusive schooling. One other notable trend which this table indicates is the dramatic reduction in females from a high of 55 in 1997 to a low of 22 in 2002, a drop of 60% in only 5 years. However, this has also increased in recent years, with the ratio of boys to girls currently a little over 2:1.

<b>Year</b> (Enrolment on September 30 <sup>th</sup> )	<b>Number of</b> <b>males enrolled</b>	<b>Number of</b> <b>females enrolled</b>	<b>Total</b> <b>enrolment</b>
<b>1997</b>	75	55	<b>130</b>
<b>1998</b>	70	47	<b>117</b>
<b>1999</b>	69	41	<b>110</b>
<b>2000</b>	65	36	<b>101</b>
<b>2001</b>	68	28	<b>96</b>
<b>2002</b>	71	22	<b>93</b>
<b>2003</b>	73	25	<b>98</b>
<b>2004</b>	75	31	<b>106</b>
<b>2005</b>	75	28	<b>103</b>
<b>2006</b>	73	32	<b>105</b>
<b>2007</b>	66	38	<b>104</b>
<b>2008</b>	72	34	<b>106</b>

*Table 2: Enrolment figures in the school 1997-2008*

Other changes are also indicative of changes in national policy post-SERC and the ‘automatic entitlement’ policy introduced in 1998. There are now fourteen special needs assistants in the school (in 1991 there were two child-care assistants) and the pupil-teacher ratio is 11:1, with additional full-time specialist teachers also employed (for Woodwork, PE and Home Economics). In recent years the school has embraced mainstream curricula and programmes such as Junior Certificate<sup>x</sup>, the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP), FETAC Level 3 certification, and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, a factor which may influence the perspectives of participants in this study in relation to the key aspect of learning / curriculum.

## 1.8 Stating the research problem

As identified above, a ‘dilemma of difference’ may pertain in relation to providing for students who are considered to have special or additional learning needs. This ‘dilemma’ also manifests itself in practice where a ‘twin track’ approach appears to exist in official educational policy in Ireland in relation to the inclusion of students with special educational needs in the mainstream education system. On the one hand, the principle of inclusive education has now been enshrined in legislation (Ireland, 2004), yet the data as shown above (in *Table 1*) reflect a gradual move rather than a dramatic shift away from special schooling. In particular, the continued existence of and support for special schools which cater for students considered to have ‘mild GLD’ could be considered questionable, given that these students function at a higher level than other students with general learning disabilities, and that the validity and continued existence of the very category of ‘mild GLD’ / MLD has been questioned (Norwich & Kelly, 2005). Many special schools catering for this type of student offer mainstream curricular options through both primary and post-primary age levels, albeit with typically smaller class sizes and a better ratio of staff to students. Is it not possible that regular schools could equally effectively provide “an education appropriate to their abilities and needs” (Ireland, 1998, p. 6) for all such students, thereby rendering this particular category of special school unnecessary? Or are there reasons for retaining these schools? Again, the argument is clear that more consultation is needed on this question. This begs the question: with whom should we consult?

A spectrum of views already exists on the type of educational provision that should be provided to students who have special educational needs: this spectrum ranges from those who, as stated earlier, wish for the practice and very concept of special education to be dismantled and deconstructed (Oliver, 1995; Skrtic, 1995b; Gaden, 1996; Centre for Studies

on Inclusive Education, 2007a), to those arguing in favour of continuing to provide choice and a continuum of service, including continued support for and promotion of special schools (O'Keeffe, 2004; Lawlor, 2005; Carr, 2006; M. Farrell, 2006). Perhaps, however, we have neither sought nor gathered in enough detail the views of those who have most to gain or lose from the special education / inclusion policies of any given time, namely the students. It is surely appropriate to ask of those students attending special schools: what are your views on the education you receive? Are there positive and negative aspects of attending a special school? Is there a tension between these aspects for you? In other words, the question of whether 'dilemmas of difference' apply for them is worth asking. The research problem can be stated thus: **there is a need to ascertain the views of students who attend special schools and to ascertain whether 'dilemmas of difference' apply for these students.**

### **1.9 Significance of and rationale for the study**

What is the significance of this study and why is it being undertaken? There are many reasons why this research is both timely and significant, and other reasons, which are perhaps more personal in nature, which explain why it is being undertaken, and these are outlined now.

This study is firmly rooted in a children's rights perspective, both in method and in theme. Concurrent to this research study, thousands of children and young people in Ireland engaged in an extensive nationwide consultation process on matters that concern them, one of which was education (Ombudsman for Children Office, 2007a). More recently, a seven-year national longitudinal study of children in Ireland, described as the most important and substantial research initiative ever undertaken with children in Ireland (Economic and Social Research Institute, 2008), has commenced. This study, '*Growing Up in Ireland*', is being overseen by

OMCYA and its origins can be traced to commitments made in the National Children's Strategy (Ireland, 2000) to undertake such research. Given the current debate around children's rights, it is surely an appropriate time to consider this theme and to present and analyse the views of a select group of children, irrespective of whether or not they have disabilities or additional learning needs.

In relation to children with disabilities, it is suggested that they have been "largely excluded from consultations and involvement in decisions which affect them" (Rabiee, Sloper, & Beresford, 2005, p. 385) and that inadequate attention has been paid to seeking the views of individual pupils (O'Donnell, 2003). This is in spite of calls to ensure children and adolescents who are disadvantaged or marginalised are not denied their rights or treated as 'non-people' but rather are enabled to take responsibility for their own lives and to participate in decision-making processes (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1997; United Nations General Assembly, 2002). This exclusion and prejudice is true not just for children with disabilities, but also for adults, as the views of persons with learning disabilities have traditionally been excluded from official histories and their voices have often been lost (Atkinson, Jackson, & Walmsley, 1997). One influential study which sought the views of women with disabilities noted the under-representation of women with learning difficulties and considered the absence of their stories to be "a major omission" (C. Thomas, 1999, p. 6).

This study offers an opportunity to hear the views of students, views that might not otherwise have been heard or considered valid. One of the key justifications for undertaking this study is that "unless people with intellectual disabilities are themselves consulted about issues such as educational inclusion ... there is a serious gap in research findings" (Ware, 2004, p. 175).

Another is that there has traditionally been very little crossover between the two paradigms of childhood and disability, with the result that “very few writers within the paradigm of the new sociology of childhood write about disabled children’s lives and very few writers in the field of disability studies display an interest in writing about children’s lives” (Davis *et al.*, 2000, p. 203). This study offers an opportunity to address this crossover lacuna in considering and merging perspectives from both paradigms.

The statutory body charged with implementing the aforementioned EPSEN Act is the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). Documentation from the NCSE highlights “inclusive research with young people with special educational needs” (National Council for Special Education, 2006, p. 3) as one of the eligible research areas it has considered appropriate for funding, while more recently, an NCSE-commissioned research project / review invited submissions from interested parties on “the role and operation of special schools and special classes” (St. Patrick’s College, 2008). One group of ‘relevant stakeholders’ identified in this project was pupils. It is clear that there is both an opportunity and a necessity to conduct research which sets out to hear the views of students considered to have special educational needs on their educational experiences, so that practitioners and policy-makers may be in a position to more effectively plan and provide for these students and for those who may follow in their footsteps. While this thesis, based on research conducted in one Irish special school, was not completed in the time-frame allowed by the NCSE-commissioned review, its timing is nonetheless significant.

As noted above, students with MLD (similar to the students in this study) are a group about which there has traditionally been less research interest (Norwich & Kelly, 2005). This is in

spite of the fact that these are students who are capable of forming their own views and who may be more readily included in regular schools than perhaps students with more severe learning or behavioural needs. Given the lack of Irish research of this type and scale with this cohort of students, it is apt to address this research gap, even if this was to be done using more traditional methodological approaches.

A further reason for undertaking this study is to attempt to bridge the research / practice divide. This gap has been presented as the classic scenario of the ‘chalk face’ viewing the ‘ivory tower’ with cynicism and scepticism (Wellington, 2000). This particular research project can be described as a form of practitioner research which can help to bridge this divide. Practitioner research works primarily towards school improvement (Coleman & Lumby, 1999), and one of the possible outcomes of this project is that higher quality and more appropriate education in the school may result from not just hearing the views of students, but by facilitating or suggesting possible change in school practice as a direct result of what students may say. Additionally, adults working in the school may benefit from living through and observing the process of research which is directly related to school experience.

Continuing in the ‘practitioner’ theme, this project contains elements of participatory research as presented on the ‘continuum of involvement’ (Porter & Lacey, 2005). As such, then, it is a model of practice that fits well with my own classroom ethos, where students are encouraged and enabled to express their views and to have a say in various aspects of classroom management and organisation and the teaching/learning process (for example in framing classroom rules or selecting class projects). At whole-school level, my perception (albeit a subjective view, yet one honed through my observations as teacher working with other

colleagues and as principal supporting colleagues) is that a similar ethos applies in the school: students are respected and their views are welcomed. However, an obvious gap was evident at the outset of this research: no Student Council existed in the school. This restricted formal opportunities for students to present their views and to have a say in decisions that affect them, as is their right under Article 12(1) (United Nations, 1989). The establishment of a Student Council was something that, while not part of the focus of the study, it was hoped from the outset might arise as a by-product of the process of engagement with students. This could create the potential for the collective and diverse views of students to be articulated and presented in an official forum, and enable students to “participate in decision making in all aspects of school life” (McLoughlin, 2004, p. 141). It is thus evident that this research project lends itself to the type of classroom environment and whole-school ethos which values democratic participation and engagement, a philosophy which many education systems and governments are now embracing (see for example Ministry of Justice UK, British Institute of Human Rights, Department for Children Schools and Families, & Amnesty International-UK, 2008; Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2008).

These reasons encapsulate both the significance of and the rationale for conducting this research project. The focus and purpose of the research are now succinctly outlined.

#### **1.10 Focus and purpose of the research**

The focus of this project is on gathering, documenting, analysing and presenting the views of students in one special school in relation to their experiences of school, incorporating primarily their views of their current school, but also their views on previous schools they may have attended or their impressions of other schools. The purpose of doing this is to



represent these views as fairly as possible and to assess if tensions exist for these students in relation to their positive and negative perceptions of special schooling. Without explicitly asking participants the exact question, it is attempting to ascertain if ‘dilemmas of difference’ apply for these students.

### **1.11 Methodology outline**

The methodology for this study is described in detail in Chapter 3. At this juncture, a brief outline of the methodology is given to set the scene for the later detail. The project consisted of a range of qualitative research strategies, gathered in five separate phases, used in a case-study style approach, with a particular focus on making the process as participatory as possible at various points for the students involved.

Specific themes such as friendships (Snelgrove, 2005), bullying (Norwich & Kelly, 2004), transition from primary school, curriculum options (Smyth *et al.*, 2004), curriculum limitations, isolation and alienation, stigma and over-protection (Norwich, 1997), autonomy, independence, choice and ambitions (A. Lewis *et al.*, 2007a) along with others (access to resources; physical / environmental conditions; respect and recognition; celebration, acceptance or rejection of difference; equality of support; belonging to a community; discipline and behaviour; labelling and categorisation), were considered as potential areas of exploration with students prior to the data collection phases. However, it was decided to commence in the initial phase of the study (a series of ten focus group meetings) without an explicit pathway or specific pre-set themes, but rather to allow participants to indicate through discussion the themes which they felt were important to them, in keeping with the belief that young people should decide what it is that matters to them (Lundy, 2007).

This opportunity for participants to set the agenda was facilitated by beginning each focus group with a very open-ended question: *“If you knew somebody who was starting in this school next September, what would you tell them about the school?”* This open-ended starting point was the foundation stone for the subsequent participatory elements to the project. Given this wide initial focus and the subsequent organic development of different methods of data collection and analysis, the term ‘emergent design’ or ‘flexible design’ (Robson, 2002) is appropriate for this study. It is also appropriate to claim that the study makes a contribution to research methodology, given the range of methods used and the manner in which participants were enabled and encouraged to give their views.

#### **1.12 Scope and limitations of the study**

This study is limited by time and resource factors. It is also limited in size by the requirements of the doctoral course to which it pertains. To fit these constraints, it is worth stating the parameters of the research, and to indicate what the study does not address.

A comparative analysis between the views of students in a mainstream setting and students in a special school was considered, but would have made this project too large for its current purpose. Similarly, in the initial thesis proposal, it was suggested that the views of parents would be sought, primarily to act as a counterpoint to the views expressed by students. While this would have added depth to the study, and indicated the extent to which the views of both groups (students and parents) were at variance or consistent with each other, it would also have possibly diluted the worth and significance of the views of the students. With this in mind, this plan was shelved, and it was decided to focus exclusively on the views of students.

The study is also limited to the extent that it is situated in a setting where I as researcher currently work and hold a position of authority, as I did throughout the data collection phases. In this sense it can be considered ‘backyard research’, which can potentially lead to “compromises in the researcher’s ability to disclose information” (Creswell, 2003, p. 184). This also raises concerns over the power differential between teacher and student possibly transferring to the researcher-participant relationship, if steps are not taken to minimise the impact of this dual role of teacher-researcher. One way of minimising this impact was to reinforce at all times during the data collection stages that my role as researcher differed in kind from that of teacher, and to remind participants that their honest views were the only ones that I sought and valued. In terms of data analysis, it was necessary to use “multiple strategies of validity to create reader confidence in the accuracy of the findings” (Creswell, 2003, p. 184). To provide further strength to the authenticity of the study, it is important to acknowledge prior to embarking on the process of listening to the views of children that to do so is potentially “challenging and uncomfortable” (A. Lewis *et al.*, 2007a, p. 211) and that this possibility must be recognised if the study is to have any validity.

### **1.13 Research questions**

I now consider the research questions which the study hopes to answer. It is worth repeating that the research problem has been identified as the need to ascertain the views of students who attend special schools and in particular to ascertain whether ‘dilemmas of difference’ apply for these students. The research questions that this study specifically seeks to address are:

1. (a) What do students who have been assessed as having mild general learning disabilities have to say about their experiences and perspectives of special schooling?  
(b) What are these students' perspectives of mainstream schools, in comparison to the special school which they attend?
2. To what extent do students feel that they have a say in matters that affect them in relation to their education?
3. Do 'dilemmas of difference' apply for students who attend this special school? *i.e.* to what extent might the views of the students reflect a tension between the positive and negative consequences of attending a special school?

These research questions are thus more appropriately viewed as layers of the same basic question, rather than distinct areas of inquiry, and can be represented diagrammatically as seen in *Figure 1* below.

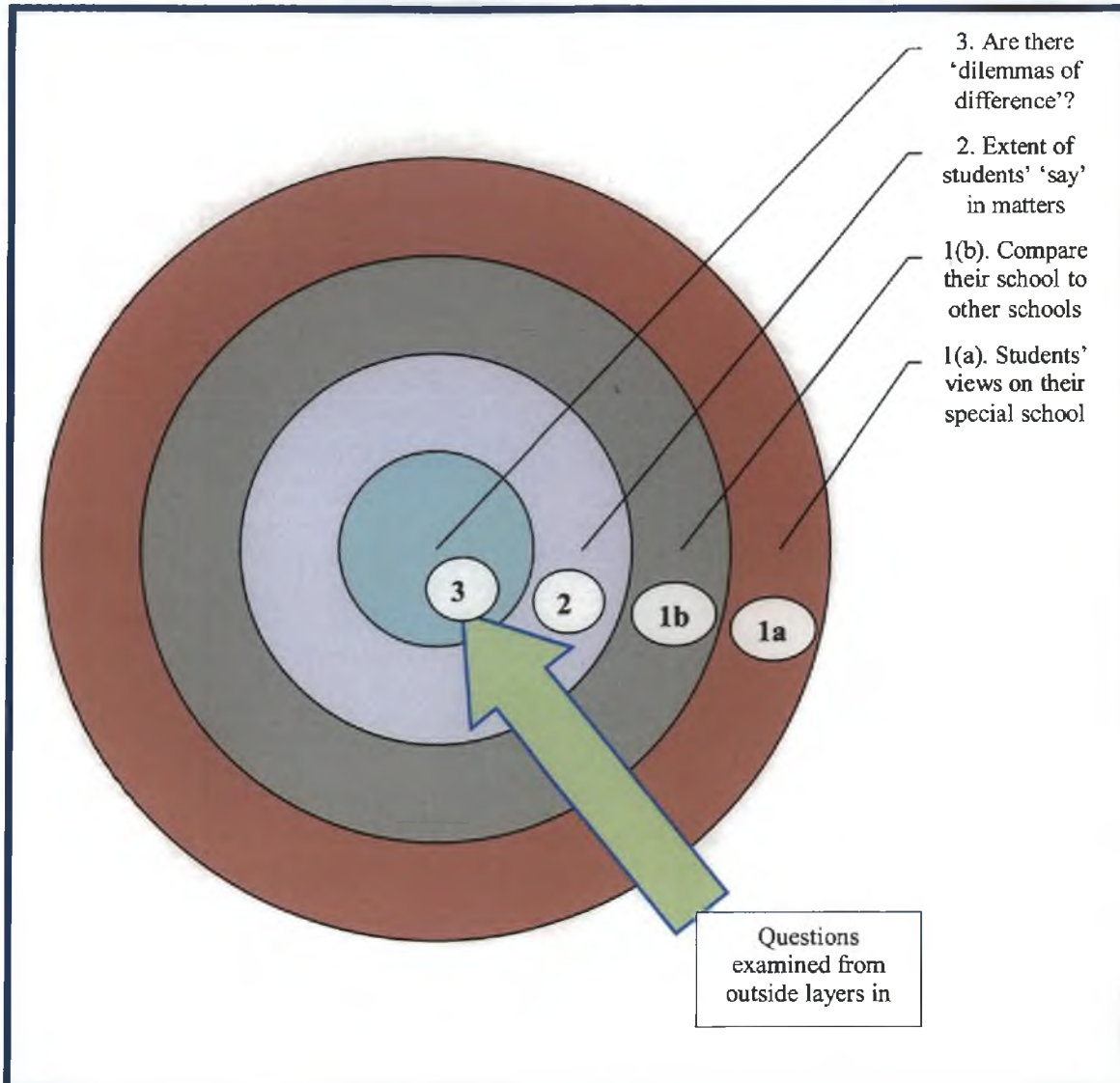


Figure 1: Layers of the research question

This diagrammatic representation is important as it indicates the concentric nature of the question(s), with all aspects of the study emanating from the one fundamental quest – to seek the views of children in relation to their experiences of school.

#### **1.14 Outline of remaining chapters**

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 presents a particular theoretical perspective which underpins the study and acts as a lens through which the views expressed are analysed. Chapter 3 presents some of the more salient literature which covers the two key themes of the project, namely the ‘dilemma of difference’ and the views of children and young people, analysed from a theoretical perspective initially but then specifically focusing on children’s views of education / school. Chapter 4 focuses in detail on methodology, outlining the flexible research design, highlighting the ethical considerations involved in undertaking this research and explaining both the data collection process and the processes used to analyse these data. Chapter 5 consists of an initial presentation of the key findings from the project, which parallels the outer layers of the research questions. Chapter 6 discusses these findings in more depth and, in seeking to ascertain whether or not ‘dilemmas of difference’ arise for the students in this study, explores this question by connecting the data / findings to the literature and to the overarching theoretical perspective. Chapter 7 presents personal reflections on both the process of conducting the study and on the findings generated through this process. It also contains a summary of the key aspects of the study, outlines implications for the study at school level and at national policy level, and signposts future possible directions. Relevant appendices which give additional insight into the various stages of the research process, a full bibliography, and pertinent endnotes which help to enlighten key aspects of the work, are all included at the end.

## Chapter 2: Developing a theoretical perspective

### 2.1 Introduction: overview

The purpose of this chapter is to construct a theoretical perspective in which the study as a whole is framed. Three specific theoretical concepts, ‘insider epistemology’, ‘conceptions of the subject’ and ‘models of disability’, are outlined. The relevance of these three theoretical dimensions is as follows: as the primary purpose of listening to children’s voices is to develop knowledge of their experiences (Tangen, 2008), it is necessary to consider initially to what extent this is possible. This necessitates adopting a position on the perspective of ‘insider epistemology’. Linked to this are various theoretical ‘conceptions of the subject’, which in turn link to distinct ‘models of disability’. This process is necessary to construct the perspective which I consider fits most appropriately with the tone and method of this study. I begin this process by examining ‘knowledge’ through the lens of ‘insider epistemology’.

### 2.2 Insider epistemology

A key question for those who study the experiences of others relates to what is known as ‘insider epistemology’, the central tenet of which is “that *insiders have a privileged access to knowledge of their own experiences*” (Tangen, 2008, p. 159, italics in original). Firmly rooted in both feminist research and the disability movement, in its strongest form insider epistemology contends that those who have not lived an experience cannot understand it: “only insiders can understand their experiences, and thus only insiders can develop valid knowledge of the insider group” (Tangen, 2008, p. 160). In relation to the experiences of persons with disability, it has been suggested that “if disabled people left it to others to write about disability, we would inevitably end up with inaccurate and distorted accounts of our

experiences” (Oliver, 1996, p. 9). In the strongest version of epistemology, to ‘know’ means to ‘have the same experience as’, and this position would jeopardise any attempt by me, as an ‘outsider’, to try to interpret and represent the views of ‘others’ whose experience I have not shared. If, however, the aim is to develop empirical or theoretical knowledge, then ‘to know’ is better understood as being “able to describe, explain or make sense of experiences” (Fay, p. 27, cited in Tangen, 2008, p. 160). Adopting this ‘weak’ or ‘open’ version of epistemology allows me to describe, and to make tentative interpretations of, the experiences and views of others. In fact, Tangen argues that outsiders are sometimes better able than insiders themselves to understand certain experiences.

The second concept that Tangen (2008) interrogates is ‘experience’. While experience can be regarded as referring to mental or inner states and processes, most contemporary understandings of experience accept that a social dimension is critical to phenomena which include experience, activities and actions. A ‘weak’ or ‘open’ version of insider epistemology allows one to have ‘knowledge’ of the experiences of others if our understanding of experience consists of not just the inner perceptions, feelings, thoughts and intentions of the subject, which are essentially private, but also incorporates actions and activities which are socially mediated and observable (Tangen, 2008). This weak version of insider epistemology is compatible then with methodologies used for listening to the views of children which are interactive and participatory, presupposing “the active participation of the child and exchange of meanings and interpretations” (Tangen, 2008, p. 160). This is a central tenet of the study. The open thesis of insider epistemology acknowledges that although participants in the study do have privileged knowledge, it is possible for an ‘outsider’ to make tentative interpretations of insiders’ experiences, and that it is appropriate to do so using a range of methods which enable participants to present their views in different ways.



### 2.3 Conceptions of the subject

Tangen (2008) also outlines five theoretical conceptions of the subject which have implications for researchers seeking to ‘know’ the ‘experiences’ of children. These different perspectives affect how the ‘subject’ as an agent of meaning is conceptualised.

The first of these relates to the theory of subjectivism, where “the subject has a direct access to knowledge of itself, but can only indirectly know something of the external world and other subjects” (Tangen, 2008, p. 162). This corresponds to the strong version of insider epistemology: each person has privileged access to knowledge of the self and others cannot access this knowledge. The second conception of the subject stems from a positivist or empirical perspective where the subject is dismissed as a relevant source of knowledge because knowledge, according to this perspective, is based solely on what is observed and experienced by the senses. In this conception, the subject’s voice is seen as a threat to validity and reliability. A third conception identifies the subject as a relational subject, which exists and develops through its relationships with other subjects, and can only be understood by reference to social and cultural contexts. A fourth conception is grounded in a structuralist perspective which actually denies the existence of the subject, while the fifth conception is contained in postmodern definitions of the subject.

Tangen suggests that the relational concept of the subject is “the most promising as a philosophical and epistemological frame of reference for research on subjective experiences” (Tangen, 2008, p. 164), and also supports the concept of ‘interactionism’, the dialectical epistemology of Brian Fay (1996) which sees the subject as dynamic and open but also closed to the extent that each of us are unique agents: we are each both individual *and* social beings.

Fay's theory, Tangen argues, is helpful for those who wish to understand "people who are *very different from ourselves* ... especially children from ethnic minorities and children who are disabled and/or marginalised" (Tangen, 2008, p. 164, italics in original). This dialectical epistemological position, coupled with a relational conception of the subject is thus the most appropriate stance for assisting in the process of understanding and interpreting the views of the subjects in this particular study.

## **2.4 Models of disability**

The relational conception of the subject also dovetails with the social relational model of disability which characterises disability from neither an exclusively social nor exclusively individual deficit perspective, but as a "form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well-being" (C. Thomas, 1999, p. 60). In other words, there are two strands to the social relational model, as it incorporates both reduced function and socially created barriers. In order to fully explain this link between the relational conception of the subject and the social relational model of disability, it is necessary initially to provide some context on various models of disability, and link these to how the practice of special education has evolved.

### *2.4.1 Medical model of disability*

It is generally accepted that throughout most of the twentieth century a dominant paradigm has influenced special education provision and how people with disabilities were perceived and treated (Sandow, 1994; Clough & Corbett, 2000; G. Thomas & Glenny, 2005). This dominant paradigm has been variously referred to as the functionalist paradigm (Skrtic,

1995b), the psycho-medical legacy or paradigm (Clough & Corbett, 2000; Skidmore, 2004), the individual model of disability (Oliver, 1990) or the medical model (Reindal, 2008). For purposes of clarity, the latter term is used in this study. In this model there are three key components: emphasis on pathology and the focus on individual deficits; the dominance of a positivist approach to assessment and research; and the power of the professional or expert.

The fundamentals of the medical model are that it locates the 'problem' of disability within the individual and “sees the causes of this problem as stemming from the functional limitations or psychological losses which are assumed to arise from disability” (Oliver, 1990, p. 3). The most recent legal definition of disability in Ireland, in the 2005 Disability Act, incorporates this construct, locating disability firmly within the individual, and retaining the central causal<sup>xi</sup> link between impairment and disability (C. Thomas, 1999).

“disability”, in relation to a person, means a *substantial restriction in the capacity of the person*<sup>xii</sup> to carry on a profession, business or occupation in the State or to participate in social or cultural life in the State by reason of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual impairment (Ireland, 2005, p. 6).

In relation to special education, the ‘orthodoxy’ of using classification systems to delineate categories of special educational need is built within this medical framework, while the pedagogical focus is on attempts to correct, cure or manipulate deficits through individual intervention (Reindal, 2008). This orthodoxy pertains in federal legislative provision in the United States where eligibility for special education depends on identifying a disability, thus reinforcing a within-child deficiency (Norwich, 2008). This also remains the orthodoxy in Ireland, where current practice in schools<sup>xiii</sup> reflects this deficit model (Lodge & Lynch, 2004), as does the definition of special educational needs now enshrined in legislation.

“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 (Ireland, 2004, p. 6) (my italics again indicate the deficit nature of the definition).

The second key element to the deficit model is the dominant role of positivism. There is general agreement that assessment and research in special education and disability services have been dominated by a positivist paradigm (Skrtic, 1995b; Paul, French, & Cranston-Gingras, 2001; Kauffman, 2002; Kwiotek, 2002; Oliver, 2002; G. Thomas & Glenny, 2005). The emphasis on intelligence testing has come under intense scrutiny, and its continued use is seen as a vehicle for legitimising a ‘within child’ approach rather than exploring any alternative analysis that might see the school, parent or society as the source of the difficulty (Peters, Johnstone, & Ferguson, 2005). The reliability, validity and the ignoring of distinct areas of intelligence in these tests are considered problematic, as is their use “for high-stakes decisions about placements in stigmatised special schooling based on biased and erroneous assessment of potential for future attainments” (Norwich & Kelly, 2005, p. 26). Supposedly ‘objective’ psychometric testing can be used to justify a particular diagnosis and lead to a child’s extrusion to a special education classroom (Danforth, 2002). Yet intelligence testing remains a powerful tool for the categorisation of children by professionals, primarily psychologists, who play a key role in assessment procedures (Norwich & Kelly, 2005)<sup>xiv</sup>. This presents as a dilemma linked to identification: is it best to assess a child and thus perhaps gain extra supports, although also perhaps gaining a negative label, or not to assess and label, but perhaps suffer by not being able to meet the individual needs of the child?

In the functionalist / positivist paradigm, the goal of research is to “describe, predict and control” (Ferguson & Ferguson, 1995, p. 112), with an emphasis on the “illusory allure” (G. Thomas & Glenny, 2005) of finding ‘quick-fix’ cures via empirical, quantitative analysis, or a search for ‘what works’ (Danforth, 2002). Positivism<sup>xv</sup> remains the prevailing paradigm of the mainstream research community in special education (Paul *et al.*, 2001). For example, a survey commissioned by the National Disability Authority (NDA) in Ireland in 2001 which examined 419 research projects over a five year period found that the vast majority fell within the ‘positivist paradigm’ (Kwirotek, 2002).

Closely linked to the dominance of positivism is the third element of the medical model, the power of the professional or expert (Atkinson, 1997), who is deemed to have “privileged knowledge” (G. Thomas & Glenny, 2005). This contrasts markedly with the ‘strong insider epistemology’ position referred to earlier. The continued professionalisation of the multi-billion dollar, self-referenced industry of special education (Paul *et al.*, 2001) has, it is suggested, helped little in improving learning or conditions for those whose needs it is intended to address (Oliver, 1995; G. Thomas & Glenny, 2005). Within this industry, a traditional client-professional relationship prevails, dictated by a “one-way conversation in which professionals diagnose and prescribe” (Skrtic, 1995a, p. 90), where the knowledge of the ‘expert’ serves to oppress and disenfranchise minorities and people who are marginalised, thereby maintaining the status quo of inequity (Freire, 1972; Shor, 1992). Special education through this lens is seen as a social construct, where power and control lie with the professionals<sup>xvi</sup> (Tomlinson, 1982; Oliver, 1990; Danforth, 2002).

The medical model of disability has been criticised for being socially reproductive and for perpetuating the continued disempowerment of people with impairments<sup>xvii</sup> (Reindal, 2008) and of the ‘consumers<sup>xviii</sup>’ of special education (Skrtic, 1995a). It has been criticised for unproblematically accepting that “professionals really do know best” (Tomlinson, 1995, p. 124). Even when more students with special educational needs learn in mainstream schools, the medical model remains the dominant discourse (Ypinazar & Pagliano, 2004), as “special educational needs are thought of as emanating from the individual who is seen as different, faulty and needing to be assessed and made as normal as possible” (Rieser, 2006a, p. 135).

Conversely, however, others have staunchly defended this approach, especially the emphasis on ‘objective’ scientific knowledge and positivism. It has been argued that “special education is a relatively young profession with a history that includes reliable empirical research on what works for students at the margins of the distribution of abilities and performance” (Kauffman, 2002, p. 23). Part of this defence of special education is a call, premised on the need for reality to take precedence over rhetoric, for the maintenance of a continuum of services<sup>xix</sup>, including special schools (O’Keeffe, 2004; Lawlor, 2005; M. Farrell, 2006).

#### 2.4.2 *Social model of disability*

In contrast to the medical model of disability, the social model of disability sees disability as a social construct which disempowers and discriminates. The origins of the social model are generally acknowledged to lie in the distinction made between impairment and disability by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in its 1976 document ‘*Fundamental Principles of Disability*<sup>xx</sup>’ (Oliver, 1990; Reindal, 2008). In the social model of disability, impairment neither causes, nor equates with, nor generates the problems of

disability: the “linear understanding of causality between a reduced function and the phenomenon of disability” (Reindal, 2008, p. 141) is rejected. The social model presents a perspective which asserts that disability is caused by human factors and is not a characteristic of, or the fault of, people with impairments (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). It is aligned with a sociological perspective on special education (Tomlinson, 1982), which views special education as a “sorting mechanism contributing to the reproduction of existing social inequalities by syphoning off a proportion of the school population and assigning them to an alternative, lower-status educational track” (Skidmore, 2004, p. 4). Proponents of the social model often use the term ‘disabled people’ rather than ‘persons with disabilities’ as they adjudge people to be ‘disabled’ by external rather than internal factors (Oliver, 2004; Oliver & Barnes, 2006).

From the social model perspective, disability is “the outcome of social arrangements which work to restrict the activities of people with impairments by placing social barriers in their way” (C. Thomas, 1999, p. 14). The social model draws attention to these disabling physical and social barriers in society that prevent persons with impairment from participating in everyday life to the same extent as those who do not have impairments, examples of which include physical restraints such as inaccessible transport, inaccessible environments and inaccessible information, but also other societal factors such as poverty, lack of useful education, prejudice, segregated services, belief in the medical model and discrimination in employment (Rieser, 2006a).

An example of a perspective which is influenced by the social model of disability from Irish special education discourse is that of the Education Working Group of the Commission on the

Status of People with Disabilities (CSPD) which proposed that ‘special educational needs’ be defined as:

special learning needs which require a range of supports in order to enable a pupil or student to achieve his or her full potential for learning and learning outcomes. This range of supports could include curriculum adjustment, counselling and guidance, specialist equipment or facilities, modified teaching techniques, paramedical services, or any other support needed to maximise learning (Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities, 1996, p. 17).

Within this proposed definition the emphasis was not on the individual’s deficit or ‘restriction’ but on the supports required which would enable any individual to participate in and benefit from an appropriate education. It differs substantially from the current legal definition of special educational needs outlined in the previous section. One factor which may have contributed to this definition was the involvement of people with disabilities in its creation. Self-determination and self-advocacy and freedom from the control of professionals (C. Thomas, 1999; Griffin & Shevlin, 2007) are other key features of the social model.

In the social model “the inhumanity and ‘medical model’ thinking involved in labelling and identifying people by their impairing condition” (Rieser, 2006b, p. 166) are rejected. Advocates of the social model of disability have been extremely critical of the continued existence of special schools and have argued for the deconstruction of the whole special education system as the only way forward, strongly of the belief that reviews of the current system all make the same error in assuming that it is the current system that needs to be improved (Oliver, 1995). This ‘tinkering’<sup>xxi</sup> is not enough to remedy the “massive failures of special education” (Oliver, 1995, p. 68), as labels and categories will be retained and will serve to keep some people apart from the rest of society. The discrimination experienced by people with disabilities is fostered in our schools and it is necessary to challenge this



discrimination in our schools (Rieser, 2006a), particularly as ‘medical model’ thinking permeates deeply the world of education (Rieser, 2006b). Oliver argues that the discourses of the special and the ordinary must be abolished, a view supported by Gaden, who suggests that the concept of mainstream or ordinary education must itself be abandoned: “if you do not want outsiders, then you cannot have insiders either” (Gaden, 1996, p. 78). Implementation of this proposal would leave us with one single education system for all.

Securing this abolition of current segregated structures in education creates a challenge, particularly for teachers: “if inclusive education is to be effective, teachers have to adopt ‘social model’ thinking about disabled people” (Rieser, 2006b, p. 158). Teachers need to be aware of the many kinds of barriers (physical, social, attitudinal, educational and institutional) which militate against the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, while all involved in education “must engage in the ongoing task of changing deep-seated attitudes and discriminatory behaviour if we are to create an inclusive future in which all will benefit” (Rieser, 2006b, p. 164). Similarly, Oliver suggests that the reconstruction of the education system must focus on two key elements. Firstly, it requires a reconstructing of school and teacher responses to difference, so that schools do not question the rights of any child to be there, and teachers display a commitment to work with all students, irrespective of needs. Secondly, the curriculum must be reconstructed so that the ideology of ‘normality<sup>xxii</sup>’, which views disability as being underpinned by personal tragedy theory and special educational needs as being underpinned by the deficit theory, must be removed. These two elements (school / teacher responses and curriculum) have particular relevance for this study.

There are clear links between the social model of disability and the human rights movement. Proponents of the social model highlight what they see as the denial of rights of persons with impairments (including the right to express a view, one of the cornerstones of this study). Sometimes this happens overtly, but it can also occur “in more subtle, benign or even benevolent forms” (C. Thomas, 1999) where help or assistance from the ‘caring professions’ is offered, guided by the ‘personal tragedy theory of disability’ (Oliver, 1990). Persons with disability then become a sub-group of ‘others’ who are excluded<sup>xxiii</sup> from power and from full participation in society (Riggins, 1997). The philosophy of the social model of disability and the actions of the ‘disability movement’ then lead the struggle against this oppression, segregation and victimisation (Campbell & Oliver, 1996).

The social model of disability has itself endured much criticism, which in turn has been refuted (Oliver, 2004). Critics of the social model claim that it focuses too much on socio-structural barriers and ignores cultural and experiential aspects of disablism. It also ignores or denies the significance of impairment and it does not serve the interests of groups of people with particular impairments, in particular those with learning difficulties (C. Thomas, 1999). It has attracted criticism for its homogenisation of people with disabilities and for not incorporating an understanding that they may be “capable of affecting the structures surrounding their lives” (Davis *et al.*, 2000, p. 206). It has also been suggested that it is biased towards male experiences of disability in that the socio-structural barriers which it prioritises generally relate to employment rather than to domestic and family domains (C. Thomas, 1999), and that ‘disabled children’ receive little attention within the social model (Connors & Stalker, 2007). Critics of the social model include medical sociologists, who argue that disability, or restrictions of activity *can* be caused by illness and impairment or by limited physical, sensory or intellectual functioning, and that to deny this is to present an

over-socialised or reductionist model. Critics also include those within the disability movement who contend that the social model denies or downplays the importance of the personal experience of restrictions and impairment and illness (C. Thomas, 1999; Reindal, 2008) and neglects the predicament of bodily limitation and difference (Shakespeare, 2006).

### 2.4.3 *Social relational model of disability*

The limitations of the social model centre around the equating of disability with restrictions of activity which are exclusively socially caused, in spite of the recognition that some restrictions of activity are caused by illness and impairment (C. Thomas, 1999). Thomas proposes a ‘social relational model of disability’, where disability is understood as the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments, as she argues that what arises from impairment is best considered as ‘impairment effects’ rather than disabilities. Thus the social relational model accepts that persons with impairments may experience restrictions of activity which result from the impairment (‘impairment effects’) but also experience disability as a result of oppressive physical and social barriers which exclude them from fully participating in society.

Further clarification of this model is provided by Reindal (2008) who distinguishes between necessary and sufficient conditions. Reduced function which arises from impairment is a necessary condition, or prerequisite, for experiencing disablement, but it may not be a sufficient condition: “whether the reduced function and its effects become a disability is dependent on restrictions within various macro levels in society that are imposed *on top of* the social effect that the reduced function implies for that individual” (Reindal, 2008, p. 144). This has implications, I believe, for our understanding of special educational needs. Why? It

acknowledges that restrictions may arise as a result of impairment and allows additional supports to be provided to minimise these restrictions, but also foregrounds the barriers (physical, communication, social, attitudinal, educational and institutional barriers) (Rieser, 2006b) which impose restrictions on persons and which need to be confronted at both macro level and at 'street level' (Lipsky, 1983). It is possible then to "give weight to the personal experience of living with reduced function, both socially and individually, without embracing an individual approach" (Reindal, 2008, p. 144) and to provide additional supports to those experiencing restrictions on an individual level, while retaining the stance that discrimination and oppression are also experienced as a result of social barriers.

A further element to the social relational model is explored by Thomas when she considers not just restrictions of activity in the physical sense on what people can *do*, but also restrictions on one's "psycho-emotional well-being, and to our sense of *who we are* or *who we can be*" (C. Thomas, 1999, p. 45). She highlights the psycho-emotional dimension of disablism which is caused by social barriers where persons with disability are made to feel "worthless, of lesser value, unattractive, hopeless, stressed or insecure" (C. Thomas, 1999, p. 47), and suggests that the conduit for these barriers leading to disablism can be professionals, family members, the media and wider culture, and even people with disabilities themselves. The 'lived experience' of people consists of multi-dimensional facets of identity such as gender, age, race and family, and may also include impairment and disability. In emphasising the psychological and emotional consequences of disablism, Thomas presents her social relational definition of disability as "a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well-being" (C. Thomas, 1999, p. 60). In this way, the model presents as similar to the 'bio-psycho-social' model where "factors and processes

within and between these three broad levels of analysis” (Norwich & Kelly, 2005, p. 7) are considered, and the binary opposition between individual and social models is seen as false.

#### 2.4.4 Comparing models of disability

Three models of disability have been presented above. To summarise, *Table 3* outlines and compares the key elements of each model as they relate to this particular study.

<b>Medical model</b>	<b>Social model</b>	<b>Social relational model</b>
Individual deficit emphasised: positivist / pathological approach	Rejects ‘individual deficit’: persons are ‘disabled’ by barriers created by society	Reduced function <u>and</u> barriers contribute to disability: ‘bio-psycho-social model’
Power of the professional (insider epistemology not considered)	Self-advocacy and voices of ‘disabled people’ prioritised (strong insider epistemology)	Professional and person with disability valued (weak insider epistemology)
Impairment → Disability	Impairment ≠ Disability	Impairment → Impairment effects; Barriers → Disability
‘Continuum of services’, depends on individual need	Want special schools closed, special education dismantled	No overt position taken on future of special schools

*Table 3: A comparison of models of disability*

## 2.5 Proposing a theoretical model

The preceding sections of this chapter have examined three specific theoretical concepts: insider epistemology, conceptions of the subject, and models of disability. In presenting various viewpoints, preferences for particular positions were espoused. Drawing from the three elements of the theoretical argument presented above, I now propose a model which will serve as a theoretical framework for the study. My perspective is one where an open thesis of insider epistemology, a relational theory of the subject, and a social relational model of disability are intertwined to provide a theoretical foundation for examining the views of children who are considered to have special educational needs. This position is presented diagrammatically in *Figure 2* on the next page.

The focus in the next chapter now turns to the two key elements of the study, namely the ‘dilemma of difference’, and the right of children to express their views and to have these given due weight, particularly in relation to their views on education / schooling.

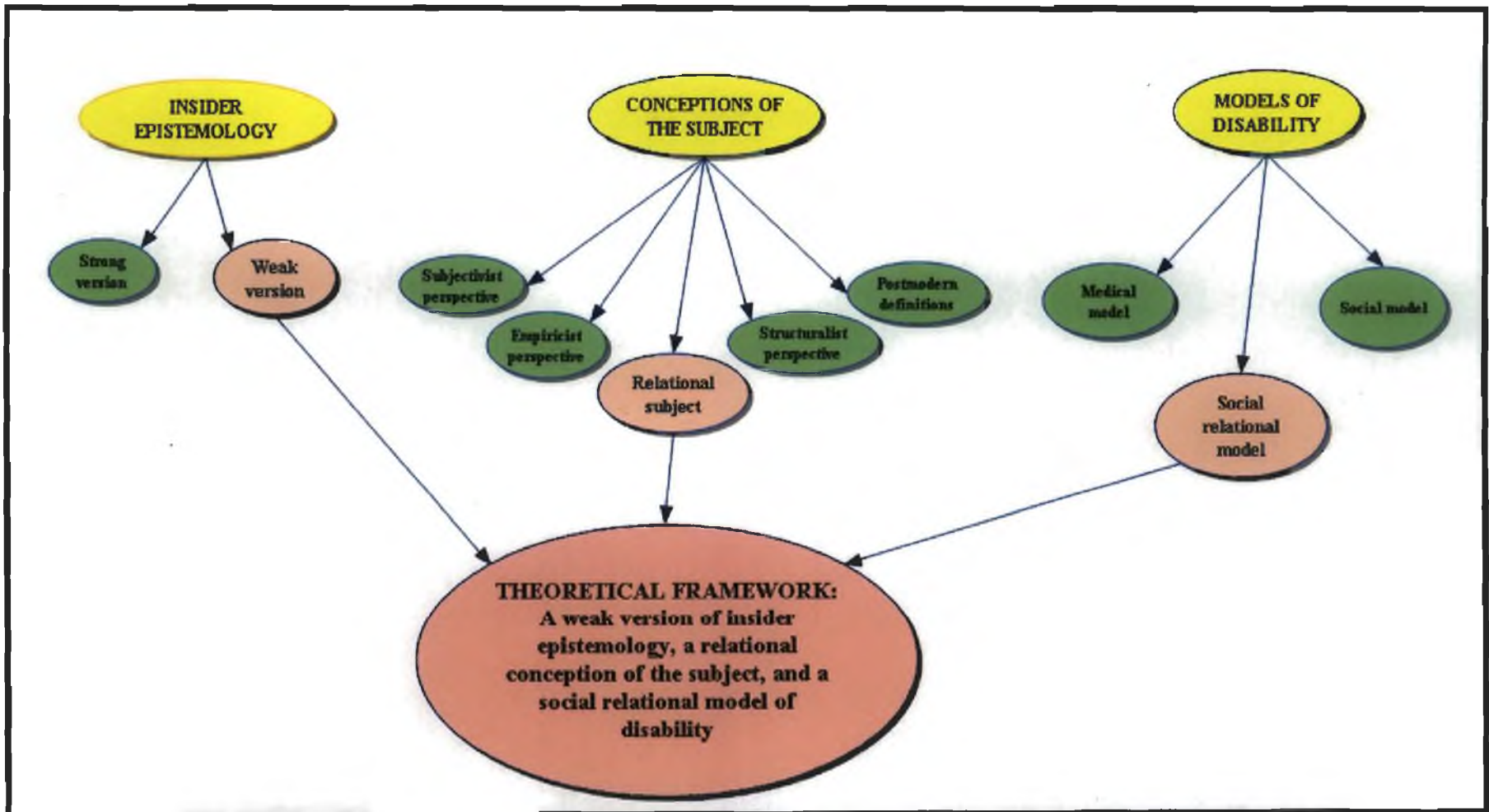


Figure 2: Theoretical framework underpinning the study

## **Chapter 3: Reviewing the literature – key themes**

### **3.1 Introduction: outline of themes**

This literature review focuses on the two broad areas which are considered to be of most relevance to this thesis. The first of these looks at key aspects of the special school / inclusion debate. A diversity of views on both the theory and practice of inclusive and segregated education is presented, concentrating particularly on the ‘dilemma of difference’, with its seemingly conflicting perspectives of inclusivity and individuality. The second area explored is the social movement of promoting children’s rights, and specifically Article 12 (1) of the UNCRC, which is concerned with the right of children to express their views and to have these views given due weight (United Nations, 1989). The fundamentals of this movement are noted, while relevant theoretical models for understanding children’s levels of participation are also presented. Key findings from select studies are highlighted – studies that sought either to capture the views of students in a generic manner or specific studies that explored the perspectives of students considered to have special educational needs. These studies have been selected because of their relevance to either the methodology or focus of inquiry of this study; they are not intended to be representative of the totality of studies in this field.

### **3.2 The ‘dilemma of difference’: special education under the spotlight**

The ‘dilemma of difference’ has application in many fields. Norwich (2008) traces its origins to the work of Martha Minow who, from a socio-legal perspective, examined how difference and diversity was perceived in legal provision (Minow, 1990), and the work of Billig and others (1988) in their wider analysis of ‘ideological dilemmas’. A dilemma in this sense consists of more than just an issue or a difficulty to be addressed, but rather refers to a



situation where there is a choice to be made between alternatives, all of which have unfavourable consequences (Norwich, 2008). Accepting a dilemmatic framework presents many challenges, as there may not be definitive solutions to dilemmas, with conflict and 'tragic choice' the inevitable outcomes "in systems committed to egalitarian values and principles amongst other values and principles" (Norwich, 2008, p. 4).

The dilemma of difference as it pertains to inclusion of children with special educational needs in regular education centres around "whether to recognise differences as relevant to individual needs by offering different provision, but that doing so could reinforce unjustified inequalities ... or whether to offer a common and valued provision for all, but with the risk of not providing what is relevant to individual needs" (Norwich, 1994, p. 293). It is a scenario with potentially negative consequences either way: recognising and responding to difference can lead to stigma, devaluation and rejection, whereas not recognising and responding to difference can be a denial of relevant and quality opportunities (Norwich, 2008).

The dilemma of difference in respect of inclusion manifests itself in three specific spheres: in whether or not to identify children as different in the first instance, in the type and range of curriculum that is offered, and in the location where education may be offered (Norwich & Kelly, 2005; Norwich, 2008). It is a model which applies "not only at a macro-social level of analysis but also at micro-social and individual levels" (Norwich & Kelly, 2005, p. 57). These three elements are now examined in more detail, while in Chapter 6 the data from this study are analysed specifically in relation to these same elements.

### 3.3 Special education dilemmas: identification, curriculum, location

The first aspect of the ‘dilemma of difference’ as it applies in special education concerns whether or not students are identified as having a special educational need and whether categories of special educational need are appropriate. This dilemma is linked to differing perspectives on labelling as presented earlier in the discussion related to the individual and social models of disability. In this dilemma, if children experiencing difficulties in learning are identified and labelled (as having a disability or as needing special education), then it is likely that they will be treated as different, devalued and stigmatised, yet not identifying and labelling these children means that it is less likely that additional and appropriate resources will be identified and provided for them (Norwich, 2008). Norwich highlights the contradictory position of the ‘backpack’ policy in the Netherlands as an example of the identification dilemma. Funding is allocated to individual students regardless of what school they attend in an attempt to promote inclusion but this policy has actually contributed to greater segregation. A recent policy change in Irish special education provision, as outlined in *Circular SP ED 02/05*, where the individual allocation of hours to students with ‘high incidence disabilities<sup>xxiv</sup>’ was withdrawn and replaced by a general allocation of resources to schools (Department of Education and Science, 2005b) could be seen as an attempt (intended or otherwise) to overcome this dilemma, although it is probably too early to analyse whether or not this change in policy has had any effect in terms of either reducing stigma or providing appropriate provision for the students concerned.

The second dilemma of difference, relating to curriculum, is this: if children needing special education are offered the same curriculum as their peers it is likely to deprive them of learning experiences relevant to their needs, whereas if they are not offered the same curriculum as their peers it is likely that they will be treated as a separate group with a lower

status (Norwich, 2008). This dilemma has particular resonance in the USA where the agenda of standards-based reform, typified by the 'No Child Left Behind' legislation and policy of 2002, has been criticised for potentially alienating and excluding lower-achieving students (including those with special educational needs) out of the system (Norwich, 2008). In Ireland, while no distinct curriculum has been mandated for students with special educational needs, curriculum guidelines have been produced for teachers working with students considered to have general learning disabilities (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2007b), while many students with special educational needs also access mainstream curricula and programmes such as the Primary Curriculum, the Junior Certificate and Junior Certificate Schools Programme, the Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate programmes. The question of what constitutes an "appropriate education" for students with special educational needs, one of the cornerstones of the EPSEN Act (Ireland, 2004, p. 5), is one which has not been definitively answered and which could rightly be considered a valid research question to be addressed, although not in this study.

The third dilemma considered relevant to special education is the dilemma of location. The dilemma is whether to teach students who need special education in regular classrooms, and in so doing, risk the likelihood that they will have less access to scarce and specialist services and facilities, or not to teach them in regular classes, thereby potentially isolating them so that they feel excluded and not accepted by others (Norwich, 2008). This tension in many ways is the central question in the inclusion debate, with some arguing for an absolute end to any form of different or segregated education (Oliver, 1995; Skrtic, 1995b; Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 2004) and others advocating that special schooling is not only justifiable but has to be maintained as an option for some children (O'Keeffe, 2004; Lawlor, 2005; Warnock, 2005; M. Farrell, 2006). A third position holds that to focus on location as the

battle ground is to miss the point, that the central question should be about what and how learning takes place rather than where it takes place (O'Brien, 2000).

Norwich, in his recently published study, sought the views of practitioners<sup>xxv</sup> in specific school systems in England, the USA and the Netherlands in relation to recognising and responding to dilemmas of difference in special and inclusive education (Norwich, 2008). His findings led him to suggest that a majority of practitioners across all three countries recognised dilemmas to some degree in the three presented areas, and that a majority of those who recognised dilemmas reported that they saw some resolution of these dilemmas. In summary, he found that dilemmas were recognised and resolutions were possible, but no simple 'final solution' was forthcoming. The relevance of Norwich's study will be highlighted again in Chapter 6, where the analysis of students' perspectives of special schooling will focus on these three specific areas of identification, curriculum and location.

For now, the focus changes to preparing the ground for this analysis by returning to the concepts of children's rights, specifically their right to express their views and to have these views given due weight.

### **3.4 Views of children and young people**

#### *3.4.1 A right to express a view: driving forces*

There is a growing acceptance now that young people have a right to be involved in decision making which affects them (Rose & Shevlin, 2003; Jones, 2005), and a growing body of literature on children's participation (Shier, 2001). The stimulus for this increased emphasis on children's participation and on hearing and heeding children's views arises from Article 12

of UNCRC<sup>xxvi</sup>, referred to earlier. The UNCRC was ratified by Ireland in 1992 (Pinkerton, 2004) and to date has been ratified by 192 countries in the world (UNICEF, 2008). Article 12 is regarded as one of the most radical and far reaching aspects of the Convention (Shier, 2001) and as one of the most challenging aspects of the Convention, as “it strikes directly at the complexity and the power differentials involved in children and young people’s subordinate status”, (Pinkerton, 2004, p. 119). However, it is also recognised as “one of the provisions most widely violated and disregarded in almost every sphere of children’s lives” (Shier, 2001, p. 108).

A substantial literature has been produced in Ireland in recent times which relates to children’s participation and the need for those in positions of power and responsibility, including researchers, to listen to the views of children (Ireland, 2000; Lansdown, 2001; Zappone, 2002; Devine, 2003; Rose & Shevlin, 2003; Butler-Scally, 2004; Pinkerton, 2004). National policy in this area in Ireland is set out in Goal 1 of the National Children’s Strategy, acclaimed as “the most significant policy commitment to children and young people made by Government in the history of the Irish State” (Pinkerton, 2004, p. 120). Goal 1 repeats almost verbatim the text of Article 12: “children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity” (Ireland, 2000, p. 30). The direct involvement of children and young people in the consultation process for the National Children’s Strategy reflected a commitment to implementation of this goal in real terms. Children were seen from the start as central stakeholders in the process, and novel ways of enabling them to participate were used, including direct invitations to children from the then Minister for Children<sup>xxvii</sup>, urging them to contact her with their views (Pinkerton, 2004). However, the lack of involvement of children in the evaluation of the strategy after

three years has been criticised: this is an aspect of children's participation that is often overlooked in favour of more measurable, rational evaluation instruments (Pinkerton, 2004).

### 3.4.2 *Frameworks for analysis of children's participation*

Traditionally the focus of children's research has been on doing research on or about children (Rose & Shevlin, 2003). The role of children as co-researchers is now gaining prominence with a noticeable change since the late 1980s coinciding with a new paradigm of childhood which recognises the value of children's views (Waldron, 2006). Children are acknowledged as actors who 'speak' in their own right and report valid views and experiences, as social and cultural agents (Wyness, 2000; Waldron, 2006) rather than subjects or objects of research (O'Kane, 2000; Kellett, Forrest, Dent, & Ward, 2004; Alderson, 2005b; Whyte, 2005).

Such increased focus on the rights of children to participate in research on topics of interest to them has led to the development of analytical frameworks for examining levels of children's participation (Hart, 1992, 1997; Rocha, 1997; Treseder, 1997; Shier, 2001; Lundy, 2007). These frameworks have relevance to both the methodology and focus of this particular study, and three in particular are presented here.

The 'ladder of participation' (see *Figure 3* below), which Hart constructed, borrowed a metaphor from Arnstein (1969). In it he sets up a hierarchy of participation where manipulation, decoration, and tokenism are considered the three lowest levels of 'non-participation' of children. The remaining rungs of the ladder indicate increasing degrees of participation of children, culminating in a process where children initiate and implement their own ideas and invite adults to join them in making decisions (Hart, 1992).

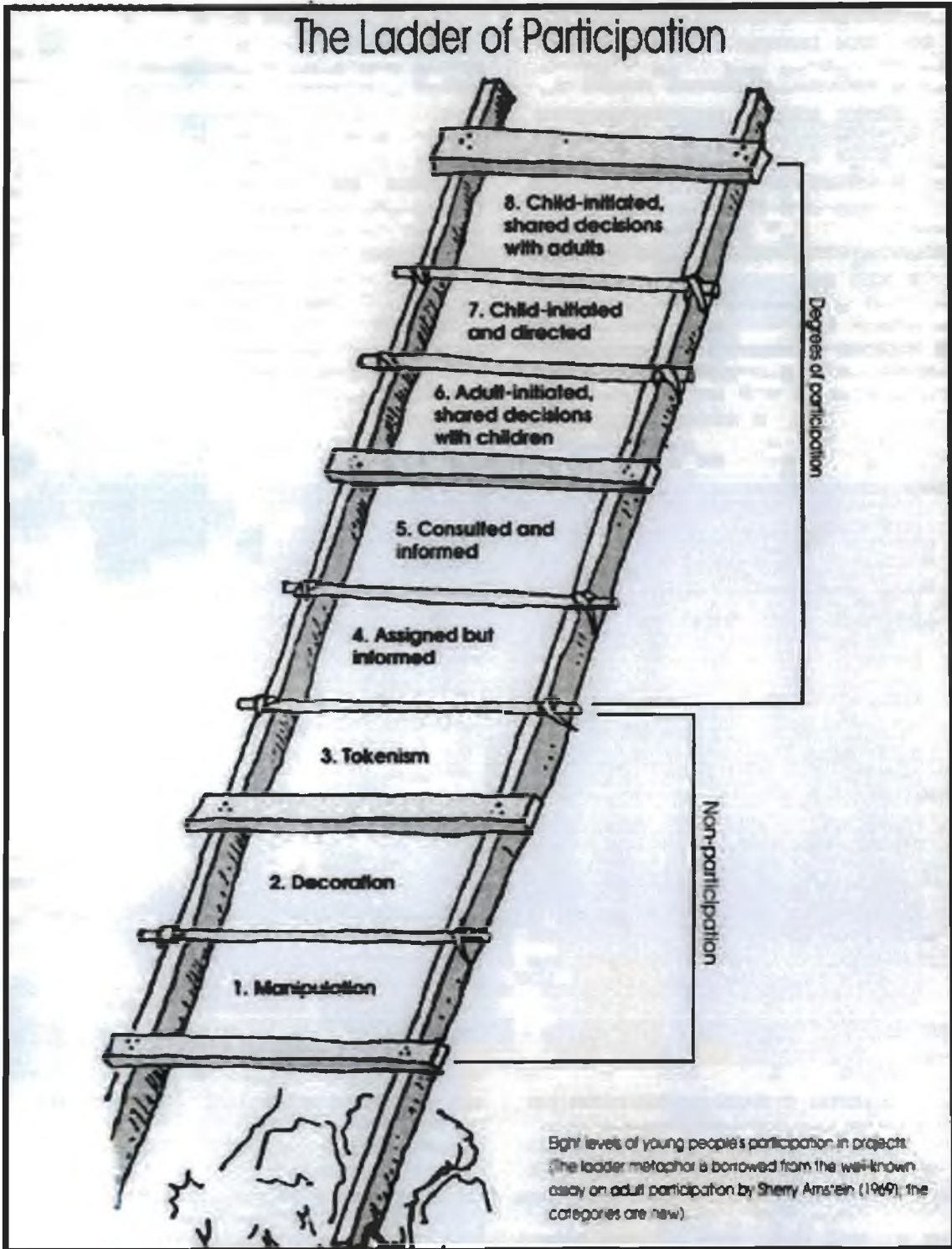


Figure 3: Hart's 'ladder of participation' (Hart, 1992, p. 8)

Hart later clarifies the purpose of the ladder and adds a note of caution about its use:

while the upper levels of the ladder express increasingly degrees of initiation by children, they are not meant to imply that a child should always be attempting to operate at the highest level of their competence ... A child may elect to work at different levels on different projects or during different phases of the same project ... The important principle is to avoid working at the three lowest levels, the rungs of non-participation (Hart, 1997, cited in Rajani, 2001, p. 55).

A more recent alternative theoretical model for understanding and analysing children's participation complements Hart's ladder. This model consists of five levels of participation, ranging from the base level where children are listened to, to the pinnacle where children share power and responsibility for decision making with adults (Shier, 2001). This framework also helpfully identifies three degrees of commitment to the process of empowerment at each level, which are named openings (a readiness to operate at this level), opportunities (conditions are right to operate at this level) and obligations (the agreed policy of the organisation is to operate at this level). In the hope that the model operates not only on a theoretical level but also at a practical level for individuals and groups who work with children, it also pinpoints the level at which organisations should operate in order to fulfil the minimum obligations as set out in Article 12. The framework is reproduced in *Figure 4* below.



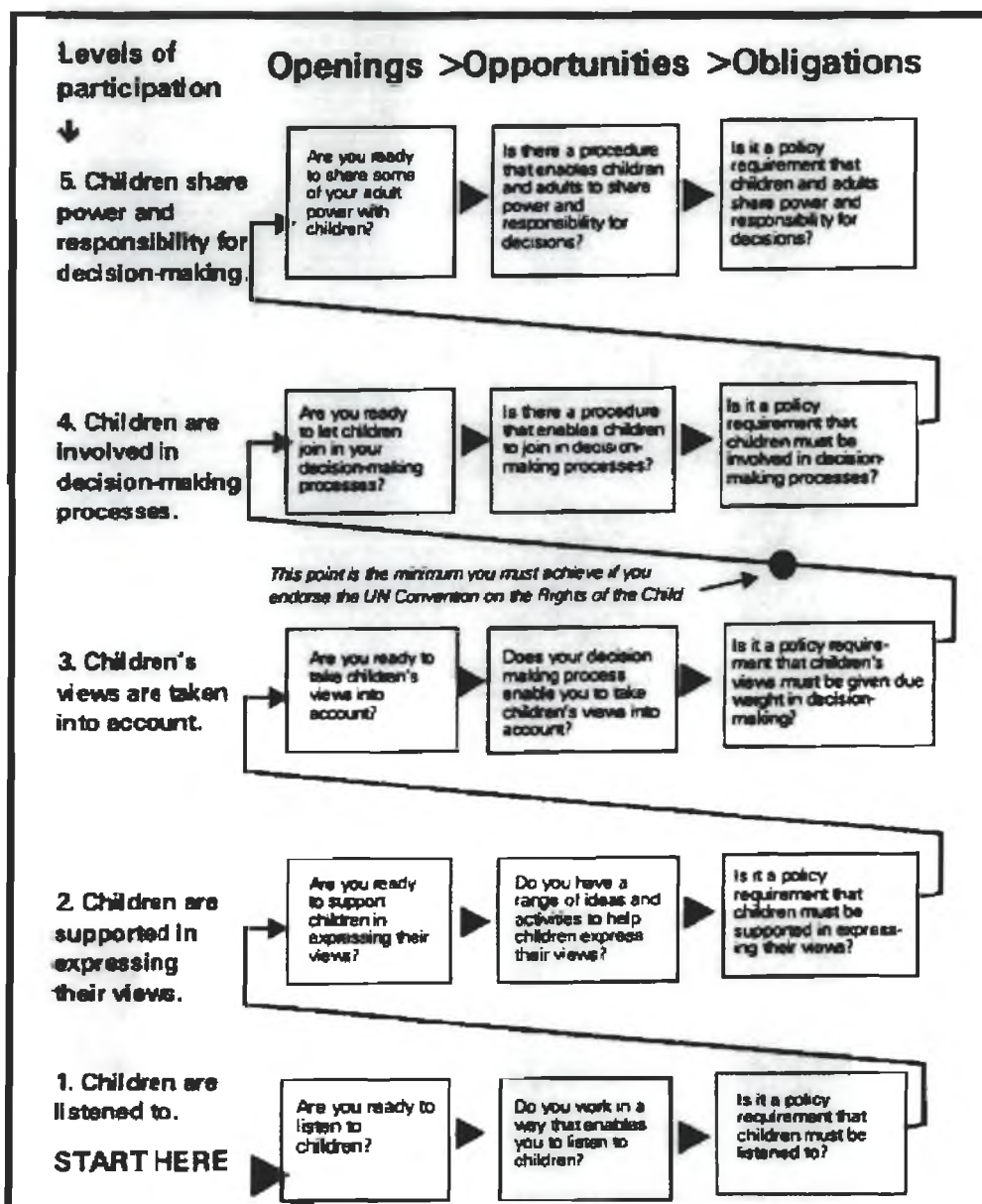


Figure 4: Shier's model for enhancing children's participation in decision making (Shier, 2001, p. 111).

It is clear from Shier's model that listening to children is considered the minimum level of engagement that is acceptable, but that this alone does not satisfy the legal obligations under Article 12 of the UNCRC, as further action beyond mere listening is required. This position is similar to that expressed more recently that terms such as 'pupil voice' or 'the right to be heard' are not specific enough as they potentially diminish the import of Article 12 (Lundy,

2007). Full implementation of Article 12 would require that children and young people exert their “right to express their views *freely* in *all* matters affecting them” (United Nations, 1989), a position which appears to be commonly ignored, particularly in schools (Lundy, 2007). For example, research conducted by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) found that the single most important issue for children in Northern Ireland was their lack of a say in decisions made about them, echoing findings of previous studies (Lundy, 2007). The practice of actively involving pupils in decision making needs to be “firmly located within the framework of children’s rights” (Lundy, 2007, p. 931) and should be considered neither as a privilege imparted by adults, nor a duty with which children must comply.

Lundy proposes a model (a visual representation of which is presented in *Figure 5* below) for conceptualising the full remit of Article 12, in which she links Article 12 to other articles from the UNCRC and to four interrelated concepts: space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy, 2007, p. 932). Each of these has relevance to this particular study, as outlined below and also referred to in the next chapter.

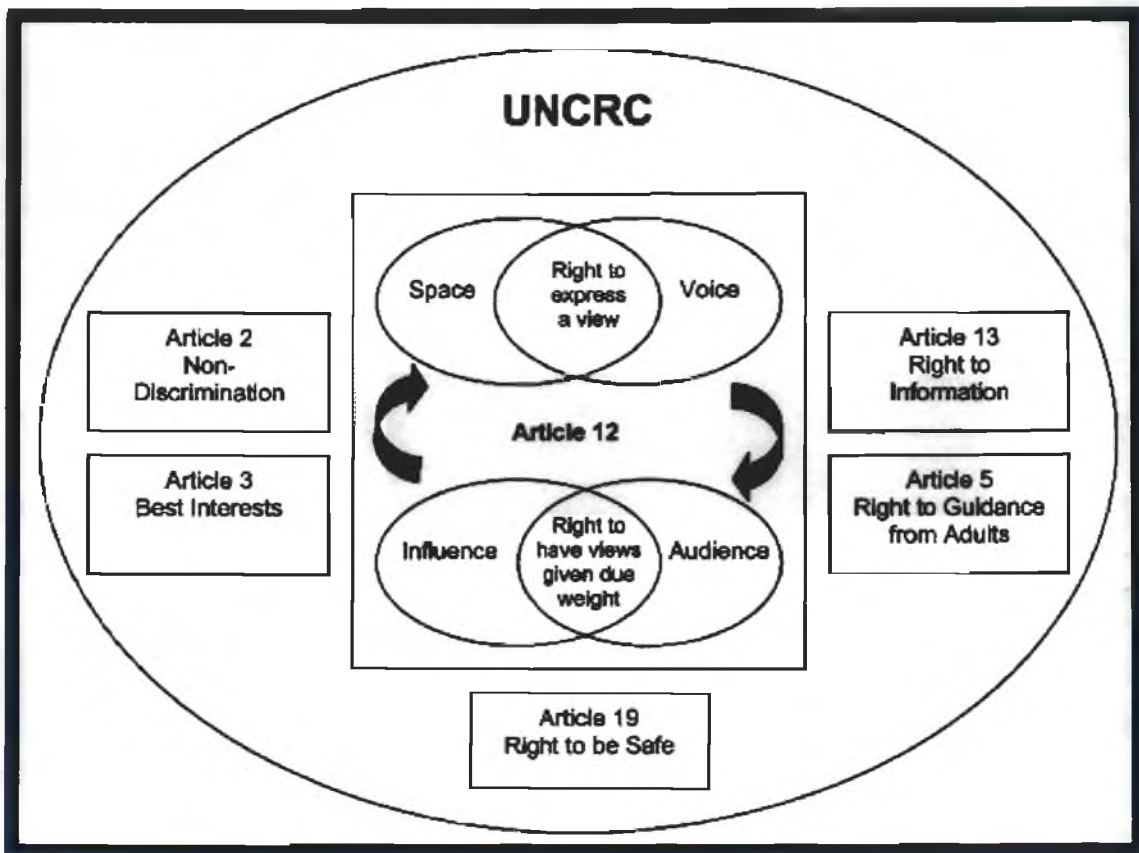


Figure 5: Lundy's model for conceptualising Article 12 (Lundy, 2007, p. 932)

The first concept which Lundy addresses is 'space', with the focus on ensuring a safe place for young people to give their views, without the predetermination of themes by adults. It also concerns the need to be inclusive of all views, while at the same time respecting the decision of some not to participate in decision-making processes. The concept of 'voice' is closely linked to space, with a specific remit to ensure views are given freely, without adult influence, and also to ensure appropriate methods are used to enable children and young people to present their 'voice' – not just orally but through writing, art or any other media they choose (Lundy, 2007).

The other two concepts of audience and influence are linked, as can be seen in *Figure 5* above, to the matter of ‘due weight’ being given to the views expressed. These views cannot be given ‘due weight’ if the audience are not adequately prepared, skilled or willing to act as active listeners. Neither due weight nor due respect accrues if a ‘tokenistic’ role is adopted, whereby those with influence pay ‘lip-service’ to listening to children’s views, but, under cover of false pretence, fail to act upon or take heed of these views. This pretence and lack of outcome can actually prove to be counter-productive, as was the case in the NICCY research which found a degree of ‘consultation fatigue’ among a group of marginalised young people. These young people declined to express their views as they had become tired of “government consultations with children and young people which had brought little tangible benefit to their daily experience” (Lundy, 2007, p. 934).

As stated above, each of these four elements are of particular relevance to this study in its totality, from its design to data collection to analysis, and in seeing the participants as people with stories to tell, and having both a right and a capability to tell them. The next section examines this idea more closely.

### *3.4.3 Linking models of participation with the theoretical framework*

Three models have now been presented which encapsulate different versions of conceptualising participation by children and young people in decision making and in research activities. What is the connection between these models, the earlier theoretical framework as presented in *Figure 2*, and the study as a whole? The models emphasise that there are incremental levels of participation (Hart and Shier) and various inter-related elements (Shier and Lundy) which are useful tools in raising adult awareness of the extent of

implementation of Article 12 (1). All three strongly argue that the pretence of tokenistic listening to children's views, without any parallel intent to take these views seriously or to act upon them, is counterproductive and wrong, and comes nowhere near fulfilling legal obligations under Article 12. This position is consistent with the theoretical perspective created earlier which frames this study. A weak thesis of insider epistemology acknowledges that the views of the 'insiders' (in this study, the participating students) are to be given 'due weight', while a social relational understanding of disability and a relational concept of the subject which consider the individual best placed to present his/her own views, also consider the relevance of social context and the views of others as important. On another level, the challenge remains to ascertain what the phrase "the child who is capable of forming his or her own views" in Article 12 conveys, and who decides on this capability. This and other related matters are addressed in the next section which focuses on how (and how well) the views of children considered to have (general) learning disabilities are taken into account.

### **3.5 Views of children with learning disabilities**

Research which seeks the views of persons with disability has often involved persons with a physical or sensory impairment<sup>xxviii</sup> (examples include Kenny *et al.*, 2000; Rooney, 2003; Grundy *et al.*, 2005). However, over the past decade a much greater emphasis has been placed on research which seeks to include the views of people with 'general learning disabilities' (e.g. Davis *et al.*, 2000; McLarty & Gibson, 2000; Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Norwich & Kelly, 2005; Stalker & Connors, 2005; M. Farrell, 2006). This has led to some people who might be considered part of this cohort becoming more knowledgeable about research and more interested in being directly involved in doing research (Atkinson, 2002). There is a trend in both policy and practice and in research towards addressing the dearth of systematic evidence portraying and analysing the views of children with disabilities (A. Lewis *et al.*, 2007a), and

this is facilitated by “taking account of the perspective of those who would not previously have been seen as able to form a valid view” (Ware, 2004, p. 175). People with learning disabilities are now seen as reliable informants who hold valid opinions and have a right to express them, a view reflected by calls for research with such persons to be inclusive and participatory (A. Lewis & Porter, 2004), although it has also been recognised that children with disabilities in Ireland face additional barriers to having their voices heard (Kilkelly, 2007).

One challenge with implementing Article 12 is that “the difficulties of achieving this with *all* children have been more slowly acknowledged” (Porter & Lacey, 2005, p. 85) while it has also been suggested that Article 12 does not grant the child autonomy as decision making is necessarily circumscribed by assessments of competence and understanding (Whyte, 2005). It has also been noted that difficult methodological issues need to be considered when gathering views of children, particularly those with learning difficulties (A. Lewis, 2002), while researchers should consider using more materials like pictures, artefacts, videos and cue cards to support children’s understanding (Jones, 2005).

Another difficulty is that what is meant by the terms ‘capable’ and ‘due weight’ is open to interpretation, and perhaps it is possible that these terms may be used as mechanisms for denying or restricting children’s rights to express their views in certain contexts. Children’s capacity for decision making increases proportionately with the opportunities they are offered to have a say in matters affecting them (Lundy, 2007), and they are often more limited by others’ low expectations of them (A. Lewis, 1995) and by adult scepticism about their capacity to make decisions (Lundy, 2007) than by their own competency or other conditions.

Children categorised as having learning disabilities may be particularly vulnerable to the charge of not being ‘capable’ of expressing views, and thus are at risk of being further marginalised. This point is relevant for this study because it links with the theoretical perspective presented earlier. If ‘medical model’ thinking prevails, where the individual is viewed from a deficit rather than a capability perspective, and there is a lack of recognition of the need to acknowledge ‘insider epistemology’, then this can lead to underestimation or ignoring of children’s capabilities. It is therefore vital to ensure that the views of children with disabilities are “respected in accordance with their evolving capacities” and that they are “provided with whatever mode of communication they need to facilitate expressing their views<sup>xxix</sup>” (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006, p. 9).

This underestimation of capability has been documented in a number of studies, one of which involved students in a special school in Scotland who were considered to have ‘multiple impairments’ and used a variety of forms of verbal and non-verbal communication. In this study the researchers admitted post-study that they had been influenced by staff in the school who underestimated the abilities of the children and that they “had failed to recognise the children’s social ability to withhold access to their world” (Davis *et al.*, 2000, p. 210). This observation is echoed in another study involving students with disabilities where the researchers encountered “surprise from the school at the extent to which the child was able to communicate their views and the fullness of these views” (A. Lewis *et al.*, 2007a, p. 210).

Taking the views of persons with disability seriously applies to adults as well as children, of course. In the UK, the views of persons with learning disabilities have been highlighted in the series of ‘Valuing People’ reports published in recent years (UK Department of Health, 2001;

UK Government, 2004, 2005), and in material available on the related website (<http://valuingpeople.gov.uk>), including a range of material published in easy-read, user-friendly format. In Ireland, policy at governmental, non-governmental and local level has also sought to enable persons with disability to have a say and to play an active role in research. Recent positive developments in inclusive research involving persons with disabilities (including those with learning disabilities) can be seen in examples of initiatives and guidance both at national level with the publication of *Guidelines for Including People with Disabilities in Research*, (National Disability Authority, 2002) and at local level, for example the *Codes of Ethics and Principles of Good Research Practice*<sup>xxx</sup>, (COPE Foundation, 2004). In addition, consultative fora (for example, People with Disabilities in Ireland, 2003) have also helped to enable children and young adults with disabilities to express their views. It is vital, however, that the views expressed are then taken seriously and given 'due weight'.

These initiatives all reinforce the assertion that "given these drives it would seem remarkable for researchers to fail to recognise the importance of eliciting the views of this group of people" (Porter & Lacey, 2005, p. 85). However, concern has been expressed about the "paucity of studies emanating from the social model of disability ... and the low rate of participation of people with disabilities in the research process as distinct from acting as respondents" (Whyte, 2005). While there are some examples of research involving either adults with a general learning disability (Browne, 2001; Flynn, 2004; McCloskey, 2004) or children who have a sensory disability (Rooney, 2003), or physical or sensory disabilities (Kenny *et al.*, 2000; O'Donnell, 2000), none of these match the profile of the participants in the current study. It is more difficult to find research seeking the views of children who have general learning disabilities, although some are included in the selection of relevant studies which are summarised and critiqued in the next section.



### 3.6 Views of students about education: some relevant studies

While there is increasing recognition of the importance of consulting students about their views on school and learning, there is also a lack of information about how best to achieve appropriate and effective consultation (Fielding & Bragg, 2003). A small number of studies which sought the views of students in relation to their experiences and perspectives of school were selected for closer examination in the context of this specific study. These were selected because of their similarity to this study in at least one key aspect. In the case of the first study there was similarity in some of the specific methods used by participants (written and pictorial representations gathered in an open-ended way) to express their views (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003). A large three-year longitudinal study with three distinct phases (Smyth *et al.*, 2004; Smyth *et al.*, 2006; Smyth *et al.*, 2007) was chosen for the similarity in terms of age profile between its participants and the participants in this study, as well as some overlap in curriculum access, albeit in different settings. Other studies were chosen specifically because they focused on eliciting the views of students with learning difficulties / disabilities. One involved children in a special school in London (Norwich, 1997), while two others sought the views of students with disabilities in both mainstream and special schools (Norwich & Kelly, 2005; A. Lewis *et al.*, 2007a).

#### 3.6.1 *Views of students in regular education settings*

'*The School I'd Like*' project was an exercise conducted in conjunction with the Guardian newspaper in the UK over three months in 2001, when children between the ages of four and eighteen were asked to describe the school they would like (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003). The data gathered were interesting both for the variety of format in which they were presented (essays, pictures, stories, plays, designs, poems, plans, photographs) and for their content. The

word which appeared most often was ‘respect’ – “it was what the children wanted but felt they didn’t get” (Gardiner, 2003, p. ix), while another recurring theme was the likening of school to a prison. Suggestions for school improvement included those related to the physical environment such as more comfortable furniture (especially chairs), more time and space to play, and clean lockable toilets (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003). Other suggestions related to curriculum and learning, including a desire for a curriculum driven by curiosity and adventure and opportunities to learn outside of school and class boundaries.

Rules and regulations were, as might be expected, the subject of some criticism: there was much negative comment about school uniform, which was considered by many an affront to individuality, and there was a strong aversion to the “regulated and segmented patterns of the school day” (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003, p. 122). The relational dimensions of school, both adult-children relations and relations between children were also considered very important. Fear of, or actual accounts of, being bullied featured regularly, while many contributions wished for teachers who were kind, funny and happy, who listened to and respected children, and who did not shout. Two other findings from the project are relevant to this study: the evidence appeared to suggest that the enjoyment of school declined sharply as children got older, and, as noted above (Lundy, 2007), it was found that “a healthier school is produced by increasing pupil autonomy and influence” (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003, p. 111).

While this study had many attractive features, the authors acknowledged some caveats: there appeared to be evidence of ‘rather deadening’ teacher guidance in some contributions, and the published account is presented merely as a ‘snapshot’ of how schools were viewed by students (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003). It also differs substantially from my study in that a far

greater number of children participated, of a much wider age range (4-18), and it refers to a different country. Nonetheless, the innovative ways in which children expressed their views, and the clarity with which these views were presented, were extremely enlightening.

From an Irish perspective, one study of note is the longitudinal study of the first three years of second-level education commissioned by the NCCA and carried out by the ESRI between 2002 and 2005. Principals, teachers, parents and students participated in a mixed methods study, the breadth of which provided an insight into their views and experiences. Some key findings from the study which reflect the perspectives of the students are highlighted now, as distinct from those of the other stakeholders or the findings of a more general nature<sup>xxx</sup>.

The first element of the study explored young people's experiences of the transition from primary school into second level education. It was found that students tended to have mixed feelings about starting secondary school, with many feeling both excited and nervous. A positive school climate, especially in relation to student-teacher relations, helped students to acclimatise, and also helped them to make more progress academically (Smyth *et al.*, 2004). Students indicated a preference for subjects with a practical orientation, such as Art, Woodwork, Home Economics, Computer Studies and PE, and felt that too much time was spent on 'academic' subjects (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004, p. 12).

Students reported that as the first year progressed, they "enjoyed school less, had more negative views about subjects and teachers, and were less likely to look forward to going to school" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004, p. 16), while their academic progress (consistent with other research findings) also declined<sup>xxx</sup>. Many students,

particularly boys, reported being bullied, which is particularly unsettling, and many pleaded for a reduction in bullying to help them settle into school<sup>xxxiii</sup>.

The second strand of the study focused on capturing the views of second year students, a group regarded by the authors as “relatively neglected in Irish research” (Smyth *et al.*, 2006, p. 8). It corroborated findings from the first strand of the study, for example that students generally became less positive about school as they got older<sup>xxxiv</sup> and that the informal school atmosphere continued to have a significant influence on how students fared (Smyth *et al.*, 2006). Students were more likely to like school if they had positive interactions with teachers, while bullying was also less of a concern for students in schools where a positive climate prevailed. Students continued to prefer subjects with a more practical orientation (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2006b). The single most reported characteristic that helped students to learn was where the teacher explained things clearly, with a helpful or friendly teacher with whom students could talk or have fun positively influencing student learning (Smyth *et al.*, 2006). Students in lower stream classes displayed more negative attitudes towards school and were “disproportionately found in the group of students that appear to be disengaging from school life” (Smyth *et al.*, 2006, p. 200).

This phase of research recommended that schools facilitate and encourage greater opportunities for students to express their views, through Student Councils or other consultative structures. A warning was added that these fora should not be used as a token gesture by those in power towards acknowledging student voice (reflecting Hart’s non-participatory level of tokenism and Lundy’s concern that the pretence of listening can be

counter-productive), or should not give preference to students who are seen as more articulate, well behaved or already more involved in school life (Smyth *et al.*, 2006).

The third strand of this longitudinal study examined perspectives as students faced the Junior Certificate exam in third year. Two phases of data collection were held in 2005, one prior to and the other post the exam (Smyth *et al.*, 2007). Trends from the first two strands were maintained: the characteristics of good teaching (clear explanations, fun, group work and practical work) remained consistent across the three years of the study, while subject preferences also remained as before (with greater levels of interest in practical / activity-based subjects). Students expressed disappointment that “time on the subjects which they enjoy most is considerably less than time they spend on subjects in which they have little interest” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2007a, p. 18).

Consistency across the three strands was evident in negative findings also, with a decline in positive attitudes to school continuing: “over 20% of students surveyed *did not* look forward to going to school and more than 10% of students *did not* find schoolwork interesting” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2007a, p. 9). By third year, over one quarter of students “were either drifting or had disengaged from school” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2007a, p. 23), and these were more likely to be boys in lower streams, from a working-class background, with lower initial reading and maths scores.

As with the previous study, this longitudinal study had many positive aspects: it tracked students’ views over a three year period and did so using both qualitative and quantitative methods. However, the sample size of over 900 students was very large, and the use of

qualitative techniques was restricted to group interviews, which the authors recognise can be problematic for two reasons. Firstly, one or two students may dominate, and secondly, some students may be wary of expressing their views in front of classmates (Smyth *et al.*, 2006). The wide range of methods used in my study ensured that these potential risks were reduced.

### 3.6.2 *Views of students with disabilities*

A variety of studies have been conducted where the perspectives of students in special schools has been sought, three of which are outlined here. Two (Norwich & Kelly, 2004; A. Lewis *et al.*, 2007a) consider the views of ‘disabled children’ in both special and mainstream settings, while the third (Norwich, 1997) was sited in a special school. The studies are discussed here in chronological order.

Norwich (1997) conducted semi-structured interviews in one inner London special school with nineteen adolescents with MLD to gauge their perspectives on school. This study is relevant to the current study due to the similarity between schools (urban special school<sup>xxxv</sup>) and profile of students (adolescents with similar learning needs), but also because it sought to explore whether students experienced tensions between the positive and negative consequences of attending a special school. Once again, however, the use of a single methodology may have limited the participants in their full expression of views, especially as some students were identified by the author as having speech and language difficulties.

The study found that over 60% of responses from participants were positive about attending a special school. The most frequent positive comments about the special school related to good teachers, while negative comments were mostly about bullying and teasing by others, both

within and outside the school. The study concluded that a tension did exist for the students between the positive benefits of the school which were predominantly about learning and support, and the negative connotations of being at a 'stigmatised' school and being teased, especially by their peers who attended other schools. However, this tension did *not* present itself as a dilemma for these students, as they did not have any significant choice about where they went to school (Norwich, 1997). This apparent lack of choice raises an interesting question about students expressing views and having their views given due weight in relation to what school, or type of school, they attend. Nonetheless, in spite of this, the vast majority of students thought that it was good to have a special school like the one they attended (only one participant favoured closing this type of special school) and they expressed no confidence in the potential of mainstream schools to provide for their learning needs.

A related study to this 1997 study (the same researcher was involved) is referred to here because of the similarity in participants' learning profile and sample size to the current study (Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Norwich & Kelly, 2005). 101 children with 'MLD', aged between 10 and 14, participated. These were from one UK local education authority area: 50 attended special schools; the remainder were in mainstream schools, with a rural / urban mix of students. Individual semi-structured interviews produced two findings of methodological relevance: the older students and the students in the mainstream schools tended to be more engaged and to give more in-depth answers. Again, this appears to suggest that for students in special schools who may have additional areas of difficulty, including difficulties in language and communication, alternatives to the interview format may be warranted. Nonetheless, this study, although utilising a different methodology to mine, and including participants from more than one setting, appears to be the most similar to my study.

Some relevant findings from this study were that only one in six of the students in the special schools expressed mainly positive views of mainstream schools, while a majority of the students in mainstream schools held positive perspectives on special schools, although these students' lack of experience of special schools may be a factor (only 14% had attended a special school). Nevertheless, although only one of the students in mainstream wanted to attend a special school, eighteen of the special school students expressed a preference for attending a mainstream school.

More significantly, the authors noted that "the most interesting emergent finding was the high level of 'bullying'<sup>xxxvi</sup> experienced" (Norwich & Kelly, 2004, p. 60), most of which was considered by students to be related to their learning difficulties. The vast majority (83%) of participants had experienced some form of 'bullying' (which was classified as physical, verbal or teasing). Three sources of 'bullying' were identified: students in their own school, students in other mainstream schools, and neighbours and peers outside school. With no significant differences across type of school, the authors concluded that bullying is pervasive for students receiving special education, regardless of placement, but students in special schools were much more likely to be targeted for bullying by peers outside their own school.

A third study of relevance is a Disability Rights Commission (DRC) study conducted in the UK in 2006, which sought the views of children with disabilities (incorporating children included under two specific terms: 'disabilities, special needs and/or difficulties' and 'learning difficulties and disabilities'), and their parents, in relation to their experiences of education. A range of methods was used, and although children were once again interviewed (individually or in groups), it was specified that the interviews included activities involving



“preference ranking, drawings and photos” (A. Lewis *et al.*, 2007a, p. 11), making the exercise more participatory than a traditional interview. It found that students were pleased with the support they received in school from teachers, teaching assistants and support workers, and little evidence that they felt stigmatised or uncomfortable with this help (A. Lewis *et al.*, 2007a). The study also found no significant differences between pupils in special schools and mainstream schools in terms of participation in out-of-school activities, although a noted barrier to participation was that “out-of-school options were restricted for pupils for whom greater support was required” (A. Lewis *et al.*, 2007a, p. 66).

In relation to curriculum options, this study found that special schools made great efforts to provide as wide and varied a curriculum as possible and also recognised the importance of extra-curricular activities. Children generally indicated that they felt included in school, although they were more likely to feel excluded during less structured activities and during break times. The researchers surmise that this may be due to the fact that these activities and times are more dependent on friendship groups and thus the students are more susceptible to potential negative attitudes and behaviours from their peers (A. Lewis *et al.*, 2007a). School Councils were identified as a powerful vehicle for exercising and developing an understanding of children’s rights, while the majority of students held the view that having a choice of educational setting (mainstream or special school) was necessary, in order to enable movement between different settings at different times, where a ‘best-fit’ approach for each individual would pertain. It was concluded that choice in provision was absolutely essential: “for some, being able to access mainstream provision was vital for self-confidence, socialisation and coping; for others, special school was an educational life-raft that probably saved them from permanent educational exclusion” (A. Lewis *et al.*, 2007a, p. 147).

This DRC study also found, consistent with the previous study referred to above, that many of the students involved had experienced bullying in the form of negative attitudes from their peers, usually in school but sometimes outside of school. Also, social isolation was a factor for many, and they relied on the support of families and siblings to overcome this ‘barrier’. For one student, changing from a mainstream school to a special school had alleviated a bullying problem, although it was not claimed that this was the cause of or the only factor which led to this alleviation. Echoing the findings from both the ESRI longitudinal study and the Burke and Grosvenor (2003) project referred to earlier, students described helpful teachers as those who were patient, kind and fun, who didn’t nag or shout, and who helped children to understand, whereas less helpful teachers were those who shouted and nagged and were unsympathetic and non-responsive to individual needs (A. Lewis *et al.*, 2007a).

### 3.7 Summing up the selected literature

The importance of listening to the views of children and young people cannot be underestimated. In fact, listening to children’s views is a necessary but not sufficient condition for compliance with legal obligations under Article 12 of the UNCRC. Children must be enabled and empowered to express their views freely, through the provision of a safe *space* and multiple opportunities and mechanisms for their *voice* to be communicated. Additionally, the views must be given due weight, by an engaged *audience* who will consider carefully the appropriate *influence* to be given to these views (Lundy, 2007). This applies to their views on *all* matters that affect them, and given its central role in their lives, their views on education and schooling are particularly important. This right also extends to all children, including those considered to have special educational needs. For these students, one of the critical questions is the extent to which they have a say in where they go to school and

“whether the child’s voice should be the determining factor in education decision-making” (Norwich & Kelly, 2004, p. 62).

Select studies have been examined because of their relevance to my research. These studies indicate factors that enhance the positive views of children about school. This is more likely in schools with an informal school climate, where staff members are considered helpful and student-staff relations are positive, and where a culture of listening to children’s views prevails. Specifically related to children with learning disabilities, the studies show that many of them experience ‘bullying’ from a variety of sources, and that those attending special schools generally spoke positively about these schools, although a tension about special schooling may also exist for many students.

I have also noted some limitations in these studies, particularly in relation to methodology. A wider range of strategies would enhance the ability of students with disabilities to participate in research. Also, a gap appears to exist in Ireland in relation to the lack of any larger-scale research which seeks the views of students who attend a special school<sup>xxxvii</sup>. It is this gap which this study addresses, through the use of a range of methods, designed to enable all students who want to express their views to do so. I now turn to explaining the methodology and the range of strategies used for data collection and data analysis in this study.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the methodology for the study. Qualitative methods of data collection were used in this study, with a range of different strategies designed to contribute in specific ways to the overall process of enabling students to participate and to have their views listened to and valued (*i.e.* given 'due weight'), as is considered appropriate in conducting research with children (O'Kane, 2000; A. Farrell, 2005b; Morrow, 2005).

The chapter begins by clarifying the research design and explaining why a qualitative approach to data collection was adopted. It then addresses matters of credibility in the study, and highlights ethical matters which were considered at various stages. Both the proposed and actual phases of data collection are outlined, with a clear explanation as to why each of five phases in the process was used. The chapter concludes with explanatory detail on the processes of data storage, coding, sorting and analysis, which were initially conducted manually, and subsequently electronically.

### 4.2 Research design

The study is designed primarily as a case study, in that it is bounded by time and activity, and multiple data collection procedures are used to gather information over a sustained period of time (Creswell, 2003). The study is designed to complement the particular theoretical perspective that has been postulated and cognisance is also taken of the need for the research strategy and methods employed to be appropriate to the research questions (Robson, 2002). A specific framework for research design (see *Figure 6* below) is useful as it indicates

directionality in the research process, with the theory and purpose helping to frame the research questions, which in turn can guide the methods and decisions to be made about sampling / selecting research participants.

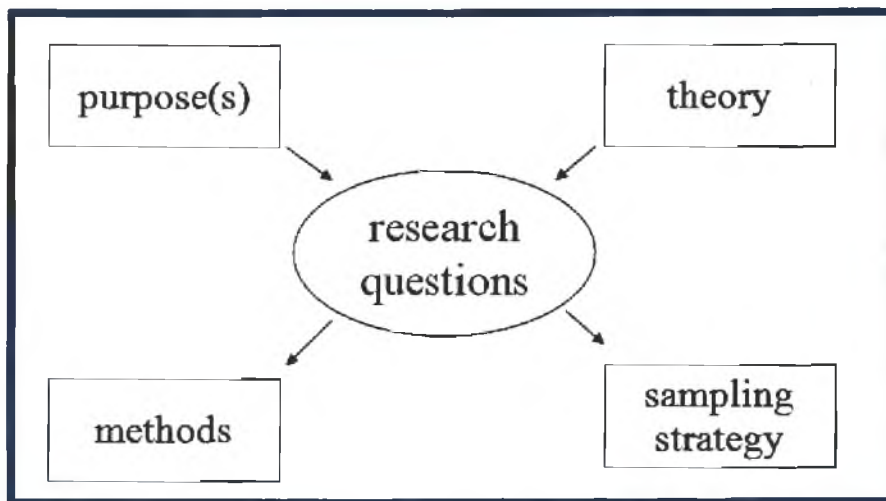


Figure 6: Robson's framework for research design (Robson, 2002, p. 82)

The research design for this study can be considered flexible rather than fixed. In fixed research design, all the separate components need to be clearly linked before the key aspect of data collection commences, and thus pilot work is essential. In contrast, in flexible research design, the separate elements must form a coherent unit by the end of the study (Robson, 2002), and thus pilot work was not conducted in this study. A fixed design strategy generally implies a quantitative approach, while a flexible design could include the collection of quantitative data but more commonly collects qualitative data. In respect of this study, it can be considered flexible as the detailed framework of the design emerged during the study rather than being tightly pre-planned (Robson, 2002). The initial plan envisaged the inclusion of both students and parents as research participants, while the theoretical perspective and

research questions evolved and changed over the duration of the study. These indicate the flexible nature of the design, with all design aspects being revisited throughout the process.

#### 4.3 Why qualitative research?

Qualitative research was considered to be the most appropriate methodology for this project for many reasons. Qualitative research takes place in the natural setting and thus fused relatively seamlessly with the daily workings of the school. Minimum disruptions to school or class routines were necessary, especially given the link between the data collection process and specific subjects like Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and English. Multiple methods were used that could be considered interactive and humanistic. The students were able to relate to me as a researcher who was also a member of staff. They were able to find out about the research in action, through the information displayed on the research notice board and by questioning me, and their active participation was a key element to the project (O'Kane, 2000; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000; Creswell, 2003; Waldron, 2006).

The emergent nature of the research design meant that while some broad themes were initially identified in the literature, it was decided to commence the initial phase of data collection in a completely open-ended manner, and to allow themes to emerge only through participants' inputs. This allowed the participants to control the agenda to a great extent and was a deliberate ceding of power, designed to address the power imbalance that may otherwise have prevailed (Waldron, 2006). Although subsequent phases were framed in a particular way which took account of the data produced in Phase 1, a forum was always made available to

participants in each of these phases to give their input on any matters that they considered relevant to the study.

The study is influenced by the three layers of theoretical understanding as presented in Chapter 2, namely that a weak thesis of insider epistemology is possible, and that a social relational model of disability and a relational theory of the subject represent the most appropriate lenses through which to understand the views of children with 'mild GLD'. What's the connection between the theoretical framework and the methodological direction? Qualitative research allows the insider's view to be prioritised, which dovetails appropriately with the theoretical perspective of insider epistemology (Tangen, 2008). Its grounding in the constructivist philosophical tradition fits with the idea that disability is a socially constructed phenomenon that means different things to different people (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004), a view also reflected in the social relational model of disability (C. Thomas, 1999).

The study also takes cognisance of the inevitability of personal interpretation in the qualitative tradition: "the researcher filters the data through a personal lens that is situated in a specific socio-political and historical moment" (Creswell, 2003, p. 182). The reflexive nature of qualitative research includes an acknowledgement of personal biases, interests and values, which I have already outlined in Chapter 1. Notwithstanding this personal interpretation, I contend that the findings are credible and valid, given the many steps taken to ensure credibility (see next section). This study involved an iterative thinking process whereby relevant literature was interwoven with the data collection and data analysis elements of the study. Finally, with specific reference to research involving children with special educational needs, qualitative research has been acknowledged as being most appropriate in that it

recognises the unique character of each individual participant (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004) and avoids attempting to homogenise a group that patently are not homogenous (Davis *et al.*, 2000).

#### 4.4 Ensuring credibility

Credibility corresponds to the test for internal validity that might apply in quantitative, positivist studies (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In qualitative research, the credibility test asks “if there is a correspondence between the way the respondents actually perceive social constructs and the way the researcher portrays their viewpoints” (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004, p. 105). The following strategies were used to test for credibility throughout this study.

A prolonged and substantial engagement<sup>xxxviii</sup> (Robson, 2002; Mertens, 2005) with participants is recommended to ensure that a good foundation of trust and mutual understanding is built up. In the case of my study it was relatively easy to build this trust as the participants were students whom I met on a daily basis and with whom I had already established a good working, trusting relationship, independent of this research. The data collection took place over a period of thirteen months, and all students were afforded the opportunity to participate in at least two of the five phases of the data collection process.

From the beginning “an extended discussion with a disinterested peer of findings, conclusions, analysis and hypotheses” was established (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004, p. 105), as well as regular consultations (via email, telephone and face-to-face) with the project supervisory team<sup>xxxix</sup>. These advisors were very useful as ‘sounding boards’ but also helped to challenge me to keep an open mind throughout the study, to consider a variety of options at



different points, and to reflect on opportunities to present material in a variety of ways. This advice also extended to making me aware of the potential to be misled by biases and prejudices and to take steps to prevent this from affecting the study.

Member checking is a vitally important criterion in establishing credibility and “a very valuable means of guarding against researcher bias” (Robson, 2002, p. 175). This was adhered to in the study, both in the focus groups and in the interviews by repeating comments made by participants and asking them to verify what they had said and to confirm the accuracy of any interpretations made. Providing ‘thick description’ (Ryle, cited in Geertz, 1973) of the many stages of the research, as well as providing the important contextual and cultural background, facilitates the reader in making a judgement on the transferability and transparency of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While these elements are both provided, no claims are made to external generalisability from this one case study. Nonetheless, this does not preclude the idea that aspects of this particular situation can ‘speak to’ or help to form a judgement about other situations (Schofield, 1993).

As noted earlier, given the flexible nature of the research design, any change in focus, method or interpretation was clearly documented, to enhance the credibility and dependability of the study. A confirmability audit (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) was conducted whereby all data gathered were stored and can be traced. Audio and video records of Phases 1-4, including back up versions, were stored electronically. Records of preparatory work, including all details related to ensuring informed, willing consent from participants (Alderson, 2000, 2005a) (and their parents also) and written transcripts of all data produced (oral, written and

graphic; from individuals, in pairs or in groups) were filed and organised chronologically, and maintained for a prolonged period after completion of the study.

A related concept is the question of the authenticity of the analysis: the extent to which a balanced view of all positions and beliefs was presented. An audit trail of all stages of work with the data in NVivo (through the Project Summary Report), as well as descriptions of instances where participants were involved in analysis of data they themselves had generated, can attest to the authenticity of the analysis.

#### **4.5 Ethical considerations**

Four major ethical concerns were carefully considered in relation to this research project, each of which required a satisfactory resolution. One centres on the potential tension between the teacher and researcher role, which could result in data being contaminated through acquiescence (participants may see it as more important to give views that they might consider pleasing to me than to give their own honest views) or through biased analysis on my behalf. Secondly, there is the necessity of ensuring that no harm is caused to participants in the process of doing this research or as a consequence of becoming involved. Two other matters that needed to be addressed were the matter of consent and the question of dissemination. While consent is often associated with the beginnings of the research process and dissemination with the conclusion of the process, in this study both elements were conducted throughout the various stages of the process. Each of these four matters is addressed in turn now.

#### 4.5.1 *Potential role conflict*

As a member of the teaching staff, my role as 'enforcer' of school policy and guardian of school ethos may have come into conflict with a need to be a 'neutral gatherer' on the question of seeking the views of students in relation to the education they are receiving. With the dual role of teacher/researcher, participants may have felt that there was a 'right answer' to each question being posed, which would have presented a potential problem for all involved had it not been addressed. Steps needed to be taken to overcome this potential risk of 'unequal power relationships' (Allen, 2005) and potential conflict of role, so that each potential participant felt comfortable and secure about saying what s/he wished to say, without fear or favour. Prior to commencing any data collection, reasons for conducting the research were given to all potential participants (and their parents) in an upfront and explicit manner, and this was repeated for new students (and their parents) who were involved in Phases 4 and 5 in the second year of the study, to strengthen the transparency of the study.

In the course of conducting focus groups and semi-structured interviews, it was essential to avoid asking 'leading questions' or expecting participants to answer in a particular way. Questions asked were open-ended in order to avoid this as far as possible. Prior to each specific instance of data collection, it was stated explicitly that all views were valid and that the most important attribute being sought from participants was that they speak openly and honestly. In my opinion this was achieved and participants did speak openly and honestly, although this is difficult to prove unequivocally. The number of 'dissenting' comments about various aspects of school life is surely testament to the honesty of responses, although it is also my view that on a small number of occasions, acquiescence (both with questions / comments made by me as researcher, and with comments from other participants in the focus group settings or in the written data which was presented in Phase 5) seemed to be apparent.

This acquiescence is consistent with literature on research with children who are considered to have 'intellectual disabilities' (Cuskelly, 2005).

As with any research question, the data collected depends on the participant group. Within a student population of just over 100, it would have been quite easy to identify those more likely to give specific types of answers, either in support of, or, conversely, highly critical of, the type of educational experience encountered in the school, thus creating findings to suit any pre-conceived views that may have been held. Care was taken to avoid selecting only convenient, compliant or 'on-message' participants – to do so would not have given a true sense of the collective voices of the students being expressed. Thus all students over the course of the two academic years of the project were invited to participate in both the initial and final phases of the process, while each of the three intermediate phases had specific, tailored purposes. This was not just a research study concerned with the concept of inclusion: it also prioritised an inclusive approach in its methodology, so that no student could feel excluded or voiceless, unless that was their own choice. However, some students did opt not to participate, which may indicate a lack of interest or a lack of confidence on their part, although reminders and positive encouragement were given to these students. It may be the case that these are the students who may have had more negative views about the school which they were unwilling to disclose to me, a member of the staff. Nonetheless, the inclusive nature of the study lends weight to the 'internal validity' of the study (Schofield, 1993), given the high percentage of students, roughly representative of age and gender differences, who participated in the study.

#### 4.5.2 *Beneficence*

A crucial aspect in any research is to ensure that no harm is perpetrated on the participants, in a physical or psychological sense, and that, where possible, participants benefit by their involvement in the study. Research with children is considered a 'risky enterprise' (A. Farrell, 2005a), with many difficult methodological issues to be considered when gathering the views of children, particularly those with learning difficulties (A. Lewis, 2002). The many challenges that pertain when conducting research with children with disabilities, who are considered to have a higher degree of vulnerability (Creswell, 2003; Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004) are often so great that they are precluded from research (Cuskelly, 2005).

In relation to this study, one of the key aspects to consider was to what extent specific themes would be foisted upon participants, in particular asking them to consider whether they thought their rights or their status or their self-esteem were in any way affected by their enrolment and attendance in a non-mainstream educational setting. Care was taken, as far as was possible, to avoid the danger of placing any of the participants in a compromising or risky situation where they were asked to comment or express an opinion on matters where they clearly may not have formed an opinion, or on matters which may have been emotionally or psychologically difficult for them to talk about. Thus the central question of whether or not 'dilemmas of difference' applied for students was never explicitly asked, as to do so may have been considered a 'leading question'. From a methodological perspective, it may have been valid to present 'scenarios' of similar-age students in a variety of settings and ascertain the views of students through their reflections and remarks on these scenarios, but this is not something about which I had thought prior to or during my data collection phases.

A related matter considered in advance was the question of disclosure of sensitive information: participants were informed that while their anonymity and confidentiality would be preserved where possible, it may have been necessary to inform other authorities if details were revealed which need to be addressed (e.g. child abuse, illegal activities, etc.). Thankfully, no such issues arose in the course of the project.

#### 4.5.3 Consent

An initial request for consent to conduct the research was made to the Board of Management of the school prior to any work being undertaken. This request stated clearly and succinctly the nature, purpose and scope of the research in simple language, and was accepted. Consent was also sought from and granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the voluntary body to which the school is affiliated.

The next step was to make all staff and students in the school aware of the project. All students were informed in appropriate language of the details of the study. For the first phase involving all students, the whole school population, including all staff, were informed at a school assembly<sup>x1</sup>. Following this, a written letter (see *Appendix B*) was given to each student explaining the purpose and procedures (Creswell, 2003) of the research in simplified student-friendly format. A slightly more detailed letter (see *Appendix C*) was posted to each parent, acting as ‘gatekeeper’, advising them of the nature of the research and also indicating that some parents may be asked to participate in the project at a later stage, as was the intention at that time. All members of staff were also given an explanatory memo detailing the proposed phases of the project at that initial stage (see *Appendix D*).

Colour coded consent forms were distributed with letters to students and parents, with a clear message that participation was voluntary, and neither positive nor negative consequences would accrue from any individual's consent or lack of consent. It was also stated clearly that any participant was free to withdraw consent at any time. A return box was placed in a prominent area of the school for completed consent forms. For three of the later phases of the research, individual consent forms were also given to both students and parents, with clear accompanying information clarifying the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of decision-making on the part of each potential participant. For each of these phases, it was necessary to send reminder letters or new consent forms to some parents / students, as forms were not returned by the expected date. Consent was not sought from parents in relation to Phase 5, as this was a whole-school initiative which allowed students to participate or not, thereby giving their own consent, and also allowed them to retain anonymity, a feature that was not possible with the earlier phases. All consent forms were filed as part of the audit trail.

As consent is an on-going process which allows for participants the right to withdraw at any time (Creswell, 2003), each participant was asked again at the commencement of each data collection exercise (except Phase 5) to consent to participating in the research activity, and was reassured that withdrawal of consent or lack of engagement at any stage in the process would not be considered disrespectful. This additional overt re-seeking of consent and reminder of choices also helped to minimise the potential power imbalance that might have created a situation where students would have consented through fear or through feeling they didn't have a choice (Porter & Lacey, 2005). To facilitate the possibility of some or all of the participants choosing to withdraw their consent during any of these sessions, arrangements were made to provide alternative learning opportunities for students at these times<sup>xli</sup>. In the initial focus groups, three participants opted to leave before the end, while a fourth opted to

remain only in an observational capacity (although did subsequently contribute unprompted to the discussion towards the end of the session). This indicates that participants were both fully aware of their options in this regard and fully competent to make the decision that they felt was appropriate for them.

#### 4.5.4 Dissemination<sup>xlii</sup>

At the stage of seeking consent from students and parents, clarification was given that the primary purpose of the study was for my own personal benefit. The intention to produce a summary of the findings for all those who participated in the project, at a language level appropriate to these participants, was also made clear. This requires a simplified summary for participants, which also includes pictorial or graphical information. Again, the use of a peer colleague to assess the suitability and clarity of this document before release contributes to the validity and effectiveness of this measure. This accessible report, which was presented to students and staff at the completion of the project, is included at the end of the thesis.

To aid the dissemination process, a notice board was erected in the school hall specifically for the duration of the project: information displayed on this explained about the project, in student-friendly format, using questions, minimal text and images. This notice board was primarily intended as information for students, but staff members, parents and visitors to the school also gained more insight into the project from it. The material on the notice board was updated on four<sup>xliii</sup> different occasions to reflect the ongoing developmental and flexible nature of the project, while selected comments, photographs and copies of student work from each of the phases of data collection were posted on adjacent walls subsequent to the completion of each of the phases of data collection. *Appendices E, L, M and V* show the



information that was posted on the research notice board at the different stages; the name of the school, which was included in this information, has been hidden.

#### **4.6 Data collection**

In this section, I begin by outlining the proposed phases of data collection as they were initially intended. Given the flexible nature of the research design, what actually transpired was at some variance with this proposal. An account of the actual phases of data collection follows.

##### *4.6.1 Proposed phases of data collection*

The initial idea for this study as indicated in the research proposal was that it would begin with a whole-school quantitative survey seeking the views of all consenting students on some broad themes relating to their perspectives on education which had been identified in the literature. The second phase was to consist of two focus groups of third year students (six in each group), where the work with the groups would relate directly to the core work of the CSPE Junior Certificate Syllabus, specifically in relation to three key CSPE concepts, namely (a) rights and responsibilities, (b) democracy and (c) human dignity. For the third phase, individual interviews with some school leavers were to be conducted, while Phase 4 was to be a series of 1:1 interviews with a cohort of students who had transferred to the school from a different second-level school, and who thus would have had an insight into the ways that different schools / systems operate at second level. Following this, semi-structured interviews were to be conducted with parents<sup>xliv</sup> of some of the students involved in the research. The purpose of these interviews would be to explore the extent of correlation between the parents' views and the views expressed by the students, exploring the same broad themes. A sixth and

final phase proposed a set of focus group meetings with another cohort of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students, linking the study once again with the aims and concepts of the CSPE syllabus.

The actual phases of data collection varied markedly from this initial plan, in keeping with the 'flexible design' nature of the project, as I now outline. The two main changes made were that all students, over the course of the two academic years of the study, were given at least two opportunities to participate, while it was decided not to interview parents as this would have made the project too large and unwieldy for its purpose.

#### *4.6.2 Actual phases of data collection*

There were five phases of data collection. Each of the phases is summarised briefly in *Table 4* on the next page and is followed by a more detailed explanation which clarifies the specific purpose and also outlines the process involved in each phase of data collection.

<b>Phase / Time Frame</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Participants / eligible population</b>	<b>% participating</b>
<i>Phase 1</i> <i>March 2007</i>	Introductory gathering of views of all students	Class-based focus groups	59 / 100	59%
<i>Phase 2</i> <i>May 2007 &amp; June 2007</i>	Gather views of school leavers; building on Phase 1 data	Interviews (5 individual and 2 pairs)	9 / 18	50%
<i>Phase 3</i> <i>December 2007 &amp; January 2008</i>	Gather views of students who attended other second-level schools	Individual interviews	6 / 6	100%
<i>Phase 4</i> <i>January 2008</i>	Participatory element; include new students	Class-based focus groups	15 / 23	65%
<i>Phase 5</i> <i>March – May 2007 &amp; February – April 2008</i>	Final views from all students; utilise alternative data collection strategies	Written and pictorial contributions	Up to 99 / 125 (53 were anonymous)	Up to 79%

*Table 4: Summary of each of the phases of data collection*

#### 4.6.2.1 *Phase 1: class-based focus groups*

The main purpose of the initial phase of data collection was to begin to create an introductory canvas for the emerging picture which would be created over the following year of data gathering and analysis, a ‘first impression’ of the views of students about school. It was envisaged that from this first impression broad themes would appear which would inform subsequent data collection phases. A second purpose for this phase was to allow all personnel involved with the school (students, staff and parents) to gain some understanding of and insight into the nature and rationale of the project in its earliest form.

The first data collection exercise involved inviting all students in the school to participate in researcher-led, class-based, open-ended focus group interviews. It was decided to commence in this format because the class groupings were a “safe space” (Lundy, 2007, p. 934), and it replicated a more natural method of classroom discussion (Costley, 2000), thus facilitating an opportunity for all students to participate in the research process from the beginning in a familiar setting, with the mutual support of friends. Focus groups are considered to be particularly suitable for use with children and adolescents where they are seen as the experts sharing experiences (Hennessy & Heary, 2005), and are also considered advantageous as the amount and range of data are increased by collecting from many people simultaneously. Other positive factors are that participants tend to enjoy the experience, and, most pertinently for this study, it allows people who have reading, writing or other difficulties to participate and contribute (Robson, 2002). Prior to the data collection, comprehensive preparatory work relating to gaining consent and setting up dissemination structures took place, the details of which have been outlined in the earlier part of this chapter. Concurrent to this work, preparation for the focus group meetings continued. This consisted of organising and testing

recording equipment, preparing introductory comments and ground rules, and agreeing venues, dates and times<sup>xlv</sup> with class teachers.

Ten focus group meetings were held in March 2007. Nine of these focus groups consisted of all consenting students in a particular class grouping, while a tenth focus group consisted of the four available<sup>xlvi</sup> students who had consented to participate, but were absent on the day their own class focus group was conducted. The discussions in each of the focus groups were recorded on a hard disc digital video recorder and on a digital sound recorder, with the informed knowledge and consent of participants that these recordings would not be used for any purpose other than for the researcher's review of the data. (This process was replicated for the interviews and focus groups in the three subsequent phases). The focus groups lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, with between four and nine participants in each group. In all, a total of fifty nine students, of which thirty seven were male, participated in the focus groups. Three groups had an adult observer present (the option to observe was given to staff members who worked with these students). Five were held in the regular classroom of the students and five more were held in another classroom or meeting room. Each of the focus groups began with the following question: *If you knew someone who was starting in this school next September, what would you tell them about it?* This question was chosen very deliberately as a starting point as it did not seek to point participants in any direction, particularly in either a positive or negative direction, in expressing their views about school.

During the focus groups, key points stated by the participants were noted on a chart<sup>xlvii</sup>, and these were read back to the group at various stages in the meeting, in keeping with the principle of member checking as previously described. At the end of each focus group,

students were offered the option to express their thoughts on the school in written or in pictorial format on a specific template given to them<sup>xlviii</sup>. Offering this option to students allowed the individual as well as the collective view to emerge, and created the opportunity to enable and to hear students' views in diverse ways. It was subsequently decided to create a separate phase of the study (Phase 5) to incorporate this method of data collection, and the written and visual data created at this time were added to the data gathered later (in 2008) for analysis. These became the data set for Phase 5.

#### 4.6.2.2 *Phase 2: interviews with school leavers*

The purpose of this phase was to develop and expand on the key themes which had emerged in Phase 1 through a series of interviews with students who were about to leave the school, having completed either the FETAC Level 3 course or the Leaving Certificate Applied course. These students were chosen for two reasons: firstly they had been in the school for the longest time and thus had more experiences to recount than others<sup>xlix</sup>, and secondly, given their impending transition from school, it afforded these students a final opportunity to participate in the project. By using semi-structured interviews, scope was allowed for development of the key themes from the initial phase but also for new themes to emerge in this phase, which they did.

Eighteen students<sup>1</sup> who were due to leave school in June 2007 were invited to participate in this phase, and given the option to be interviewed either individually or in pairs. Research has shown that it can be beneficial to conduct research with children in 'friendship groups' or in pairs or triads (David, Tonkin, Powell, & Anderson, 2005), and that working in pairs is a supportive and enabling process which can help children feel confident by allowing them to

“follow on each other’s leads, pick up points and confirm, comment or move on” (Mayall, 2000). Nine students<sup>1</sup> consented to participate in this phase and interviews were conducted over a one-week period in May / June 2007. Five students opted to be interviewed alone, while two pairs of students opted to be interviewed together.

The interview schedule for Phase 2 included questions on students’ views about their class and subjects, staff and students, and on themes that had emerged from Phase 1 such as outings, sports, rules and their views on how the school compares to other schools. The full schedule of questions is included in *Appendix F* at the end.

#### 4.6.2.3 *Phase 3: interviews with select group of students*

This phase took place in a new academic year (2007-8). The purpose of this phase of research was to ascertain the views of a select number of students in the school who had attended a different form of second-level school prior to attending the special school. Six students fitted this criterion, and all six consented to be interviewed, making this the only phase of the study where 100% of the potential participants agreed to contribute. The rationale for selecting these students was that they might have more to say about other second-level schools, with their greater first-hand experience of other schools.

The six participants in this phase of the process were interviewed individually in December 2007 and January 2008. These interviews consisted of a series of semi-structured questions but also included an initial foray into a more participatory element in the study, in the hope that participants would enjoy it more, and that “the findings may more accurately report their own views and experiences” (Alderson, 2005a, p. 30).

The interview questions in this phase (see *Appendix G*) focused on the students' perspectives on their current school and their previous school, and how they were alike and not alike. Students were also asked about who made the decision for them to attend a special school. Included as part of the interview, a list of twenty topics that had arisen in the two earlier phases was shown and explained to each interviewee who then had the option to talk about three (or more) of these. This exercise proved most worthwhile as the range of topics chosen by only six interviewees showed the diversity of views and interests in this group.

#### 4.6.2.4 Phase 4: 1<sup>st</sup> year participatory focus groups

The primary purpose of this phase was to include the 1<sup>st</sup> year students who had not been in the school for Phase 1 in the previous school year, and thus to allow them to express their views on school as their fellow students had previously done. A second purpose was to introduce a more participatory element to these focus groups, specifically by using materials and concrete objects to facilitate the generation of ideas and to support participants' increased understanding (Jones, 2005), and also to assess if some participants might be more engaged by these exercises than by the more traditional focus group element.

Two participatory focus groups were held in January 2008. Fifteen out of a total of twenty-three students participated<sup>lii</sup>. The initial part of the focus group mirrored the method used in the Phase 1 focus groups, consisting of an open-ended discussion starting with the same question for students: "*if you knew somebody who was going to be starting in the school next September what would you tell them about it?*" The second element of these meetings involved two simple participatory exercises, using ideas devised by the Centre for



Participatory Strategies (O'Reilly-de Brún & de Brún, 2007). In the first, each student was given a coin and asked to place it in one of five envelopes which had faces corresponding to a Likert-type scale reflecting the students' perceptions on "*what I think of school*". In the second exercise a series of large symbols<sup>liii</sup> were placed on tables and participants were invited to select symbols or to use supplied post-it notes to write or draw something that represented their views on school (see *Appendix H* for a sample of these data and results from the Likert-type scale activity). A further element introduced in this phase was that those involved were asked immediately after this final element of the session to explain and clarify their selections / contributions, thus introducing an element of participant-led analysis of data.

#### 4.6.2.5 *Phase 5: written and pictorial contributions*

This phase of data collection took place in two distinct time periods. Initially, students who had participated in Phase 1 were invited to represent their thoughts on school in either pictorial or written format – the purpose of this was to allow further exploration / explanation of ideas that may or may not have been expressed in the focus group meetings. This proved to be relatively successful, and so it was decided to expand on this idea and create a separate phase of data collection. Thus the process was repeated after the three subsequent phases had been completed, but with changes to both method and structure.

There were two purposes to the second element of this final phase of data collection. One was to allow all students in the second year of the study a final opportunity to participate in the project, and in particular to enable those who had not participated in any other forum to date to contribute their ideas. The second purpose was to utilise a different strategy to collect data: this time each class was given a selection of four different templates (see *Appendix I*) and

students were invited to complete one or more of these templates. Two of these involved written responses, the other two sought pictorial / visual representations from participants. One of the written templates, a sentence completion exercise, was a modified version of an activity created by the National Educational Psychological Service (Department of Education and Science and National Educational Psychological Service, 2007, pp. 11-12). Offering participants the opportunity to write or to draw was found to be a successful strategy in other studies involving children (P. Christensen & James, 2000a; O'Kane, 2000; Morrow, 2005; Waldron, 2006), with writing in particular being seen as “a more reflective process, providing the children with the time to think about their responses” (Waldron, 2006, p. 100). Both methods had been central to the UK study referred to earlier (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003).

A clear explanation of this final phase of the study was given to all students at a whole-school assembly, and all were invited to participate. A cover letter was written for students and for staff, which was then distributed to each classroom with a selection of the four templates described above, all colour coded. Students were given three weeks<sup>liv</sup> in March 2008 to participate in this project. The data collected were then sorted into four different types and the written data transcribed into electronic form for subsequent data analysis, while the participants' drawings were scanned and saved electronically. The totals for each type of data collected in the two time segments of this phase are presented in *Table 5* below.

DATA TYPE	Pictorial (one large frame)	Pictorial (six small frames)	Written (blank)	Written (six sentence completions)
Initial contributions March – May 2007 (22)	2	10	10	<i>not offered</i>
Later contributions February – April 2008 (77)	24	13	8	32
Totals by data type	26	23	18	32
Totals by format (99)	49		50	

Table 5: Data collected in Phase 5 – written and pictorial contributions

The process of collating these contributions shows some interesting insights: firstly it can be seen that students were split fairly evenly in both time segments in the format (written or pictorial) they chose to give their views. Secondly, the increased number of contributions in 2008 reflects the success of collectively inviting all students to participate in this final phase. Finally, the sentence completion option, which had not been offered in the first time segment, but which was offered for the second part, proved to be very popular, accounting for over forty per cent of the contributions in this phase. This ‘scaffolding’ option may have appealed to students as it is a pedagogical tool with which they are familiar, and also because the amount of space allowed for each answer encouraged short, succinct responses.

#### 4.7 Data analysis process

This section contains three distinct parts. Data gathered in the initial phase of focus groups were read and coded manually, and some were also subject to a degree of participatory analysis, while subsequent to this all data from each of the five phases were stored, coded and

sorted electronically, which facilitated in-depth analysis. The three elements are described now.

#### 4.7.1 *Initial manual process*

At the end of each focus group, the electronic recordings (video and audio) were transferred on to computer hard disk and also backed up on to DVD (video files) and CD (audio files). The video recordings were each watched at least three times, and transcription of all student comments was completed. Following this, all transcripts were read, enabling me to get “a *general sense* of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning”, (Creswell, 2003, p. 191) and a selection of key comments which I felt at that initial stage represented to some extent the totality of views expressed by the students were displayed on the notice board in the school hall (*Appendix J* shows how a sample of these were displayed). No sorting or categorisation of data had yet taken place, but this was an important exercise for me to familiarise myself with the data and to introduce a visible first outcome for those who had participated (and indeed those who had not).

This initial analysis of data also allowed me to provide a review of this phase to all students (those who had participated and those who had not), all parents and all staff. The initial communication consisted of a short assembly to students and staff. Individually labelled letters, written in appropriate language, were then distributed to all students (*see Appendix K*). Simultaneously, a separate letter was distributed to parents, summarising the work to date and informing them about what lay ahead. Contemporaneously, a memo was provided to all staff to keep them informed of the current state of the project.

The ten transcripts from the focus groups were then printed and cut up in to individual comments. A total of 358 “units of information” (Hennessy & Heary, 2005) were counted. These units were then sorted initially in to twenty four separate arbitrary categories or nodes (see *Appendix N*), helping me to get some understanding of the range and frequency of topics raised by participants.

After this initial categorisation was complete, these categories were re-examined, and on further analysis of both individual units and of category headings, four broader themes were created. These are listed in *Appendix O*, which also indicates an initial breakdown of the relative frequency of occurrence of these themes. Having completed this process, I was unsure how to proceed. With some direction, I opted to involve students in participatory analysis of data. In the next section, I describe my efforts in this regard.

#### 4.7.2 *Participatory coding and sorting*

Following one consultation with the thesis supervisory committee during the project, where consideration was given to involving the participants more directly in the process of coding, sorting and analysing the data, a trial participatory model was used to code and sort the data created by two of the ten focus groups in Phase 1. This model consisted of two separate stages, conducted with each of the two groups chosen<sup>iv</sup> in November and December 2007. In simple terms, the first stage can be considered the coding phase, where the participants watched the recorded video of the initial focus group in which they participated. Each participant was given a set of Post-It notes, and wrote a word or phrase or drew a picture or symbol which they felt best encapsulated the theme of anything they had said, for each “unit of meaning” identified by them. I played a dual role in this exercise: pausing the video at

appropriate points, and supporting / advising participants who were unsure what their initial comment had been or were unsure how to summarise or code, or how to spell a particular word they wanted to write. In the second stage, held the following week, participants returned to the table of Post-It notes created by their group and were invited to sort these into categories and name the categories. *Appendix P* shows some of the categories and how the students allocated their ‘units of information’ to these categories. Some direction and support was necessary for the students in this process, and to a greater extent with one group more than the other<sup>lvi</sup>.

This exercise was interesting as it showed the varying degrees in which the participants engaged in the data analysis. Some participants were extremely focused and enthusiastically engaged while others were less engaged and left one of the two sessions in which they were asked to participate (they seemed less enthusiastic in particular about the second stage of the process, where the more ‘fun’ element of reviewing their own focus group on video was no longer part of the exercise). This seems to indicate that individual participants had different levels of interest in this participatory research exercise – some were content just to be involved in the focus group itself but showed little enthusiasm for the analysis element, others liked to review the video (out of curiosity and perhaps a chance to remember or notice something funny or interesting), whereas some were much more willing to engage in the process of analysis in its entirety. This seems to give credence to Hart’s caution (suggested earlier) that children often elect to work at different levels on the ‘ladder of participation’ (Hart, 1997, cited in Rajani, 2001), perhaps the level at which they are most comfortable or interested. It might also indicate, however, that my facilitation of the exercise might have been inadequate or poorly planned.

This exercise also highlighted that a different process of analysis by different analysts would invariably produce different results in a qualitative process such as this. The students in one group created five different categories, and in the other group created eight, and also distinguished a greater number of ‘units of meaning’ than I had identified in my coding process. This caused me to reflect that my original manual coding process was deficient in not creating a sufficient number of nodes: where my analysis had grouped statements into a node of “multiple” meaning, the participants were more diligent in distilling these phrases down into more basic units. This convinced me that it would be appropriate to subject all data from Phase 1, as well as all subsequent data, to the rigours of full-scale electronic coding and analysis. This was the next approach.

#### *4.7.3 Subsequent electronic process*

In the manual sorting and analysis of data, the process of listening, watching, transcribing, cutting, categorising, tabulating and re-categorising was tedious and logistically challenging. To eliminate the need to manually cut up reams of data and to facilitate a clear audit trail where the movement and placement of all data would be readily traced, I decided to use a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) programme, namely NVivo 7. This software was selected following demonstrations of its capacity, and a (perhaps naïve) confidence in the ability of the software to do as it claimed it could do: to access, manage, shape and analyse data, and to remove many of the manual tasks associated with analysis, like classifying, sorting and arranging information (QSR International, 2006). The learning curve of all CAQDAS has been acknowledged as steep (Konig, 2008), and this presented a new and separate challenge that had to be overcome. It was also essential to keep in perspective that much of the planning, structuring and contextualising for the specific data set and site required thinking skills that can not be provided by software. Whether analysis is conducted

manually or electronically, the analytic practice and its underlying principles remain the same. While using NVivo ultimately may have facilitated a more in-depth analysis of the data, and greater transparency of the process, it was not used to save time or effort, but rather to ease the physical problem of moving, re-arranging, storing and duplicating data in paper format. The process of storing, coding, sorting and analysing data using NVivo 7 developed in the following manner.

#### 4.7.3.1 *Stage 1: opening casebook, storing data*

The first preparatory element involved setting up a casebook<sup>lvii</sup> (a database of sorts) of all ‘cases’ (individual participants in the project). Ten attributes (e.g. gender, class group) were set up, and values were assigned to each case. 53 cases were set up for contributions made anonymously in Phase 5. The second element involved storing all data in NVivo. Every source was either transcribed (text) or scanned (images) into Word documents and then imported into NVivo 7. From here, all data were coded initially to a specific case. This process, when completed, allowed me to see at a glance how many references, and in how many phases, each participant had contributed to the study. *Appendix Q* displays a screen shot of a selection of the cases from the casebook, with names obscured to protect anonymity.

#### 4.7.3.2 *Stage 2: preliminary coding and auto-coding*

All data were subjected to an initial round of preliminary coding to ‘free nodes’, which are ‘virtual filing boxes’ (QSR International, 2008) containing data of a similar theme from all sources, in keeping with the emergent design nature of the project. In all, forty one ‘free nodes’ were created, using the ‘constant comparative method’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), some of which overlapped with the categories into which the ‘units of information’ (nodes) had



been placed in the initial manual sorting of Phase 1 data. These nodes can be considered 'participant driven' as they emerged from the data, without any reference to the research questions at this initial stage.

Where possible, auto-coding of certain data sets was used: for the interviews from Phases 2 and 3 and the 'sentence starters' element of Phase 5. Auto-coding is simply an organisational tool that speeds up the process of preliminary coding – it does not change what would have happened in a manual coding system or in preliminary electronic coding but merely automates the administrative task of preliminary coding and generates its own specific nodes.

#### 4.7.3.3 *Stage 3: grouping by theme*

The completely coded free nodes were grouped into six sets of 'tree nodes' representing six key themes: people, curriculum, organisation and environment, aspects of special schooling (these four had emerged from the manual coding and sorting of the data gathered from Phase 1 as described above), bullying and miscellaneous views (nodes which held perspectives which were not easily otherwise categorised). These six themes were then matched with the relevant research questions and the nodes were moved into appropriate sections – this constituted an initial move from participant-driven categories to themes driven by the focus of inquiry and specifically by the research questions. Some of the categories applied to more than one of the research questions and were copied accordingly.

#### 4.7.3.4 *Stage 4: coding on*

Having completed the processes of auto-coding and coding to free nodes, and subsequent reorganisation into themes, a further round of coding was used ('coding on') to distil the

nodes into appropriate sub-categories. Often this involved coding on to positive, negative or neutral / mixed comments within the relevant node, reflecting the approach adopted by Norwich in his 1997 study, but sometimes this structure was inappropriate and another 'coding-on' structure was applied. See *Appendix R* for an example of how this 'coding on' process was conducted.

#### 4.7.3.5 *Stage 5: generating proposition statements*

Once all necessary 'coding-on' work was completed, it was appropriate and necessary to begin drafting proposition statements summarising my analysis and understanding of the data. Drafting propositional statements moves the procedure beyond identifying and describing the broad themes and concepts to beginning to create summary statements that convey the collective meaning of the data segments coded to each category. A propositional statement, then, may be defined as "a statement of fact the researcher tentatively proposes, based on the data" (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 140). The mechanism I used for generating these statements in NVivo was through the use of memos, which were written at the lowest level (child node) that was deemed necessary for each of the categories, and then converged into 'master memos' at the higher levels. This 'bottom-up' approach was used to ensure that no relevant comments were missed and that my analysis could be as thorough as possible.

#### 4.7.2.6 *Stage 6: testing proposition statements and distilling data*

The next phase of the process involved testing the draft proposition statements against the data for supporting 'evidence' to back up suggestions recorded in the memos. Part of this process involved a revisit of the particular tree nodes to assess the accuracy of the summary statements. However, it also involved further interrogation of the data through the use of

queries to ascertain if supporting evidence was present elsewhere in the coding tree. At times, the outcome of running such queries was that new nodes were generated as data were gathered from disparate existing nodes to validate or amend a stated belief in a given proposition statement.

Five different types of queries are possible in NVivo. These are text search queries, coding queries, matrix coding queries, word frequency queries, and compound coding queries. I used the first three of these queries. In *Appendices S, T and U* I explain the process for each of these three and show an example of how these queries were used to validate proposition statements or distil data.

#### **4.8 Summing up and moving on**

This chapter has outlined in detail the various strands that contributed to the methodological structure of the study. The flexible nature of the research design, which complements the qualitative nature of the study, has been portrayed, and clear links have been made between the theoretical perspective outlined in Chapter 2 and the specific methodological direction in the study. Possible concerns about matters of credibility and specific ethical considerations have been directly addressed, while both the proposed and actual phases of data collection have been described. In the last section, a detailed account of the manual, participatory and electronic procedures of data analysis have been presented, with a step-by-step explication of the journey from coding to analysis to proposition statements in NVivo 7.

The next two chapters now present the findings from the study and a discussion of these findings. In the first instance, in Chapter 5, this is done at the initial level of analysis as posed

by the first two research questions. This chapter presents the students' views on a thematic basis, with comments noting some of the connections between these views and the views of students presented in other studies referenced in Chapter 3. Chapter 6 then delves deeper into the data and seeks to answer the remaining element of the research question, by deliberating on whether or not 'dilemmas of difference' can be said to apply for these students.

## Chapter 5: Initial findings – what are the views of students?

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter gives a descriptive overview and an initial representation of the views expressed by students. In the first instance, it is worth re-stating the research questions posed earlier:

1. (a) What do students who have been assessed as having mild general learning disabilities have to say about their experiences and perspectives of special schooling?  
(b) What are these students' perspectives of mainstream schools, in comparison to the special school which they attend?
2. To what extent do students feel that they have a say in matters that affect them in relation to their education?
3. Do 'dilemmas of difference' apply for students who attend this special school? *i.e.* to what extent might the views of the students reflect a tension between the positive and negative consequences of attending a special school?

The chapter focuses on the two separate but related elements of the first of the above questions, and on the second question, through a presentation of and a discussion on the main themes which emerged from analysis of the data. Selective comments from participants are included as evidence supporting the findings presented. Each comment is referenced with a note indicating the gender and class grouping of the contributor, and the phase from which the comment originated. The third of the research questions stated above, which focuses on 'dilemmas of difference', is addressed in Chapter 6, which offers deeper analysis and

interpretation of the views of participants. As well as focusing on dilemmas, Chapter 6 also links to the three elements of the theoretical framework which underpins the study.

What follows in this chapter is an initial representation of the views of students expressed in a coherent and structured manner in respect of each of the six themes identified in the electronic analysis process and specified in the previous chapter. Summary statements drafted at the end of the manual analysis process on completion of Phase 1 of data collection (the ten initial focus groups) were synthesised with summary statements drafted in NVivo and recorded in memos at the completion of the distinct stages of the coding process. The more generic themes which relate to Research Question 1(a) are presented initially, while the second element of this first question (Research Question 1(b)), which relates specifically to their views of other schools, is dealt with separately. An examination of students' views about the extent of a say they feel they have (related to Research Question 2) is then conducted. The chapter concludes with a brief summary and a link to Chapter 6.

## **5.2 Dominant themes: research question 1(a)**

The six themes are considered in this order: people, organisation and environment, curriculum, bullying, miscellaneous views, and views on special schooling and disability. No significance is attached to the order of themes.

### *5.2.1 People*

Participants expressed views on staff and fellow students. At times the distinction was not explicit (comments were made about 'people' in the school) but this was usually clarified, or the context often provided clues as to which cohort the comment was more likely to refer.

### 5.2.1.1 Staff<sup>viii</sup>

The views expressed by participants about staff were predominantly positive (105 positive comments, 22 negative comments). Many participants highlighted positive characteristics of staff and their willingness to help students - with their school work but also with other matters e.g. bullying or problems at home. The findings are similar to findings from other studies (Norwich, 1997; Smyth *et al.*, 2004; Norwich & Kelly, 2005) which found that students had generally positive views of teachers and other staff members, and the characteristics of staff members which appealed to students in this study correlate closely with those mentioned in other studies. These include attributes such as being kind, fair, quiet, fun and helpful.

- *Really nice teachers and staff; people help us* (1<sup>st</sup> year, female, Phase 1)
- *They help you a lot and they teach you everything that you don't know about like history, geography, religion, science* (1<sup>st</sup> year, male, Phase 1)
- *They never shout at you all the time, they just talk quietly* (2<sup>nd</sup> year, male, Phase 1)

The negative comments about staff were almost exclusively about those who were considered too strict or who 'gave out' to or sanctioned students in some way. One finding of significance is that of those who commented negatively about staff, excluding five which were made anonymously in Phase 5, thirteen were male and only one was female. Even this solitary contribution was in agreement with what a male class colleague had previously said.

- *We shouldn't have teachers up the field annoying our heads* (2<sup>nd</sup> year, male, Phase 1)
- *Some are not so sound out ... can be strict sometimes* (LCA 2, male, Phase 2)



(3<sup>rd</sup> year, male, Phase 5 – intended text: “I don’t like being given out to”)

Figure 7: A negative comment about staff

#### 5.2.1.2 Fellow students

In general, comments about fellow students were also complimentary, with more than twice as many positive comments (38) as negative comments (15) about other students. The two adjectives most commonly used to describe other students were ‘nice’ and ‘friendly’, while nine of the pictures drawn in Phase 5 explicitly mentioned friends and many others implied friendship. Some students mentioned that they missed their friends from their old school, but others pointed out that they hadn’t had any friends in their old school or that they had no friends at home, and that having friends was one of the best things about their school. Participants referred to birthdays, school discos and outings as examples of times when fellow students are very friendly, while one feature was that students noted a whole-school bond in that people from all class groupings were friends with each other.

- *I like the school because I can do stuff I couldn’t do in my old school ... I didn’t have any friends in my old school (3<sup>rd</sup> year, female, Phase 1)*
- *When you start 1<sup>st</sup> year you could make friends with all the 3<sup>rd</sup> years (3<sup>rd</sup> year, female, Phase 1)*
- *It’s good because you might get lots of friends – shake hands – all over the school (FETAC, female, Phase 1)*



- *It's brilliant, the people in it, students, staff ... it's a good school* (1<sup>st</sup> year, female, Phase 4)
- *When you go on the bus you go into the hall and make friends* (1<sup>st</sup> year, male, Phase 4)

Again, there were some negative comments, primarily expressing views on undesirable behaviours. Some mentioned 'the wrong crowd' and 'scumbags' as people to be avoided or students who ought to be removed from the school.

- *The school is ok but it's not the best – you might get on with some of the friends but keep away from the wrong crowd like people who smokes 'cos sometimes they get into trouble* (LCA 2, female, Phase 1)
- *I'm not friends with all of them sure you can't be friends with all of them sure you can't ... some nice, some not nice, you know* (FETAC, female, Phase 3)
- *Some students in the school are sound and some of the soundents [sic] people ever and then others are suck ups and get away with murder* (anonymous, Phase 5)
- *Other students would get ya taken for life by our buddies at home. Students act dump [sic] which is a disgrace* (LCA 1, male, Phase 5).

This final comment is interesting in that it raises an issue that appears throughout the study: how certain students perceived themselves and their school by reference to other students in the school. For some, including this participant, it was a matter of some embarrassment for them to be associated with other students and with the school. On balance, however, students generally spoke positively about their peers, while expressing reservations that some behaviour from other students was inappropriate or unacceptable.

### 5.2.2 Organisation and environment

The comments which one could consider to relate to school organisation and school environment touched on many different topics, from the physical state of the school to arrangements for break times, from school rules to travel arrangements for students.

### 5.2.2.1 *Physical environment*

There were more negative (18) than positive (7) comments about the physical environment. Students were unhappy about litter, old windows, doors, floors and computers, chairs that were too small, lack of heating in the hall, small rooms and untidy classrooms. They wanted new paint, new chairs, an improved play yard (all of these have actually been provided in the intervening time), and lockable toilets. Many of these concerns show similarity to concerns expressed by participants in *'The School I'd Like'* project (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003) referred to earlier. Other students, in contrast, commented that they liked the paint, the flowers and the paintings in the school. Also, students were generally complimentary about the facilities in the school, particularly the gym and showers, sports facilities (which were in the process of construction during the second year of the research project) and computers. However, two students felt that more use should be made of the gym while another bemoaned the fact that students did not have their own lockers.

- *The one bad thing about the school is the litter in the area (2<sup>nd</sup> year, male, Phase 1)*
- *It's good, nice colours all the colours when I look around (FETAC, female, Phase 1)*
- *Where the wall was hit it's not even fixed, every bathroom I went to all the doors are all old and there's no locks on it what if a girl walked in and there's no lock on the door (FETAC, male, Phase 1)*

The picture below (*Figure 8*) is one student's impression of the school, which clearly portrays a very positive image.



(FETAC, male, Phase 5)

*Figure 8: One participant's impression of the school*

#### *5.2.2.2 Break times and free time*

Comments about break time and free time were split fairly evenly between negative (13) and positive (11). While many liked the options available at break time, some were critical that there was nothing to do and that there should be more activities and games. (This is perhaps understandable given the context: the school playground was being reconstructed and was out

of bounds for part of the duration of the research, in the time frame during which Phases 3, 4 and 5 were conducted). Others resented that students were not allowed to leave the school, or that there was no school canteen for students, while too much supervision was also a matter of discord for some.

- *Lunch time breaks are great as well because you would get a little break from doing work* (LCA 2, female, Phase 5)
- *We've to sit up in the yard like a pack of prisoners, they're left out. I'd say we should be left out for lunch break. I'd love to go out and have something to eat instead of being stuck up the field in the hot weather* (3<sup>rd</sup> year, male, Phase 1)

#### 5.2.2.3 School rules and discipline

More students thought rules were fair (14 references) than unfair (10 references). One rule that was deemed particularly unfair was that students were not allowed Coke<sup>lix</sup>, with this constituting one difference with 'normal secondaries'. Students expressed unhappiness about some aspects of discipline enforcement in the school, with criticism of the system of administering yellow cards and red cards as sanctions, and specific incidents mentioned as examples where students felt aggrieved by this system (see for example *Figure 9* below).

- *In normal secondary schools they have Coke – we're not allowed to get Coke only orange and stuff* (1<sup>st</sup> year, male, Phase 1)
- *Yellow cards are crap like. If you're playing football or something, yellow card for doing something stupid* (LCA 2, male, Phase 2)
- *I think the school rules are very good ... some are a bit harsh but we'll live with them* (LCA 2, female, Phase 2)

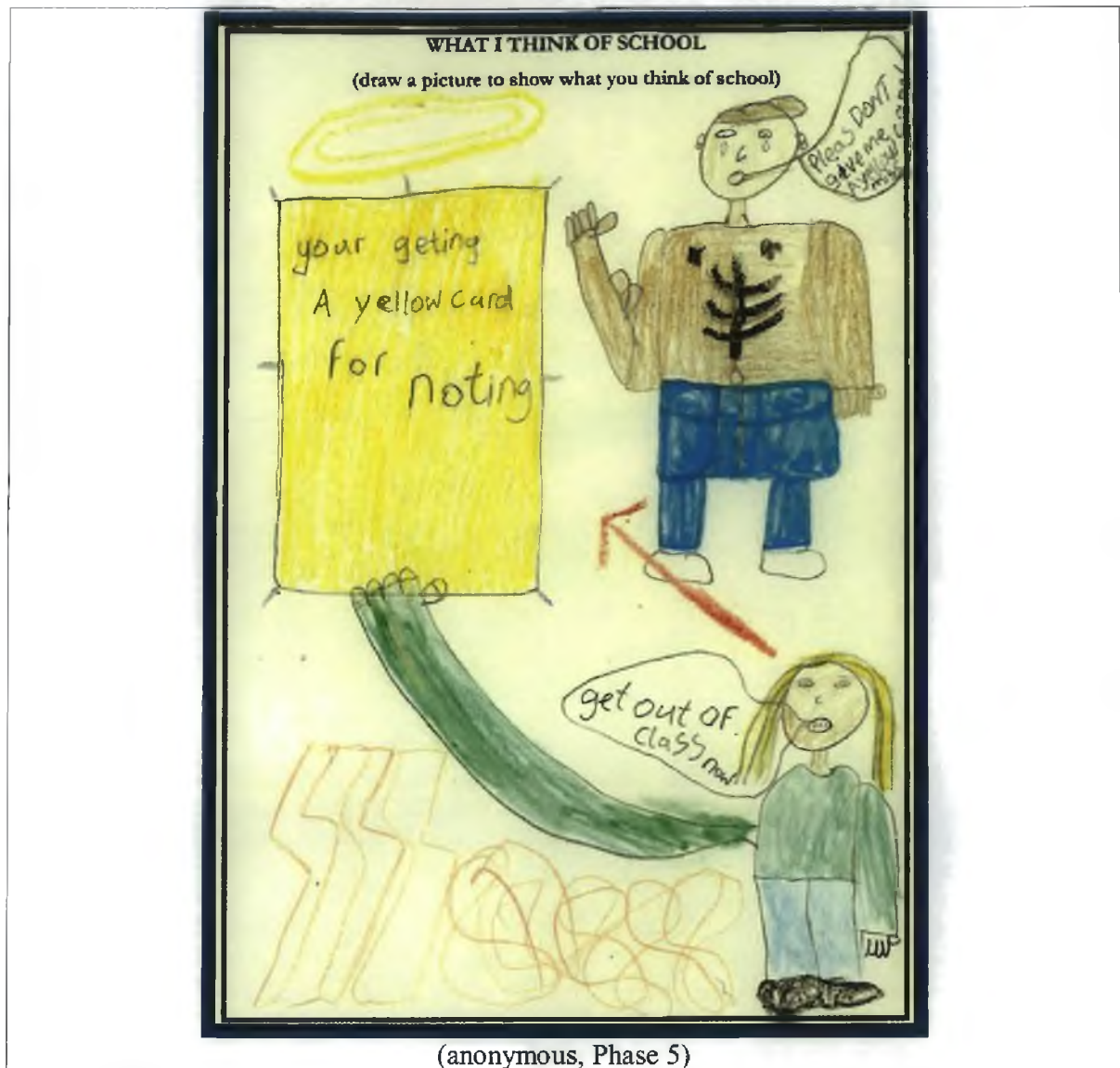


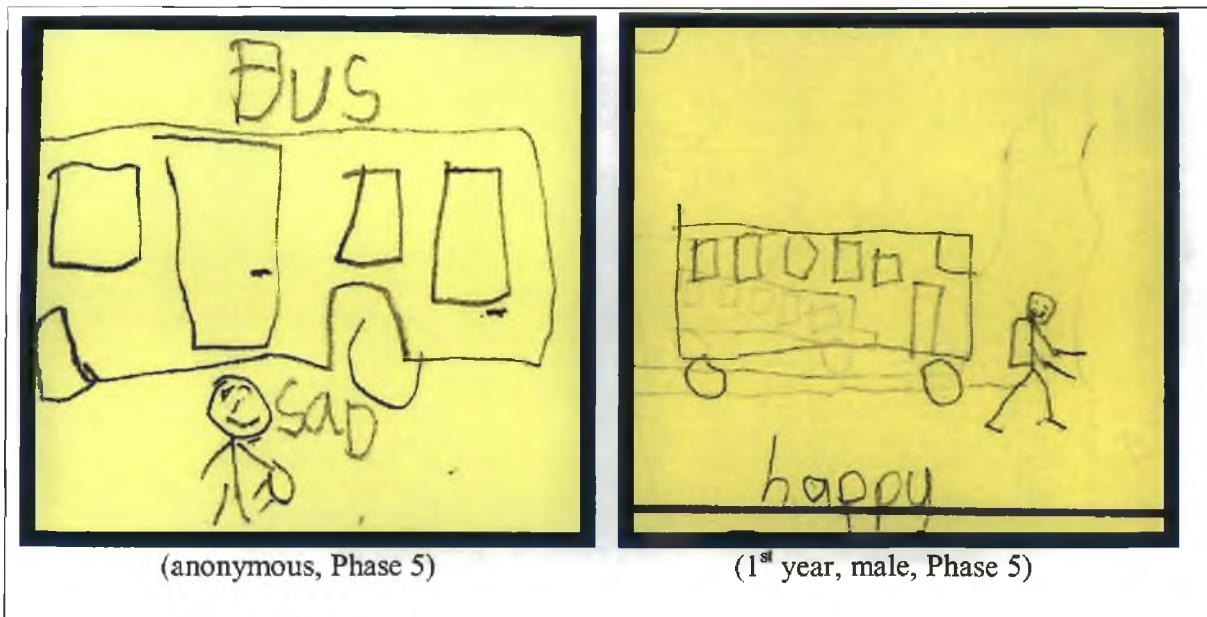
Figure 9: Objecting to the yellow card procedure

Smoking was raised as an issue by some students, with views ranging from those who wanted greater policing of the no smoking policy to those who felt that students should be allowed to smoke without adult interference. A small number of students commented about the uniform: some said they didn't like it and wouldn't wear it, while others said they liked it. One commented that it was unfair that some people wore it and others did not. However, these comments did not appear to reflect either the frequency or severity of negative comments about uniforms in the *'The School I'd Like'* study.

- *Some people wear their own clothes and more people have to wear their uniform – is it uniform or not uniform which is it? It's unfair if you see other people wearing their clothes and you're not allowed. It should be the same for everybody (1<sup>st</sup> year, female, Phase 1)*
- *I think you should be left have a fag that's what I think (3<sup>rd</sup> year, male, Phase 3)*

#### 5.2.2.4 Travel to school

In spite of the fact that many students travel long distances to and from school (some up to 40 miles each way), travel was not a major issue for students. Only four students commented negatively about travelling to school: one said it made him tired, one resented having to come a longer distance every day, while another didn't like the traffic. The fourth was one of four who drew a picture of coming to school on the bus; three pictures drawn by other students, in contrast, depicted positive views (see examples in *Figure 10* below).



*Figure 10: Conflicting views on travelling to school*

#### 5.2.3 Curriculum

The term ‘curriculum’ covers both specific and implicit elements, referring not only to the subjects and programmes taught, but also to how and why they are taught and to the outcomes

for the learner (Ireland, 1995). Substantial amounts of data were produced on diverse curriculum matters. These included comments on schoolwork and homework, comment on the subjects taught and not taught in the school, and specific comments on educational outings and sport, as well as views on the various stages of schooling from 1<sup>st</sup> year to FETAC / LCA<sup>ix</sup> level. In the next chapter, one of the elements on which I focus is whether or not a dilemma of difference applies in relation to curriculum for these students. In the first instance, I analyse their views about the range of matters associated with curriculum.

### 5.2.3.1 *Schoolwork and homework*

A range of views was expressed about schoolwork and homework, from very positive to mixed / descriptive views, to very negative views (roughly an equal number of references for each of the three sub-categories – 26, 24 and 20 respectively), although participants tended not to elaborate on why they liked schoolwork. In a show of hands in one of the focus groups, seven participants indicated that they liked doing homework while the other three indicated that they did not like doing it. Negative comments were mostly about the work, especially homework being too hard, although one said that the work was too easy, while others said that they liked doing homework and that it wasn't too hard or too much.

- *I think that the work isn't easy but it's not too hard either* (1<sup>st</sup> year, female, Phase 1)
- *Homework is like an enemy* (3<sup>rd</sup> year, male, Phase 1)
- *Homework has to be done ... I don't like it ... it will help you in the future anyway I suppose* (2<sup>nd</sup> year, male, Phase 1)
- *School's brilliant ... writing, homework ... is brilliant* (1st year, female, Phase 4)
- *I think as well as sport the subjects are great as well because you would be doing a lot of work and I like doing work* (1st year, female, Phase 4)

### 5.2.3.2 *Subject choice*

Students were generally very pleased with the range of subjects on offer in the school. The subjects mentioned most often as being liked were PE (including sports), Woodwork, Art, Maths, English and Home Economics, while the subjects mentioned most often as not being liked or being difficult were Maths, English and Irish (see *Table 6* below). Similar findings had emerged from the three-year ESRI study where students indicated a clear preference for subjects with a practical orientation over the more traditional ‘academic’ subjects (Smyth *et al.*, 2004; Smyth *et al.*, 2006; Smyth *et al.*, 2007). There was a recognition by some students that their peers in mainstream schools did more subjects, and they mentioned five subjects that they would like to have in the school: Metalwork, French, History, Geography and Science (interestingly, the latter three are offered in school, although not as exam subjects, and so were perhaps not accorded ‘status’ by the students).

- *I found Maths difficult until I learnt how to do it properly* (1<sup>st</sup> year, female, Phase 1)
- *I like Art, Drama, Cooking and Computers, Woodwork* (3<sup>rd</sup> year, female, Phase 1)
- *I hate English, I like Maths the most* (1<sup>st</sup> year, male, Phase 4)
- *My favourite subject is Woodwork because I like to make stuff out of wood* (2<sup>nd</sup> year, male, Phase 5)



<i>Subjects Liked</i>		<i>Subjects Not Liked Or Considered Difficult</i>		<i>Subjects Students Would Like To Do</i>	
<b>Subject</b>	<b>No. of references</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>No. of references</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>No. of references</b>
PE (including sports)	3 + 26 = 29	Maths	10 + 2 = 12	Metalwork	6
Woodwork	21 + 3 = 24	English	7 + 2 = 9	French	6
Art	19 + 4 = 23	Irish	5 + 0 = 5	History	3
Maths	15 + 4 = 19	Social Ed.	3 + 0 = 3	Geography	3
English	14 + 4 = 18	Home Ec.	2 + 0 = 2	Science	2
Home Economics	12 + 3 = 15	Music	2 + 0 = 2		
Computers	7 + 6 = 13				
Music	3 + 2 = 5				

*Table 6: Students' views on subjects – frequency of reference by individuals*

(Note: The two figures added in two of the columns above represent the number of references from oral or written responses and the number of references from visual data respectively.)

### 5.2.3.3 *Current class*

There were more positive comments (29) than the combined total of negative or neutral comments (26) by participants about their current class. Predominantly the comments relating to students' current class came from the school leavers in Phase 2 and from those interviewed in Phase 3, with generally favourable comments on both the LCA and FETAC courses. Some LCA students recognised that while the course was challenging, it was still worthwhile.

- *School can be alright sometimes, this year has been too much work compared to the last few years (3<sup>rd</sup> year, male, Phase 1)*
- *Work is hard but when you know what you're doing it's not so hard like – you do loads of tasks (LCA 1, female, Phase 1)*
- *In LCA you work your ass off non-stop, you work all the time, you work right up to lunchtime, you're on the computers every day you're learning new stuff (LCA 2, male, Phase 1)*
- *When I started this school in 1<sup>st</sup> year it was good 2<sup>nd</sup> year was good as well 3<sup>rd</sup> year was alright and this year I can't stand the place (LCA 1, male, Phase 5)*

#### 5.2.3.4 *Educational outings*

One distinguishing feature of the school's curriculum is the substantial amount of learning done outside the classroom, particularly in the local environment. For many students, the weekly or less frequent educational outings were the highlight of being in school. The predominant view was that the outings were fun and 'craic', yet the purpose of the outings was also clear to most students, and they also recalled in detail both the variety of places visited and specific aspects of these outings.

It was also noticeable as students progressed from 1<sup>st</sup> year through the school that they were not pleased with the reduction in frequency of outings. Older students agreed that outings were greatly reduced in the later years of school (from 3<sup>rd</sup> year on) because of the pressure of work. The positive views of students affirm the view that "out-of-school activities can ... be designed to provide experiences which amplify learning in school" (Wedell, 2005, p. 9). A small number of negative comments were made: that some outings were boring or that they were a waste of time, but these were very much in the minority.

- *It is relevant because it shows us we can deal with the city and the outside world and deal with money and all that kind of stuff, and people* (LCA 1, male, Phase 1)
- *As you get older, you don't go out as much* (1<sup>st</sup> year, female, Phase 1)
- *We go to town and we go bowling ... we go loads of places ...today we are going horse riding* (FETAC, female, Phase 2)
- *They should ban outings in the school ... because you're in school to work, not go on outings* (LCA 2, female, Phase 2)
- *We go on outings downtown to see interesting places and to get to know our way around the city* (anonymous, Phase 5)

### 5.2.3.5 Sports and activities

Participants were overwhelmingly positively disposed towards sports and sports facilities in the school, with many describing sports as '*brilliant*', '*cool*' or '*fantastic*', while students also liked PE. The school's gym was a source of pride, but predominantly it was the inter-school sports competitions that students commented most favourably about, specifically swimming, soccer and basketball. In common with the previous topic, trips to sporting events and to other schools were mentioned as highlights by individual participants. Where criticism was expressed it was that there was not enough sport, or not specific sports, or limited access to the gym. Only two comments were overtly negative, suggesting that sport was boring.

Students mentioned lots of different activities that they liked doing in the school such as fun days, visiting the relaxation room, competitions, quiz and discos. However, the favoured activity was pool, which was mentioned in four phases of the research and was evident in seven of the drawings presented in Phase 5.

- *We have the gym, PE, we play all different sports, volleyball, hockey, soccer, basketball, loads of other activities like circuit training (3<sup>rd</sup> year, female, Phase 1)*
- *Some of the people don't like soccer, basketball and all that but so they might go for other things like rugby ... I would like to see that in the school (LCA 2, male, Phase 2)*
- *I like soccer but I don't like basketball anymore (1<sup>st</sup> year, female, Phase 4)*
- *Every sport we do in the school is cool because you would keep fit and healthy (LCA 2, female, Phase 5)*

In all, over 50% (26 of 49) of the students' drawings in Phase 5 represented some aspect of sport or an activity, which probably reflects the level of enjoyment students garnered from their participation in sports and activities in the school. Some examples of these contributions are included in *Figure 11* below.



Figure 11: Samples of visual representations of sports and activities

#### 5.2.3.6 Work experience and future hopes

Participants in the senior classes spoke very positively about work experience (apart from one who was quite apprehensive) and were optimistic about future training and employment options, with LCA students strongly of the opinion that this course would help them to get a good job. This positive outlook on work experience, and its central place in the senior-cycle curriculum, is interesting when one considers the findings of a previous study in which twenty four students who had transferred from a special school for students with ‘MLD’ to

mainstream schools were interviewed some years after leaving school (Hornby & Kidd, 2001). This study found that the students who had undertaken work experience in school fared much better in securing employment by comparison to those who had not.

- *I want to learn how to read and write, get an education, get a job, I want to have a wonderful life* (2<sup>nd</sup> year, male, Phase 1)
- *Work experience is positive – you got to pick where we want to go* (LCA 1, female, Phase 5)
- *I did two childcare work experiences do you know with children and I loved the two of them so I'm hoping to do work with children* (LCA 2, female, Phase 2)
- *I want to get better at work experience because I'm not so good at it ... it's very hard* (FETAC, female, Phase 3)
- *Some think [sic] are good like PE and work experns [sic]* (anonymous, Phase 5)

#### 5.2.4 Bullying

Bullying (students referring to being mocked or hit) arose as an issue in four phases of the study, although it was particularly prevalent in the interviews with school leavers and those who had attended other second-level schools (Phases 2 and 3). What is most striking is that it was raised by participants in six of the seven Phase 2 interviews, unprompted by any remark or question. It appeared in three of the Phase 3 interviews when participants were asked to compare present and previous schools. Mentions of bullying were more sporadic in the focus groups and did not appear to arise as a major issue, and did not appear at all in any of the writings or drawings submitted in Phase 5. The absence of this theme from Phase 5 data is perhaps a little surprising given that three of the six sentence starters would have given participants scope to write about bullying, and to do so anonymously, if they had wished, and drawing about bullying was also an option which was not used. Perhaps this indicates that the more appropriate methodology for getting participants to talk freely about a sensitive matter such as bullying may in fact be the traditional interview, rather than any of the more participatory techniques or focus groups. This premise is borne out by the high levels of

disclosure in relation to ‘bullying’ in individual interviews in a previous, related study (Norwich & Kelly, 2004).

Bullying was experienced by students in their current school, in previous schools and outside school, reflecting findings from a previous study, where bullying was experienced by participants in both mainstream and special school settings (Norwich & Kelly, 2004). Those who spoke about their experiences in previous schools and outside school were very animated and definite in their views about how this upset them. Bullying outside school usually consisted of being mocked by others for being seen as having a disability or for going to a special school. The most common response to being bullied / mocked outside of school was to ‘walk away’ or ignore the comments.

- *Stop people mocking and insulting (2<sup>nd</sup> year, male, Phase 1)*
- *He does get mocked about the school but we tell them there’s nothing wrong with the school (3<sup>rd</sup> year, male, Phase 1)*
- *I still deal with the bullying at home but I take no notice of it now. I laugh it off and walk away (LCA 2, female, Phase 1)*
- *It was frustrating, you would get bullied every day (LCA 2, male, Phase 2)*
- *The last school I was in ... I didn’t like it at all because I used to get bullied (2<sup>nd</sup> year, female, Phase 3)*

#### *5.2.5 Miscellaneous views about the school*

Some comments made by participants, which do not fit readily into any of the other themes, are presented here.

##### *5.2.5.1 Starting in the school*

A number of students spoke about the transition into a new school. Predominantly they felt nervous or worried about starting off, while six said they were happy to start in the school and

three said they were unhappy, although all three said that they later felt very happy in the school. These findings, although based on a small number of responses, are broadly consistent with the findings of the much larger ESRI study of first year pupils (Smyth *et al.*, 2004), which indicated that pupils were both nervous and excited about starting second-level education.

- *In September I felt nervous because we had a lot of work and meeting the teachers (1<sup>st</sup> year, female, Phase 1)*
- *School is alright like, you get used to it after a while, it wouldn't be really great the first day because you wouldn't know no-one, you'd have to get used to people and after a while you'd be ok you'd be able to do whatever you like ... then you get friendly with them and when you go out to the yard then you can have a chat with them (2<sup>nd</sup> year, male, Phase 1)*
- *I was quite nervous when I first got here ... I was new with all the other students (FETAC, male, Phase 2)*

#### 5.2.5.2 Fun

There were many references to having fun, to fun days, to great 'craic', having a laugh, and it being a fun school or subjects / programmes being fun. There were at least two references to fun in each of the five phases of the research. The views expressed support the importance of humour, fun and laughing for students in their positive perspectives on school (Woods, 1990). A matrix coding query run on these data across the year groups of participants found a relatively even spread of comments across all classes. This appears to be at odds with the views expressed by students in the second and third years of the ESRI study, where it was found that students' enjoyment of school tended to decrease with age (Smyth *et al.*, 2006; Smyth *et al.*, 2007).

- *The good stuff - it's good to come in and have a laugh (3<sup>rd</sup> year, male, Phase 1)*
- *I think it's fun because you have gym, I like that, I like Art, I like Woodwork, Cooking (FETAC, male, Phase 2)*
- *The school is great fun and we have games (1<sup>st</sup> year, female, Phase 4)*

- *School is very interesting and fun ... (I) enjoy going to school every day (1<sup>st</sup> year, male, Phase 5)*

### 5.2.5.3 *Suggestions to improve the school*

Throughout the study students were quite willing to suggest ways in which they could see the school being improved. In the school leaver interviews (Phase 2) this question was explicitly addressed to participants, while in the sentence completion exercise in Phase 5, participants were asked to finish the sentence “*I would like my school better if ...*”. The most common suggestions to improve the school related to other students (changing their behaviour or having them removed from school), the school environment (improve it or have a school shop), sports (include more sports, especially Gaelic games) and being on a par with ‘*normal secondaries*’, a theme which is addressed in more detail in the next section.

- *Get rid of all scumbags and let us out go out on outings. Let people who get in trouble all the time stay behind in school and deal with it (LCA 1, male, Phase 1)*
- *I'd like to see no fighting and all that, no bad languages, no headlocks in the yard (FETAC, male, Phase 2)*
- *Half days on Wednesdays ... to get out at 12 o'clock like most schools (LCA 2, male, Phase 12)*
- *1<sup>st</sup> years and 2<sup>nd</sup> years should play (basketball) Mondays and Tuesdays and the older people should play Thursday and Friday (1<sup>st</sup> year, male, Phase 4)*
- *I would like my school better if we could have June off, we could stay in our class when we come in the mornings (anonymous, Phase 5)*
- *I would like my school better if we have longer lunch ... go to shop for lunch on our own (anonymous, Phase 5)*
- *I would like my school better if there was hurling and Gaelic football in the school (LCA 2, female, Phase 5)*
- *I would like my school better if everyone to be nice to each other and have a shop (anonymous, Phase 5)*



### 5.2.6 Views on special schooling and disability matters

Many students expressed views about the school being a special school. This section presents views of students about whether or not they would tell someone else where they go to school, or whether or not they would recommend the school to a sibling or offspring if s/he had difficulties with learning. Students' uses of and perceptions on terminology and language used to describe people considered to have learning disabilities and/or special educational needs, including themselves and their peers in the school, are reported. These somewhat diverse topics are all encapsulated in this broad theme. Other related topics on this theme are considered in more detail in the next chapter, in considering whether or not dilemmas of identification and location apply for students.

#### 5.2.6.1 Disclosure

One of the more interesting findings relates to disclosure - whether or not the student would admit to peers or friends that they attend a special school. Of those questioned on this, all but one said that they would not tell someone that they go to a special school, although some were prepared to name the school or to give some indication where it is but not to divulge further information. This probably partly pertains to the physical location of the school, which would identify the school's links with a disability services provider, a link some students were anxious not to disclose.

- *They'd be asking us what school do you go to I just say I can't tell them I make some weird name or something (FETAC, male, Phase 1)*
- *A good few of them know alright ... well, like they first found out like and I was denying it. Then I just goes I might as well leave it off like if they know ... My girlfriend knows as well like. She says she don't care either. A school is a school (LCA 2, male, Phase 2)*
- *When they ask my school I say I can't remember the name (LCA 2, female, Phase 2)*

The following conversation portrays poignantly how one student felt about telling others about the school he attended and his reasons for not disclosing this information. It also gives an insight into instances of name-calling that he was subjected to by his school peers, and how he created a defence to deal with this, by responding in a clever, calculated manner.

Conversation 1:

I: If you met somebody from outside this school would you tell where you go to school, would you tell them that you go to this school?

- *I wouldn't tell them, no*

I: You wouldn't tell them

- *No*

I: And is there a reason why you wouldn't tell them?

- *Because they might call me a retard*

I: And if somebody asked you what school do you go to what would you say?

- *What would I say I say I go to a school up in the city*

I: And have you had experience of that, of people calling you names?

- *Ah...*

I: Like you said retard have people called you names like that or other names?

- *No.*

I: Not directly to yourself?

- *Well maybe a few times.*

I: Would that be people in your area at home or?

- *No, in the school*

I: In this school?

- *Ya*

I: Alright. And what's your reaction to that?

- *I just say you're in this school too so I don't know what you're on about.*

(I – Interviewer; student – LCA 2, male, Phase 2)

#### 5.2.6.2 *Language and terminology*

Negative, demeaning or what might currently be considered inappropriate terminology was used more frequently by participants than what might be considered appropriate terminology.

Among the terms used, some were given as examples of names that students were called by other people e.g. 'retard'; some were terms they used to describe themselves where they identified themselves as their disability e.g. 'me and him used to be like a special', 'I am a special need'; others identified the signage adjacent to the school as a negative aspect of the terminology of special / different provision. Some students did, however, use language in a way that would be considered appropriate in current thinking e.g. 'learning difficulty', 'disability' and 'special needs'. What is more difficult to ascertain is if there was any level of awareness amongst these students of the varying perspectives on disability as presented by the different models (medical, social and social relational) discussed in Chapter 2. It did not appear that students internalised any sense of oppression by society as a whole against them, although, as seen above in respect of bullying, it was the case that individual students were conscious of the hurt caused to them by other individuals.

- *I met a slow friend anyway (1<sup>st</sup> year, male, Phase 1)*
- *Me and him used to be like a special (2<sup>nd</sup> year, male, Phase 1)*
- *Some people might mock them for going to the school because the school is classified as a special needs school but it's actually not it's actually for people with learning difficulties but they won't see it that way (LCA 2, female, Phase 1)*
- *I used to get called retarded and handicap and all the names, but I went to staff and said I'm getting sick of people calling me handicap I don't like it - it really pisses me off (LCA 2, female, Phase 1)*
- *It's just a school, school is a school, if you call it special needs, so what? (LCA 2, female, Phase 2)*

#### 5.2.6.3 *Recommending the school to others*

All nine participants in Phase 2 were asked if they would consider sending a sibling or offspring to the school if she had a learning disability. One did not answer (it was a pair interview); the other eight all indicated that they would, although one mentioned that other options would also be considered. The reasons for saying yes were varied and included: a

more knowledgeable and helpful staff; easier work; the student would be *'safe and sound'* and the school was a *'nice school'*. The following responses were given to the question: *"If you had a brother or sister, or in years to come, a son or daughter, who had difficulties with learning, would you consider sending them to this school?"*<sup>lxi</sup>

- *I'd send them straight up here ... I went through it, I know what it's like, so I know that my son or daughter would be safe and sound here* (LCA 2, male, Phase 2)
- *Yes, because the staff and everything here is fantastic, you're not left behind like you were years ago like* (LCA 2, female, Phase 2)
- *I would ya ... because the exams are easier ... than the ones in the normal schools* (LCA 2, male, Phase 2)
- *Yes I would ... because I had learning difficulties in my old school and I wanted to go somewhere else I wanted to go to a different school but my mom and dad said you know your learning difficulties you go to this school and it will help you to learn ... it's not that you're slow or stupid or thick like 'cos you're not you're not stupid or thick you know like just you need that extra bit more help* (FETAC, female, Phase 2)
- *I would think about it but I would get my other options as well* (LCA 2, male, Phase 2)

### **5.3 Comparing the school with other schools: research question 1(b)**

Comparisons with other schools touched on a number of areas: curriculum (a lot of comparisons related to subjects offered, educational outings and level of work), organisation (matters as diverse as Transition Year and rules about drinking Coke), facilities (the gym was a source of pride but the lack of a canteen or shop was a grievance for some) and personnel (both the comparative quantity and quality of staff and students). Some of these have been mentioned in the previous section; what is presented here is an attempt to synthesise the views expressed into a coherent, representative overview.

More positive comments were made about the current school (50) than about other schools (36). This is consistent with school-based research which finds that, in general, students prefer the school they currently attend (Norwich & Kelly, 2004). Reasons why students

preferred their current school included: a more caring staff who gave more support, were nicer and less strict; better facilities; the opportunity to go on outings; sports in the school; friends; less bullying and less tolerance of bullying; and better rules, with no detention. Just two reasons given could be considered as specific to the school being a special school: smaller class sizes and a more appropriate level of work. Students commented that other schools had more subjects or students spent much more time at homework. This was commented on in three of the initial focus groups and by four of the school leavers interviewed in Phase 2, while all four of the students who had attended a mainstream second level school who were interviewed in Phase 3 (the other two interviewees in this phase had come from a special school / alternative educational placement) indicated that their previous school was much harder than their new school. Another feature of the interviews from Phase 3, involving those who had attended another second-level school, was that they spoke in some length about discipline procedures in their old school, especially detention.

- *It's a good school because in other schools they have nothing like we have – they haven't got pool tables, free classes ... If you're worried, you can talk to teachers, they're there for you, in other schools they'll say it's nothing to do with me (3<sup>rd</sup> year, male, Phase 1)*
- *In another school you wouldn't be going on outings, in this school I found it interesting (LCA 2, male, Phase 1)*
- *There's more stuff to do like whereas in another school we never got the chance to do basketball we didn't even get the chance to go away (FETAC, female, Phase 3)*
- *I never went on outings in my old school (FETAC, male, Phase 1)*
- *We might be a small bit slower doing work but other than that we're pretty much the same like 'cos we have the same opportunities in life as they would and we do you know we have the same activities sometimes we would have more than they would have because not every school has a gym, not every school has a resource room and a pool room (LCA 2, female, Phase 2)*
- *There's more teachers in the school willing to help you ... more supports, ya. You wouldn't see that in many schools (LCA 2, male, Phase 2)*
- *The teachers weren't nice either ... they would get cross with you for the wrong things they just weren't nice (3<sup>rd</sup> year, female, Phase 3)*

- *I love it because it's the only school that understands me* (anonymous, Phase 5)

Thirty references suggested that other schools were harder or had more subjects than their current school. Nonetheless, there were some aspects that students preferred about other schools. These included friends, staff, a wider range of sports, a canteen / shop, being allowed out of school at lunch time, being allowed to smoke, no uniform, after-school study, more subjects and half days.

- *In 6<sup>th</sup> class, it was brilliant ... the teachers in our old school were funny* (2<sup>nd</sup> year, male, Phase 2)
- *In my old school you can wear normal clothes if you want* (1<sup>st</sup> year, male, Phase 4)
- *In every other school – you're allowed play hurling or rugby* (LCA 1, male, Phase 1)

Only three students commented that their current school was harder than their previous school. This is noteworthy for the fact that these three students came from specialised settings (one had attended a special school, one a special class in a mainstream second-level school, and the third had attended an alternative educational placement outside mainstream or special school provision) and all three indicated that they had not been sufficiently challenged in their previous school.

- *The other school wasn't giving me much homework you know ... all I do is watch DVDs* (FETAC, male, Phase 2)
- *The subjects in this school would be ... different sometimes ... I think more subjects* (2<sup>nd</sup> year, male, Phase 3)
- *You do more work here. In my other school you just go in there and sit down just for the day really. They tell you go to class but if you didn't go to class they wouldn't really say nothing* (3<sup>rd</sup> year, male, Phase 3)

In relation to students' perception of 'equality' with students in other schools, two very clear matters of concern were raised by a significant number of students. Firstly, some students felt

aggrieved that they were not allowed out at lunchtime, while secondly, there were criticisms of two distinct aspects of timetabling. The first of these related to the fact that the school did not have a half day on Wednesdays as was the practice in many nearby second-level schools<sup>lxii</sup>; the second related to the school being open for all of June, in contrast to ‘*normal secondaries*’ which closed in early June. Both of these operational matters arise as a direct result of the anomalous situation whereby the school continues to be officially recognised as a ‘special national school’, a designation applied universally to all special schools of its type in Ireland, in spite of the fact that the school caters only for students of second-level age.

- *Everything is different in this school - less people in this school, you're not allowed out at lunchtime, why are we not allowed out during breaks? Out by the shops when normal secondaries now are? (1<sup>st</sup> year, male, Phase 1)*
- *The only good thing about their school they get a half day every Wednesday (3<sup>rd</sup> year, male, Phase 1)*
- *Half-days on Wednesdays ... we never get half days (1<sup>st</sup> year, female, Phase 4)*

#### **5.4 Students having a say in matters that affect them: research question 2**

This section examines the extent to which students felt they were enabled to express their views, specifically in relation to three aspects of their education. These are their role and the extent of a say they had: (a) in the decision that they would attend the special school, (b) in decisions made about classes and subjects in the school, and (c) in relation to matters affecting them generally in the school.

In relation to students having a say in the decision made for them to attend the special school, this question was asked specifically of the six students interviewed in Phase 3 who had attended another second-level school, and their replies split evenly three ways. Two said that

their parent(s) had initiated the decision for them to attend the special school; two said that they had initiated it, while two stated that it was a joint decision between themselves and their parents. Apart from the interviews in Phase 3, this question also arose in a number of the Phase 2 interviews and in one of the initial focus groups: four students (all from the LCA 2 class) indicated that they had not had a say in the decision to come to the special school, with some saying they would have liked to go to a different school<sup>lxiii</sup>. One student indicated that he had made the decision himself, while two others indicated that they had been given a say in the process of deciding to attend this school, and that they had wanted to come to the school.

- *I would have liked to have had a say but I didn't. At first I was rebellious against the school I didn't understand at the time I thought I'm different to everyone else. As I got older my opinions about being here totally changed (LCA 2, female, Phase 1)*
- *I had the choice of going to another school in my home town but I chose here over the bus (LCA 2, male, Phase 2)*
- *Well my parents asked me are you interested in moving into another school ... so I just said yes straight away (2<sup>nd</sup> year, male, Phase 3)*
- *My mom and dad, I spoke to my mom and dad, and my best friend (FETAC, female, Phase 3)*

A small number of students felt that they didn't have a choice when it came to choosing their senior-cycle option, deciding between the LCA and FETAC class. This rankled particularly with one student who was placed initially in the FETAC class against his wishes, but who persuaded the principal to allow him an opportunity in LCA. He said he benefited from this because he had "*the courage to stand up and say rather than being quiet in the classroom*". Conversely, however, another student who had spent some time in the LCA class and then changed to the FETAC class commented that he much preferred the FETAC class, while a third student who was in the LCA class believed that the FETAC option was much more attractive, but was not available to him.

- *I stood up after 2 months I said to my Mom and Dad that I'm not able for that class ... it wasn't for me, I'm after getting high scores in that class – that shows that if you*



*have the courage to stand up and say rather than being quiet in the classroom through all the years, that's what I would say ... I stood up for myself saying that I'd be able for LCA (LCA 2, male, Phase 1)*

- *Better in FETAC ... more outings, it's a lot of fun up there ... you can go on jobs like scones and getting the milk (FETAC, male, Phase 1)*
- *I would have chosen FETAC ... that class is better and the work is easier ... I can't go in there anyway 'cos the principal and my mam won't let me (LCA 1, male, Phase 1)*

In relation to students' perceptions about how they were treated by staff and given a say in matters affecting them in day-to-day school events, participants mentioned specific instances where this occurred *e.g.* selecting work experience placements, staying in during break times, and also that they were treated appropriately for their age. Some specific references were also made to situations where students felt they were not consulted or not given a say *e.g.* on LCA tasks, and in not being permitted to smoke. These comments indicate the glaring need for a formal forum such as a Student Council to be established to enable and to hear and to give weight to the views of students in these and other matters.

- *Staff would listen to you I suppose (2<sup>nd</sup> year, male, Phase 1)*
- *Some of the tasks are alright – the car wash – you got to choose what you got to do and you can make money too (LCA 1, male, Phase 1)*
- *Work experience is positive – you got to pick where we want to go (LCA 1, female, Phase 1)*
- *In 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> year you were allowed go to your friends' class and stay there for a while – in LCA they don't allow you it's a pain (LCA 1, male, Phase 1)*

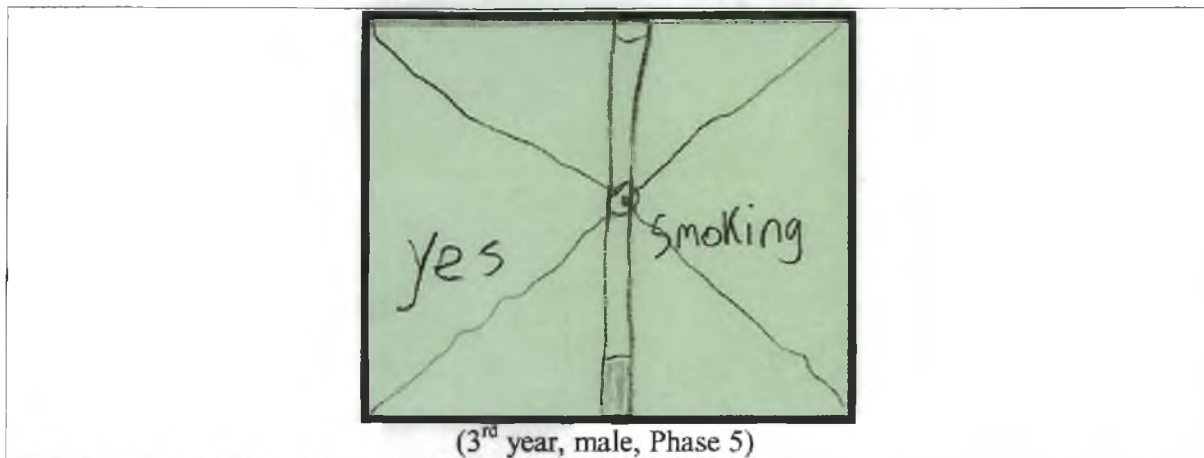


Figure 12: Expressing a view about smoking

In summary, it appears that, while students feel that they do have a say in matters relating to them, this could be further enhanced by creating both formal structures for them to voice their opinions and a more firmly embedded culture of consultation and listening within the school.

### 5.5 Summing up and moving on

The findings as presented above make for very interesting reading. Generally, students spoke very positively about many aspects of school. They held very positive views on staff, highlighting many examples of their kindness, helpfulness and friendliness. This suggests a positive informal school climate, which has been identified as one of the key factors that contribute to students having positive views about school (Smyth *et al.*, 2004; Smyth *et al.*, 2006). While they also spoke generally positively about their peers in the school, some students were critical of some of their fellow students. This tension between positive and negative views of peers echoes views from a study with a similar size population, albeit across a number of schools and settings (Norwich & Kelly, 2005), in which participants said that they were very happy that friends helped them with their work and played with them, but also remarked on incidents of bullying or teasing. This seems to confirm that students with

'mild GLD' / 'MLD' are susceptible to being bullied, not only in their own school, but also in their out-of-school interactions with other people, particularly people of their own age in their own communities, and in previous schools they had attended. One can also see a link between the 'social model' perspective on disability and the views of some who spoke about other people, including family members, underestimating their ability, supporting the view that hurt is sometimes unintentionally caused by well-meaning but ill-informed others (C. Thomas, 1999). This broad theme of bullying links in many ways to the question of identification and identity, which is discussed in more depth in the next chapter.

The views expressed about curriculum are predominantly positive. The overwhelmingly positive views about educational outings reflect the desire of children in general to be given opportunities to learn outside the confines of the classroom (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003), while the high approval ratings for sports and activities in the school indicate students' levels of interest and talents in this sphere, but also the central role given to sport in the school. The students' preference for practical subjects, which, as noted above, is consistent with the views of second-level students in general in Ireland (Smyth *et al.*, 2006; Smyth *et al.*, 2007), may indicate that the views of this cohort are more similar than dissimilar to the views of their peers in mainstream second-level schools. Further exploration of the theme of curriculum is provided in the next chapter, in considering whether or not a 'dilemma of difference' applies in relation to curriculum.

In respect of school organisation and environment, one can see, again, many parallels between the views of the participants in this study and the views of a wider, diverse group of students (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003). This is reflected in their critical views, but also in their

constructive suggestions for school improvement, many of which relate to these matters. The views expressed indicate the importance of the physical environment to students, in particular matters related to toilets, furniture, appearance and play space. Matters related to school organisation at a different level, namely that of the school's status, are discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

This chapter has presented what I consider to be the key findings from the five different phases of the data on a thematic basis, addressing specifically the first two research questions, the first of which consisted of two separate but related elements. In using a thematic approach, a holistic picture of the views of students is presented in what I hope is as representative and accurate a manner as is possible. The focus now turns to the third research question, which seeks to ascertain from the data whether or not 'dilemmas of difference' apply for the students in this study. This question is addressed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6: Do ‘dilemmas of difference’ apply?

### 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter, in addressing the first two research questions, presented predominantly descriptive accounts of my initial interpretations of participants’ views on the school. In this chapter, the focus is on providing a more analytical approach, by moving to the third research question which the study seeks to answer, namely whether ‘dilemmas of difference’ apply for the participants. In this sense, it moves to the core of the research question (see again *Figure 1*, p. 24). Dilemmas of difference are considered in respect of three distinct areas which appear in the literature, while a fourth dilemma, specific to this study, is postulated. These dilemmas are considered in relation to the theoretical perspective, originally presented in Chapter 2, which frames the study. To set the scene then, it is worth summarising both this theoretical perspective and the key elements of the literature on ‘dilemmas of difference’ as they apply to special education and specifically to the education of children with ‘mild GLD’.

The theoretical perspective that frames this study incorporates an intertwined model consisting of an ‘open’ thesis of insider epistemology, a relational theory of the subject, and a social relational model of disability. It is of relevance in particular in this chapter where the views expressed by the subjects (participants) are analysed in relation to the three strands of this theoretical perspective as well as to ‘dilemmas of difference’. Once again, it is important to emphasise the personal nature of my analysis and interpretation, in keeping with the open thesis of insider epistemology. My understandings are my representation of the actual views of participants, and while they attempt to portray these views as accurately as possible, they are nonetheless my interpretations of the views of others. There are “uncertainties involved in the analysis and interpretation of evidence” (Eraut, 2005b, p. 111) which highlight the

complex nature of distilling, analysing, interpreting, presenting and discussing evidence gathered, and it is important to both recognise and accept these uncertainties.

In setting out how ‘dilemmas of difference’ might apply in special education, Norwich (2008) identifies three specific strands, originally formulated in an earlier study (Norwich, 1993), where these may arise: in identification, curriculum and location. Each of these is addressed in turn in this chapter, and a fourth is added. I interrogate the three original strands initially in the same order as Norwich (2008) presents them, but discuss later how a framework for analysis of these dilemmas might be created by reconstructing and reordering the different aspects relative to each other. I decouple difference from dilemmas for each of the strands, by considering in the first instance whether or not difference applies before then considering if a dilemma applies to this difference. I also consider whether difference is a matter of degree or of kind for each of the specific strands. Finally, I conclude this chapter by looking at how this dilemmatic perspective interacts with the overarching theoretical perspective of the study.

Before examining these elements, it is necessary, I feel, to explain the particular strategy adopted for the challenging task of conceptual analysis required in this chapter. Dilemmas of difference apply at many levels; from macro-social to micro-social to individual levels of analysis (Norwich & Kelly, 2005, p. 57). The latter two apply in particular to this study, with dilemmas and tensions potentially applying collectively for the student population as a whole, but also possibly applying for individual students in respect of unique, context-specific aspects of their experiences of school. Various options were considered when going about the task of trying to ascertain whether dilemmas of difference apply from analysis of the data. One option would have been to focus exclusively on analysis of individual cases, by

considering all data coded to individual cases in the study, as all data created by each case are available for review in each case node. However, with 140 cases, this risked turning the study into a quantitative number-crunching exercise with the focus on counting positive and negative references made by each case. Another option would have been to look in depth at selected cases and analyse whether these individual cases recognised ‘dilemmas of difference’. The difficulty with this approach would be that while an in-depth focus would have been helpful in understanding the perspectives of these selected individuals, the lack of breadth across the full range of cases could potentially put the internal generalisability of the study in jeopardy, in that these findings could not claim to be representative of the views of the group as a whole.

Given this ‘dilemma’ about searching for dilemmas, a compromise solution was found. Selected individual cases were examined to ascertain the extent to which the views expressed could be considered to display dilemmas of difference – the individual interviews from Phases 2 and 3 were particularly suited to this level of analysis, as were the written and visual data produced in Phase 5. On top of this, a more holistic re-reading of the focus group transcripts (Phases 1 and 4) enabled me to judge whether or not a more collective sense of dilemma presented itself within the group dynamic. Utilising both of these strategies facilitated a more rounded perspective on whether dilemmas of difference applied for students, and if so, to what extent. Simultaneously, existing nodes in NVivo were re-positioned and re-examined, to parallel the distinct themes. The discussion that follows arises from this multi-strategy approach, presented in a narrative style, rather than in a case-by-case or phase-by-phase structure.

## 6.2 The dilemma of identification

The dilemma of identification concerns whether or not certain students should be identified as needing special education. Doing so can provide the appropriate resources but can also potentially lead to stigma and devaluation and possible negative self-concept (Norwich, 2008). Part of the tension is around whether to use categories to label individual students, or to construct continua of learning and attainment (Norwich & Kelly, 2005). The dilemma for the students is that there “cannot be additional provision ... without some individual identification” (Norwich & Kelly, 2005, p. 173). This dilemma is closely aligned with the other identified dilemmas of location and curriculum. In one sense, it precedes these other dilemmas in that both of these would not apply without the initial difference of identification, yet in another sense it is broader than these and encapsulates all aspects of difference, while also impacting on key concepts such as identity, self-perception and stigma.

Is there difference for the students in this study in relation to identification? I contend that there is difference, and it is one both of degree and of kind. A difference of degree exists by virtue of the use of IQ scores to delineate separate categories of learning disability, while this distinction itself then leads to difference in kind for these students, as they now carry the specific label of ‘mild GLD’. The next question to address, then, is whether or not a dilemma of difference applies in relation to identification.

My initial reading of the data led me to the view that tensions around identification were not forcefully expressed by the majority of students. This may be as a result of the methodological openness and flexible design of the study which allowed participants to decide what aspects of school they wished to address, with many either choosing not to, or not



being explicitly asked to, consider this matter. Closer analysis did, however, show that tensions around identification did arise, for at least some students. This is not just specifically manifested in respect of whether children are identified for the purposes of providing special education (Norwich, 2008), but also includes an extension of this - identification of the students by others, through use of labels or by judging them, often in a demeaning or hurtful way. This is apparent in two distinct ways. One is that some students came to an ‘official realisation of difference’, through realising that they are given an official categorisation / label, with one outcome being that the student attends a different type of school. Sometimes this realisation may have been influenced by parents, as the following comments testify.

- *My mom and dad said, you know your<sup>bxiv</sup> learning difficulties, you go to this school and it will help you to learn (FETAC, female, Phase 2)*
- *My mom told me a couple of weeks back that I was going to a new school ... my Mom said there's a different school in ( ) and I said that might be a good idea Mom (2<sup>nd</sup> year, female, Phase 3)*

The second way in which students faced the dilemma of identification could be considered a more subversive or ‘unofficial realisation of difference’, through the negative and hurtful comments from others – in their families, in their schools, but most predominantly in their communities. This aspect connects very obviously with the concept of bullying to which I referred in the previous chapter, a concept which has also appeared as a central theme in other studies (Norwich & Kelly, 2004; McGuckin & Lewis, 2006). This awareness of the views of others was quite prevalent in the testimonies of students, and it did appear that a stigma was felt by at least some participants which stemmed from being seen as ‘different’ by others. The negative language, name-calling and bullying to which some students were subjected represented a negative dimension to their lives. For some, they had internalised this perception of themselves and had adopted a ‘medical model’ interpretation of themselves or

of their peers in the school, identifying themselves by the comments of others, or, conversely, by refusing to accept the views of others.

- *Well, I am a special need here, like ... I think it's ok to be a special need and to come to this school* (FETAC, male, Phase 2)
- *Other teachers and students from other schools will say "oh look at them they're a bunch of retards or whatever" but we're not and we know we're not that but trying to explain that to someone who's starting here they'll think "oh why am I sent to this school have I done something wrong or why are they calling me a retard"?* (LCA 2, female, Phase 1)

Four different students contributed to the following conversation, including the student about whom the first speaker is referring. The suggestion is that he is subjected to bullying because he is identified by the school he attends, yet the strong feeling from within this focus group is that the positives of attending the school greatly outweigh even the negative aspects like this.

#### Conversation 2:

- *Like M. gets bullied about the school, saying what's happening to him and all that they say we don't do work, sit around on your hole all day*

I: How do you deal with that?

- *Walk away*
- *Walk away*
- *I just go, ya, whatever*
- *Don't listen to them, just walk away*

(I – interviewer; students – 3<sup>rd</sup> year, multiple respondents, Phase 1)

The transcript below highlights how one particular student weighed up his desire to attend his local second-level school with a realisation that the pace of work might have been too challenging for him to receive an education appropriate to his particular needs. This particular excerpt reflects at an individual level the dilemma of difference in its three guises – related to both location and curriculum but most fundamentally to identification. This student appears to adopt a 'social relational' understanding of his disability in acknowledging both his own

struggle to keep up but also the disabling impact of the inability of teachers (and, one assumes, the entity of the school) to cater for his individual needs.

Conversation 3:

- *I could have went to the Community School as well, but my parents didn't want me to go there in case I'd be kept back in the same class over and over. But I wanted to go to the Community School*

I: You didn't have the choice, but would you still hold that you should have gone to the Community School?

- *No I think I was better off going here because I would have been struggling there*

I: Why? What would be different?

- *The teachers wouldn't have been helping you there as much – just move on to the next subject*

(I – interviewer; student - LCA2, male, Phase 1)

In summary then, what I suggest is that an identification difference presents for all students in the school, and an identification dilemma presents for at least some students in the school. This dilemma is related both to 'formal' or official identification as a person with 'mild GLD' and also to the manner in which they are treated and viewed 'unofficially' by others outside the school community. The data show that some students' perspectives are fluid rather than fixed: their negative perception of the school before they attend changes to more positive views of the school once they attend. Others, in contrast, appeared very happy with the school from the beginning, and did not indicate that they felt burdened with any dilemma about their identification or identity. Yet, while the positive views indicate that students like the school, nonetheless many are conscious of their difference in attending a special school, and conscious of how others may view them by virtue of their attendance there. Note, for example, the comment (referred to in Chapter 5) by one student who stated that he would not disclose to others that he attended a special school because "*they might call me a retard*".

### 6.3 The dilemma of curriculum

The dilemma of curriculum centres around whether a ‘common curriculum’ with the same learning experiences should be provided to children, irrespective of their learning abilities and needs (Norwich, 2008). Providing a common curriculum risks denying to some students the opportunity to have relevant learning experiences, while not doing so means these students are likely to be treated as a separate lower status group. I consider here the students’ views about curriculum, and draw my own conclusions from these views.

As shown in Chapter 5, students’ views on curriculum matters were generally very positive. Certainly, students expressed a preference for certain subjects over others, and some also indicated clearly which subjects they would have liked to study. However, expressing subject preferences does not of itself indicate any tension around the provision of a ‘common curriculum’. Similarly, while some students felt that they get too much homework in school, others indicated that they did not get enough, that they liked doing it, or that it was much harder in other schools. The comments in relation to subject choice are particularly pertinent for school management to consider, if it wishes to identify potential areas of expansion that may further ‘mainstream’ the school in line with other second-level settings.

So do the views of students in relation to curriculum indicate anything that might represent a dilemma? My view is that a curriculum dilemma did not arise for the students in this study, contrary to what Norwich (2008) found in his study (albeit using different methods and through analysis of the views of professionals, not students). One relevant factor to note, however, is that the curriculum dilemma in Norwich’s study relates more generally to students with more severe disabilities than the participants in this study. Specific contexts

may also have had a contributory effect to the curriculum dilemma found by Norwich, for example, in the UK he notes that until recently there was “no provision in the general curriculum structure or assessment arrangements for children with severe or significant SENs” (Norwich, 2008, p. 52). The specific contexts of Irish curriculum provision and of Irish special schools (and in particular the uniqueness of the study school) are also relevant to this discrepancy, I contend, as I now explain.

One of the advantages of being a unique school (the only one in Ireland which caters exclusively for students of second-level age considered to have ‘mild GLD’) is that this has enabled the school to set its own agenda in relation to what it considers an ‘appropriate curriculum’. In that sense, the curriculum can be seen as different in kind to that offered in other schools. In reality, recent years have seen an evolution towards a merging of aspects of mainstream provision (Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied) and alternative provision and approaches (FETAC Level 3, emphasis on ‘off-campus’ learning through regular educational outings), to form what many students seem to consider (although they did not express it in these terms) ‘the best of both worlds’. The opportunity to access certification programmes similar to their peers in mainstream education is a positive for students, as is the appropriate pace and level of work. In this sense there is also a difference of degree in relation to curriculum, but the similarities indicate that the degree of difference is not very marked.

Despite the relative commonality of the curriculum with that in mainstream schools, its implementation nonetheless differs substantially. The curriculum as implemented remains student-centred, rather than examination-driven, with much more of an emphasis on the holistic development of the learner, and a ‘cherry-picking’ of mainstream programmes and

subjects to suit the abilities and needs of students. Obviously, smaller class sizes are of benefit, but the views from students suggest that the school appears to have merged successfully a second-level model of provision with a primary-level model of care. Aspects of curriculum provision which differ markedly from that offered in mainstream schools, specifically the emphasis on a 'life-skills' approach and on learning through 'off-campus' experiences, substantiate this assertion, as the following conversations clearly show, with fun and function present in learning experiences.

Conversation 4:

I: What's the point of the trips in terms of school?

- *They learn you how to use your money and stuff*

(I – Interviewer; student – 1<sup>st</sup> year, male, Phase 1)

Conversation 5:

- *Every Wednesday we go on outings because its FETAC*

I: Why do ye go out? What's the reason for going out? Is it just for fun or a doss or is there learning in it?

- *Well, ya, it's learning about Maths and ... it's fun to go out, like.*

I: Ok, and what kind of things might you learn when you go out

- *Well like if you go into a restaurant, if you know the prices.*

I: Ok, so it teaches you how to order your food in a restaurant.

- *Ya, and giving the exact same amount of change*

I: Ok, so looking after your money.

(I – Interviewer; student – FETAC, male, Phase 2)

Rather than students feeling stigmatised or devalued, this balanced approach to curriculum actually contributes to their positive outlook on school. I suggest, given these views, that the close alignment of the school curriculum with that provided in mainstream schools is a source of satisfaction and pride for many students, while the 'different' aspects of the curriculum are

considered in a positive light, as being better than what might be available in mainstream schools. Thus although ‘difference’ in curriculum is apparent for at least some students, it does not appear to manifest itself as a dilemma. The structure of curriculum and learning, where selective use of mainstream programmes and curricula is intertwined with school-specific, class-specific and even student-specific alternative approaches, appears to operate very successfully, if one accepts the views of students in this study. The level of choice and alternative routes available for students indicate that the curriculum is differentiated at both a macro (whole-school) and a micro (individual student) level, and this appears to work very well. The over-riding impression is that students are content, or at least not discontent, about any difference in curriculum or learning that they might be experiencing. This is partly due to the support received from staff in helping students to access the curriculum, as the following comment testifies.

- *You’re never left out – like if you have something wrong with your homework they will help you (2<sup>nd</sup> year, male, Phase 1)*

In some respects, the views of students in relation to curriculum can be linked with a more positive perspective on the ‘social relational’ model of disability, and also relate closely to the discussion on identification above. While the impairment of the individual student is recognised (otherwise s/he would not be attending the school), strenuous efforts are made to alleviate impairment effects, by allowing students to avail of and benefit from an individually tailored “appropriate education” (Ireland, 2004, p. 19). It appears, from the views of the students, that this is what they feel they are receiving.

The views about curriculum are in many senses also representative of the totality of views expressed in the study as a whole, in highlighting that it is difficult to categorically claim a

collective voice for the participants. This brings me back once again to the subject of ‘insider epistemology’ and the uncertainty in claiming to represent the views of others. Each individual has had their own experiences and their views are individual, with some more naturally articulate than others at expressing those views. The conversations below indicate how two students valued the fact that they were following, and succeeding in, the same course (LCA) that was being followed by other students around the country in mainstream schools, and that this was one of the biggest positives about the school for them. What it also shows is that even for students from the same class, some were more naturally expressive whereas others tended to respond more succinctly to questions asked. This difference indicates that a certain level of skill and a range of techniques are needed to engage meaningfully with participants, to ensure that a diversity of views is heard from as wide a range and as great a number as is possible. This allows all who wish to be included to have their say.

Conversation 6:

I: What made you keep coming then?

- *To get my Leaving Cert*

I: So your ultimate aim was to get your Leaving Cert?

- *Ya*

I: Ok. If the school didn’t have Leaving Cert, would you have kept coming?

- *No*

(I – Interviewer; student – LCA 2, male, Phase 2)

Conversation 7:

- *Before I started in the school I didn’t actually think about doing the Leaving Cert because I thought I wouldn’t be able for it*

I: How do you feel about it now?

- *When I was actually started it I found it very difficult – my parents encouraged me to keep at it then*

(I – Interviewer; student – LCA 2, female, Phase 1)



In summary, then, my contention is that a dilemma of curriculum does not manifest itself in any substantial way for the participants in this study. While they are treated as a separate group from their peers by having a modified curriculum, the similarities between the curriculum they access and that which their peers in mainstream schools access means that this separateness does not appear to translate (for the participants in this study) into ‘lower status’, as Norwich (2008) suggests may be the outcome. Perhaps the generally accepted view that for students “the social dimensions of classroom life often take precedence over the academic” contributes to this position (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004, p. 102), and thus their views on curriculum may not be consistent in any case with the views of other stakeholders. Nevertheless, in this particular study, it is probably justifiable to claim that the school has, by effectively marrying mainstream and alternative approaches to curriculum in recent years, resolved or avoided the particular dilemma of curriculum.

#### **6.4 The dilemma of location**

The dilemma of location is concerned with where children with special educational needs are taught: either in regular classrooms where they may not receive access to scarce and specialist services and facilities, or in specialised provision, which may cause a sense of exclusion and lack of acceptance by other children (Norwich, 2008). The ‘special school’ nature of the location of this study makes this difference one of kind, rather than degree. Does a dilemma of location apply? It appears that this dilemma did manifest itself for at least some students. Close examination of the data generated from the interviews in Phases 2 and 3 seems to indicate that initially, at least, some students were resistant to, and resentful of coming to a special school, as the three conversations below attest. It is also apparent from these conversations how the themes of identification and location are closely aligned.

Conversation 8:

- *I wanted to go to a different school, 'cos I didn't really understand it at first or understand why I had to come here. Then my mom and dad sat me down and said you've to go to this school 'cos you've got difficulties with learning in your old school*

I: How did you feel about that, that you had to come to a school that you didn't know anything about?

- *I felt scared*

I: How did you get over being scared? How did you cope with that?

- *I said to my mom like why do I have to go to this school? I know I have learning difficulties but like why do I have to go d'you know like to this school? My mom said to me they'll help you*

(I – Interviewer; student – FETAC, female, Phase 2)

The conversation above is striking for the manner in which the student presents the role of her parents as advocates for special schooling. In this sense, again, it can be seen as an 'open' version of the 'social relational' model where the actions of others can either enhance or minimise the 'impairment effect' on the individual. In this case, the actions of others (parents) are conducted in the genuine belief that assistance for and amelioration of the young person's impairment will best be provided through attending the special school, thus it is an attempt to assist the young person. This is contrary to the beliefs of those who assert that special schools are damaging and exclusionary (Rustemier, 2002; Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2004; Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 2004), and who advocate that all special schools, which constitute an "alternative eugenic model of segregated education" (Alliance for Inclusive Education, 2005) should be closed. Of course, as with other themes discussed here, one's perspective on the parents' position can be either supportive or critical of their decision to opt for special schooling for their daughter.

The following conversation highlights that for some students, their views on the school changed over time, from being initially resentful and rejecting of the school, to gradually

coming to accept and to like it. This may indicate a gradual acceptance of 'difference' but also suggests that the students' views are influenced by their mainly positive experiences in school over time replacing their (perhaps understandable) initial fears and discomfort.

Conversation 9:

I: In 1<sup>st</sup> year, were you here against your will? Did you resent being here?

- *I hated being here*

I: You hated being here. Did you have any choice when it came to?

- *No*

I: Who made the decision?

- *It was kind of me too, but my parents as well*

I: Ok. Was there any other option for you to consider, any other secondary school?

- *Not that I know of*

I: And how long did it take then for that kind feeling of hating to?

- *2 to 3 years*

I: And where would you, say if on a scale of 1 to 10, if you say well 1 is I really hated it? Where would you be now on the scale of your opinion of the school?

- *10, it's that good now.*

(I – Interviewer; student – LCA 2, male, Phase 2)

The next excerpt contains views expressed by one student in two separate phases, indicating perhaps the depth of feeling that she had about this particular matter. The views expressed show remarkable insight and an ability to reflect on changes of opinion over the course of five years in the school.

Conversation 10:

- *I didn't get a choice when I started primary school, they noticed straight away that there was something wrong ... my principal said she knew a principal for special needs, it wouldn't be right to send me to a normal school because she was afraid my grades would go down. My mother and father said fine.*

I: Did you have a say?

- *I would have liked to have had a say but I didn't. At first I was rebellious against the school I didn't understand at the time I thought I'm different to everyone else. As I got older my opinions about being here totally changed*

I: At the start were you unhappy to be here?

- *I didn't understand why I was sent here as I got a little older I started to like it. This is the right place for me ... When I came up here I was a bit troublesome because I didn't understand why I was up here, and what was I supposed to do here, it actually took me a good two years to settle.*

I: What are your impressions now as you are leaving?

- *Love it, don't want to leave*

(I – Interviewer; student – LCA 2, female, Phases 1 and 2)

The location dilemma produces, I would argue, ambiguous feelings for some students. While these students appeared to be quite happy in the school and with what it offered them, they also expressed an ambiguity or even negativity about the school which appeared to be related to how others might perceive them by virtue of their attendance at a special school. In other words, happiness with the school itself, (especially its ethos, curriculum, the staff and other students / friends) was tempered by a sense of unease with what the school signified and represented in the wider community, and the potential negative ramifications of this representation. Again, this position was much more clearly expressed by the school leavers in both Phase 1 and Phase 2, suggesting that these students were more skilled at teasing out these nuances. These comments also highlight once again the close interlinking of the identification and location dilemmas, while the links with the topic of disclosure, referred to in detail in the previous chapter, are also obvious.

- *I'm not saying I'm embarrassed about the school but it is kind of embarrassing in a way ... People would be asking where do you go ... I got my way out of that by saying do you know where it is then they say where is it so I say ah it's too long to explain so you get away with it in a way (LCA 2, male, Phase 1)*
- *The reason why I say it's a bit awkward is because some would be getting bullied which others wouldn't, do you know, like personally myself I was getting bullied in my own area for special needs (LCA 2, female, Phase 2)*

A related 'location dilemma' manifests itself, not about the 'special school' nature of the school, but about the actual physical location of the school, and what is around it. The school is adjacent to, and closely linked to, the main administration offices and other education<sup>lxv</sup> and care facilities of a voluntary agency (referred to below as XXXX) which supports persons of all ages and varying abilities who live with intellectual disability. This co-location on one campus was viewed very negatively by some students. Visible signage outside the school grounds was a clear negative in this regard for some students.

- *Around our friends they say we go to XXXX, we're sick of hearing it but we get used to hearing it, we just don't care anymore because we're nearly out the door anyway. It just shows a huge XXXX sign ... take the XXXX sign down – other special needs schools wouldn't have XXXX written across it (LCA 2, male, Phase 1)*
- *I would say take down the XXXX sign (LCA 2, male, Phase 2)*

In contrast to this view, another student spoke powerfully in both focus group and interview about how people with learning difficulties in the past did not get the opportunities that they would get today, and saw clearly the benefits of attending the special school. Again, one can suspect here that the student's views have been influenced by the views of parents or family members, in keeping with findings from other studies that "children and young people with learning difficulties actively interpret and select from the views of others in forming their own self-perceptions" (Norwich & Kelly, 2005, p. 164). It also highlights again one of the key elements of the theoretical perspective that frames the study, the relational conception of the subject.

- *I think it's actually a brilliant school because we're getting a chance that people wouldn't have 40 years ago because there's actually loads of people out there I know loads of adults that can't read and can't write they can't do nothing properly for themselves and they all say I'd love to be up in (school) ... they see we're getting the opportunity they never got when they were at school. 40 years ago if you had problems or learning difficulties there was nothing like this – they were just thrown to the back of the class and just left there (LCA 2, female, Phase 1)*

In summary, then, my assertion is that a dilemma of location does apply, at least for some students, but that the ‘stigma’ or negative aspect of this dilemma is related more to the immediate physical environs of the school and the association of the area as a whole with disability service provision, and to the students’ perceptions of how others view them, than to the actual school. What is interesting about this is that while students are critical of the way they are perceived by others in their own community, they in turn see themselves as being ‘different’ to those who may have more severe disabilities or greater degrees of learning needs. The reality of being in a special school is compounded for some by the physical location of the school and their perceptions about how others might view them because of this. It seems to indicate that the school’s ‘difference’ would be more acceptable to at least some of the students if it were located in a different area, and not directly associated, in a physical / locational sense at least, with a disability services provider. This is a matter which requires reflection and consideration by both the school’s management and the management of the disability service provider. Reaffirming the social relational aspect of the study, this also highlights the challenge for wider society to be more accepting of difference and disability.

## **6.5 A fourth dilemma**

My analysis of the views of students in this study leads me to the tentative conclusion that a fourth dilemma applies in this specific context. This dilemma is difficult to name, but is primarily related to matters of school structure and organisation, and has already been discussed to some extent in Chapter 5. In some ways, it overlaps with each of the three dilemmas discussed above, in particular the location dilemma. Nonetheless, I contend that, for this specific context, it stands alone also, as a specific dilemma that arises in this particular location but which arises from a complex interlinking of factors, of which location is just one.

This dilemma only appeared to be an issue for a certain number of students, but yet I consider it to be significant enough to suggest its existence. I will refer to it as the ‘status dilemma’ as it centres on the anomalous status of the school as a special national (first-level) school catering exclusively for students of second-level age. This anomaly makes this difference one of kind, rather than of degree. Given this unique status of the school, it is perhaps unsurprising that this theme has not (to my knowledge) appeared in the literature on dilemmas. I shall now clarify why I think a dilemma applies in relation to this difference of ‘status’.

The school’s uniqueness in catering exclusively for students of second-level age within primary school structures can be seen both positively and negatively. This uniqueness allows a great deal of autonomy, which has been of benefit in managing and creating an appropriate curriculum, as can be seen in the generally positive comments from students, and the lack of an obvious dilemma related to curriculum. Yet, in catering exclusively for second-level age students while operating within primary school administrative structures, some students felt aggrieved at certain aspects that made their school ‘different’ to other second-level schools, and felt that they were unfairly treated in comparison to their peers in mainstream schools. This manifested itself in their gripes about over-supervision, not being allowed to smoke or to leave school at lunchtime, or play certain sports, although all of these are internal organisational matters that could readily be altered ‘in-house’ if management chose to do so. (Whether any of these changes are warranted or would be in the best interests of students is of course a different question!) It also manifested itself to a lesser degree in the few suggestions for a greater range of subjects.

Perhaps the greatest indicators of this difference suggested by students, however, were the perceived injustices felt by students in comparison to those in other schools in terms of structure and timetabling. One of these concerned the practice of other second-level schools in the area having half-days on Wednesdays; the other was that the school remains open through June when all mainstream second-level schools have closed. The dilemma is that while students wished to be treated similarly by having a weekly half-day and by finishing in early June, the current position of a shorter school day was something they were unsure about giving up. Nonetheless, this is one ‘dilemma’ which remains a current ‘bug-bear’ of students, as it has surfaced as an item for discussion in Student Council meetings this year. The comments and conversation that follow highlight the views of students in this matter.

- *Not fair either – we’ve to stay in school for the whole day on Wednesday and every other school gets out at 12.20 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, female, Phase 1)*
- *In the summer we finish on the 30th and some schools finish on the 4th – how is it that the other gang are off? (1<sup>st</sup> year, female, Phase 1)*
- *No half days, that’s bad (FETAC, male, Phase 1)*

#### Conversation 11:

I: Do you think we should have a half day in this school?

- *Ya, I do.*

I: If you compare this school to (a local second-level school)

- *Well at the end of the day we finish an hour before them every day so*

I: So would you prefer to have a longer day until half 3 or 4 o’clock but have a half day for one day?

- *Half day for one day*

I: Would you mind working until ...

- *Half 3, 4 o’clock, I wouldn’t. Half day would be better I think like*

I: And have a longer day every other day

- *Ya, I think it should be 9 ‘till 4 and then give us a half day maybe Wednesday*

I: So keep it the same as secondary schools.

- *Ya. Like why should we be different?*

I: We have to stay in school until the end of June. What do you think of that?



- *Bad - like the other people get to stay off and we have to come to school.*  
(I – Interviewer; student – 3<sup>rd</sup> year, male, Phase 3)

I contend then, that this dilemma is specific to the unique circumstance of the school, and is one that needs to be addressed by both school management and by national policy-makers.

## 6.6 Reconstructing and re-ordering the dilemmas

Reflecting on these four potential dilemmatic constructs, I now wish to reconstruct and re-order the dilemmas into a more appropriate framework. My first contention is that a continuum applies for each of the dilemmas, ranging from very weak to moderate to very strong, while I have de-coupled difference and dilemma, as indicated earlier. This allows consideration of whether or not difference applies in the first instance, and then to consider the extent to which a dilemma might apply in respect of each particular theme. It also allows consideration as to whether the difference is of kind or of degree. Finally, I see very strong links between all four dilemmas, but suggest that the identification dilemma is the foundation on which each of the other three are built, and that the status dilemma can be considered as a subordinate of the location dilemma, in that it would not arise at all if the location dilemma itself was not present. I have represented this re-ordering and re-structuring, which takes into account each of these aspects, in *Figure 13* below.

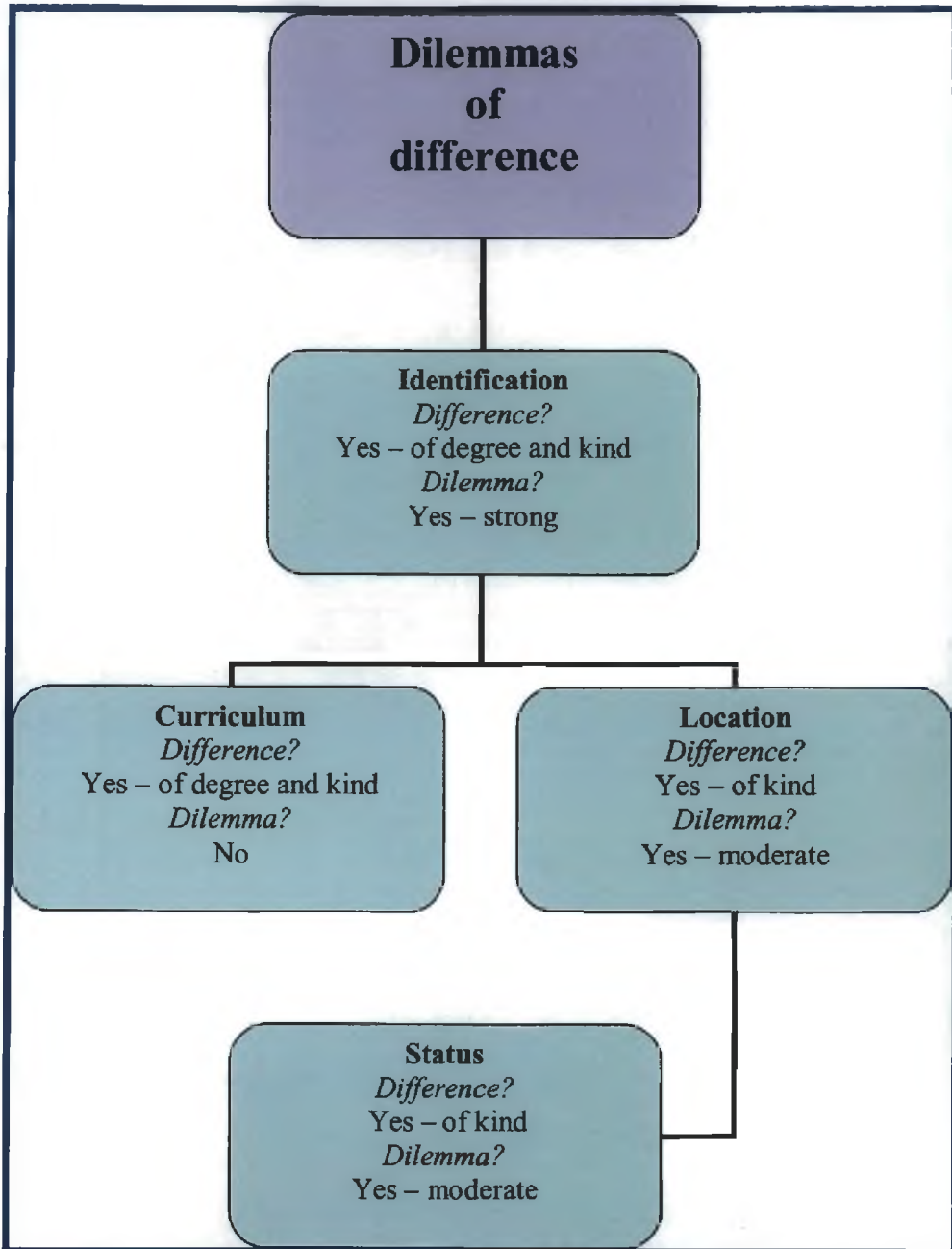


Figure 13: Dilemmas of difference - how they apply

In summary, then, it appears as if a dilemma of difference in relation to identification was apparent for many students in the study, dilemmas of difference in relation to location and status may apply to a moderate extent, for at least some students, whereas the difference in curriculum appeared not to create a dilemma for students in this school. I intend now, in

concluding this chapter, to consider how the dilemmatic perspective that has been examined interacts with the theoretical perspective which frames the study.

### **6.7 Concluding impressions: linking ‘dilemmas’ with the theoretical perspective**

In the first instance, my presentation and analysis of students’ views must be tempered with the caution, once again, that a ‘weak thesis’ of insider epistemology colours this study, and I draw conclusions very tentatively from the data, conscious that they are my conclusions of the words, writings and drawings of others, to whose ‘club’ I do not belong. This is particularly true of my attempts to ascertain to what degree ‘dilemmas of difference’ might apply for students, as this was the one question, unlike the other research questions, that was not explicitly asked of students, and thus, the challenge of ‘reading between the lines’ was more difficult in trying to conceptualise a coherent answer to this question.

The other two aspects of the theoretical perspective are closely linked: a social relational understanding of disability coupled with a relational conception of the subject. What both of these perspectives suggest is the importance of our social interactions, and that our experiences and views are derivative of our social contexts and social relations. This is certainly true of this particular study, where students’ views, ranging from their perspectives on mundane, everyday matters which concern them, to more deeply-held attitudes and beliefs about their own identity and the world they inhabit, are all coloured by their interactions and relations with others, whether that be in school, in family or in the community. It is obvious from this study that many influences impact on students, from both within and outside the school. The comments on staff and fellow students indicate that at the time of data collection, the participants were both influenced by others and able to express a view about others.

The dilemmatic perspective has proved very useful in reminding us that, for these students, a social relational understanding of disability can provide a clear insight into the nature of their ‘disability’ in life. The philosopher Thomas Pogge distinguishes between ‘horizontal inequality’ which indicates difference that does not bestow an advantage on one person over another (*e.g.* the colour of one’s eyes) and ‘vertical inequality’ where difference bestows an advantage / disadvantage on one person (*e.g.* being dim, obese or frail is generally considered disadvantageous) (Pogge, 2003). Thus the students’ intellectual impairment can be considered a ‘vertical inequality’ which can restrict their functionings. However, the negative effect of the impairment is compounded by the manner in which society at large, through the belittling and hurtful behaviour or comments of individuals, or the education system itself, by not providing appropriately for individual needs, can add an extra ‘disabling’ layer onto individuals’ experiences. The (intellectual) impairment does not of itself fully explain the (learning) disability; the inability of society in general, and the education system specifically, to minimise the impact of the impairment effects also contribute to the disability, leading to greater challenges for the individual.

To conclude this chapter, I wish to make a short comment about the usefulness of the dilemmatic perspective. Views on trying to create a greater understanding of disability and of the views of persons with disability have recently attempted to move beyond dilemmas of difference. For example, work on a ‘capability approach’ emphasises an interlocking of personal, social and circumstantial factors in understanding disability and claims to have moved beyond the dilemma of difference (Terzi, 2005). However, I find myself agreeing with the argument that although Terzi’s assertion “provides a useful perspective to the field of SEN/disability, this is at the level of principles and justifications and not about the actual design of educational provision and its consequences” (Norwich, 2008, p. 31). The

dilemmatic perspective has proved extremely useful for this study, in that a theoretical construct was effectively applied in the analysis of the reality of children's perspectives. I also believe that I have demonstrated how the dilemmatic perspective can be adapted and extended in this in-depth analysis of the views of students.

## Chapter 7: Reflections, summary and closing remarks

### 7.1 Introduction

This final chapter consists of a number of separate elements. Initially, I present my reflections on the data collection procedures and the data analysis procedures. In these reflections, I also look closely at the ‘views of children’ question: specifically how the study might have supported or restricted participants to give their views, and how it sought to answer the question of the extent of a say children have in matters of importance to them. I also consider the extent to which the study managed to comply with the criteria set by the various models of children’s participation, and with Article 12(1) of UNCRC, which were presented in Chapter 3. Following this, a short summary of the thesis is presented and some possible directions and cautions for future research are signposted. Implications of the findings are highlighted, with a particular focus on implications at local / school context level, as well as at national / policy-making level. I conclude with some pertinent closing remarks.

### 7.2 Reflections

#### *7.2.1 Reflecting on the data collection process: lessons for the future*

In this study I utilised a range of methods which helped to support students in participating; this is one of the key contributions of the project to the research field. The process of collecting data by a variety of means added depth to the study and enabled and facilitated participation of a large number of students. The range of data collected from a large percentage of the student population validates the wisdom of providing alternative strategies for participants. The use of multiple strategies and phases also helped with the process of

triangulating the data for validation purposes. Both of the ‘whole-school’ phases (the initial class-based focus groups and the final phase of written and visual contributions) attracted relatively high percentages of the student population. The use of a more participatory approach also complements the ‘social relational’ approach to disability by rejecting a positivist perspective and changing the power relations in research (Porter & Lacey, 2005). I now briefly reflect on each of the phases in turn.

It appeared that a small number of students in the initial phase did not find the focus group format sufficiently interesting to hold their attention; some of these left the focus groups, as it had been explained to them that they were entitled to do, while others, from my observations at the time and subsequent reviewing of videos, appeared less interested when their peers in the group were speaking. This was particularly apparent in one of the initial focus groups (a 1<sup>st</sup> year class). Nevertheless, overall the level of discussion and interaction in these focus groups was very encouraging, and indicated both the capability and the desire of students to express their views, notwithstanding the significant demands on both linguistic and cognitive capabilities (Porter & Lacey, 2005). These initial focus groups opened the door for many students to ‘have their say’ and provided rich and varied data which stood on their own merits but also created a foundation for further avenues of exploration in subsequent phases.

Phases 2 and 3 had specific remits, and they addressed these in an appropriate way. As indicated earlier, the interviews appeared to facilitate more in-depth reflection and comment from students. This was particularly obvious in the manner in which some spoke very poignantly about their experiences in other schools and their experiences of bullying. In this sense, they produced an insightful new layer of data, building on top of the initial foundations

established in Phase 1. Including the element of choice in the Phase 3 interviews where students selected the topics they were most interested in talking about (see *Appendix G*) was particularly useful, and would possibly offer greater benefit in a study involving a larger number of interviews, as the range of topics chosen would offer an indication of what aspects or topics students wanted to prioritise.

The decision to include a more participatory element to the two focus groups of first year students which constituted Phase 4 was designed to reduce the possibility of lack of interest or focus recurring, and doing so certainly added to the interest level, as both activities, although relatively simple, engaged all participants. In the case of one student in particular, the second participatory element (where students selected an image or drew / wrote something on a Post-It that represented an aspect of school for them) proved to be highly successful. This student had barely participated in the traditional focus group discussion, giving very short answers or making no comment, whereas the participatory exercise saw him very much 'on-task', focused, and contributing orally both during the exercise and in the immediate aftermath when I asked students to explain their pictures / comments. On observing this student, I thought immediately of the small number of students who had participated in the initial phase of focus groups and who probably would also have been much more engaged in the participatory exercises, had they been given the opportunity at the time. This confirmed to me that it was the correct decision to include these participatory exercises, and in future focus groups with children, I would certainly consider using a similar strategy, although I would probably be a bit more creative and adventurous in the range of images and pictures that I would put at the disposal of the participants, and also consider using photographs or even role-play as mechanisms for gathering the views of participants.



The final phase of data collection proved particularly useful in that the four different options (two written, two pictorial) gave great scope to each student to select a style of presentation that best suited her / his learning style or preferred mode of communication. It was the only phase which did not involve direct input from me, and thus in a sense offered the possibility of capturing the 'unmediated views' of participants. It did appear, however, in a small number of cases, that class teachers may have conducted some of this work as a whole-class exercise, as there seemed to be some overlap in the range of written responses from students of the same class. While the intention was no doubt to offer support and guidance to participants, this support may also have had the effect of limiting their inputs, as some students may have preferred to include phrases or comment generated by others (staff or students) rather than to present their own original ideas. Certainly in the responses where it was obvious that there had been neither group discussion nor adult input, the comments and drawings were extremely interesting and thought-provoking.

In summary then, each of the five phases, and the different strategies incorporated in each phase, contributed in their own way to the overall effectiveness of the data collection process, and the range of methods used is a particular strength of this study. Prior to beginning fieldwork, it would have been impossible to predict which methods would prove most successful. Hindsight shows that multiple methods produced data of great richness and authenticity; they are data 'owned' by their creators. The interviews conducted in Phases 2 and 3 proved particularly enlightening, especially when attempting to answer the key question about dilemmas of difference, and demonstrated that traditional methodologies are still very useful, and are often equally as effective with children as are the more innovatory methods of gathering data.

### *7.2.2 Reflecting on the data analysis process: lessons for the future*

Three different methods of data analysis were attempted in the course of this study. In Chapter 4, I clarified why the decision was made to change from a manual to an electronic method of data analysis. Notwithstanding this change, the initial manual process of data analysis was worthwhile, as it built a foundation which made further analysis possible. Certain key themes emerged very strongly across the focus groups, while it was useful in identifying what aspects of school life made students feel happy, and conversely, what were the aspects about which they felt least happy. It also demonstrated clearly how articulately certain students were able to express their views, and how their views, in the initial focus group phase, reflected both a confidence about expressing their own opinions but also a willingness to hear and agree or disagree with the views of others. This reinforces the validity of utilising the relational conception of the subject to develop a perspective on the study, as all interactions, between researcher and subject(s) and amongst subjects (participants) themselves, influenced the direction and overall tone of each focus group. The ‘participant-led’ nature of the focus groups facilitated the free and open expression of views, without any agenda other than the hearing of these views.

As mentioned previously, some involvement of participants in analysing data also occurred, involving two of the ten focus groups after completion of Phase 1, and as part of the focus group exercise in Phase 4. The former of these procedures, where a time span of almost nine months had passed between the data collection and subsequent attempt at participatory analysis, did not appear to me to work as successfully as it possibly could have. The time lag would have been a contributory factor, I believe, but perhaps the more likely challenge was that I had not previously completed an exercise like this and thus was somewhat ‘unsure of my ground’. It might have helped to have either piloted this activity on an unrelated ‘test

project', or to have extended its use beyond the two focus groups selected, to maximise its effectiveness. It also demonstrated that students needed to experience this analysis exercise over a sustained period to develop their own skills and confidence in this activity, rather than expecting a one-off exercise to be successful. While the students were generally co-operative and tried to engage in the analysis of what they had previously contributed, for some, as noted earlier, it was apparent that they were not very interested in participating in the analysis of the data. Others, however, engaged very well with the process, indicating again that different strategies work well for different participants.

The third element of data analysis, using a specific CAQDAS system (NVivo 7) proved to be a good choice. It allowed scope for detailed analysis without the multitude of paper and baskets and space that a similar level of manual analysis would have necessitated. It also facilitated the creation and easier perusal of visual representations of the data through the accessibility and readability of all data within hierarchical coding trees. However, the steep learning curve which I mentioned earlier certainly did apply, and making the decision to adopt an electronic approach to analysing data is one that should not be taken lightly. Neither should it be automatically assumed to be the most appropriate option in every qualitative study. While using NVivo certainly saved space and paper, it did not save time or make the analytical process any easier; if anything it made this challenge greater in that the multitude of possibilities and options within the software (setting up coding frames and trees; coding on, and on, and on; running various types of queries; merging nodes into new nodes *etc.*) meant that there was always the attraction / risk of continuing to engage in another bit of 'playing' with the data and the software *ad infinitum*. The challenge in this is not to lose sight of the purpose of the software, and to remember that it is simply a tool for supporting my own insights.

Similarly, when applying Shier's model to this study, my own reflection is that the study maps somewhere close to or near the point which he identified as the minimum which had to be achieved to endorse Article 12 (Shier, 2001). Children were listened to, they were supported (and encouraged) in expressing their views, and their views were taken into account. Some of the views expressed in the study were capable of being instantly addressed, while many others have been transplanted from the study into the newly established Student Council, which has, for the first time, given all students a sense that their views matter in the school and that there is a forum for everyone to express these views and to have them given 'due weight'. Whether the study reached Shier's fourth level of involving students in decision-making processes is more difficult to prove, although the open-ended beginnings of the project over eighteen months ago certainly gave some scope to those involved in that initial phase to set the agenda for what followed thereafter, at least in content if not in method.

The conceptual framework that I find most interesting for interrogation of this study is Lundy's model (Lundy, 2007). How did this study address matters related to voice, space, influence and audience? The question of space was well addressed in that students were enabled to express their views at all times within a safe and familiar environment, and their freedom to express their views in any way, and in respect of any aspect of schooling, was at all times made clear to them. Giving students a voice to express their view was also, I believe, well facilitated, in that multiple strategies (oral, written, pictorial) were made available to students to contribute, while all students had the opportunity to participate in at least two of the phases.

The two concepts which relate to the matter of giving ‘due weight’ to the views of children and young people are perhaps more difficult to analyse in their application to this study. Certainly the audience for these views lies almost exclusively within my control, and the level of success of finding and engaging with an audience depends on how effectively different versions of the views expressed can be disseminated to the different stakeholders and interested parties. Those that are potential audience members include staff, parents and management at the school, as well as those involved in the disability services provider to which the school is attached. Academic audiences may have a requirement for a different style of dissemination. Although it would have been possible to write with children for an academic audience, as others have done (for example Kellett *et al.*, 2004), given that this was my first foray into research of this magnitude and with such large participant numbers I opted not to do this. Those that deserve the most appropriate level of response (to which a great amount of thought should be applied) are the story-tellers themselves and their school peers who either did not or could not contribute. For the sake of building future confidence in the validity and authenticity of listening to young people’s views, it is vital that this is done as effectively and in as ‘child-friendly’ a manner as possible. Setting up the research notice board in school, and providing appropriate dissemination through regular updates on the study, including the final ‘child-friendly’ report, certainly helped students (and staff) to be informed about the project. It also addressed the two distinct elements of ‘audience’ and ‘space’ which are seen as central to the full implementation of Article 12 (Lundy, 2007).

Finally, the level of ‘influence’ (Lundy, 2007) which is to be given to these views is again something that is perhaps too early to judge. If the study remains purely at the level of an academic exercise, then the ‘due weight’ given to the views expressed must surely be considered negligible in terms of their effect on the lives and conditions of the participants,

even if ripples of discussion are created in academic circles about the exercise. If, however, the stakeholders listed in the previous paragraph, particularly the stakeholders who maintain power in the school, specifically management and staff, give ‘due weight’ not only to the views expressed in this time-limited study, but to accepting, and taking ownership of, the concept of giving children a right to express their views and to taking these views seriously, then it will, I believe, have been a worthwhile venture.

#### *7.2.4 Reflecting on ways ahead: suggestions for future research*

This study, in its tentative conclusions, challenges much of the contemporary literature which suggests that full inclusion of all children is the preferred future direction for educating children with diverse needs in our schools. In so doing, it is of course open to the charge of bias, given my role as a special school teacher for over seventeen years. One way of exploring the generalisability and transferability of these conclusions is for a different researcher, or research team, to undertake a similar style project, in a similar setting. This however, is easier said than done. The setting in which this study took place is unique in Ireland, while the time-specific, context-specific nature of the project means that it could never be replicated, not even in the same setting, as the views would now be those of a different cohort of students, living a different history under differing circumstances. This explains the weight given to each of the three separate but linked elements of the theoretical perspective, particularly the ‘open thesis’ of insider epistemology.

Nevertheless, the study does lend credence to the need for further studies which might aid our understanding of various aspects of the inclusion debate, and of the drive to enable children to play a more active role in research. In relation to the first of these dimensions, studies seeking

to ascertain the views of students of a similar profile, in both mainstream and specialised settings, would surely be worthwhile. This could take the form of merging some of the methodology of this study with the type of participant profile of the UK study referred to earlier (Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Norwich & Kelly, 2005), in which students with 'MLD' in mainstream and in special schools participated.

Seeking the views of children and their parents, as was the original intention with this study, would also be worthwhile, and this 'case study' style approach could even be extended to consider the views of other stakeholders including staff, management and policy makers. Gathering the views of parents could provide insights into how young people construct their views and how they are influenced by others – again drawing attention to the relational conception of the subject and the social relational model of disability. A specific study comparing the views of professionals in Ireland with the views of their counterparts gathered in the three-country study conducted by Norwich (2008) would also be very useful and may highlight specific contextual aspects of special education provision in Ireland.

In relation to enabling children to play a more active role in research, the selective use of a limited amount of participatory exercises, and the open-ended, flexible design of this particular study both suggest that the scope and potential for enhanced quantity and quality of this type of approach could yield dividends in terms of both developing the processes of research and enhancing the end product. Above all, what is absolutely essential is that future studies continue to focus on encouraging children and young people to express their views, and on giving these views due weight and due respect, recognising the capability of children to articulate their views. There is a need to explore in more depth both what it is that young

people with disabilities experience but also how they respond to these experiences and in particular the dilemmas which they may face in their lives. Part of the challenge is to find out more about how others might support them in dealing with these dilemmas. This applies to their teachers, to researchers, to parents and siblings, and to wider society, which has much to learn in this regard.

### 7.3 Summary

This study focused on enabling, hearing and giving weight to the views of students who attend a special school, and attempted to portray these views in a coherent manner, both at a narrative level but also at a more conceptual level, concerning 'dilemmas of difference'. In attempting to do so, a range of different strategies was used within a flexible research design, with the intention of enabling as many students as possible within the school population to contribute their views.

The study considered three distinct but related elements in analysing the views expressed by students. The initial, surface-level analysis focused on identifying the key themes and topics that students saw as being important to them, and representing these in a coherent, structured fashion. Five major themes were identified, while a sixth 'set' incorporated a range of miscellaneous views. Of the five identifiable themes, students spoke generally very positively about two of these: curriculum and people. Two other themes, school organisation and environment, and bullying, drew, on balance, more negative responses from participants. However, many of the comments made about bullying referred to students' experiences not only in their school but also quite frequently with others, especially peers, in their own communities and in previous schools they had attended. The fifth key theme, which



encapsulated a broad range of topics under a generic heading of 'views on special schooling and disability', threw up a range of views. In considering all of these themes, comparisons were made with views expressed by students in related studies, chosen selectively because of a particular connection with this study, in either methodology or participant profile. Recognising the views of students about other schools, in comparison to their current school, was another feature of this phase of analysis: in general participants spoke more favourably about their current school than they did about other schools, although this was neither universally true for individuals nor for themes.

The second level of analysis considered the extent to which students felt they had a 'say' in matters that affect them: an explicit examination of how effectively they were afforded the right to express a view and to have this view given due weight. The findings indicate that students had mixed views about this, with some expressing the view that they were enabled to express their views on a range of matters, and that these views were taken into account, while others strongly disagreed and felt aggrieved that their views were not listened to and that they were not empowered or enabled to be involved in decisions that affected their lives. Family members, members of staff and school management all played a part in the extent to which participants felt that they had been given a 'say', and it was apparent that the views of some students were influenced by the views of some of these 'significant others'. However, the very act of being involved in this study itself strengthened participants' experience of having a say, while the indirect outcome of setting up a Student Council has hopefully cemented a philosophy of listening to children's views in the school for the foreseeable future. The challenge for the school is to now embed this practice of enabling, hearing and giving weight to students' views more completely into the ethos and fabric of school life.

Finally, the analysis examined the concept of ‘dilemmas of difference’, initially related to three areas identified in the literature, but also incorporating a fourth dilemma that could be said to apply uniquely for the participants in this particular study. I suggested that for some students, at least, dilemmas of difference manifest themselves very clearly in respect of three areas: identification, location and status, while differences in the fourth strand, curriculum, did not appear to manifest themselves as a dilemma for students. This is so, I contend, because the vast majority of students were much more positively disposed towards curricular options (taken in its broadest sense, including subjects, sports, and out-of-school learning opportunities) in their current school and tended not to reflect to any great extent on the possibility of other schools providing something better for learners than what they were receiving.

What can be said about children’s views overall? In spite of the existence of these dilemmas, a clear-cut preference for special schooling over mainstream schooling appears evident from the data, yet these dilemmas indicate that there is unlikely to be a perfect solution. The nature of special education leaves us with real dilemmas which require “balancing tensions, accepting less than ideal ways forward and working positively with uncertainties and complexities” (Norwich & Kelly, 2005, p. 177). Nonetheless, the endorsement of the school by the majority of participants does give plenty of food for thought. Does special schooling work? In the views of at least some of the students in this study, satisfaction with the specific school in this study is tempered with a less positive outlook on the nature of special schooling in a wider sense, and the negativity associated with both the location of the particular school and the views of many others in society. In this regard, it appears as if the dilemma of special schooling has not been definitively resolved in this single study, and, as my opening quotation suggested, the debate continues.

## 7.4 Implications of the findings

It is vital, I contend, that before concluding this work, the potential implications of the key findings as summarised in the previous section are discussed. In doing so I initially propose what I consider to be the key implications at local / school level, before subsequently considering what the implications might be at national / policy-making level.

### 7.4.1 Implications at local level

The students' views offer much for school management (and the disability services provider to which the school is affiliated) to consider. Firstly, the specific aspect of the dilemma of location which relates to the physical location of the school is a particular matter of concern, given that at least some students were unhappy with this aspect of their schooling. Resolving this particular dilemma may require consideration of a re-location of the school to another area, where the association with other disability services would not be as apparent, thereby limiting the potentially stigmatising aspect of this dilemma. Secondly, the 'status dilemma' is also something which school management should consider addressing, by seeking full second-level status for the school. This, however, cannot happen without policy change at national level, as this decision would not be in the gift of local management to provide independent of national policy, thus I discuss this matter further in the next section. A third matter for school management to consider is the future role of the school in terms of identification of students with 'mild GLD'. If, as is predicted, the numbers of students in this category continue to fall, given the change in policy since *Circular SP ED 02-05* (Stevens, 2007), what is the potential impact on future enrolment figures and the future viability of the school? Conversely, however, given the generally positive views of the students in this study

in relation to the curriculum which they access, is it more likely that there will be a greater demand for schools such as this in the future, especially for students of second-level age?

Aside from these specific matters, there is a bigger potential gain for the school and its students, of which management should be cognisant. This relates to the potential for enhancing the opportunities for students to ‘have a say’ and to contribute in a real way to making the school a happier and better learning and teaching environment. Creating an ethos of enabling and hearing and giving weight to students’ views will require a belief in the merits of Article 12, and a commitment to deliver on it. This can be delivered through formal mechanisms such as the Student Council and student representation on bodies such as the Green Schools Committee, but also provides a challenge to staff and management to embrace this ethos in all aspects of their engagement with students, in both curricular and pastoral dimensions. Given the predominantly positive comments made by students in the study about the capacity and willingness of staff to listen, this challenge should not prove insurmountable for staff and management in the school, and should help to alleviate the additional obstacle experienced by children with disabilities of not having their voices heard (Logan, 2008a).

#### *7.4.2 Implications at national level*

At national level, there are, I believe, three critical matters that this research has highlighted as requiring attention. Two of these are specific to special schools; the third is of a more general nature. The first matter concerns national policy in relation to special schools. While the move towards inclusive education, as outlined in Chapter 1, appears to be gathering pace, and enrolments in special schools continue to decline, many barriers to inclusion remain (Stevens & O'Moore, 2009). Thus the first challenge for policy-makers is to specify in clear

policy terms the future role (if any) of special schools in the special education continuum in Ireland (Stevens & O'Moore, 2009), and to take cognisance of the views of students in these schools, including those in this study who have spoken in generally positive terms about their experiences in a special school.

The second matter is dependent on the previous matter being resolved by maintaining and adequately resourcing special schools in Ireland, and, if this is the case, relates to the matter discussed in the previous section, namely the 'second-level' status of this one school in particular, but also of other special schools (in effect, the vast majority of them) that provide education for students of second-level age. Given that almost three quarters of students in special schools designated for students with 'mild GLD' are over 12 years of age (Stevens & O'Moore, 2009) and that these students access many aspects of regular post-primary curricula and programmes such as Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied, this change in status should be given immediate priority. The recent recommendation that "school structures, curricula, staffing and other supports (in these schools) should reflect an environment that is significantly different to that of the primary school" (Stevens & O'Moore, 2009, p. 211) is to be welcomed, but does not, I suggest, go far enough. The students of second-level age attending these special schools deserve to attend schools officially sanctioned and designated as second-level schools, and not be confined to attending 'national schools', which is insulting to notions of equality of access and opportunity, and was certainly viewed negatively by at least some of the participants in this study. It would be extremely simple to pilot this status change in the special school where this current study took place, given its uniqueness in catering exclusively for second-level age students, but it is an issue that is wider than just this one school. If this requires the restructuring of existing special schools into separate primary and post-primary schools, then this should be done.

The third matter is one of a more general concern, and relates once again to the theme of the study: enabling and hearing and giving due weight to the views of students. National policy has already been set in this regard (Ireland, 2000, 2001, 2002); it is now incumbent on policy-makers to ensure that these policies are implemented, so that goals and targets can be achieved, and that children's best interests can be determined and their lives can be improved (Logan, 2008b).

### **7.5 Closing remarks**

The views expressed in this thesis are an attempt by me to present the views and opinions of another group of people, of whom I am not one. It is important to state again at this point the interpretive nature of the categorisation, analysis and the process of presenting findings. There are many uncertainties associated with both the collection of evidence and its subsequent analysis and interpretation, many of which relate to the specific contexts in which data gathering takes place (Eraut, 2005a).

Although my years of experience of working in the school where the study took place are undoubtedly of assistance to me in gaining access to the students and their views, what is contained in this study must still be seen in this context – my interpretation of the views of others. Without the co-operation, honesty and bravery of these students in agreeing to tell me their views, this study would not have occurred; I hope that in return I have in some small way lit the flame for at least some of these students to believe that they have a voice and that their views are not just worthy of consideration, but can help to make a difference, in their lives and in the lives of others. I hope that I have done justice to their stories and that their hopes and dreams can be realised. I conclude by repeating two extremely moving and

powerful comments which highlight how deeply some of these students reflected on what the school meant to them.

- *What I think of school is I love it because it's the only school that understands me* (anon, LCA2, Phase 5)
- *I like the school because you can do stuff that you couldn't do in your old school – like you can make more friends. I didn't have any friends in my old school* (female, 3<sup>rd</sup> year, Phase 1)

## Appendices

### Appendix A: A note on terms - “child / children”

For the purpose of this paper, and to avoid the confusion between the term child / children and other terms (young people / teenager / adolescent / student / pupil), I shall use the term ‘child’ as defined in the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* to refer to “a person not more than 18 years of age” (Ireland, 2004, p. 8). Puzzlingly, this definition is at odds with the definition of a child as “a person under the age of 18 years”, as construed by the *Children Act* (Ireland, 2001, p. 16) and the *Ombudsman for Children Act* (Ireland, 2002, p. 5), which is also that used in Article 1 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989). Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that “a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (United Nations, 1989, p. 2).

However, because the focus of this paper is on the education of children with ‘mild GLD’, I will use the first definition, as it includes those both under eighteen years and those who are eighteen years of age. This is for two reasons. Firstly, it is by definition more inclusive, as one extra year is included in the life of a child, and secondly, on a practical level, many children with special educational needs remain in full-time education until the end of the school year after their eighteenth birthday. A number of the participants in the study had reached their eighteenth birthday at the time of their involvement. Mathematically, one could present it in the following terms: child = person  $\leq$  18 years old.



## **Appendix B: Initial explanatory letter and consent form for students**

February 27<sup>th</sup> 2007

To all students

I would like to find out from all the students in the school what you think of your education and of this school. I would like to hear your opinions and your voices. I am doing this because I am also studying at the moment and this is part of my work for my course. It is called **research**, which is a word which means **finding things out**.

If you would like to get involved in this project, I will ask you to **sign a form** before I ask you to do anything else. This tells me that you are happy to be involved. If you don't want to be involved, that is fine too. So please look at the consent form, **sign section A or B** and **return to me or put it in the box outside the hall**.

If you agree to help me, I will make sure that what you say will be kept private. The only reason I will not be able to do this is if you tell me about something that is against the law – then I will have to report that. When I have finished my work I will tell everyone who helped me about what I found out.

For the **first part** of the research I am asking every student in the school to **tell me**, by writing, drawing, taking photographs, or by saying, **what you think of the school**. You can talk about / write about anything as long as it tells me what you think honestly about the school. Your teacher and assistants will help you with this work. You can do it in school but also at home if you wish. This work will **start in a week or two**. When it is finished I would like you to discuss what you have done with your classmates. I will then collect your work and the recordings of your discussions.

If you want to ask me any questions about this, you can do so at any time. If you want me to explain more about it, I can do so. There will be a **notice board** near the front door to tell everyone about the research and you can look at this to see what is happening.

Thank you for now.

\_\_\_\_\_

Colman Motherway

-----

**CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENTS: PHASE 1**

PLEASE SIGN A or B BELOW.

THEN PUT IT INTO THE ATTACHED ENVELOPE AND RETURN TO COLMAN OR  
PLACE IT IN THE BOX OUTSIDE THE HALL. THANK YOU.☺

A: I **agree** to take part in the first part of Colman Motherway's research in March 2007.

SIGNED: \_\_\_\_\_ (STUDENT)      DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

OR

B: I **do not agree** to take part in the first part of Colman Motherway's research in March  
2007.

SIGNED: \_\_\_\_\_ (STUDENT)      DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Initial explanatory letter and consent form for parents

**RE: Research Project in (...)**

February 27<sup>th</sup> 2007

Dear Parents / Guardians

My name is Colman Motherway and I teach in (...). I am currently studying for a postgraduate degree. As part of this degree I wish to do some research. The research I wish to do is to **find out what the students in (...) think about education and about this school**. I would like to hear and record the views and opinions of the students.

This study will be confidential. No names of actual people will be mentioned in the report (I may use false names in places). The only reason I may not be able to keep information confidential is if someone tells me about something that is illegal – then I will have to report that. When I have finished my research, I will give a summary of what I have found to everyone who has been involved. There will be a **notice board** near the front door in school to tell everyone about the research and you are welcome to look at this to see what is happening.

I would really appreciate your help in doing this study. For the **first part** of the study I am **asking every student in the school to tell me**, by writing, drawing, taking photographs, or by saying, **what they think of the school**. The teachers and assistants will help students with this work. It will be done in school but can also be done at home if students wish. This work will start in a week or two. When it is finished I will collect the work. I will also record discussions before and after the work and collect these.

I have asked each student to agree to take part in this research, and I also require consent from a parent or guardian. If you and your son/daughter agree that s/he can take part, then I will invite him/her to be involved in this first part of the research. If you do not wish this to happen, this is fine; I will continue with those students who have agreed to take part.

I would be grateful if you could **sign** either **A** or **B** on the attached form and **return to me in the enclosed envelope**. You can **post** it back to me or **give it to your son/daughter** to put in the **research box** outside the hall. S/he will also have received a consent form to return to me. I would be grateful if these could be returned by next **Monday March 5<sup>th</sup>**.

If you want to ask me any questions about this, you can do so at any time by ringing me in school. The best time to talk to me is 9.00 – 9.30 in the morning or 3.00 – 3.30 in the afternoon.

Thank you for now.

Yours sincerely

\_\_\_\_\_

Colman Motherway

### **CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS & GUARDIANS: PHASE 1**

PLEASE SIGN A **OR** B AND RETURN TO COLMAN MOTHERWAY (BY POST OR BY HAND) IN THE ATTACHED ENVELOPE PLEASE.

A: I **give consent** for my son / daughter \_\_\_\_\_ to take part in the first phase of Colman Motherway's research in March 2007.

**SIGNED:** \_\_\_\_\_ (**PARENT / GUARDIAN**)

**DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_

OR

B: I **do not give consent** for my son / daughter \_\_\_\_\_ to take part in the first phase of Colman Motherway's research in March 2007.

**SIGNED:** \_\_\_\_\_ (**PARENT / GUARDIAN**)

**DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix D: Initial explanatory memo for all staff in school**

*Date: February 2007*

*To: All staff*

*Re: Colman's Research Project*

I will be conducting research in the school over the next 12 – 18 months. This is for a thesis I am doing for a Doctorate in Education through St. Patrick's College in Drumcondra. The working title of my thesis is: "Student and Parent Experiences of Special Education and Schooling in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Ireland: A Case Study of One Special School".

The focus of this project is on gathering, documenting, analysing and presenting the multiple perspectives of students and parents in the school in relation to their experiences of this school. The purpose of doing this (apart from my own reasons to complete my course) is to learn from these perspectives and to assess if a tension may exist for these students and parents in relation to their perceptions of special schooling.

I hope to put a notice board in the hall in the next few weeks and to use this as a mechanism for informing people (staff, students and parents) about the nature of the research project and its various phases. I also hope to be able to put some of the data gathered on the notice board after each of the phases (see below).

I intend to gather data for this thesis in a number of phases. Briefly, I envisage that these phases will be as follows, although changes are possible:

### **Phase 1: Introductory Student Views on Their Experiences of School: MARCH 2007**

I will be asking all students in the school to complete an initial exercise where they document their experiences in this school. This can be done in a variety of ways. I'll be asking for your (staff) co-operation in facilitating this exercise at classroom level. *See separate page for a more detailed outline of this process.* I hope to get a flavour of the key themes which are important to students from this introductory phase.

## **Phase 2: Focus Group Research with 3<sup>rd</sup> Year Students: APRIL – MAY 2007**

I will be conducting focus groups with my own class (Groups A and B) over a period of four to six weeks (one class per group per week). This process will hopefully add some depth to what Phase 1 documented. There will be a link between the themes discussed, the methodologies, and some of the key concepts of CSPE (democracy, human dignity and rights and responsibilities).

## **Phase 3: Individual Semi-Structured Interviews with School Leavers: JUNE 2007**

I hope to individually interview some of the students who will be leaving the school in June (from both the LCA 2 class and the FETAC class). I hope that this will again add more richness to the data gathered from the whole-school exercise and the focus groups.

## **Phase 4: Individual Semi-Structured Interviews with Specific Group of Students: OCTOBER 2007**

I may consider asking one cohort of individual participants to consent to be interviewed individually for the project. These are students who have transferred to (...) from a mainstream second-level school, and thus should have an insight into the ways that different schools and school systems operate.

## **Phase 5: Semi-Structured Interviews with Parents: OCTOBER - NOVEMBER 2007**

I will conduct semi-structured interviews with parents (one or both) of some of the students involved in the research (it will probably be the parents of the students in my current class who will have participated in the focus groups). The purpose of these interviews would be to explore to what extent their views correlate with the views expressed by the students about their educational experiences, by exploring the same broad themes.

Other phases may be included along the way. Possibilities include:

- Interviewing some of the new first year students at various stages of the next school year
- Asking all students to complete a final questionnaire towards the end of the project
- Interviewing past students of the school (the school will be 50 years old in 2008)

I am asking you for your co-operation with this project. While it is primarily serving my own needs and purpose, I have also deliberately sought to do research that would potentially have a positive impact on the life of the school and on the lives of the students, parents and staff. I hope that the inconvenience to classes and to you will be kept to a minimum, and that the benefits to the school throughout the process and at the end will have been worth the effort.

If you have any concerns or questions about any aspect of the study, please come talk to me.

Thanks

Colman

---

**Phase 1: Introductory Student Views on Their Experiences of School: MARCH 2007**  
**DRAFT OUTLINE OF PLAN**

**PREPARATORY WORK (end of February / early March)**

- (a) Students will be informed about the research project at a whole-school assembly
- (b) A notice board will be displayed in the hall which will give information about the project
- (c) All students will be given a letter asking them to consent to participate in Phase 1 of the study.
- (d) Letters will be posted to parents informing them of the study and seeking their consent for their son/daughter to participate in Phase 1 of the study.
- (e) Consent forms will be collected.

**DATA COLLECTION**

The **nine class teachers** will be asked to allocate two class lessons to this data collection exercise, within a timeframe of two weeks (**March 12<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup>**). The process envisaged is as follows:

## Lesson 1: PREPARATION AND DOING

- (a) Students will be asked to consider the following: *A new student is coming to this school. S/he has never been here before. What would you honestly like to tell them or show them about this school?*

The teacher will act as a facilitator who will guide an initial brainstorming session with the class. Prompt questions can be used, such as:

*What do you really think of this school?*

*What do you think is important for this student to know about the school?*

*What would you have liked to have known before you started in this school?*

*Can you think of anything to tell them that would help them to settle in better when they start?*

This part of the lesson will be tape-recorded. It may also be possible to photograph the results of the brainstorm exercise.

- (b) Students will begin writing or drawing or orally describing or photographing what it is they wish to tell this potential student about the school.
- (c) If students wish to finish this work at home, they may do so.
- (d) If teachers wish to allocate a second class period to the exercise, they may also do so.


## Lesson 2: FEEDBACK


With facilitation by the class teacher, students share what they have written or describe their picture or photographs with their peers and staff, one by one. Students will be encouraged to ask each other questions on what they have described. Again, these lessons will be recorded. All material will be collected after lessons.



# COLMAN'S RESEARCH PROJECT 2007-2008

## WHAT IS IT?



A project to find out what the students  (and their parents) think about school & education.

## WHEN DOES IT HAPPEN?

Between  
March 2007  
and  
October 2008

## WHERE DOES IT HAPPEN?




## WHO IS INVOLVED?



Colman Motherway is the researcher

The students are the participants  
Some parents may also be participants

## WHY IS IT HAPPENING?




Colman is doing a course in a college in Dublin. This research is the coursework (project) he must do to pass his exam.


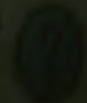
## WHAT HAPPENS FIRST?

All students and parents / guardians got a letter and **consent form** in February. This lets Colman know (✓ or ✗) if you wish to take part in Part 1 of the project.

## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

In March 2007 Colman will ask students to tell him what they  think of school. He will discuss how this will happen with each class & teacher.

## HOW CAN I FIND OUT MORE?

1. Watch this notice board 
2. Ask Colman to tell you more about it 

## **Appendix F: Schedule of Phase 2 interview questions**

*(Other questions may be asked as interview develops)*

1. You're going to be leaving school in the next few weeks after \_\_\_ years here. How do you feel about that?
2. You finished up in the LCA 2 / FETAC class. What are your thoughts on this class / course?
3. Think of the subjects you have done in school. Which did you enjoy the most? Are there some subjects that you found harder / easier or less/more interesting than others? Why was this?
4. Are there any subjects that you did that you did not want to do, or are there subjects that you did not do that you would have liked to have done?
5. How did you think the staff treated you in this school? How do you think students were treated in the school in general?
6. At the focus groups lots of people spoke about outings. What is your opinion on school / class outings?
7. People also mentioned that the school has lots of sports. What are your feelings about that?
8. What is your opinion on the rules of the school? Would you like to change or drop some of them or to add some new rules?
9. If you had a brother or sister, or in years to come, a son or daughter, who had difficulties with learning, would you consider sending them to this school? Why do you say this?
10. Although you won't be here next year, what one thing would you like to see done to improve the school?
11. Some people mentioned that it was awkward coming to a 'special needs school'? What are your thoughts on that?
12. At the focus groups, many comparisons were made between this school and other schools. What is your opinion on that – how do you think this school compares to other schools?
13. At the focus groups, you mentioned that (*refer to specific comment made by interviewee if appropriate*) Can you tell me why you said that and if you still consider that to be true?
14. Is there anything else that you would like to say to me or to ask me before we finish this interview?

**Appendix G: Schedule of Phase 3 interview questions**

1. You have been in this school since last September / September 2006. I know you may have spoken about what you think of it at the focus group meetings last March, but would you mind telling me again what you think of this school?
2. Can you tell me a bit now about the last school you were in?
3. In what ways are the two schools alike?
4. In what ways are the two schools different?
5. I'm now going to ask you to compare the two schools under these headings. You can choose which topics you'd like to talk about first. As we go through the list I'll explain what I'd like you to tell me and we can mark off which topics we get done.

Discipline	Homework
Allowed out at lunchtimes	Allowed Coke
Subjects	Half days
School in June	Outings
Class work	Transition year
Detention	Number of people in the school
Other students	The school building
Staff	Travelling to school
Fun / craic	Sports (including equipment and facilities)
Friends	Free time

6. Whose decision was it for you to attend this school? Did you have any say? If you had the choice, which school would you choose to go to?
7. Is there anything else that you would like to say to me or to ask me before we finish this interview?





**WHAT I THINK OF SCHOOL**  
(draw a picture to show what you think of school)

A large, empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for a student to draw a picture showing their thoughts on school. The box occupies most of the page's vertical space.

## WHAT I THINK OF SCHOOL (in words)

The things I like best about school are:

The things I don't like about school are:

The things that I am good at in school are:

The other students in my school are:

The staff in my school are::

I would like my school better if:

**WHAT I THINK OF SCHOOL**

**(draw some pictures to show what you think of school)**




Appendix J: Sample of comments from Phase 1 posted on notice board

School is lethal because from 1<sup>st</sup> up to 3<sup>rd</sup> year classes have hardly no rules and then if they can get into FETAC that would be the best thing they could do – and they get paid – that’s a bonus

I’d say we should be left out for lunch break I’d love to have something to eat instead of being stuck up the field

You get no time to relax, even if teachers are out they leave you

It’s good because you might get lots of friends all over the school

I think the school should be done up a bit ... new painting inside and outside, every bathroom I went to the doors are all old and there’s no locks ... put new signs as well

*I had the choice of a different school as well but I chose here over the bus – some might say it’s kind of a bad choice but I was 13 by the time – but I like the school now – the teachers are nice and the students are nice as well and friendly and there’s lots of activities there as well*

## Appendix K: Update for students after Phase 1

**RE: Research Project in (...)**

May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2007

TO ALL STUDENTS

This letter is to let you all know, as I said I would, about the research project that I am doing with you. **59 of you** took part in focus group meetings with me in **March**. You all gave me your views about the school. Some of you also wrote things and drew some pictures for me. I'd like to thank you all very much for your help with this.

If you'd like to see some of what you said, it's up on the notice board in the hall. I'm also giving this to each class to look at. Here are some of your comments:

- *"I never went on outings in my old school – it's a good thing we go out every Wednesday ... and have fun"*
- *"This year has been too much work compared to the last two years"*
- *"I like the school because I can do stuff I couldn't do in my old school – like you can make more friends"*
- *"I have good and bad people ... most of them (staff) are sound but there's two or three that I don't like"*
- *"I like cooking, computers, woodwork, Art, Irish. Maths is alright, it's boring"*
- *"Some people wear their own clothes and more people have to wear their uniform – is it uniform or not?"*
- *"I think the school should be done up a bit ... new painting inside and outside"*
- *"Take the XXXX sign down – other schools wouldn't have XXXX written across it"*
- *"Staff are very nice, everyone gets along with each other, great competitions in the school"*
- *"Why are we not allowed out during breaks when normal secondaries are?"*








For the next part of the project, in the next few weeks I want to interview all the **school leavers**. I will give these students a separate letter to explain about this.

Thank you all again for your co-operation so far. Remember you can talk to me at any time about the project.

---

Colman Motherway

# COLMAN'S RESEARCH PROJECT 2007-2008

<p><b>WHAT IS IT?</b></p> <p>A project to find out what the students of  (and their parents) think about school &amp; education</p> 	<p><b>WHEN DOES IT HAPPEN?</b></p> <p>Between March 2007 and October 2008</p>	<p><b>WHERE DOES IT HAPPEN?</b></p> <p></p>	<p><b>WHO IS INVOLVED?</b></p> <p> Colman Metherway is the researcher</p> <p>The students are the participants</p> <p>Some parents may also be participants</p>
<p><b>WHY IS IT HAPPENING?</b></p> <p>Colman is doing a course in a college in Dublin. This research is the coursework (project) he must do to pass his exam.</p> 	<p><b>WHAT HAS HAPPENED SO FAR?</b></p> <p><b>PART 1</b> was in March 2007</p> <p>I interviewed 59 students in all classes in focus groups.</p> 	<p><b>WHAT HAS HAPPENED SO FAR?</b></p> <p><b>Part 2</b> was in May / June 2007</p> <p>I interviewed 9 students who were school leavers from LCA 2 and FETAC.</p> 	<p><b>WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT?</b></p> <p>In October / November 2007 I will ask some groups from next year to look at the video and tell me what you think.</p> 
<p><b>AND THEN WHAT HAPPENS?</b></p> <p>I will talk to the new students and new staff and tell them about the project and what they can do.</p> 	<p><b>IS THERE MORE I CAN DO?</b></p> <p>Yes ✓ You can tell me what you think of school at any time. Write it, draw a picture, or tell me.</p>   	<p><b>HOW CAN I FIND OUT MORE?</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Watch this notice board.</li> <li>2. Ask Colman to tell you more about it.</li> </ol>  	<p><b>COLMAN'S RESEARCH</b></p> <p style="color: red; font-weight: bold; font-size: 1.2em;">31 10 2007</p>

# COLMAN'S RESEARCH PROJECT 2007-2008

## COLMAN'S RESEARCH PROJECT 2007-2008

### WHO IS INVOLVED?

Colman Matherway is the researcher  
The students are the participants  
Some parents may be participants

Part 2 was in  
May / June 2007

Colman interviewed 9  
School-Leavers from  
LCA 2 & FETAC classes

### WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Every student can write or  
draw a picture telling  
Colman their views of school

### WHAT IS IT?

A project to find out  
what the students of  
think  
about school & education

### WHY IS IT HAPPENING?

Colman is doing a course  
in Dublin. This research is  
the work or project he  
must do to pass his exam.

Part 3 was in  
October 2007

Two of the focus groups from  
last year looked at the  
videos with Colman.

### AND THEN?

Maybe Colman will talk to  
some of your parents  
to see what they think  
of your school

### WHEN DOES IT HAPPEN?

Between  
March 2007  
and  
October 2008

### WHAT HAS HAPPENED SO FAR?

Part 4 was in  
December / January  
Colman interviewed 6 students  
who had been in a different  
second-level school

### AND AFTER THAT?

Colman will write a report to tell  
people what you  
have said about school.

### WHERE DOES IT HAPPEN?



PART 1 was in  
March 2007  
Colman interviewed 59  
students in all classes  
in focus groups.

Part 5 was in  
January 2008  
The two first-year  
classes took part in  
focus groups and activities

### HOW CAN I FIND OUT MORE?

1. Watch this notice board.
2. Ask Colman to tell you more about it.

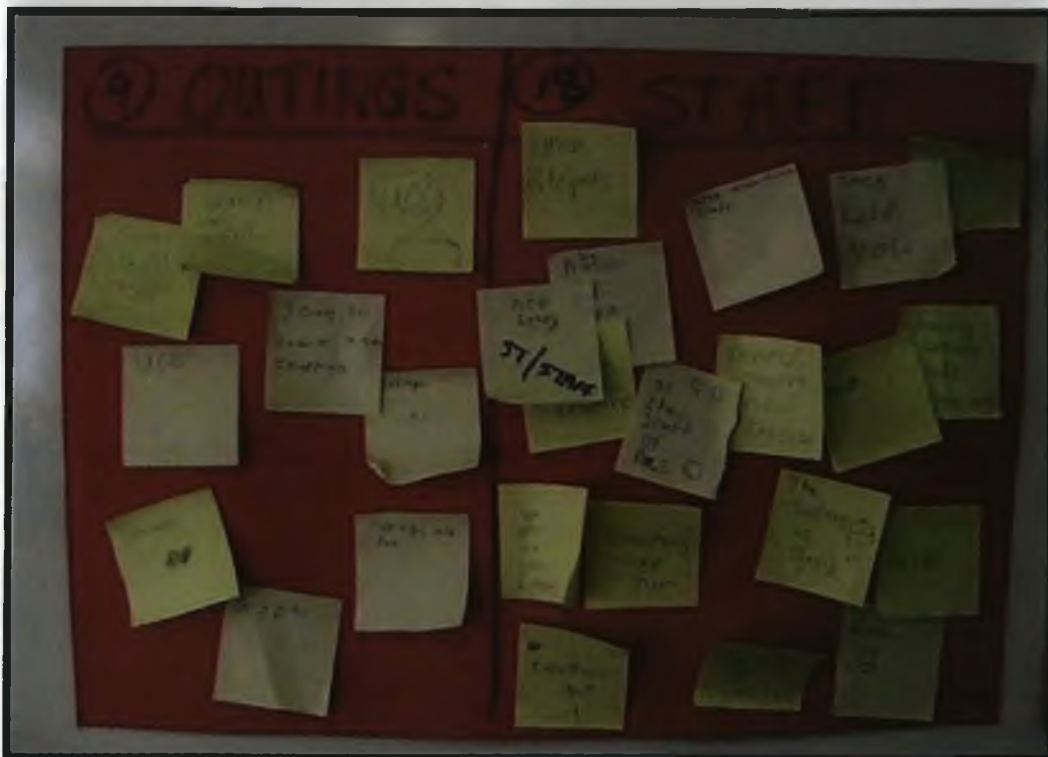
**Appendix N: Categories arising from initial manual coding exercise (Phase 1 data)<sup>lxvi</sup>**

<i>CATEGORY</i>	<i>NO. OF UNITS</i>
Comments about subjects / schoolwork / homework	53
Comment comparing the school to other schools	33
Comments about staff	29
Comments specific to class or year groups	29
*Positive general comments about school	23
Comments about outings	17
*Comments containing multiple ideas or themes <sup>lxvii</sup>	16
*Negative general comments about school	15
Comments about the physical environment about the school	15
Comments about student choice, voice, rights, responsibilities	15
Comments about the location of the school / special schooling	15
*Comments expressing participants' feelings	13
Comments advising potential new students how to behave	13
Comments about sport in the school	12
Comments about fellow students	11
*No comments / don't know	11
*Mixed general comments about school	6
Comments about staff and students	5
Comments about school uniform	5
Comments about travel & transport	5
Comments about future career options	5
Comments about school rules	5
Comments about disability allowance	4
*Questions from participants not related to focus group discussions	3

**Appendix O: Themes created following further manual analysis of initial categories**

BROAD THEME	INITIAL CATEGORIES INCLUDED IN THIS THEME
People <i>63 comments from valid set of 337 = 18.69%</i>	Comments about fellow students Comments about staff Comments about staff and students
Curriculum <i>138 / 337 = 40.95%</i>	Comments about subjects / schoolwork / homework Comments about outings Comments about sport in the school Comments specific to class or year groups Comments about future career options
Organisation / environment <i>56 / 337 = 16.62%</i>	Comments about the physical environment of the school Comments about school uniform Comments about school rules Comments about travel & transport Comments advising potential new students how to behave
Views on special / different education <i>80 / 337 = 23.74%</i>	Comments comparing the school to other schools Comments about the location of the school / special schooling Comments about student choice, voice, rights, responsibilities Comments about disability allowance

Appendix P: Categorisation and sorting of data by participants – some examples



Appendix Q: A section of the casebook, showing number of sources and references

**Nodes**

- Free Nodes
- Tree Nodes
- Cases\_
- Relationships
- Matrices
- Search Folders
- All Nodes

**Cases**

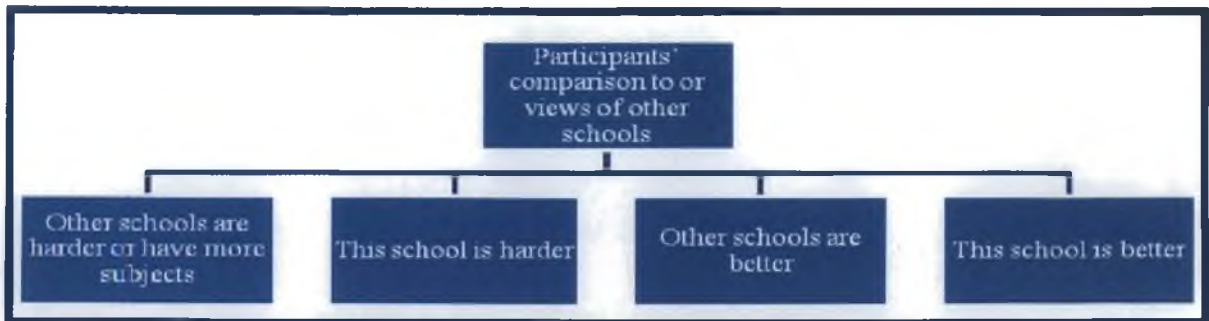
Name	Sources	References
Lynd	1	4
Máir	1	5
Marg	3	11
Marg	3	
Mari	3	
Mary	1	
Mich	1	
Mich	2	
Niam	1	
Nicol	2	
Nicol	1	
Nicol	2	
Patri	1	10
Patri	4	7
Phili	2	7
Robe	1	1
Ross	1	7
Roy	3	7
Roy	2	18
Sam	2	7
Sam	3	4
Sam	3	5
Sara	2	2
Sara	1	1
Sean	1	9

140 Items



## Appendix R: An example of the 'coding on' process

The theme relating to research question 1(b) sought to ascertain the views of the participants about other schools. The data were coded on to one of four sub-categories (see below). The hierarchical coding tree consists of a range of 'parent' and 'child' nodes. A further level of coding was conducted following this stage, with the purpose of ascertaining the key aspects of students' positive views of their current school.



**Nodes**

- Free Nodes
- Tree Nodes
- Cases
- Relationships
- Matrices
- Search Folders
- All Nodes

**Sources**

- Nodes
- Sets
- Queries
- Models
- Links
- Classifications
- Folders

Look for: Search In Tree Nodes Find Now Clear

**Tree Nodes**

Name	Sources	References
Element 1b - comparison to or views o	25	108
other schools harder ~ more subjects	11	30
positive about other schools	15	36
positive about the school	17	50
better staff	7	9
bullying	5	9
class size	2	3
facilities	4	7
friends	3	3
level of work	5	6
outings	4	6
right for me	6	6
rules	3	3
sports	2	2
subjects	1	1

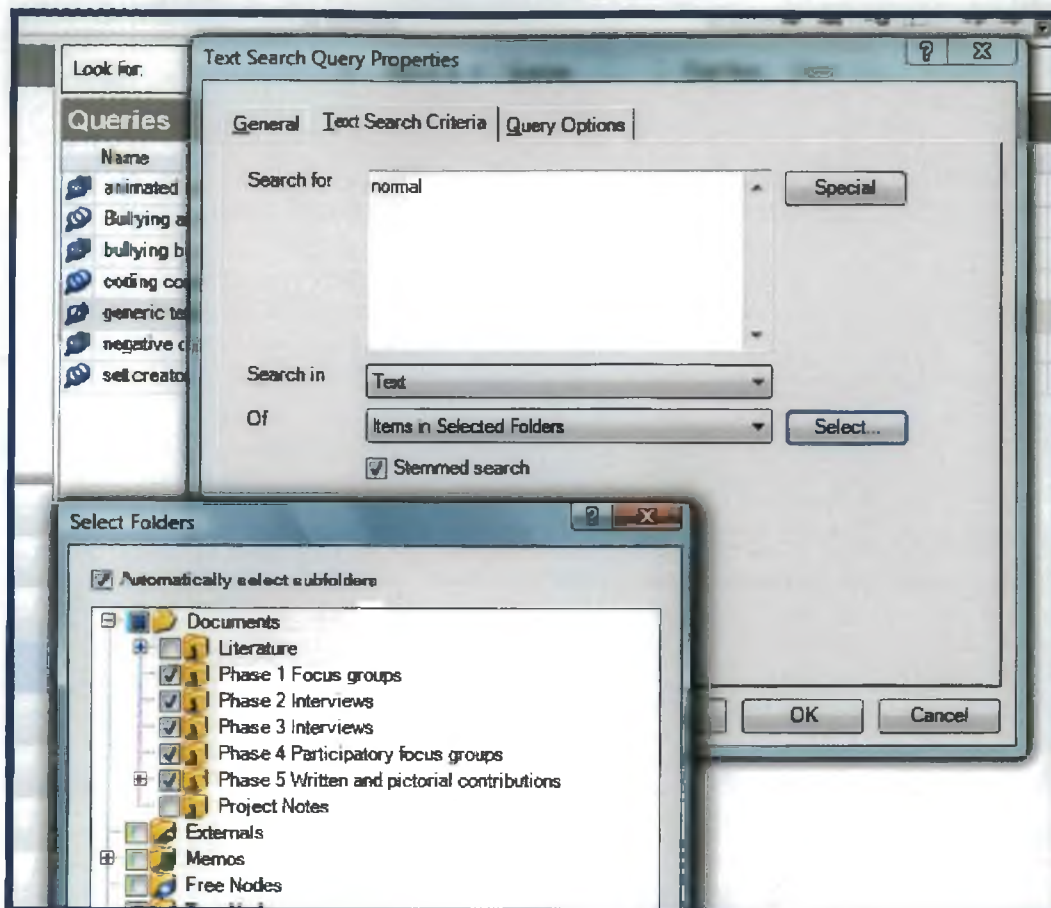
decision making Element 1b-comparison-this scho positive about this school

Reference 1 - 2.01% Coverage

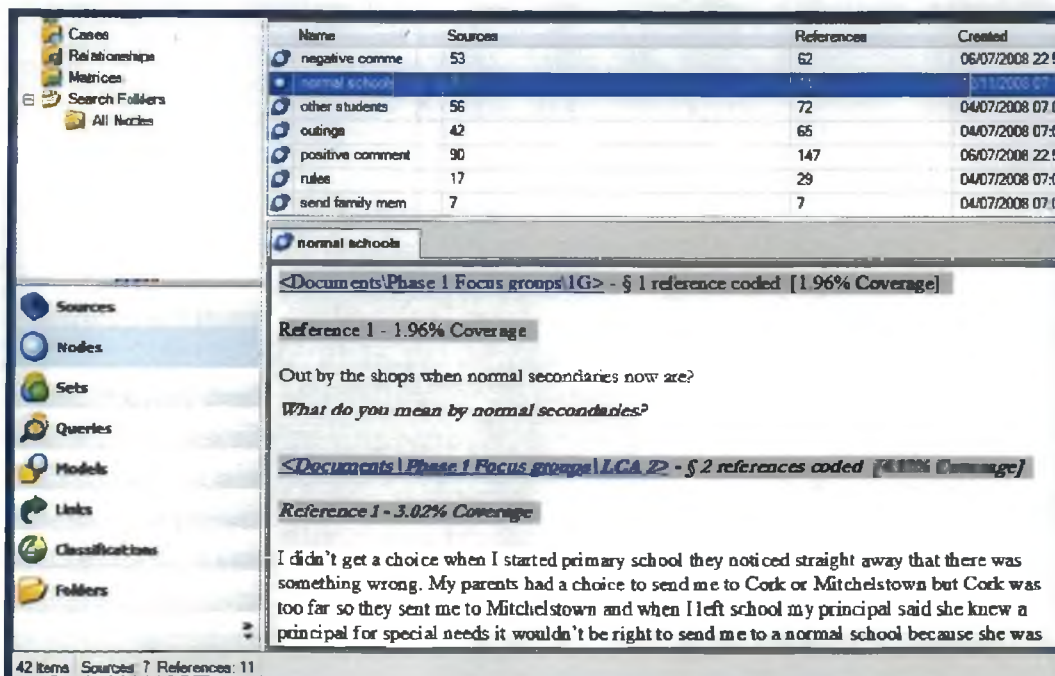
*Is there anything else you'd say that would be different about the school?*  
they're very caring

## **Appendix S: Running a text search query**

A text search query gathers data where a certain word (or phrase) is used. Some of these contexts gathered may not relate to the meaning of the word, while other situations where participants talk about a concept but do not mention the specific word. For example, I wanted to ascertain at one point how many references had been made by participants using the term '*normal*' schools. Running a text search query on the word 'normal', limited to the folders storing the data collected in the five phases, produced eleven references from seven sources. By manually filtering these references I was in a position to decide that seven of these references were specifically relevant to what I had wanted to ascertain, as some of the comments from participants used the word 'normal' in a different context. While many other references may have implied difference between the 'special' school and the 'normal' school, running this query gave me the information I required as to how many references specifically used the word 'normal' in the context to which I wished to apply it.



Step 1: set up text search query and limit folders in which to search



Step 2: run text search query and examine results for relevance of each reference

## Appendix T: Running a Boolean coding query

A Boolean coding query is a multi-criteria search using an ‘operator’ (for example, ‘and’ or ‘greater than’ or ‘or’) to gather or distil data from the transcripts. For example, I wanted to assess how many references were coded to the nodes ‘bullying and mocking’ and ‘comparison to other schools’, as it was my belief that quite a number of students referred to bullying in this context. Running a coding query using the Boolean operator ‘and’ on these two nodes showed me that ten references from five different sources spoke about bullying in relation to other schools these students had attended. The screen shot below shows how the result of this particular Boolean query was generated in NVivo.

The screenshot displays the NVivo interface. On the left is a navigation pane with icons for Sources, Nodes, Sets, Queries, Models, Links, and Classifications. The main window is titled 'Results' and contains a table with the following data:

Name	Sources	References	Created
animated about bullying by inside or	16	108	27/09/2008 12:51
Bullying and other schools	5	10	12/11/2008 21:44
gender v bullying	16	47	21/07/2008 14:33
negative comments about staff and g	13	21	12/11/2008 21:51

Below the table, the selected query 'Bullying and other schools' is expanded to show two references:

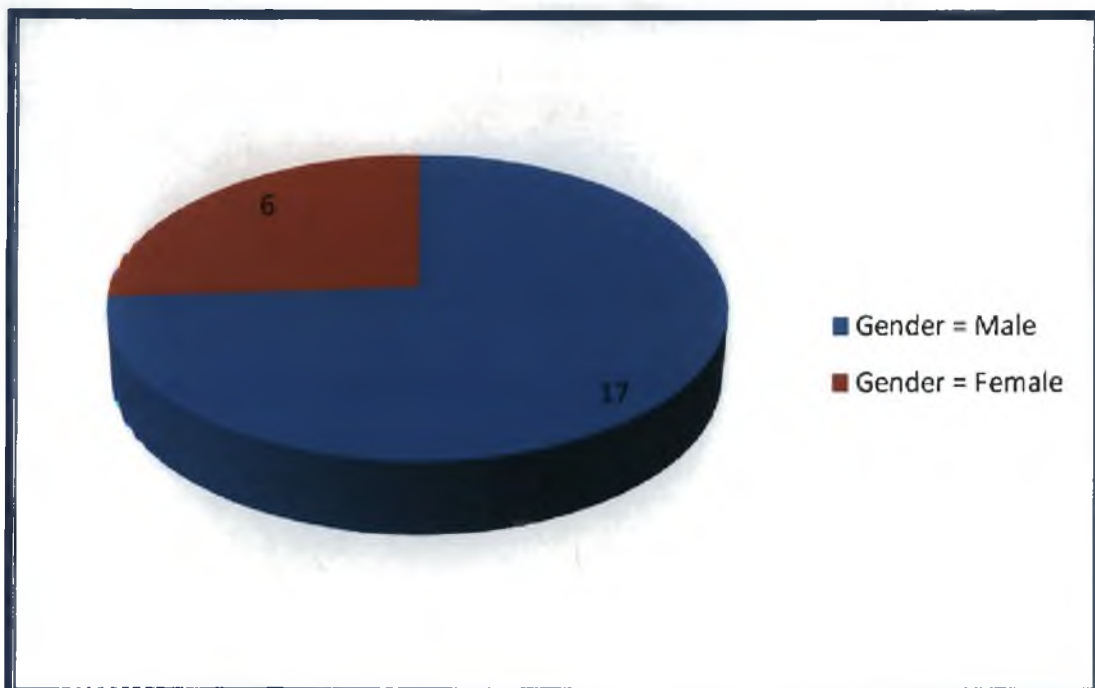
**Reference 1 - 2.65% Coverage**  
*Do you think the school, the staff, are doing enough about it or should we be doing more about it?*  
You're doing enough about it, you stay there at lunchtime which is better whereas in my old school they have to watch people inside and outside and sometimes you have to stay inside for safety reasons 'cos some did you ever hear of smoking and drinking, some smoke and drink

**Reference 2 - 2.89% Coverage**  
The reasons I moved were I wanted to move I had my reasons for it  
*What were they?*  
Being bullied and kicked around people kicking me and everything

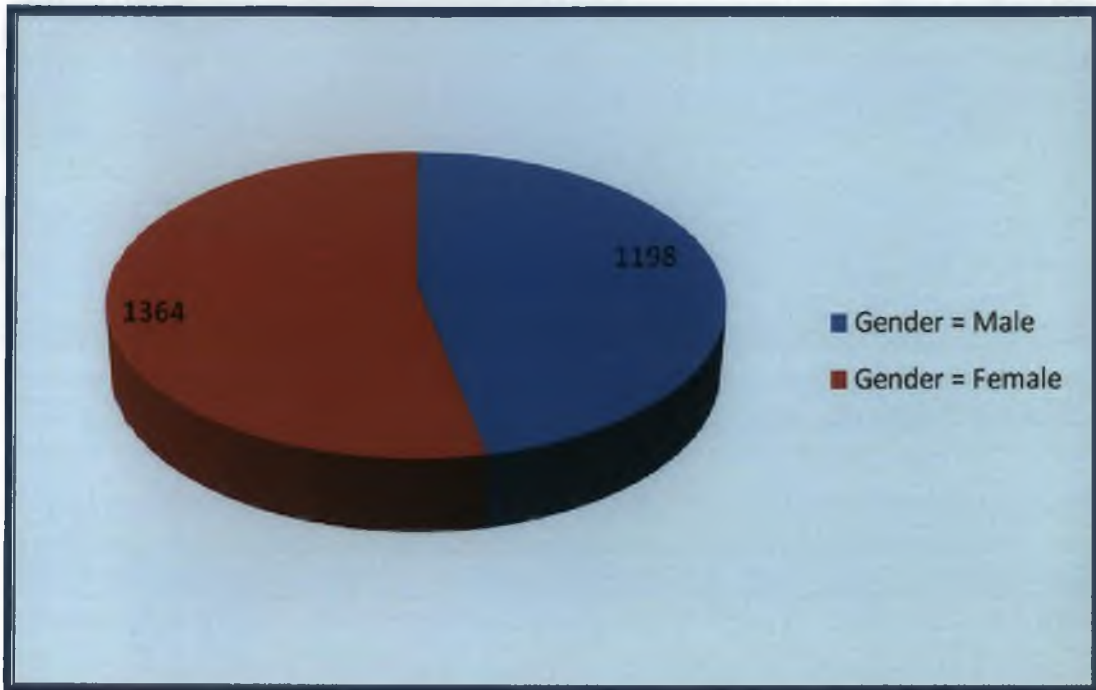
### Appendix U: Running a matrix coding query

The third type of query I ran was a matrix coding query. This query can clarify relationships between distinct elements in the study and can create quantitative data from the study to enhance understanding and validate certain propositions. For example, I wanted to ascertain what the relationship was between gender and the negative comments made about staff. I ran a matrix coding query which cross-referenced the tree node with the attributes 'male' and 'female', and found that thirteen cases were male and only one was female.

The results of a separate matrix coding query which tested references to bullying against gender are shown in the two charts below. What these results show is that while more males than females referred to bullying, the numbers of words coded show that female participants spoke in more detail about bullying, relative to male participants.



*Chart 1: Matrix coding query – gender v bullying - references to bullying by number of cases*




*Chart 2: Matrix coding query – gender v bullying - references to bullying by number of words coded*

## COLMAN'S RESEARCH PROJECT

### WHAT WAS IT?

A project to find out what the students of Colman think about school & education.

2. Some were interviewed by Colman.



### WHEN DID IT HAPPEN?

In 2007 and 2008.

### WHERE DID IT HAPPEN?

Colman.

### WHAT HAPPENED?

Colman's interviewees asked the students what they thought about the school.

One 100 students took part.

### WHAT DID THE STUDENTS SAY?

The students had jobs to do. They did all kinds of things. They did, wrote or drew.



### WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The results will be made into a report. It will be given to you. You will be asked to give your views on the report.

### WHAT OTHER STUDENTS SAY ABOUT STUDENTS

I like to go to school. I like to learn. I like to play sports. I like to be with my friends.

### WHAT OTHER STUDENTS SAY ABOUT STAFF

The staff are nice. They help me. They are kind. They are good.

### WHAT OTHER STUDENTS SAY ABOUT OUTINGS

I like to go on trips. I like to see new places. I like to have fun.

### WHAT OTHER STUDENTS SAY ABOUT SPORTS

I like to play football. I like to play basketball. I like to play tennis.

### WHAT OTHER STUDENTS SAY ABOUT SCHOOL RULES

The rules are good. They help us. They are fair. They are just.

### WHAT OTHER STUDENTS SAY ABOUT BULLYING

I don't like to be bullied. It's not nice. It's not good. It's not right.

### WHAT OTHER STUDENTS SAY ABOUT THE SCHOOL'S BETTER YEAR

I like to go to school. I like to learn. I like to play sports. I like to be with my friends.

### WHAT OTHER STUDENTS SAY ABOUT THE SCHOOL'S BETTER YEAR

I like to go to school. I like to learn. I like to play sports. I like to be with my friends.

### WHAT OTHER STUDENTS SAY ABOUT THE SCHOOL'S BETTER YEAR

I like to go to school. I like to learn. I like to play sports. I like to be with my friends.

### WHAT OTHER STUDENTS SAY ABOUT THE SCHOOL'S BETTER YEAR

I like to go to school. I like to learn. I like to play sports. I like to be with my friends.

6 1 2009

## References

- Alderson, P. (2000). Children as researchers: The effects of participation rights on research methodology. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* (pp. 241-257). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Alderson, P. (2005a). Designing ethical research with children. In A. Farrell (Ed.), *Ethical research with children* (pp. 27-36). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Alderson, P. (2005b). Research by children. In K. Sheehy, M. Nind, J. Rix & K. Simmons (Eds.), *Ethics and research in inclusive education: Values into practice* (pp. 61-75). Abingdon, Oxford: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Allen, G. (2005). Research ethics in a culture of risk. In A. Farrell (Ed.), *Ethical research with children* (pp. 15-26). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Alliance for Inclusive Education. (2005). Press release: Heading for inclusion - responding to Warnock. Retrieved January 15th 2009, from <http://www.allfie.org.uk/pages06/hfi.html#warnock>
- American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. (2008). Frequently asked questions on intellectual disability and the AAIDD definition (updated January 2008). Retrieved September 10th 2008, from <http://www.aamr.org/Policies/pdf/AAIDDFAOonID.pdf>
- Artiles, A. J. (1998). The dilemma of difference: Enriching the disproportionality discourse with theory and context. *The Journal of Special Education*, 32(1), pp. 32-36.
- Atkinson, D. (1997). *An auto/biographical approach to learning disability research*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Atkinson, D. (2002). Self-advocacy and research. In B. Gray & R. Jackson (Eds.), *Advocacy and learning disability* (pp. 120-136). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Atkinson, D., Jackson, M., & Walmsley, J. (1997). *Forgotten lives: Exploring the history of learning disability*. Kidderminster: BILD Publications.
- Baker, J., Lynch, K., Cantillon, S., & Walsh, J. (2004). *Equality from theory to action*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- BehaveNet. (2008). Diagnostic criteria for mental retardation. Retrieved November 6th 2008, from <http://www.behavenet.com/capsules/disorders/mentretard.htm>
- Biasini, F. J., Grupe, L., Huffman, L. and Bray, N.W. (1999). Mental retardation: A symptom and a syndrome. In S. D. Netherton, D. L. Holmes & C. E. Walker (Eds.), *Child and adolescent psychological disorders: A comprehensive textbook* (Vol. 4, pp. 6-23). Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Booth, T., & Ainscow, M. (2002). *Index for inclusion: Developing learning and participation in schools* (2nd ed.). Bristol: Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education.
- Browne, S. (2001). *Euro awareness with people with intellectual disabilities: A report to the Euro Changeover Board of Ireland*. Cork: COPE Foundation.
- Burke, C., & Grosvenor, I. (2003). *The school I'd like: Children and young people's reflections on an education for the 21st century*. London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Butler-Scally, D. (2004). *Report on the selection process for the appointment for the Irish Ombudsman for Children*. Dublin: Public Appointments Service.
- Byrnes, M. A. (Ed.). (2002). *Taking sides: Clashing views on controversial issues in special education*. Guilford, CT: McGraw-Hill/Dushkin.
- Campbell, J., & Oliver, M. (1996). *Disability politics: Understanding our past, changing our future*. London: Routledge.



- Carey, D. J. (2005). *The essential guide to special education in Ireland*. Dublin: Primary ABC.
- Carr, J. (2006, November 2006). Special education – an inclusive agenda. *InTouch (Monthly Magazine of Irish National Teachers Organization)* 3.
- Central Statistics Office. (2008). Full-time pupils and students in institutions aided by the Department of Education and Science (number) by type of education institution and year. Retrieved March 2nd 2008, from <http://www.cso.ie/px/des/Dialog/Saveshow.asp>
- Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education. (2002). The inclusion charter [Electronic Version]. Retrieved September 25th 2008 from <http://www.csie.org.uk/publications/charter-05.pdf>.
- Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education. (2004). Reasons against segregated schooling [Electronic Version]. Retrieved July 15th 2008 from <http://www.csie.org.uk/publications/reasons-against-seg-04.pdf>.
- Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education. (2007a). Ten reasons for inclusion [Electronic Version]. Retrieved September 29th 2008 from <http://www.csie.org.uk/publications/ten-reasons-02.pdf>.
- Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education. (2007b). What is inclusion? Retrieved November 13th 2007, from <http://www.csie.org.uk/inclusion/what.shtml>
- Certo, J. L., Cauley, K. M., & Chafin, C. (2003). Students' perspectives on their high school experience. *Adolescence*, 38(152), pp. 705-724.
- Children's Rights Alliance. (2008). Over one million reasons for children's rights referendum. Retrieved October 25th 2008, from <http://www.childrensrights.ie/pubs/OverOneMillReasonsRef081008.pdf>
- Christensen, P., & James, A. (2000a). Childhood diversity and commonality: Some methodological insights. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* (pp. 160-178). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Christensen, P., & James, A. (2000b). Introduction: Researching children and childhood: Cultures of communication. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* (pp. 1-8). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Clough, P., & Corbett, J. (Eds.). (2000). *Theories of inclusive education: A student's guide*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Coleman, M., & Lumby, J. (1999). The significance of site-based practitioner research in educational management. In D. Middlewood, M. Coleman & J. Lumby (Eds.), *Practitioner research in education: Making a difference*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities. (1996). *Targeting needs: The report of the education working group*. Dublin: Author.
- Connors, C., & Stalker, K. (2007). Children's experiences of disability: Pointers to a social model of childhood disability. *Disability and Society*, 22(1), pp. 19-33.
- COPE Foundation. (2004). *Codes of ethics and principles of good research practice: A policy document for conducting research in COPE Foundation*. Cork: COPE Foundation Research Department.
- Costley, D. (2000). Collecting the views of young people with moderate learning difficulties. In A. Lewis & G. Lindsay (Eds.), *Researching children's perspectives* (pp. 163-172). Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Cox, T. (2005). Pupils' perspectives on their education. In K. Topping & S. Maloney (Eds.), *The RoutledgeFalmer reader in inclusive education* (pp. 57-72). London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Cuskelly, M. (2005). Ethical inclusion of children with disabilities in research. In A. Farrell (Ed.), *Ethical research with children* (pp. 97-111). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Danforth, S. (2002). On what basis hope? Modern progress and postmodern possibilities. In M. A. Byrnes (Ed.), *Taking sides: Clashing views on controversial issues in special education* (pp. 4-13). Guilford, CT: McGraw-Hill/Dushkin.
- David, T., Tonkin, J., Powell, S., & Anderson, C. (2005). Ethical aspects of power in research with children. In A. Farrell (Ed.), *Ethical research with children* (pp. 124-137). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Davis, J., Watson, N., & Cunningham-Burley, S. (2000). Learning the lives of disabled children: Developing a reflexive approach. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* (pp. 201-224). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Department for Education and Skills (UK). (2003). *Data collection by type of special educational need*. London: Author.
- Department of Education. (1993). *Report of the Special Education Review Committee*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Department of Education and Science. (2002a). *Circular SP.ED 08/02*. Retrieved August 31st 2008 from [http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobervlet/spedc08\\_02.pdf](http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobervlet/spedc08_02.pdf).
- Department of Education and Science. (2002b). *Information note for professionals in relation to disability categories in Department of Education and Science*. Retrieved August 31st 2008 from [http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobervlet/spedc08\\_02\\_note.pdf](http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobervlet/spedc08_02_note.pdf).
- Department of Education and Science. (2005a). *Minister Hanafin hears children's views on the future of Irish education*. Retrieved September 4th 2008 from <http://www.education.ie/robots/view.jsp?pcategory=10861&language=EN&category=40272&link=link001&doc=27118>.
- Department of Education and Science. (2005b). *Special education circular SP ED 02/05: Organisation of teaching resources for pupils who need additional support in mainstream primary schools*. Retrieved October 7th 2007 from [http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobervlet/sp02\\_05.doc](http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobervlet/sp02_05.doc).
- Department of Education and Science. (2006). *Minister Hanafin announces 30% increase in rates of capitation paid to special schools*. Retrieved November 26th 2006 from <http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?maincat=10861&pcategory=10861&category=10876&sectionpage=13637&language=EN&link=link001&page=2&doc=33389>
- Department of Education and Science. (2008a). Education statistics 2006-2007 [Electronic Version]. Retrieved January 9th 2009 from [http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobervlet/statistics\\_key\\_06\\_07.pdf](http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobervlet/statistics_key_06_07.pdf).
- Department of Education and Science. (2008b). Key Education Statistics 1992/93 - 2002/03 [Electronic Version]. Retrieved March 7th 2008 from [http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobervlet/statistics\\_key92\\_03.pdf](http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobervlet/statistics_key92_03.pdf).
- Department of Education and Science and National Educational Psychological Service. (2007). *Special educational needs, a continuum of support: Resource pack for teachers*. Dublin: Author.
- Devine, D. (2003). *Children, power and schooling: How childhood is constructed in the primary school*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.
- Devine, D. (2004). School matters: Listening to what children have to say. In J. Deegan, D. Devine & A. Lodge (Eds.), *Primary voices: Equality, diversity and childhood in Irish primary schools* (pp. 109-127). Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- Dyson, A. (2001). Special needs in the twenty-first century: Where we've been and where we're going. *British Journal of Special Education*, 28(1), pp. 24-29.

- Economic and Social Research Institute. (2008). Growing up in Ireland. Retrieved September 3rd 2008, from <http://www.growingup.ie/>
- Eraut, M. (2005a). Editorial: Uncertainty in research. *Learning in Health and Social Care*, 4(2), pp. 47-52.
- Eraut, M. (2005b). Editorial: Uncertainty in the analysis and interpretation of research information. *Learning in Health and Social Care*, 4(3), pp. 111-116.
- Fahey, R. (2007). Post-school outcomes and social experiences of past pupils of a special school for pupils with mild general learning disabilities: How they inform transition curricula. *Reach Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland*, 21(1), pp. 7-20.
- Farrell, A. (2005a). Ethics and research with children. In *Ethical research with children* (pp. 1-14). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Farrell, A. (2005b). New times in ethical research with children. In *Ethical research with children* (pp. 166-175). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Farrell, M. (2006). *Celebrating the special school*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Ferguson, P. M., & Ferguson, D. L. (1995). The interpretivist view of special education and disability: The value of telling stories. In T. M. Skrtic (Ed.), *Disability and democracy: Reconstructing (special) education for postmodernity* (pp. 104-121). London and New York: Teachers College Press.
- Fielding, M., & Bragg, S. (2003). *Students as researchers: Making a difference*. Cambridge: Pearson Publishing.
- Flutter, J., & Rudduck, J. (2004). *Consulting pupils: What's in it for schools?* London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Flynn, J. (2004). *Independent living project final report*. Cork: COPE Foundation.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Gaden, G. (1996). The challenge of inclusiveness: Towards a more generous system of education. *Reach Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland*, 9(2), pp. 76-82.
- Gardiner, B. (2003). Foreword. In C. Burke & I. Grosvenor (Eds.), *The school I'd like: Children and young people's reflections on an education for the 21st century* (pp. ix-x). Abingdon: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In C. Geertz (Ed.), *The interpretation of culture* (pp. 3-30). New York: Basic Books.
- Gilligan, A. L. (2007). The dilemma of difference. In P. Downes & A. L. Gilligan (Eds.), *Beyond educational disadvantage* (pp. 39-46). Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- Griffin, S., & Shevlin, M. (2007). *Responding to special educational needs: An Irish perspective*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan.
- Grundy, A. L., McGinn, M. K., & Pollon, D. E. (2005). Striving toward inclusive research practices: The evolution of the participant-as-transcriptionist method. *Disability and Society*, 20(4), pp. 453-468.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hart, R. (1992). Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship [Electronic Version]. Retrieved December 18th 2008 from [http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens\\_participation.pdf](http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens_participation.pdf).
- Hart, R. (1997). *Children's participation: The theory and practice of involving young citizens in community development and environmental care*. New York: UNICEF.
- Hennessy, E., & Heary, C. (2005). Exploring children's views through focus groups. In S. Greene & D. Hogan (Eds.), *Researching children's experiences: Approaches and methods* (pp. 236-252). London: Sage Publications.

- Hornby, G., & Kidd, R. (2001). Transfer from special to mainstream - ten years later. *British Journal of Special Education*, 28(1), pp. 10-17.
- Inclusion Ireland. (2008). About Inclusion Ireland: Our name change. Retrieved September 5th 2008, from [http://www.inclusionireland.ie/about\\_namechange.html](http://www.inclusionireland.ie/about_namechange.html)
- Ireland. (1937). *Bunreacht na hÉireann*. Dublin: Government Publications Sale Office.
- Ireland. (1995). *Charting our education future: White Paper on education*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Ireland. (1998). *Education Act*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Ireland. (2000). *The National Children's Strategy: Our children – their lives*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Ireland. (2001). *Children Act*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Ireland. (2002). *Ombudsman for children Act*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Ireland. (2004). *Education for persons with special educational needs Act*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Ireland. (2005). *Disability Act*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education. (2006). *Special schools in transition: Concerns and hopes among teachers in the sector*. Dublin: Author.
- Jones, P. (2005). Inclusion: Lessons from the children. *British Journal of Special Education*, 32(2), pp. 60-66.
- Kauffman, J. K. (2002). Commentary: Today's special education and its messages for tomorrow. In M. A. Byrnes (Ed.), *Taking sides: Clashing views on controversial issues in special education* (pp. 14-23). Guilford, CT: McGraw-Hill/Dushkin.
- Kellett, M., Forrest, R., Dent, N., & Ward, S. (2004). 'Just teach us the skills please, we'll do the rest': Empowering ten-year-olds as active researchers. *Children and Society*, 18, pp. 329-343.
- Kenny, M., McNeela, E., Shevlin, M., & Daly, T. (2000). *Hidden voices: Young people with disabilities speak about their second level schooling*. Cork: Bradshaw Books.
- Kiddle, C. (1999). *Traveller children: A voice for themselves*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Kilkelly, U. (2007). *Barriers to the realisation of children's rights in Ireland*. Dublin: Ombudsman for Children's Office.
- Konig, T. (2008). CAQDAS - a primer. Retrieved November 10th 2008, from [http://www.lboro.ac.uk/research/mmethods/research/software/caqdas\\_primer.html#which](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/research/mmethods/research/software/caqdas_primer.html#which)
- Kwirotek, R. (2002). *Where are we in Ireland? A response to Mike Oliver*. Paper presented at the Inaugural National Disability Authority (NDA) Disability Research Conference. Dublin. Retrieved October 8th 2007, from [http://www.nda.ie/cntmgtnew.nsf/0/87418679FAE58B0E80256F02004753E9/\\$File/Plen2.doc](http://www.nda.ie/cntmgtnew.nsf/0/87418679FAE58B0E80256F02004753E9/$File/Plen2.doc). December 3rd 2002.
- Lansdown, G. (2001). *Promoting children's decision making in democratic decision making*. Florence: Innocenti Research Centre.
- Lawlor, L. (2005, November 4th). Running down special schools (letter to the Editor). *Irish Times*, p. 14.
- Lewis, A. (1995). *Children's understanding of disability*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lewis, A. (2002). Accessing, through research interviews, the views of children with difficulties in learning. *Support for Learning*, 17(3), pp. 110-116.
- Lewis, A., Parsons, S., & Robertson, C. (2007a). *My school, my family, my life: Telling it like it is*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham and Disability Rights Commission.

- Lewis, A., Parsons, S., & Robertson, C. (2007b). *My school, my family, my life: Telling it like it is - child-friendly report*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham and Disability Rights Commission.
- Lewis, A., & Porter, J. (2004). Interviewing children and young people with learning disabilities: Guidelines for researchers and multi-professional practice. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 32, pp. 191-197.
- Lewis, J. (2000). Let's remember the "education" in inclusive education. *British Journal of Special Education*, 27(4), pp. 202.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. London: Sage Publications.
- Lipsky, M. (1983). *Street level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Lodge, A., & Lynch, K. (Eds.). (2004). *Diversity at school*. Dublin: The Equality Authority.
- Logan, E. (2008a). *Equality for all: through education, training and employment*. Paper presented at the People with Disabilities in Ireland Conference. Limerick. Retrieved April 6th 2009, from [http://www.oco.ie/whatsNew/what\\_weve\\_said.aspx?article=c3c6e73b-47c8-4dcf-886f-66f580aaa223](http://www.oco.ie/whatsNew/what_weve_said.aspx?article=c3c6e73b-47c8-4dcf-886f-66f580aaa223). March 3rd 2008.
- Logan, E. (2008b). Message from the Ombudsman for Children. In *Hearing children: Annual report of the Ombudsman for Children's Office 2007* (pp. 10-14). Dublin: Author.
- Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), pp. 927-942.
- Mayall, B. (2000). Conversations with children: Working with generational issues. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* (pp. 120-135).
- Maykut, P., & Morehouse, R. (1994). *Beginning qualitative research: A philosophic and practical guide*. London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- McCloskey, D. (2004). *An evaluation of the COPE Foundation drop in club final report*. Cork: COPE Foundation.
- McGuckin, C., & Lewis, C. A. (2006). Experiences of school bullying in Northern Ireland: Data from the Life and Times Survey. *Adolescence*, 41(162), pp. 313-320.
- McIntosh, P. (2002). An archi-texture of learning disability services: The use of Michel Foucault. *Disability and Society*, 17(1), pp. 65-79.
- McLarty, M. M., & Gibson, J. W. (2000). Using video technology in emancipatory research. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 15(2), pp. 138-148.
- McLaughlin, O. (2004). Citizen child - the experience of a student council in a primary school. In J. Deegan, D. Devine & A. Lodge (Eds.), *Primary voices: Equality, diversity and childhood in Irish primary schools* (pp. 128-143). Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- Mertens, D. M. (2005). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications.
- Mertens, D. M., & McLaughlin, J. A. (2004). *Research and evaluation methods in special education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Ministry of Justice UK, British Institute of Human Rights, Department for Children Schools and Families, & Amnesty International-UK. (2008). *Right here, right now: Teaching citizenship through human rights*. London: Ministry of Justice UK.
- Minow, M. (1990). *Making all the difference: Inclusion, exclusion and American law*. New York and London: Cornell University Press.

- Morrow, V. (2005). Ethical issues in collaborative research with children. In A. Farrell (Ed.), *Ethical research with children* (pp. 150-165). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2004). *NCCA commentary on ESRI research into curriculum provision and school integration among first year students*. Dublin: Author.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2006a, April). Caught in the middle: The experiences of second year students. *info@ncca*, 3, 14-15.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2006b). *ESRI report on the experiences of second-year students: Summary*. Dublin: Author.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2007a). *ESRI research into the experiences of students in the third year of junior cycle and in transition to senior cycle: Summary and commentary*. Dublin: Author.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2007b). *Guidelines for teachers of students with general learning disabilities: Overview*. Dublin: Author.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2008). Diversity and inclusion. *info@ncca*, 8, 8-9.
- National Council for Special Education. (2006). NCSE research initiative – fund to support the development of the research infrastructure in special education. Retrieved November 19th 2006, from <http://www.ncse.ie/research/NCSE%20Research%Initiative.doc>
- National Disability Authority. (2002). *Guidelines for including people with disabilities in research*. Dublin: Author.
- Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People. (2008). Democra school. Retrieved October 27th 2008, from <http://www.niccy.org/democra.aspx?menuid=620>
- Norwich, B. (1993). Ideological dilemmas in special needs education: Practitioners' views. *Oxford Review of Education*, 19(4), pp. 527-546.
- Norwich, B. (1994). Differentiation: From the perspective of resolving tensions between basic social values and assumptions about individual differences. *Curriculum Studies*, 2(3), pp. 289-308.
- Norwich, B. (1997). Exploring the perspectives of adolescents with moderate learning disabilities on their schooling and themselves. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 12(1), pp. 38-53.
- Norwich, B. (2002). Education, inclusion and individual differences: Recognising and resolving dilemmas. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 50(4), pp. 482-502.
- Norwich, B. (2008). *Dilemmas of difference, inclusion and disability: International perspectives and future directions*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Norwich, B., & Kelly, N. (2004). Pupils' views on inclusion: Moderate learning difficulties and bullying in mainstream and special schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(1), pp. 43-65.
- Norwich, B., & Kelly, N. (2005). *Moderate learning difficulties and the future of inclusion*. London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- O'Brien, T. (2000). Increasing inclusion: Did anyone mention learning? *Reach Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland*, 14(1), pp. 2-11.
- O'Donnell, M. (2000). The voice of the pupil: Pupils' perspectives on their inclusion in mainstream school following transfer from special school. Unpublished MSEN Thesis. Dublin City University.
- O'Donnell, M. (2003). Transfer from special to mainstream: The voice of the pupil. In M. Shevlin & R. Rose (Eds.), *Encouraging voices* (pp. 228-253). Dublin: National Disability Authority.

- O'Donoghue v Minister for Education. (1993). *Judgement delivered by Mr. Justice O'Hanlon on May 27th 1993*.
- Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. (2008). Home page. Retrieved September 4th 2008, from <http://www.nco.ie/viewdoc.asp?DocID=120>
- O'Kane, C. (2000). The development of participatory techniques: Facilitating children's views about decisions which affect them. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* (pp. 136-159). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- O'Keeffe, P. (2004). The special school in an age of inclusion. *Reach Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland*, 18(1), pp. 3-15.
- Oliver, M. (1990). *The individual and social models of disability*. Paper presented at the Joint Workshop of the Living Options Group and the Research Unit of the Royal College of Physicians. Retrieved February 29th 2008, from <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/Oliver/in%20soc%20dis.pdf>. July 23rd 1990.
- Oliver, M. (1995). Does special education have a role to play in the twenty-first century? *Reach Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland*, 8(2), pp. 67-76.
- Oliver, M. (1996). *Understanding disability: From theory to practice*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Oliver, M. (2002). *Emancipatory research: A vehicle for social transformation or policy development?* Paper presented at the Inaugural National Disability Authority Disability Research Conference. Dublin. Retrieved July 18th 2008, from [http://www.nda.ie/cntmgmtnew.nsf/0/87418679FAE58B0E80256F02004753E9/\\$File/Plen1.doc](http://www.nda.ie/cntmgmtnew.nsf/0/87418679FAE58B0E80256F02004753E9/$File/Plen1.doc). December 3rd 2002.
- Oliver, M. (2004). The social model in action: If I had a hammer. In C. Barnes & G. Mercer (Eds.), *Implementing the social model of disability: Theory and research* (pp. 18-31). Leeds: Disability Press.
- Oliver, M., & Barnes, C. (2006). Disability politics and the disability movement in Britain: Where did it all go wrong? [Electronic Version]. Retrieved September 23rd 2008 from <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/Barnes/Coalition%20disability%20politics%20paper.pdf>.
- Ombudsman for Children Office. (2007a). Press release: Big Ballot results. Retrieved November 24th 2007, from [http://www.oco.ie/whatsNew/press\\_releases.aspx?article=cddb1bd1-692c-4cce-aac3-c62d90e90752](http://www.oco.ie/whatsNew/press_releases.aspx?article=cddb1bd1-692c-4cce-aac3-c62d90e90752)
- Ombudsman for Children Office. (2007b). Results! Retrieved March 2nd 2008, from [http://www.oco.ie/ballot/the\\_count.aspx](http://www.oco.ie/ballot/the_count.aspx)
- O'Reilly-de Brún, M., & de Brún, T. (2007). *Participatory learning and action training manual*. Galway: Centre for Participatory Strategies.
- Paul, J., French, P., & Cranston-Gingras, A. (2001). Ethics and special education. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 34(1), pp. 1-16.
- People with Disabilities in Ireland. (2003). *Youth: Beyond disability seminars*. Dublin: Author.
- Peters, S., Johnstone, C., & Ferguson, P. (2005). A disability rights in education model for evaluating inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 9(2), pp. 139-160.
- Pinkerton, J. (2004). Children's participation in the policy process: Some thoughts on policy evaluation based on the Irish National Children's Strategy. *Children and Society*, 18, pp. 119-130.
- Pogge, T. W. (2003). Can the capability approach be justified? [Electronic Version]. *Unpublished manuscript*. Retrieved January 8th 2009 from <http://mora.rente.nhh.no/projects/EqualityExchange/Portals/0/articles/pogge1.pdf>.

- Porter, J., & Lacey, P. (2005). *Researching learning difficulties: A guide for practitioners*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Priestley, M. (1997). The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation and the Disability Alliance discuss fundamental principles of disability [Electronic Version]. Retrieved September 28th 2008 from <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/UPIAS/fundamental%20principles.pdf>
- QSR International. (2006). The impossible just got possible: NVivo 7. Retrieved March 29th 2008, from [http://www.qsrinternational.com/FileResourceHandler.ashx/RelatedDocuments/DocumentFile/102/NVivo7\\_Brochure.pdf](http://www.qsrinternational.com/FileResourceHandler.ashx/RelatedDocuments/DocumentFile/102/NVivo7_Brochure.pdf)
- QSR International. (2008). NVivo 8 features and benefits. Retrieved October 30th 2008, from [http://www.qsrinternational.com/products\\_nvivo\\_features-and-benefits.aspx](http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo_features-and-benefits.aspx)
- Qvortrup, J. (2000). Macroanalysis of childhood. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* (pp. 77-97). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Rabiee, P., Sloper, P., & Beresford, B. (2005). Doing research with children and young people who do not use speech for communication. *Children and Society*, 19(385-396).
- Rajani, R. (2001). *The participation rights of adolescents: A strategic approach*. New York: UNICEF.
- Reindal, S. M. (2008). A social relational model of disability: A theoretical framework for special needs education? *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 23(2), pp. 135-146.
- Rieser, R. (2006a). Disability equality: Confronting the oppression of the past. In M. Cole (Ed.), *Education, equality and human rights: Issues of gender, 'race', sexuality, disability and social class* (2nd ed., pp. 134-156). London and New York: Routledge.
- Rieser, R. (2006b). Inclusive education or special educational needs: Meeting the challenge of disability discrimination in schools. In M. Cole (Ed.), *Education, equality and human rights: Issues of gender, 'race', sexuality, disability and social class* (2nd ed., pp. 157-179). London and New York: Routledge.
- Riggins, S. H. (1997). The rhetoric of othering. In S. H. Riggins (Ed.), *The language and politics of exclusion: Others in discourse* (pp. 1-30). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Roberts, H. (2000). Listening to children: And hearing them. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* (pp. 225-240). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Robinson, C., & Taylor, C. (2007). Theorizing student voice: Values and perspectives. *Improving Schools*, 10(1), pp. 5-17.
- Robson, C. (2002). *Real world research* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Rocha, E. (1997). A ladder of empowerment. *Journal of Planning, Education and Research*, 17, pp. 31-44.
- Rooney, N. (2003). Creating a culture of change: Exploring the perspectives of young people with hearing impairments. In M. Shevlin & R. Rose (Eds.), *Encouraging voices* (pp. 159-177). Dublin: National Disability Authority.
- Rose, R., & Shevlin, M. (2003). Providing opportunities and learning by encouraging voices. In M. Shevlin & R. Rose (Eds.), *Encouraging voices* (pp. 3-14). Dublin: National Disability Authority.
- Rustemier, S. (2002). *Social and educational justice: The human rights framework for inclusion*. Bristol: Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education.



- Sandow, S. (1994). More ways than one: Models of special needs. In S. Sandow (Ed.), *Whose special need? Some perceptions of special educational needs* (pp. 1-11). London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Schofield, J. W. (1993). Increasing the generalizability of qualitative research. In M. Hammersley (Ed.), *Educational research: Current issues* (Vol. 1, pp. 91-113). London: Sage Publications.
- Scott, J. (2000). Children as respondents: The challenge for quantitative methods. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* (pp. 98-119). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Shakespeare, T. (2006). *Disability rights and wrongs*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Shatter, A. (2008). Has Taoiseach abandoned children's rights referendum? Retrieved October 24th 2008, from <http://www.fine Gael.ie/news/index.cfm/type/details/nkey/35239>
- Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations: A new model for enhancing children's participation in decision-making, in line with Article 12.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Children and Society*, 15(2), pp. 107-117.
- Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Skidmore, D. (2004). *Inclusion: The dynamic of school development*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Skrtic, T. M. (1995a). The functionalist view of special education and disability: Deconstructing the conventional knowledge tradition. In T. M. Skrtic (Ed.), *Disability and democracy: Reconstructing (special) education for postmodernity* (pp. 65-103). New York and London: Teachers College Press.
- Skrtic, T. M. (Ed.). (1995b). *Disability and democracy: Reconstructing (special) education for postmodernity*. New York and London: Teachers College Press.
- Smyth, E., Dunne, A., Darmody, M., & McCoy, S. (2007). *Gearing up for the exam: The experiences of Junior Certificate students*. Dublin: Liffey Press.
- Smyth, E., Dunne, A., McCoy, S., & Darmody, M. (2006). *Pathways through the Junior Cycle: The experiences of second year students*. Dublin: Liffey Press.
- Smyth, E., McCoy, S., & Darmody, M. (2004). *Moving up: The experiences of first year students in post-primary education*. Dublin: Liffey Press.
- Snelgrove, S. (2005). Bad, mad and sad: Developing a methodology of inclusion and a pedagogy for researching students with intellectual disabilities. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 9(3), pp. 313-329.
- St. Patrick's College. (2008). Review of the Role and Operation of Special Schools and Special Classes. Retrieved June 16th 2008, from [http://www.spd.dcu.ie/main/academic/special\\_education/documents/webinfo\\_001.doc](http://www.spd.dcu.ie/main/academic/special_education/documents/webinfo_001.doc)
- St. Patrick's College Special Education Department. (2007). *Survey of special schools and classes*. Paper presented at the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education 19th International Conference 2007 "In the midst of policy and paper". Dublin. June 2007.
- Stalker, K., & Connors, C. (2005). Children with learning disabilities talking about their everyday lives. In G. Grant, P. Goward, M. Richardson & P. Ramcharan (Eds.), *Learning disability: A life cycle approach to valuing people*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Stevens, P. (2007). *Educational provision for children with mild general learning disabilities in national schools and special schools in the Republic of Ireland 1989-2004*. Unpublished Ph.D., Trinity College, Dublin.

- Stevens, P., & O'Moore, M. (2009). *Inclusion or illusion? Educational provision for primary school children with mild general learning disabilities*. Dublin: Blackhall Publishing.
- Swan, T. D. (1994). Making the ordinary special and the special ordinary. In B. J. Spelman & S. Griffin (Eds.), *Special educational needs: Issues for the White Paper* (pp. 7-18). Dublin: Education Department, University College Dublin.
- Tangen, R. (2008). Listening to children's voices in educational research: Some theoretical and methodological problems. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 23(2), pp. 157-166.
- Teegan, J. P. (2003). *An ill wind blowing good: The story of COPE Foundation*. Cork: Mercier Press.
- Terzi, L. (2005). Beyond the dilemma of difference: The capability approach to disability and special educational needs. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 39(3), pp. 443-459.
- Thomas, C. (1999). *Female forms: Experiencing and understanding disability*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Thomas, G., & Glenny, G. (2005). Thinking about inclusion. Whose reason? What evidence? In K. Sheehy, M. Nind, J. Rix & K. Simmons (Eds.), *Ethics and research in inclusive education: Values into practice* (pp. 9-27). Oxford: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Thomas, G., & Loxley, A. (2001). *Deconstructing special education and constructing inclusion*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Tomlinson, S. (1982). *A sociology of special education*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Tomlinson, S. (1995). The radical structuralist view of special education and disability: Unpopular perspectives on their origins and development. In T. M. Skrtic (Ed.), *Disability and democracy: Reconstructing (special) education for postmodernity* (pp. 122-134). London and New York: Teachers College Press.
- Topping, K., & Maloney, S. (2005). Introduction. In K. Topping & S. Maloney (Eds.), *The RoutledgeFalmer reader in inclusive education* (pp. 1-13). London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Treseder, P. (1997). *Empowering children and young people: Training manual*. London: Save the Children & Children's Rights Office.
- UK Department for Education and Skills. (2001). *Special educational needs code of practice*. London: Author.
- UK Department for Education and Skills. (2004). *Removing barriers to achievement*. London: Author.
- UK Department of Health. (2001). *Valuing people: A new strategy for people with learning disabilities in the 21st century*. London: HMSO.
- UK Government. (2004). *Valuing people: Moving forward together*. London: HMSO.
- UK Government. (2005). *Valuing people: Making things better*. London: HMSO.
- UNESCO. (1994). *The Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education*. Salamanca: Author.
- UNESCO. (2004). Inclusive education. Retrieved November 13th 2007, from [http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=12078&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=12078&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)
- UNICEF. (2008). Convention on the rights of the child: Frequently asked questions. Retrieved October 26th 2008, from [http://www.unicef.org/crc/index\\_30229.html](http://www.unicef.org/crc/index_30229.html)
- United Nations. (1989). *United Nations convention on the rights of the child*. Geneva: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.
- United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (1997). *Children with disabilities* (No. CRC/C/69). Geneva: United Nations.

- United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2006). *General comment No. 9 (2006): The rights of children with disabilities* (No. CRC/C/GC/9). Geneva: United Nations.
- United Nations General Assembly. (2002). *A world fit for children* (No. S-27/2). Geneva: United Nations.
- Waldron, F. (2006). Children as co-researchers: Developing a democratic research practice with children. In K. C. Barton (Ed.), *Research methods in social studies education* (pp. 85-110). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- Ware, J. (2004). Ascertaining the views of people with profound and multiple learning disabilities. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 32, pp. 175-179.
- Warnock, M. (2005). *From integration to inclusion*. Paper presented at the Annual Lecture of the General Teaching Council for Scotland. Retrieved December 20th 2007, from <http://www.gtcs.org.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.asp?IID=1251&slID=1779> October 5th 2005.
- Wedell, K. (1995). Making inclusive education ordinary. *British Journal of Special Education*, 22(3), pp. 100-104.
- Wedell, K. (2005). Dilemmas in the quest for inclusion. *British Journal of Special Education*, 32(1), pp. 3-11.
- Wellington, J. (2000). *Educational research: Contemporary issues and practical approaches*. London: Continuum.
- Whyte, J. (2005). *Research with children with disabilities: A review of practical and ethical concerns*. Dublin: National Disability Authority & Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin.
- Williams, P. (1993). Integration of students with moderate learning difficulties. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 8(3), pp. 303-319.
- Woodhead, M., & Faulkner, D. (2000). Subjects, objects or participants? In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* (pp. 9-35). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Woods, P. (1990). *The happiest days? How pupils cope with school*. London: The Falmer Press.
- World Health Organization. (2007). *International statistical classification of diseases and related health problems 10th revision*. Geneva: Author.
- Wyness, M. G. (2000). *Contesting childhood*. London: Falmer Press.
- Ypinazar, V., & Pagliano, P. (2004). Seeking inclusive education: Disrupting boundaries of 'special' and 'regular' education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 8(4), pp. 423-442.
- Zappone, K. (2002). *Achieving equality in children's education*. Dublin: Education Disadvantage Centre, St. Patrick's College.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The remit of OMCYA includes the harmonisation of policy issues that affect children in many areas, such as early childhood care and education, child welfare and protection, children and young people's participation, and research involving children (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2008).

<sup>ii</sup> One recent example of children's direct involvement in research in Ireland is the '*Big Ballot*' process undertaken in 2007, where the views of over 69,000 children in the country were gathered and analysed (Ombudsman for Children Office, 2007b), the results of which form the basis for current and future work of the OCO.

<sup>iii</sup> This is sometimes referred to as 'capturing the student voice' although, as I outline later in this paper, this term may be inadequate, as voice is just one element of the requirements needed to fulfill obligations under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989).

<sup>iv</sup> Mild Mental Retardation (F70) is classified in the ICD-10 classification of diseases as "Approximate IQ range of 50 to 69 (in adults, mental age from 9 to under 12 years). Likely to result in some learning difficulties in school. Many adults will be able to work and maintain good social relationships and contribute to society." (<http://www.who.int/classifications/apps/icd/icd10online/>)

<sup>v</sup> There are also fourteen types of special school in Ireland, eleven of which are category specific.

<sup>vi</sup> These data are compiled from figures produced by the National Intellectual Disability Database.

<sup>vii</sup> I have taught in the school since 1991, apart from three years (2003-2006) on secondment to another position.

<sup>viii</sup> From October 2007 to February 2008 and from April to June 2008 I changed role from class teacher to Acting Principal. During this period, Phases 3 and 4 and parts of Phase 5 of the research were undertaken.

<sup>ix</sup> This timeframe is chosen for two reasons. Firstly, my own experience of working in this school began seventeen years ago in 1991. Secondly, as indicated earlier, the Special Education Review Committee was established in 1991.

<sup>x</sup> Eight subjects are currently offered to examination level in the Junior Certificate: English, Irish and Mathematics at Foundation Level; Home Economics, Environmental and Social Studies (ESS), Art, Craft and Design and Materials Technology (Wood) at Ordinary Level and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) at Common Level.

<sup>xi</sup> Historical evidence is widely available that the prevailing view of the psycho-medical or deficit model has identified the source of the problem as individuals who happen to be categorised as different or deviant throughout the history of special education. For example, the Egerton Commission of 1889 in the United Kingdom stated that "the blind, the deaf, dumb and educable classes of imbeciles if left uneducated become not only a burden to themselves, but to the state" (cited in Tomlinson, 1995, p. 128), while in Ireland the 1936 Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Reformatory and Industrial Schools recommended that: "it is in every way undesirable that mentally deficient children, even of the higher grade, should be placed with normal children. Such children are a burden to their teachers, a handicap to other children, and, being unable to keep up with the class, their condition tends to become worse" (cited in Swan, 1994, p. 10).

<sup>xii</sup> My italics indicate the individual deficit nature of the definition.

<sup>xiii</sup> This manifests itself in the practice of allocating extra resource teaching hours to students identified as having special educational needs, where the emphasis on individual support and intervention sustains an implicit underlying philosophy of helping the child to adapt to the existing system rather than attempting to change systems, attitudes and beliefs.

<sup>xiv</sup> It has been suggested that one of the reasons why psychologists hold dear to the practice of administering individual IQ tests is that they are 'closed tests' that can only be administered by trained psychologists. Hence they become "the unique tool of the applied psychologist and a symbol of our professional identity" (Danforth, 2002, p. 9), which leads to a tendency to clutch lovingly to the IQ kit.

<sup>xv</sup> This aspect of the medical model links closely with the empiricist conception of the subject where experiences and personal opinions are not considered relevant to research (Tangen, 2008).

---

<sup>xvi</sup> In Ireland, a recent addition to the field of professionals working in this field is the Special Educational Needs Organiser, whose role is to “coordinate and advise schools at the local level in the provision of special educational services” (Carey, 2005, p. 189).

<sup>xvii</sup> In relation to the employment prospects of people with disabilities, it has been commented that “the classifications of learning disability based on a medical model have promoted individual lack of abilities rather than capabilities, rendering many unemployable” (McIntosh, 2002, p. 75).

<sup>xviii</sup> ‘Consumers’ is suggested as a more appropriate term than ‘client’, which is considered “an artefact of the traditional objectivist view of the professions” (Skrtic, 1995a, p. 90).

<sup>xix</sup> The ‘continuum of services’ was one of seven principles enshrined in the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (Department of Education, 1993) while it is also one of the functions of the National Council for Special Education “to ensure that a continuum of special educational provision is available as required in relation to each type of disability” (Ireland, 2004, p. 21).

<sup>xx</sup> This document itself originated from discussions in 1975 between UPIAS and the Disability Alliance. These discussions noted that “it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society” (Priestley, 1997, p. 20).

<sup>xxi</sup> Lloyd (2000, p. 136) also uses this term. He objects to this approach which neglects “seriously addressing the fundamental underlying issues of social injustice and inequality”.

<sup>xxii</sup> Oliver claims that “normality is a construct imposed on a reality where there is only difference” (Oliver, 1995, p. 74).

<sup>xxiii</sup> The practice of excluding those with disabilities is referred to as ‘disablism’, a practice which needs to be confronted in the same way that the exclusionary practices of sexism, racism and homophobia were confronted in the twentieth century (Oliver, 1995).

<sup>xxiv</sup> The categories of special educational need considered to be ‘high incidence disabilities’ are “borderline mild general learning disability, mild general learning disability and specific learning disability” (Department of Education and Science, 2005b, p. 3).

<sup>xxv</sup> The range of participants in this study included class teachers and special education or resource teachers in regular and special schools, counsellors and psychologists, teaching assistants and administrators (Norwich, 2008).

<sup>xxvi</sup> Among the other rights which apply to children is the right to protection of their cultural identity. This concept was explored in tandem with the matter of children’s voice in one particular study involving gypsy, traveller and fairground children, a group who are often, like the participants in this particular study, represented as marginalised and voiceless (Kiddle, 1999).

<sup>xxvii</sup> The Minister for Children (Minister of State with special responsibility for Children) at this time (2000) was Mary Hanafin, later to become Minister for Education and Science.

<sup>xxviii</sup> One of the more interesting research projects in the disability field is a ‘participant-as-transcriptionist’ study where participants transcribed their own interviews. This “created high-quality transcripts that were representative of their own voices” (Grundy, McGinn, & Pollon, 2005, p. 456) and was considered enabling for a researcher who is hard of hearing.

<sup>xxix</sup> In the UK, Government policy now acknowledges and values the views of children with disability: one of the fundamental principles of the *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* is that “the views of the child should be sought and taken into account” (UK Department for Education and Skills, 2001, p. 7).

<sup>xxx</sup> This document is a good example of an agency being aware of the need for inclusive and participatory approaches to research, and being pro-active in producing specific guidelines on how best to include participants in research.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Variations in gender and in socio-economic groupings, while significant, are not referred to here.

<sup>xxxii</sup> This decline was more marked for students of low academic ability and those who attended designated disadvantaged schools, while students with lower reading and mathematics test scores also experienced a higher level of negative interaction with teachers.

---

<sup>xxxiii</sup> 42.1% of students recommended this as a way of helping them to settle in school (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004). Quieter students, physically immature students, and members of minority groups were seen to be more at risk of being bullied.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Interestingly, two different sets of data are presented in summaries of the report which appear on the NCCA website. One document reports that “the proportion of students who find schoolwork interesting falls from 50% at the start of first year to a low of 20% by the end of second year” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2006a, p. 15), while another, which purports to be a reproduction of the first article, reports that “the proportion of students who find schoolwork interesting falls from 80% at the start of first year to a low of 55% by the end of second year” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2006b, p. 3). The data presented in the actual report suggest that the latter figures are correct (Figure 6.1, in Smyth *et al.*, 2006, p. 169).

<sup>xxxv</sup> While the school in this current study is in an urban area, and the majority of students attending are from this urban area, many students attend from outside this city, including rural areas up to 40 miles from the school.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> The authors refer to ‘bullying’ in inverted commas as “it is reported without corroborating evidence and covers some behaviour which is usually not classed as bullying, e.g. teasing in fun” (Norwich & Kelly, 2004, p. 60)

<sup>xxxvii</sup> A recent study which is of some relevance sought the views of past pupils of a school for students with mild GLD, and considered aspects such as their views on the special school. Nonetheless, the participants were adults rather than children (Fahey, 2007).

<sup>xxxviii</sup> In one case study involving students with ‘MLD’ in three special schools, the researcher spent time with participants in their classrooms in order to build a good relationship with students, and subsequently embarked on a series of group interviews (usually four students per group) which allowed participants to relax and feel more at ease than individual interviews might allow (Costley, 2000).

<sup>xxxix</sup> The supervisory team consisted of three academics with experience in special education and in research with children. Two were staff members of the host college; the third was an external supervisor.

<sup>xl</sup> Arrangements were subsequently made to deliver this message orally to those students who were absent on the day.

<sup>xli</sup> Similar alternative arrangements were made for students who chose not to participate in the class-based focus groups, without this impacting in any way on their standing in the school community. This was possible as other members of staff made themselves available to teach or supervise those students who had opted not to participate in the focus groups.

<sup>xlii</sup> One matter related to dissemination is the necessity to avoid fraudulent practices of “suppressing, falsifying or inventing findings to meet a researcher’s or an audience’s needs” (Creswell, 2003, p. 67). These practices were absolutely avoided throughout the study.

<sup>xliii</sup> The first posting of information on the noticeboard was in March 2007. Subsequent changes occurred in October 2007, February 2008 and finally in January 2009, at the completion of the project.

<sup>xliiv</sup> These proposed interviews were to involve either one or both parents, and were to be conducted in the school or in the parents’ homes, depending on which was more convenient to those who agreed to participate. It was subsequently decided not to proceed with this phase of the project.

<sup>xliiv</sup> Some focus group meetings had to be rescheduled; one was rescheduled three times. Predominantly this was due to lack of availability of students because of absence or other school events, although constraints with my own free time also contributed to rescheduling.

<sup>xlivi</sup> Eight students who had consented to participate were absent on the days the focus group interviews with their classes took place. Of the four remaining students, one had, to all intents and purposes, left the school in mid-March and two others attended only very sporadically after that. Attempts were made to create a focus group with the remaining three in May, but this failed as the three were never in school on the same day, and two of them had indicated that they had lost interest in participating by this stage.

<sup>xlivi</sup> However, during one focus group this process was abandoned after about fifteen minutes as the depth of information / opinion given by the participants was too great and detailed for me to be able to continue writing and listen carefully without disrupting the flow of ideas or failing to act as an effective moderator.

---

<sup>xlviii</sup> These templates were also available to anyone on the notice board in the hall, although this method of facilitating participation proved to be less successful than was anticipated. The templates were by and large ignored, although these were re-modelled and became the basis for Phase 5 of the research process.

<sup>lix</sup> There was one exception to this. One of the nine who participated in this phase had actually only been in the school for one year, having attended a special class in a mainstream second-level school prior to this.

<sup>l</sup> Eight were from the FETAC class and ten from the Leaving Certificate Applied 2 class.

<sup>li</sup> Parental consent was also sought from those who wished to participate. One student who was over eighteen argued that he could speak for himself in matters of consent, and so parental consent was not sought in this case.

<sup>lii</sup> In the first group, five out of ten students chose to participate, in the second group, ten out of thirteen students in the class participated.

<sup>liii</sup> These images / symbols were all sourced in the Symbols tool available in Microsoft Word and printed in enlarged size.

<sup>liv</sup> This was later extended by one week in the final school term, as three of the nine class groups had not responded within the initial period.

<sup>lv</sup> The two groups selected were chosen for convenience – they were the easiest groups to form as the students remained in a distinct cohort and were all available and willing to contribute at this particular time. Other groups were either unavailable or more difficult to re-form given that the participants were in different base classes.

<sup>lvi</sup> Interestingly, the second year group required much more assistance than the first year group, perhaps reflecting the greater learning needs of these students.

<sup>lvii</sup> In the casebook it was decided to use the actual names of each participant, as it made it easier for identification purposes. These were subsequently changed towards the end of the process to protect anonymity.

<sup>lviii</sup> In setting ground rules for the focus group meetings, I had asked participants not to refer to any individuals (staff or students) by name. This was done to prevent the meetings becoming personalised and to protect everyone, although in doing this, some of the honesty and directness of participant feeling may have been diluted. Nevertheless, two people were mentioned positively on a number of occasions, the principal (“helps other people”, “is very kind and nice”) and the secretary (“is very nice as well”, “is real fun”).

<sup>lix</sup> Another student actually mentioned that it was good that you were allowed drink Coke. This suggests that a ban on Coke was a class-specific, rather than a whole-school rule.

<sup>lx</sup> FETAC is the Further Education and Training Awards Council. Some students move into a class which prepares students to take a range of Level 3 FETAC courses after they have completed 3<sup>rd</sup> year (Junior Certificate year). LCA is the Leaving Certificate Applied programme, a two-year modular based programme which was introduced in 1995 for students who may have had a vocational rather than an academic focus in senior cycle. In this school, students continued to either the FETAC or LCA class after Junior Certificate year. Generally the more academically able students were in the LCA class, although this was not always the case.

<sup>lxi</sup> This is an example of where auto-coding in NVivo assisted in the organisation of data for subsequent analysis.

<sup>lxii</sup> A related gripe was that the school did not close early on the last day of each term / year as is the practice in other schools.

<sup>lxiii</sup> Two of these four students were actually referring to their initial move to a primary special school, prior to their enrolment in their current school. Given their younger age, it is perhaps more understandable why they were not consulted about this move.

<sup>lxiv</sup> I am unclear as to whether the student meant the comment from the parents referred to ‘your learning difficulties’ (possession) or ‘you’re learning difficulties’ (‘you are’ – defining the student).

<sup>lxv</sup> Two other special schools are also in close proximity, and the students from the three schools share transport services.

<sup>lxvi</sup> Those marked with \* were either ignored or subsumed into one of the four broader themes in the next phase but are not specifically transferred into the sub-headings shown in Appendix O, given their generic nature.

<sup>lxvii</sup> While it seems not to make sense to consider ‘comments containing multiple ideas’ as individual data sets, I considered this to be appropriate in this initial stage as the comments were made by one person, were usually short and yet contained reference to many themes. An example is the following: “School can be alright

---

*sometimes, this year had been too much work compared to the last two years, good activities like quiz, sports, basketball, good subjects as well, good gym and woodwork, some schools in (...) mightn't have the same, the teachers are sound out, well most of them, the odd one or two are not". Within this one can count no fewer than six separate topics, yet to separate these out would risk losing the composite picture that the comment creates. Using NVivo allowed me to code data like this to multiple nodes.*