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Ollscoil na hÉireann, Corcaigh
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**Inclusionary Leadership: A Qualitative Study of
Principals' Experiences, Practices and Perceptions of
Leading Autism classes in Irish Primary Schools**

Thesis presented by

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I would like to dedicate this research to principals. You are an inspiration- keep fighting the good fight!

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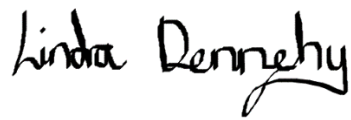
Glossary of Acronyms

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AS	Autistic Spectrum
ASD	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
CDNT	Child Disability Network Teams
CORA	Cork Open Research Archive
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CPSMA	Catholic Primary School Management Association
CSL	Centre for School Leadership
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DE	Department of Education
DEIS	Delivering Equal Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills/ Science
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs
GP	General Practitioner
HSE	Health Service Executive
IEP	Individual Education Plan
INTO	Irish National Teachers Organisation
IPPN	Irish Primary Principal Network
ISM	In School Management
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NIPT	National Induction Programme for Teachers
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
OCD	Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
OT	Occupational Therapist
PDSL	Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership

PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
PL	Professional Learning
PLC	Primary Language Curriculum
PST	Professional Support Team
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator
SENO	Special Educational Needs Organiser
SERC	Special Education Review Committee
SET	Special Education Teacher
SISL	Supporting Inclusive School Leadership
SLT	Speech and Language Therapist
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SREC	Social Research Ethics Committee
UCC	University College Contract
UN	United Nations
UNCRPD	UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
WHO	World Health Organisation

Declaration

This is to certify that the work I am submitting is my own and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere. All external references and sources are clearly acknowledged and identified within the contents. I have read and understood the regulations of University College Cork concerning plagiarism and intellectual property.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Linda Dennyhy". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Linda" and last name "Dennyhy" clearly distinguishable.

9th July 2023

Abstract

This study explores the experiences, practices and perceptions of primary school principals currently leading autism classes in Ireland. Autism classes in mainstream primary schools are becoming increasingly common in the Irish education system. The prevalence of autism classes highlights the importance of their role in enabling autistic children to attend mainstream schools. It reflects the increasing number of autistic pupils who require these specialised placements. Primary schools serve all children. It is essential that autistic children are supported in the best way possible so they can reach their full potential. The principal has a pivotal role in all aspects of his or her school, including leading the autism classes. Given the centrality of their role, it is imperative that the principal is supported by the best practices and theory available. This study sought to give the principals time to reflect on their inclusive leadership and decipher what it meant for them in their lived experience and context. Theories of leadership through a socio-cultural lens frame the overall study. A qualitative research design was adopted using semi-structured interviews with 15 primary school principals. Analysis of the data was conducted using a reflective thematic analysis approach. Findings of the research reveal that there are particular leadership styles that align with an inclusive leadership approach. These styles are distributed leadership, transformational leadership and instructional leadership. A positive disposition towards inclusion is an important factor in the principal's perceptions of their leadership. The idea of inclusionary leadership is borne out of the study. This term indicates that leaders striving for inclusion in their schools do not view it as a destination to be reached but rather a long-term journey they travel. Reciprocal leadership within the whole school community has an influence on the sustainability of the principal's role. The autism class as a model of a professional learning community emerges from the research and has potential to enhance the professional life of the stakeholders in the school. This research is a pathway for further study in the field. It has implications for pupils, principals, school communities and policy makers regarding the value of the work of inclusionary leaders.

1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The educational landscape in Ireland is changing at a rapid rate with an influx of pupils from different faiths, cultures and an increase of children with additional needs attending mainstream schools. Special education has experienced a number of changes and reforms in recent times (Kenny, McCoy and Mihut, 2020). With these changes comes the need for school principals to be proactive and innovative in developing their own leadership skills to respond to the rapidly changing education system. ‘School leaders matter for school success’ (Grissom and Loeb, 2011, p. 1091). The number of special classes in Ireland has grown exponentially in recent years (Banks, 2016). An intimate knowledge of the education system is required to support autistic children in an inclusive manner. Principals, with their multifaceted role, can be the change-makers in developing inclusive schools (Lüddeckens, Anderson and Östlund, 2022). Autism is a complex area as it intersects with many stakeholders, such as the Department of Education (DE) who are responsible for services like school transport and allocation of staff to classes. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE), through the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO), allocate the classes in response to regional needs. The Health Service Executive (HSE) provides professional services such as occupational therapy (OT), speech and language therapy (SLT) and psychologists. Adaptive equipment is organised and applied for through the DE. The principal assists families in supporting children achieve their full potential (Fallah, Reynolds and Murawski, 2023). They collaborate with the school community, actively working with them and mentoring them to traverse and navigate the structures to best support the child’s development and education (Hopkins-Thompson, 2000). The

principal works in partnership with teachers, supporting them in developing their pedagogy in response to the needs of the children in their class (Lambrecht *et al.*, 2020). Working together, an open dialogue can ensue where the principal facilitates a learning and developmental experience for the child and teacher (Admiraal *et al.*, 2021). The principal can organise specific training, teacher exchange or visits, depending on the needs of the teacher (Hariyati *et al.*, 2023). This collaboration allows for a richer experience for both pupil and teacher. The role of the principal is central to the positive operation of the inclusive school (Lüddeckens, Anderson and Östlund, 2022; Vlachou and Tsirantonaki, 2023).

1.2 Rationale for the study

The rationale for this study was borne out of a professional conversation which took place a number of years ago with a fellow principal. This principal spoke about challenges they faced when leading special classes. They spoke of leading special classes as being burdensome on their leadership and therefore they were negatively disposed to them. This sparked the question: ‘what were the challenges for principals leading special classes?’ This question then led to another question: ‘what were the opportunities in leading special classes?’ These questions in turn lent themselves to thinking about what it was really like for principals to lead special classes in mainstream schools. The aim of this research was to answer these questions through the voice of the primary school principal. So often, the principal is identified as having overall responsibility for the initiative or *commande de jour* in Department of Education Circulars (Irish Primary Principal Network, 2022), but their voice is rarely heard. Given that school principals have a proven impact on student outcomes (Coelli and Green,

2012) it stands to reason that gaining an insight into the experiences and perspectives of the principal will support the inclusion of autistic pupils (Horrocks, White and Roberts, 2008). As a principal who was about to open their first autism class in September 2019 when I began this doctoral journey, I could identify with others in a similar position of knowledge deficit regarding the leadership of special classes.

I became very interested in the area of autism when I was a teaching principal and an autistic child entered my classroom, a number of years ago. At first, I failed this child entirely with my traditional teaching approach. I knew he deserved more than I was giving him at that point. To better support this child, I undertook a certificate in autism which led to a diploma in autism and thus began a perpetual interest in the area. This experience marked a significant point in my professional career. It was life changing in how I viewed education, inclusion and my role as a teacher and principal. My personal rationale was that I hoped to glean an insight into best practices from the experienced principals in this study and develop a framework that could support principals who were just about to lead autism classes. I hoped that this would improve the lives of both autistic children and their principals.

This study was undertaken with principals from different areas in Ireland. As the study seeks the principal voice, qualitative research was conducted through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The study began in September 2019. The unprecedented event that was the COVID 19 global pandemic began in March 2020, which impacted my doctoral journey and this study. These impacts are outlined in the research methodology, subsequent decisions made and the rationale for these decisions. A chapter on the impact of COVID 19 is included in the thesis to reflect the times in which the study was set.

1.3 Context

‘Ireland has a unique and complex history in relation to its approach to inclusive education’ (Kenny, McCoy and Mihut, 2020, p. 14). Inclusion, special education and additional needs are all highly contested and researched both nationally and internationally (Travers *et al.*, 2014; Avramidis and Toulia, 2020; Smith and Leonard, 2005; Slee, 2018a; Norwich, 2008; King, 2017). There is a growing body of research carried out in the Irish context, much of which informs the rationale for this study (National Council for Special Education, 2018; Bond, 2016; Daly, 2016; Lynch *et al.*, 2020; National Council for Special Education, 2016). Ireland’s education system has developed to respond to the needs of children in recent years. With societal change, more children with additional needs are attending mainstream schools. Supports such as Special Needs Assistants (SNA) and Special Education Teachers (SET) are in place to assist children with additional needs access the curriculum (Brownell *et al.*, 2016; Raftery and Brennan, 2021). Special classes are another response to supporting inclusion in the Irish education system (DES, 2020). An expansion of the special class model is currently underway, to allow the system to cope with an increase in demand (Banks and McCoy, 2017). There is such a shortage of placements available, that in 2019, Dublin 15 schools were instructed to open special classes without any prior consultation (DES, 2019).

Leadership as a topic has been well researched in Ireland. Reviews of leadership in Ireland summarise current leadership practices (Murphy, 2019). Hero leadership is explored and adapted towards a more contemporary shape of leadership (Sugrue, 2009). Some research examines leadership styles, such as distributed leadership (Hickey,

Flaherty and Mannix McNamara, 2023; Hickey, Flaherty and Mannix McNamara, 2022; Murphy and Brennan, 2022). International research explores instructional and transformational leadership (Lambrecht *et al.*, 2020). Educational theory and context are examined by Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017).

There is a body of research in existence outlining the different aspects of special classes (Ware, 2009; Banks, 2016; McCoy *et al.*, 2014; McCormack, 2019). Research on special class teachers outlines the conditions that best support these teachers (Drew and Cahill, 2020; Oliver and Reschly, 2010). The specific role of the autism class teacher has been reviewed (Ryan and Mathews, 2022b; Horan and Merrigan, 2019). The role of the SNA has been studied, with recommendations such as the School Inclusion Model pilot being enacted following a following a *Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme* by the National Council for Special Education (2018)

Although a number of research studies has been published in the area of autism classes, there is limited research available on the role of principals leading autism classes (McCormack, 2019). In existing research on principals and autism classes, the principal forms only part of larger research projects and their views are combined with others in the findings (Daly, 2016). Some research reports offer recommendations for principals without asking for their views (Banks, 2016).

Leadership practices and perspectives cannot be separated from their social and cultural context (Spillane, Halverson and Diamond, 2004). A principal's work should be viewed in the context of leading their school, which includes the autism classes. In order to best support the work, they do, their voices need to be heard. This research is based on recommendations for further research into principal practices in inclusive special education from an international perspective (Cobb, 2015) and the Irish context

(Murphy, 2019). It seeks to fill the knowledge gap by producing a study that is purely from the perspective of the principal leading autism classes, a perspective which is currently limited and underexplored.

1.4 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore the practices, perspectives and experiences of current principals. It looks to place value on their voice and lived experience of leading schools with autism classes. It seeks to give them the opportunity to reflect on their inclusionary leadership and decipher what that means for them in their context and lived experience. The study aims to map the data created and analyse it through the theoretical framework of leadership styles through a socio-cultural lens (Hartley, 2009). The study will also support principals to be the best inclusionary leaders they can be and support autistic pupils to have a rich educational experience in primary schools. From this exploration of leadership, the recommendations are transferable cross-sectorally to second level schools and internationally to other education systems.

1.5 Research Questions

The focus of this research is to explore the experiences, practices and perceptions of primary school principals when leading autism classes. Their experiences are explored to gain knowledge of the professional life of the principal. Their practices are considered in order to gain practical examples of their present lived experiences. The principals' perceptions are examined to attempt to uncover the approach they take to inclusion. The insights offered are reviewed and assembled, to paint an overall picture of the primary school principal as they lead autism classes. In an effort to add to the current body of literature, this study aims to address the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of current primary principals of leading schools with autism classes in the context of their professional life history and present lived experience?
2. What advice would current primary principals give to other principals who are leading or are about to lead schools with autism classes?
3. What are the principal's own reflections and understanding of the meaning of their experience of leading schools with autism classes?

1.6 Outline of Chapters

1.6.1 Chapter 2- Literature Review-Autism

Chapter 2 introduces and reviews the current literature and research available on the topic of autism. It begins by attempting to develop a definition of autism. This is complex to uncover within the literature. There is consensus that the current DSM 5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and the Dyad of impairment are appropriate measures. Co-occurring needs can often exist in an autistic child. A co-occurring need can complicate the supports they may need and therefore it must be considered. Debate surrounds the appropriate language to use when addressing the issue of autism. Such terms as autistic, ASD, units, child with autism may be used when referring to a pupil who attends an autism class. For this study, the rationale for using the terms 'autistic child' and 'autism class' are outlined.

The general areas of special education and inclusion are explored. The literature on inclusive education is examined and Ireland's approach to inclusion in education is reviewed and discussed. Similarly, the review moves into the special class response in the Irish educational system. From there, the impact the autism classes have on

professional learning for all staff is considered. The overall impact of leadership in the inclusive space is investigated and leads to the next chapter.

1.6.2 Chapter 3- Leadership & Inclusion

In this chapter the themes of leadership and inclusion are explored. The chapter begins by looking at the wider inclusion landscape. Leadership for inclusion is examined through the literature. Again, the language around inclusive leadership is explored. A number of roles undertaken by principals are evident within the research. These roles are outlined and considered. There are three leadership styles that are most aligned with an inclusionary leader as identified in the research. These styles are transformational leadership, distributed leadership and instructional leadership. These three styles are investigated and scrutinised within the research.

1.6.3 Chapter 4- COVID 19

Chapter 4 reflects the timing of this study. The occurrence of the global pandemic that was COVID 19 could not have been predicted. The pandemic had far-reaching consequences for schools and autism classes. The implications of this time are explored within the literature on the topic of COVID 19.

1.6.4 Chapter 5- Situated Learning, Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Chapter 5 begins by outlining why schools should be considered as learning organisations. Situated learning forms part of the theoretical framework for this study. The relevance of situated learning in the context of the autism classes is evaluated and debated. The peripheral participation of the principal in the context of their school is utilised in the research and will be explored further in the data chapters. A view on

learning as acquiring an identity is evaluated and analysed in the context of those associated with and involved in autism classes.

The chapter discusses the two pillars that underpin the study, namely theories of leadership and socio-cultural theory. Distributed leadership as a framework for leadership (Spillane, 2005) which allows the enactment of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and communities of practice (Wenger, 2011) is a central tenet to the research. Hartley (2009) explores theories of leadership through a sociocultural lens and this lays a foundation for the study.

1.6.5 Chapter 6- Research Methodology

This chapter explores the research methodology used in this study. The research questions frame the study. The constructivist paradigm and interpretive genre are employed in the study. The appropriateness of qualitative research is discussed and presented along with its use within this research. Ontology, epistemology and phenomenology are outlined and explored. The sample selection process for study participants is presented and justified under a number of different areas. The data collection method of interview is described. The interview stages in the study are outlined. The use of thematic analysis to analyse the data is explained. Trustworthiness and ethics are identified through informed consent, confidentiality and data storage. Ongoing ethical dilemmas are explored and analysed.

The major findings of the study are displayed in a visual mind map. This visual resource outlines the major themes that emerged from the data analysis. Visual representation of data aims to enhance the reading and comprehension of the findings (Verdinelli and Scagnoli, 2013). A pathway for discussion of the themes of leadership, COVID 19,

professional learning and tensions and dilemmas was created. These major themes are discussed in the chapters that follow.

1.6.6 Chapter 7- Leadership

Chapter 7 outlines the analysis of the data that led to the theme of leadership. The term “inclusionary leadership” was identified and is explained. From the data, principal beliefs and values were identified. The idea of inclusion and strategies for inclusion are presented. Inclusion and exclusion in primary schools is explored through the data. Coaching and mentoring emerged as a theme and this is demonstrated in Chapter 7. A number of roles principals assume when leading autism classes were revealed from the data. These roles include advocate, partner, interpreter, negotiator, helper, supporter, organiser and conflict resolver. Each of these roles is presented and explored. The leadership styles identified in the literature are reflected in the findings of the data. Transformational leadership, instructional leadership and distributed leadership were all found to be utilised by principals in the study.

Autism classes as a model of distributed leadership is put forward and justified data evidenced. Traditional ideals of inclusion are discussed such as the autism classes as a school within a school, which was described by a principal. The idea of reciprocal support of staff towards the principal was an idea that emerged from the data. Staff taking a responsibility for what they are like to lead shapes this idea. The importance of the disposition for the inclusionary principal is explained.

1.6.7 Chapter 8- The impact of COVID 19 on Autism classes

Chapter 8 outlines the impact of the COVID 19 global pandemic on many autism classes. The importance of communication during this time is explored. Technology was central as a tool for communication. The principals spoke of their issues with

Department of Education communication. The COVID 19 response plan had to be adopted for the autism classes. COVID 19 impacted the principals' style of leadership. Deliberative leadership was employed so decisions could be made and the school community kept safe. Wellbeing was a theme to emerge from COVID 19 data. The wellbeing of staff, principals, parents and autistic pupils is explored and examined. The data outlines a number of opportunities is presented. Staff upskilling in their use of technology was highlighted. There was joy during the summer provision and the reopening of the autism classes after lockdowns. The principals expressed the opinion that staff bonding and adaptation during this time was commendable.

1.6.8 Chapter 9- Professional Learning

Professional learning from initial teacher education (ITE) to post-appointment professional learning was explored with a lens on inclusion and the autism classes. The principals' disappointment with current ITE programmes was identified through the data. The avenues for professional learning for staff currently working in the autism classes was explored. While principals felt the professional learning on offer was of a high quality, they lamented that these opportunities were not afforded to special needs assistants (SNAs) who work with the same cohort of children. Leadership development prior to and post taking on the role of principal leading autism classes was described and analysed through the data.

1.6.9 Chapter 10- Tensions & Dilemmas

In this chapter a number of tensions and dilemmas were identified in the data. The principals maintained that staffing was of high importance for the autism classes. They argued that incorrect staffing could create issues within the class. Resourcing of the classes was highlighted as an area of concern for the principals. They felt accessing

professional supports was difficult at present and children were impacted because of this. The current system of placement of autistic pupils was criticised by the principals. They felt the system was crude and a review of placement should be put in place to ensure children are receiving the best education available to them. Conflict was explored through the management of expectations. The principals had to manage their own expectations as well as those of other stakeholders.

1.6.10 Chapter 11- Conclusion

In Chapter 11, the research questions are revisited. The questions which framed the research now frame the final discussion and conclusion. The questions are answered using data from the study. Following discussions, original recommendations are put forward for consideration. These recommendations evolved from the data. They are offered in order to build on the current good practice by school principals when leading autism classes.

Finally, a definition of inclusionary leadership is proffered from the data.

1.7 Significance of the study

The heroic narrative of the work of the primary school principal is a problematic one, and one that needs disruption in order to allow for the evolution of the role towards a sustainable pathway (Sugrue, 2009). Principalship, while ever noble, is ever changing and evolving. Principals need to develop and evolve to meet the needs of the pupils they serve. The existence of autism classes is steadily increasing in Ireland. Few primary principals will not encounter leading autism classes in their professional careers. In order to undertake this role effectively they need to equip themselves with knowledge and skills, to inform their beliefs and values, so they can carry out their role (Vlachou and Tsirantonaki, 2023). This study aims to explore the actions and

experiences of the inclusionary leader who leads autism classes and to build on the existing research evidence. It is hoped that the study will provide valuable insights for school principals, school communities and policy makers.

The following chapters provide an in-depth review of the literature pertaining to the leadership of autism classes along with the theoretical framework that underpins this study.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This study investigates the lived experiences of primary school principals as they navigate the leadership of autism classes in their respective schools. Discussion regarding special education and autism classes has featured strongly in popular culture, political policy and academic research in recent years.

A large range of literature and policy has been pivotal in structuring this literature review thematically while identifying the pertinent research questions worthy of investigation. The resulting research questions framed the entire study. There are two major themes discussed in this literature review: Autism and Leadership. Under each of these themes, a number of sub-themes were developed and explored.

This literature review will examine relevant literature on the combined topics of Autism and Leadership in mainstream Irish primary schools. Existing literature on the COVID 19 pandemic was also included, given that this study was conducted during the height of the pandemic. The literature review will present findings from both a national and international perspective. Relevant public policies will be identified and discussed, given their centrality to the special education debate as well as the changing landscape of Irish society.

2.2 Search and Review Process

The University College Cork (UCC) electronic library catalogue was used as a search tool to identify relevant literature, including books and articles. The following are some examples of terms used in the searches for literature in the research area; Special

Classes in Ireland, Autism Units, Autism, Autism Spectrum Disorder, ASD Classes, ASD Leadership, Leadership for inclusion, Leadership and special classes, Leadership of autism classes. In order to identify themes, inductive reasoning was used. This enabled the research to be categorised and thus informed the data collection process (McMillan and Gogia, 2014).

2.3 The wider Inclusion landscape within Irish primary education

Ireland's education system has developed and widened greatly in the past 20 years to reflect social diversity and progress (Quinn, 2012). Societal change has been rapid, a factor seen in particular during the *Celtic Tiger* period of prosperity, followed by a period of austerity to rectify the wrongs (Devine, 2005). These societal changes have encouraged the need to focus on inclusion in a broader sense within education. There are a number of issues that need to be examined when considering inclusion in the Irish primary school system. With an increasing number of families in Ireland originating from different cultures and backgrounds, the traditional model of Irish Catholic primary education is being challenged in many ways (Meehan and O'Connell, 2021). Families are exercising their right not to have their children taught Catholic religion as it contravenes their beliefs (Rougier and Honohan, 2015). In recent times a more diverse array of patronages has allowed many primary schools to respond to the growing desire to cater for the more varied needs of parents. These new schools purport to be inclusive and diverse in nature, while traditional Catholic schools maintain their openness to all faiths and none (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018).

There exists a debate regarding the quality of inclusion of disadvantaged pupils in primary schools. The Delivering Equal Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme, which was launched in 2005, has been very successful in meeting the educational needs

of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (Campion, 2019). The Department of Education is currently conducting their own review of the scheme, the results of which are due for release in the near future. Cuts to resources in times of austerity certainly impinged on the inclusive nature of Irish education. In Budget 2011, 42 ‘Resource Teacher for Traveller’ posts were quashed in order to save money, yet children from the Traveller community still needed support when engaging with education (Department of Education and Skills, 2011).

Primary school teaching has been a female-dominated profession and this trend continues to the present day (Heinz, Keane and Davison, 2021; Heinz and Keane, 2018). While more males are needed to equally represent society, more staff from culturally diverse backgrounds are required to reflect the varied nature of Irish society (Heinz, Keane and Davison, 2021). Many children never see themselves represented in school staff who are largely white, middle class and Irish (Burns, Colum and O’Neill, 2023; Heinz and Keane, 2018). While primary teaching is a predominantly female profession (Drudy, 2006), senior leadership positions are predominantly held by males in terms of ratio (Department of Education, 2023a).

Areas for debate within the inclusion sphere in primary school education are extensive and diverse. When leading for inclusion, principal teachers need to be cognisant of the wide and varying aspects of inclusion in the Irish primary school system. This study examines the area of leadership for inclusion in the context of pupils with additional needs, specifically those pupils in autism classes in Irish primary schools.

2.4 Autism

This section will examine relevant literature on the area of autism in mainstream primary schools. The review will examine where they are situated within the wider

educational landscape in Ireland. The findings presented are taken from a national and international perspective.

2.4.1 Autism diagnosis

Autism is diagnosed following an assessment by a multi-disciplinary team using a tool such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—5th edition (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2022) or the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problem (World Health Organization, 2019). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder which is characterised by deficits in social communication and the presence of restricted interests and repetitive behaviours, as per the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). In DSM-5, the concept of a spectrum autism diagnosis was created given that although a threshold needed to be reached in order to qualify for the diagnosis, there are varying degrees of developmental delays in different areas for those who are diagnosed. de Giambattista *et al.* (2019) suggest that future editions of the DSM-5 might include some categories or subsections which would have the ability to recognise the different nuances of the autism spectrum.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates the international prevalence of autism at 0.76%. Baxter *et al.* (2015) concluded that there was little variance to this figure regionally. Although autism is diagnosed in all racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups, Caucasian children are consistently more likely to be identified with autism than any other demographic group (Hodges, Fealko and Soares, 2020). Zeidan *et al.* (2022) found that more studies examining autism take place in Western societies and that research sample sizes were much smaller in underrepresented areas. Autism diagnosis is more common in males (Demily *et al.*, 2017). Differences can be seen in

the male to female ratio, with a 3:1 ratio reported by Loomes, Hull and Mandy (2017) while Zeidan *et al.* (2022) outline the worldwide ratio as 4:2. While there currently is no single cause for autism, studies show that genetics and environmental factors affect the developing brain (Hodges, Fealko and Soares, 2020). Early diagnosis can be key in applying the necessary interventions to support a child. Early red flags include poor eye contact, inability to respond to name, inability to share and loss of language or social skills (Hodges, Fealko and Soares, 2020). Autism can be diagnosed as early as 18-24 months of age, when these characteristics can be differentiated from typical development (Zeidan *et al.*, 2022).

2.4.2 Co- occurring needs

Often a diagnosis of autism can occur with another behaviour or psychiatric co-occurring conditions (Cullinane *et al.*, 2022) such as anxiety, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), mood disorders or other behaviour disorders (Soke *et al.*, 2018). Doherty, Haydon and Davidson (2021) argue that because of the vulnerability of autistic people and the existence of co-occurring needs, their treatment can be hampered due to differences in communication, social interaction and presentation. Zeidan *et al.* (2022) found that there has been significant positive global improvement in awareness and public health responses to autism. The benefits of the early identification of autism correlates with more positive improvements over time (Cullinane *et al.*, 2022).

2.4.3 The language debate

As outlined in the introduction, the chosen term of referral within this study is autistic children and autism classes. References to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) were made by participants and this term has been kept to protect the integrity of the

principals' voice. Great debate around the language and terms used when speaking to the discourse of autism is evident in this current time (Cullinane *et al.*, 2022). Words and language are powerful and when used to describe a person they can give even greater meaning, while carrying risks (Vivanti, 2020). Some of the debate centres around the right of a person to use language to describe themselves. This person-first language ranges from *ASD individual* to *individual with ASD* or *person with autism* to *autistic person*. Some research argues that referring to a person as *having autism* has the potential to frame it as a difficult condition that could be problematic or burdensome for parents/caregivers, and therefore a negative in the wider society (Jones and Harwood, 2009). The debate goes further in terms of altering ASD to autism. The use of the word 'disorder' in Autism Spectrum Disorder has been a grave concern for people within the community. The term *disorder* shapes a negative notion of autism akin to the use of the term disabled when referring to the needs of a child (Kelly, 2005). Autistic persons use person first language to abate any stigma (Botha, Dibb and Frost, 2022). While Vivanti (2020) proffers that there is a clear consensus on the preferred language from autistic people, Botha, Hanlon and Williams (2021) argue that this is not the case. In the research there appears to be consensus around the most offensive terms which they outline are 'person with autism' or 'person with Autism Spectrum Disorder' (Botha, Hanlon and Williams, 2021, p. 2; Kapp *et al.*, 2013; Kenny *et al.*, 2016). Botha, Hanlon and Williams (2021) outline the idea of the person with autism as a nod to the common terminology of an illness, for example a person with cancer or a person with diabetes. They argue that this phraseology is akin to comparing autism to an illness. They offer the alternative phrase *person on the autism spectrum* as an unconventional but more appropriate term to use. Given its unconventional nature it carries much less historical connotations. They argue that it locates the person and identifies them in a

smaller subgroup and is a ‘much less offending middle ground between two more politically entrenched ways of talking’ (Botha, Hanlon and Williams, 2021, p. 2). The term neurodiversity has been increasingly used in recent times to acknowledge that some people ‘may find that their experiences of the world and of other people do not align with the norm, and this is attributed to basic, underlying neurological differences’ (Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019, p. 23). This concept encourages the celebration of difference while promoting respect. The discourse about ‘neurodiversity’ suggests the need for ‘a framework that does not pathologise and focus disproportionately on what the person struggles with, and instead takes a more balanced view, to give equal attention to what the person can do’ (Baron-Cohen, 2017, p. 747).

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006) requires that all people are guaranteed their full human rights without distinction. This human rights-based approach protects all persons no matter how they view themselves or what terms they choose to describe who they are (Zeidan *et al.*, 2022). This perspective promotes a respect for autistic people who are allowed a choice in the terms they choose for themselves. As a result of this choice, there is a lack of consensus in the terminology (Botha, Hanlon and Williams, 2021). Persons on the spectrum are increasingly choosing their language of choice and should be asked what is their term of preference by others (Cullinane *et al.*, 2022). These changes in language are of note to principals of autism classes as they are an example of how important continual professional learning is in order to utilise the most up to date language in use.

2.4.4 Prevalence of Autism in Ireland

NCSE Research Report No. 21 conducted by Daly *et al.* (2016) included some 14,000 children on the autistic spectrum in Ireland. This contradicted prior statistics, which

suggested 1 in 65 children held a diagnosis of autism. This is significantly higher than current international studies, which estimate that 1 in 100 children have a diagnosis of autism (Zeidan *et al.*, 2022). A 2012 Health Services Executive (HSE) review of Assessments of Need (AON) conducted under the terms of the Disability Act (2005) showed that 20% (545) of children referred for an AON were identified as having autism. Further to this, the National Review of Autism Services estimates that among 16,000 persons with disabilities reviewed, the prevalence of ASD within this cohort could be estimated to be in the order of 1.1% (Department of Health, 2018, p. 17).

Given that 17% of primary school children in Ireland attend a single sex school (Ríordáin, 2022), gender differences are of note in terms of provision for autistic children. The National Review of Autism Services gave no indication of the gender divide for children diagnosed; the estimated ratio of autistic boys to girls diagnosed varies (Westwood *et al.*, 2016; Zeidan *et al.*, 2022), but there is a general agreement that there is a higher prevalence amongst boys. Loomes, Hull and Mandy (2017) report it as a 3:1 ratio, male to female. There is an emergent theory that symptomology in girls is different (Guldborg, 2019) or less obvious and hidden in plain sight (Cullinane *et al.*, 2022). Thus, many girls remain without a diagnosis (Dean, Harwood and Kasari, 2017). Others suggest that current assessment instruments, such as the DSM-5 are more presupposed to diagnosing males rather than females (Zeidan *et al.*, 2022). This is an important point to note for principals and teachers, as there may be girls enrolled in their schools who are undiagnosed but may require a certain level of support or accommodation. In education, as much integration as is appropriate and feasible with as little segregation as necessary should always be the primary aim, while remaining cognisant of gender and differences in diagnosis (Department of Education and Science, 1993).

Whilst this increase in the number of children being diagnosed with autism has been acknowledged (Boilson *et al.*, 2016), the contributory factors are not as easy to identify (Westwood *et al.*, 2016). Possible factors include greater international awareness of autism and its characteristics, which leads to earlier diagnosis and interventions (Zeidan *et al.*, 2022). The increase in autism diagnosis rates suggest that the Irish education system will need to develop and progress to meet the ever-increasing numbers of autistic children. Therefore, a growing number of primary principals will be presented with the opportunity to support these children through the provision of autism classes.

2.5 Special Educational Needs Provision in Schools

This section aims to explore the provision for special education in schools in Ireland and internationally, with a focus on the provision for autism. The culture of inclusive and special education will be examined in the Irish context and Ireland's response to international provision will be outlined. Relevant policies, literature and research reports will be outlined throughout this section, with the aim of providing an authentic insight into the current model of education provided for children with SEN and specifically, autism.

2.5.1 Inclusive and Special Education Policy in Ireland

Educational provision for children with additional needs 'reflects the duality in the system which has existed since 1950s' (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020, p. 993). Ireland's special education landscape has developed dramatically since the early 1990s. In 1993, the broad term of SEN was first discussed by the Special Education Review Committee (SERC). The SERC report was fundamental in the development of special education in Ireland. It defined students with special educational needs as:

...those whose disabilities and/or circumstances prevent or hinder them from benefiting adequately from the education which is normally provided for pupils of the same age, or for whom the education which is generally provided in the ordinary classroom is not sufficiently challenging (Special Education Review Committee (SERC) report, 1993, p. 18).

In summarising, the review committee stated its position on students with disabilities - there should be 'as much integration as is appropriate and feasible with as little segregation as is necessary' (*Special Education Review Committee (SERC) report, 1993, p. 22*). This committee recommended a continuum in the provision of education that would reflect the continuum of needs of pupils. The report spoke about mainstreaming with support, and part or full-time placement in a special class or special school as part of a wider menu of provision. The SERC report was a foundational document that had a major influence on policy and advancement in special education. Following the SERC report, the *Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities* was published in 1996. This report advocated for more co-ordination between the health and education services. Subsequently, in 1998, the Education Act equipped the nation with a definitive overview of SEN which enabled a more informed approach for provision (Government of Ireland, 1998). A number of supports were developed to assist all children access education. Under the terms of the Education Act 1998, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) was established as a statutory body. The NCCA advises the Minister for Education about curriculum-based matters for all students, including those with additional needs. A curriculum for children with general learning disabilities was developed in 2007 (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2007). In 2019, following a review of the primary curriculum, the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) was launched (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2019). Such has been the trajectory towards catering for all children in our education system that this new curriculum is inclusive of all

children who attend primary school including neurodiverse pupils. Under the terms of the Education Act 1998, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) was established, which became an independent statutory agency. Currently, NEPS provides psychology services for all students in schools and is an important support to children, teachers and principals. The rights of children with special educational needs to the same opportunities and right of access as all other children is enshrined in the Education Act 1998. The steps taken in the Education Act 1998 began to forge a path for the development of inclusive education as it is today in Ireland (Griffin, Care and McGaw, 2011).

Legal proceedings taken by parents of children with additional needs against the State forced further developments in special education. Some extremely influential Supreme Court cases greatly altered and shaped educational policy in Ireland, by testing boundaries and challenging pre-conceived notions and the educational status quo (Shevlin and Rose, 2008). Two such cases are the O'Donoghue Case in 1993 and the Sinnott Case in 2001 (Kenny, McCoy and Mihut, 2020). Prior to these cases, the state had argued that some children were *ineducable* within the meaning of Article 42 of the Irish Constitution (Dympna, 1999). Whyte (2015) documents how the legal cases supported formalisation of education for children and young people with severe intellectual disabilities. In fact, Ireland now exhibits a 'robust legislative context' as a result of these legal cases (Daly *et al.*, 2016, p. 25). This legislative context is underpinned by the various acts currently in place such as the Education Act (1998) and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 (Government of Ireland, 2004). The EPSEN Act (2004) dictated that every child must be provided with an education. It also went further, pointing towards a change in mind-set, moving away from segregated education, stating that children with special

educational needs should be educated in an inclusive environment with their typically developing peers (Kenny, McCoy and Mihut, 2020). Ireland ratified the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCPRD) in 2018 (United Nations, 2006). The underlying principle to UNCPRD is that persons with any category of disability must enjoy equality in all human rights and fundamental freedoms. This vision extends to autistic children, who have the same rights as their neurotypical peers. The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has stated that advancing the implementation of UNCPRD is a matter of priority for the Irish government (O'Gorman, 2021). This willingness by the State to work towards inclusive education for all is a positive step towards achieving it (Byrne, 2022). In 2022, the Education (Provision in Respect of Children with Special Educational Needs) Act 2022 was enacted. This Act ensures that schools cooperate with the NCSE in providing placements for children with special educational needs. In particular, it applies to the provision and operation of special classes by schools when requested to do so by the NCSE. This Act amends the Education Act 1998 and the EPSEN Act 2004.

The Special Education Review Committee (*Special Education Review Committee (SERC) report*, 1993), following the ratification by Ireland of the U.N. Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), initiated a rights-based approach to education for all children within the Irish education system. This initiated a legislative move towards inclusive education that occurred 'swiftly with little discussion' (Stephens and O'Moore, 2009, p. 4). These acts enabled a rights-based approach to provision (Kenny, McCoy and Mihut, 2020; Cullinane *et al.*, 2022). Although all legislation has been aimed at provision for children with SEN, there are variations in requirements between certain acts of legislation. The Education Welfare Act (2000) proposes a 'certain minimum education' (Government of Ireland 2000, p.5) and the

EPSEN Act (2004) promotes an ‘inclusive environment’ with children who do not have ‘such needs’ (2004, p. 5). The concepts of inclusion and integration will be explored forthwith.

2.5.2 Ireland’s Response to Inclusive Education Internationally

Fitzgerald and Radford (2020) argue that inclusive and special education are sometimes viewed as incompatible. Inclusive education in Ireland is conceptualised on a continuum (Tiernan, 2022). More recent debate suggests that special and inclusive education can co-exist to improve the outcomes for all learners (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020; Florian, 2019). Whilst there has been noteworthy progress in the area of special and inclusive education in Ireland, it is interesting to explore where Ireland is positioned when compared to other countries. The tensions surrounding the concept of inclusion appear to be an international concern. Byrne (2022) attempts to untangle the elasticity of what exactly inclusive education means. This study encompasses a large sample of over 70 countries, with differing legislation. An increasing number of pupils with SEN are being placed in segregated settings such as special classes and special schools both by parental choice and otherwise (Byrne, 2022). Warnock and Norwich (2010) recognise the logic in placing some children in separate environments to meet their needs, but stress this should not always be considered the ideal scenario.

In the United States, legislation demands that children with SEN are placed in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for their learning. LRE has been defined as educating pupils in the most typical environment possible, without impacting their progress (Kauffman, Burke and Anastasiou, 2023). Despite this legal requirement, similar to Ireland and the United Kingdom, there is still a sense of confusion in the educational community about what inclusion should involve. Eller *et al.* (2015) proffer that

everyone is different and some children need a separate learning environment to their peers in order to access the most appropriate education for them.

Similar to the situation in Ireland, the number of autistic children requiring school placement is on the increase in the U.S. In a study conducted by Litton *et al.* (2017), four professors of education and psychology reviewed the current practice in place and the level of preparation teachers receive at initial teacher education (ITE). They concluded that this rapidly increasing area of need warranted the introduction of a specific teacher education programme in the area of autism. However, this programme has faced challenges. It divided the SEN teachers and mainstream teachers, which encouraged bad practice as neither teaching cohort understood the pressures and routines of the others (Blanton, Pugach and Boveda, 2018). As a result, the U.S. has rectified this issue and devised a dual-service qualification aimed at producing highly efficient educators (Blanton, Pugach and Boveda, 2018). In contrast, in Ireland teachers engage in general pre-service teacher training. Their teacher qualification qualifies them to be a special education and mainstream teacher.

Historical research has highlighted that there was no specific SEN initial teacher education in Ireland, but advances became evident with the introduction of discrete SEN modules in all Bachelor of Education programmes in Ireland (Ware *et al.*, 2011). The move towards improving inclusive education in ITE can be seen in the research. In older research reports two years apart, the results remained identical, no specific pre-service education is referenced and teachers admit to feeling unprepared (Banks, 2016; McCoy *et al.*, 2014). More recent research shows that inclusive education is now part of ITE. A report by Hick (2019), commissioned by the NCSE, reviewed the components of inclusive education in Irish ITE. The investigation included all third level education institutions in Ireland that train primary and post-primary teachers. The study

discovered varying approaches to the provision of inclusive education. From site visits and interviews with staff and students, a comprehensive report was compiled, with a number of findings relevant to the current study. The provision of SEN modules has improved, however it is still limited, and similar to debates in the literature among institutions, different conceptualisations of what inclusive education entails are apparent (Hick, 2019). Ryan and Mathews (2022b) recommend that teachers be equipped with skills to work on all areas of the continuum of educational provision through their ITE.

2.6 The special class response

Current educational provision for primary school age autistic students consists of a continuum of provision. Provision includes dedicated special schools for autistic pupils as well as special classes for autistic students in special schools. Autistic students enrol in mainstream classes also. Staffing is allocated to special schools on the basis of the school's student profile. Staffing in autism classes have a pupil-teacher ratio of 6:1 and the support of two Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) per class (Department of Education, 2020b). The NCSE gives the following description of the provision of special classes:

'Special classes are part of a continuum of educational provision that enables students with more complex special educational needs to be educated, in smaller class groups, within their local mainstream schools. They offer a supportive learning environment to students who are unable to access the curriculum in a mainstream class, even with support, for most or all of their school day. Students enrolled in special classes should be included in mainstream classes to the greatest extent possible, in line with their abilities' (National Council for Special Education, 2016, p. 2).

Special classes operate within a mainstream primary school. Following a child's formal diagnosis of autism, a professional may make a recommendation that the child should

attend a special class in order to access the curriculum. The role of the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) is to support parents in finding a suitable placement for their child based on professional recommendation. The Department of Education states that ‘the effective operation of a special class centres largely on the leadership of the principal and school management team’ (Department of Education, 2020b, p. 12), while outlining some of the agencies and professionals whose efforts contribute to the effective operation of a special class (as seen in Figure 1, below).

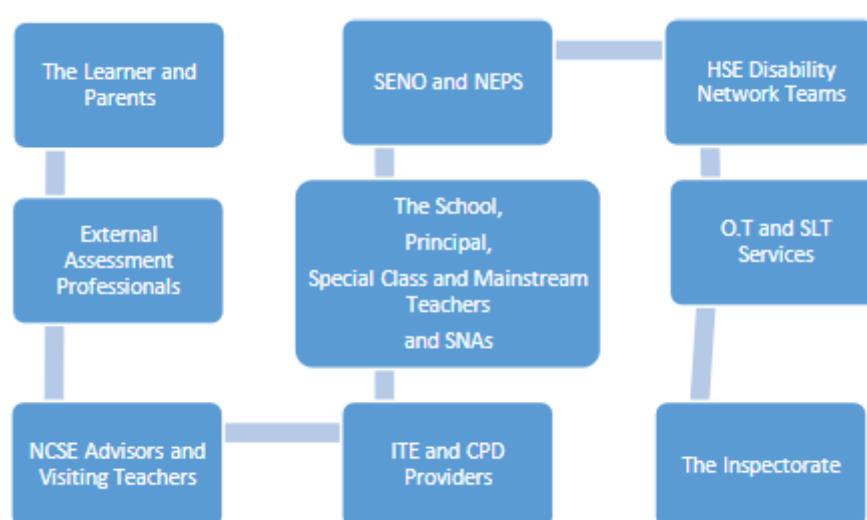


Figure 1: Stakeholders involved in decision making regarding special education (Department of Education, 2020b, p. 12)

The Department of Education (DE) in Ireland has developed a special class provision satellite model, co-located in mainstream primary schools specifically for pupils with autism (Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2019). McConkey *et al.* (2016) found that children with additional needs were veering more towards enrolment in mainstream schools with a decrease in special school enrolments. They also found a slight decrease in special class enrolment. Kenny, McCoy and Mihut (2020) counter this argument by stating some schools were operating unofficial special classes through pooling of available resources within the school. Fitzgerald and Radford (2020) outline how

changes in legislation have resulted in an increase in the number of special schools and special classes. The NCSE outlined the changes in a range of data from 2011 to 2019 as follows:

- *Increase provision for students with special educational needs*
- *Government expenditure on special education increased by 46%*
- *Special education as a percentage of the total education budget increased by 12.7%*
- *Additional teaching posts for special education increased by 46%*
- *Special Needs Assistant (SNA) posts allocated increased by 51%*
- *Provision of special classes increased by 196%*
- *Number of students enrolled in special classes increased by 155%*
- *Number of special schools has increased by 13%*
- *Number of students enrolled in special schools has increased by 15%.*
(National Council for Special Education, 2019, p. 2 & 3)

More recent data from the NCSE also supports this claim, given the increase in number of special classes nationwide. Over 200 new special classes are to open in September 2023, to respond to the demand for places (National Council for Special Education, 2023). Since 2011 the number of special classes in Ireland has increased by 386% (Department of Education, 2021). The DE, under a press release by Minister Madigan, purported that special classes are ‘part of the continuum of educational provision that enables students with more complex special educational needs to be educated, in smaller class groups, within their local mainstream schools’ (Department of Education, 2021). This is in line with the *Special Education Review Committee (SERC) report 1993* report and within the aspirations of the EPSEN Act (2004), as well as Ireland’s obligations under the UN Charters. (United Nations, 2006; United Nations, 1989). Kenny, McCoy and Mihut (2020) highlight issues around the inclusion of pupils in special classes in the school. They proffer that special classes give the illusion of inclusion but that this is only at a superficial level. National Council for Special Education (2011) outlined a more open approach to special classes and inclusion, but

Banks and McCoy (2017) question whether this is the case and ponder whether special classes are just in physical proximity to mainstream classes without a deeper connection. Ware (2009) found that almost half the population of the special classes spend their entire day in the special class which contradicts the DE's direction to have children integrated in their mainstream class as much as possible. Tensions arise with the current model of provision when consideration is given to the Irish Government's 2018 ratification of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006). The UN has outlined that its vision for inclusion does not include the duality that exists within Irish education at this current time. It envisions equality where children can access education with others in their local community (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020).

2.7 Impact of autism classes on professional learning

A recent guidance document for school 'stresses that the quality of teaching and learning is the most critical factor in determining positive outcomes for students with autism' (Cullinane *et al.*, 2022, p. 28; National Council for Special Education, 2015). Internationally, studies show that ITE is limited and insufficient in preparing teachers to teach in autism special classes (McConkey and Bhligri, 2003; Syriopoulou-Delli *et al.*, 2012). Sugrue (2002) argues that teachers have a varied range of competencies once they leave their ITE, suggesting that newly qualified teachers may struggle in supporting pupils in the autism class (Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2019). However, Hick (2019) suggest that ITE in Ireland has the foundation in place for developing teachers who are inclusive, with the potential to develop this even further.

As outlined previously, a teacher qualification obtained in Ireland allows a teacher to teach in any position in their school, including the autism classes. Once a teacher completes their ITE, they then enter the *Droichead* Programme which enables them to access full Teaching Council registration (National Induction Programme for Teachers, 2022-2023). ‘Droichead is an integrated induction framework which is based on a whole school approach in supporting newly qualified teachers’ professional learning’ (National Induction Programme for Teachers, 2022-2023). It involves a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) engaging in a school-based induction programme. This programme is supported by a Professional Support Team (PST) based in the school. A range of activities for and observation of the NQT are part of the process. In recognition of the different settings that a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) may be based, the programme has now been extended to include SEN settings, which includes the autism class. *Droichead* is an Irish word and translates to *bridge* in English. *Droichead* is seen as the bridge between a teacher’s ITE and *Cosán* which is a teacher’s long term professional learning journey, according to The Teaching Council (The Teaching Council, 2016).

It stands to reason that more experienced and skilled teachers are in a better position to support the work of the autism class (Stoiber, Gettinger and Goetz, 1998). A knowledge and understanding of autism is required to ‘make sense of learner’s behaviours and needs’ (Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2019, p. 235). This highlights a challenge for principals in ‘meeting the needs of the learners’ in the autism class (Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2019, p. 234). Short, autism-specific courses are available from NCSE and the Middleton Centre for Autism. A number of autism certificates and diplomas are offered by third level institutions. The Department of Education part-funds two programmes specific to teacher professional learning in the area of autism. These

programmes are the *Post-Graduate Certificate/Diploma Programme of Continuing Professional Development for Teachers working with Students with Special Educational Needs (Autism)* (Department of Education, 2023b) and the *Graduate Certificate in the Education of Pupils on the Autism Spectrum (AS)*, for teachers working with pupils on the AS in special schools, special classes or as special education teachers in mainstream primary and post-primary schools (Department of Education, 2023a). These courses afford teachers the opportunity to upskill in the area of autism in a ‘community of practice’ model (Wenger, 2011). Teachers are released on block release for lectures and return to their posts throughout the year, bringing new learning with them, sharing it with their academic colleagues. This shared learning experience develops the capacity of each member of the group. Schools benefit from the expertise the teacher gains. However, there are limited places on these courses and waiting lists apply for interested teachers. A condition for entry to many of these courses is that a teacher must be in a SET or special class position, which can have implications for class allocation.

2.8 The impact of Leadership in the inclusive space

The increase in the demand for inclusive education in Ireland has been outlined throughout this chapter. Inclusive practice and provision for autism has implications for schools (Banks, 2016; Shevlin and Flynn, 2011). One of the resulting challenges is the pressure placed on schools to develop systematic approaches to whole-school SEN provision and inclusion. Kenny, McCoy and Mihut (2020) outline that changes in SEN resourcing gives schools more autonomy in how they approach inclusion. They caution, however, that this new autonomy will be ‘enacted within a pre-existing culture of

schools' (Kenny, McCoy and Mihut, 2020, p. 11). The nature of schools and their diverse cultures results in no one single approach to lead special classes and makes it difficult for researchers to assess their impact (Banks and McCoy, 2017; Rose *et al.*, 2015). It is often the principals' perceptions that are used to measure the impact of school cultures (Cheng, 2017). This position highlights the importance of the disposition of the principal towards an inclusionary leadership style as a way of working (Hong, Ivy and Schulte, 2009). Kenny, McCoy and Mihut (2020) argue that the plethora of policy initiatives and reforms coupled with historical cultures has made it difficult for schools to move away from traditional ways of working. Strong and effective leadership is paramount when adopting innovation and change (Jeffers, 2010) and is needed in leaders who are trying to adopt a more inclusionary approach to their work.

3 Leadership & Inclusion

3.1 Introduction

In examining the literature, it is clear that in the search for the ideal inclusionary leadership style or competency that a definition has not been agreed upon. The relationship between student outcomes or attainment is clearly linked to leadership (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2008; Lambrecht *et al.*, 2022; Duncan and Stock, 2010) what is less clear is how to define and capture the most appropriate leadership to affect positive outcomes.

This research examines the principal when leading autism classes and trying to affect positive change (Lüddeckens, Anderson and Östlund, 2022). In order to research the area of inclusive leadership, this literature review seeks to examine more deeply the leadership skills and practices within the realm of inclusion in current literature. It firstly explores the language around principals and then goes on to seek out any consensus around best practice for inclusive leadership and inclusive schools.

3.2 Leadership for Inclusion in an Irish Context

Murphy (2019) contends that more research is needed in the area of inclusive leadership in Ireland in order to support its increasing diversity and to sustain leadership in the long term. A number of leadership and inclusion papers in the Irish context are discussed forthwith. What is clear is the importance that principals play in the enactment of inclusive pedagogy in Irish schools (Brennan, King and Travers, 2019).

Ireland's approach to special educational needs in the past was a parallel system where general education and special education developed simultaneously but in parallel to one another (Kenny, McCoy and Mihut, 2020; Shevlin and Banks, 2021). It is reported that

teachers themselves take on the role of Special Educational Need Co-Ordinator (SENCO) at second level (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020). The Irish National Teachers Organisation (Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 2023) recommends that all primary schools should have a post of responsibility for SEN, to reduce teacher and principal workload, however this is often not possible, due to varying school size and the number of members on the in-school management (ISM) team. Fitzgerald and Radford (2020) argue that a top-down approach, or leaders working in an isolated capacity, is not an ideal environment for inclusion. In their study they found Irish principals 'demonstrated a clear commitment to inclusive education, prioritised it in their schools, and ultimately elevated the status attributed to SEN' (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020, p. 1002). Banks (2021) looks at the change of funding model, a direct response to the increased cost of special education. Her report highlights the pivotal role that principals play in ensuring resources are used wisely to support all students. Teachers appreciate the support they receive from school leadership when trying to collaborate to develop their own inclusive leadership practices (Brennan, King and Travers, 2019).

Shevlin and Banks (2021) have reviewed the current model of special education provision. They suggest that a different model may be in place in the future. Given the pivotal role that principals have in special and inclusive education, it stands to reason that they will play a central role in supporting any changes to the current system in Ireland. This highlights the importance of Irish principals in developing a framework for inclusive leadership that can adapt to any changes necessary to ensure pupils are supported in the best way possible.

In order to develop a pathway for principal development in the area of inclusive leadership, we must first consider where inclusive leadership presently stands, starting with the language around the concept.

3.3 Language of Inclusive Leadership

One of the anomalies that arises from the literature is the phraseology of inclusive leadership versus leading for inclusion. While the interchange of the wording appears simplistic and unremarkable, the phrases denote different ideals. Are principals leading in an inclusive manner or is their leadership leading to inclusion? It could be argued that the end result is the same, however the process differs. This differential can be seen in the skills the principal utilises in their leadership. The language to define the skills a leader utilises to carry out their duties varies within published literature. Cobb (2015) entitles his study ‘Principals play many parts’ (Cobb, 2015, p. 231), likening the principal’s work to a Shakespearean actor who performs for a given audience. The skills needed by principals and leaders can be framed within ‘domains’ (Cobb, 2015; Inspectorate, 2022). This term is indicative of ownership or a territorial expression. This terminology suggests that leadership is an absolute. This notion of singularity negates the notion of shared leadership as central to the running of any school (Inspectorate, 2022). Óskarsdóttir *et al.* (2020) use the term ‘models of leadership’ in reference to inclusive leadership (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020, p. 527). This terminology denotes the idea of modelling a standard for leadership that can be imitated by others. ‘Competencies’ is another term visible within the literature that is used to describe the skills a leader uses to carry out their leadership. Competencies can be defined as the abilities to do something effectively or well (Drisko, 2014). While the term is certainly apt for what we hope leaders strive for, what is less clear is how inclusion is done well or effectively. Inclusive schools are described as needing ‘input variables’ and

‘essential processes’ to operate (Kinsella, 2020, p. 1351). When looking towards inclusive leadership we need to explore competencies and leadership styles that best promote this type of leadership.

3.4 Roles that principals play when leading for inclusion

When identifying the role of the leader within the research we must first look to what is specifically required of a leader to undertake within the area of inclusion. Fitzgerald (2017) discusses the role of the principal within the framework of the *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs Guidelines* (Department of Education and Science, 2007). Long (2018) discusses leadership as a key factor in the provision of an inclusive education. Much of the literature speaks to leadership as being central to inclusive education (Fitzgerald, 2017). Cobb (2015, p.221) states that the work which principals do in relation to special education is “crucial”. Within the literature, the roles and responsibilities that the principal must undertake are vast and it can be difficult to countenance a specific list. Five roles that emerged from the meta-analysis of inclusive leadership literature for inclusive programme delivery within these domains are: visionary, advocate, innovator, interpreter and organiser (Cobb, 2015, p. 221). Fitzgerald (2017) outlines key positions that a leader must assume within the school: “arbiter, rescue[r], auditor, collaborator and expert” (Fitzgerald, 2017, p. 454). Cobb (2015) suggests that within the area of staff collaboration, the principal must take on the roles of ‘visionary, partner, coach, conflict resolver and organiser.’ (Cobb, 2015, p. 223). Under the domain of parental engagement, Cobb (2015) identified three principal roles: partner, interpreter and organiser (Cobb, 2015, p. 227). Kinsella (2020) contends that there are five core processes of inclusion: communication, consultation, collaboration, co-ordination and collaborative enquiry. Given the wide-ranging tasks associated with leading for inclusion and in an effort to identify the most common roles

within the research, the results are tabulated in the below table from a number of recent research studies.

	Inclusive programme delivery. Cobb (2015)	Staff Collaboration. Cobb (2015)	Parental Engagement. Cobb (2015)	Senco role in post-primary schools in Ireland. Fitzgerald (2017)	Organising Inclusive schools. Kinsella (2020)	SENCO & Principal's Experiences. Fitzgerald and Radford (2020)
Visionary	✓	✓		✓		
Partner/ Collaborator/ mentor		✓		✓	✓	✓
Coach		✓				✓
Conflict resolver/ Arbiter		✓	✓	✓		
Advocate	✓					
Interpreter	✓		✓			
Organiser/ coordinator	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Consulter					✓	
Communicator					✓	
Rescuer				✓		
Expert				✓		✓

Table 1: Roles that principals play as identified in research

The most common role identified across a variety of literature was principal as organiser/ co-ordinator. Kinsella (2020) contends that the organisational psychology paradigm is key to organising inclusive schools. Within this paradigm the principal can be identified as the organiser of the programme used for inclusive delivery. They organise how the school develops special education delivery within their context. The principal organises the resources, timetabling and programmes of staff professional development. They organise and carry out staff recruitment and foster staff teamwork through reflection and collaboration (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020). They assist parents by organising supports and responding to the needs of the given cohort of children at any one time (Cobb 2015). Fitzgerald (2017) agree that principals are responsible for organising staff development and improvements in pedagogy. The identification of the organiser as a key role of the principal in inclusive education must be considered when developing a framework for inclusive leadership within the sector.

Another role that appears commonly across the literature is that of principal as partner/ collaborator/ mentor. This describes the principal as an intermediary for parents and the services or government departments, to decipher and understand how to access the services that their child may need. Having examined the most common roles for inclusive leadership, it is necessary to review what current models of inclusive leadership exist in current practice.

3.5 Defining a model of inclusive school leadership

Models of leadership are used to describe leadership practices rather than specific roles. They attempt to conceptualise or define leadership through particular characteristics or their utilisation within leadership. The style of practice denotes how principals carry out their everyday leadership role within the school. Much discussion regarding

leadership styles and which style is most effective for school leadership is evident in the literature. For the purposes of this research, there is a focus on effective leadership models for inclusion. Three key leadership styles are purported to be the most appropriate for the inclusive school. These models are transformational leadership, distributed leadership and instructional leadership (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020). These styles will be discussed below, to further investigate their place within inclusive leadership.

3.5.1 Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership as a style is discussed frequently within the research when leadership for inclusion is considered (Blandford, 2013; Lambrecht *et al.*, 2022; Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020). This type of leadership is traditionally associated with the ability to affect change and innovation by impacting on people and cultures within schools (Navickaitė, 2013; The Teaching Council, 2011). This type of leadership may be important for a school leader who is trying to influence a change of culture within a school, such as developing an inclusive culture. Woodcock and Hardy (2017) describe inclusion as a ‘re-culturing’ process which looks to change the values of the school. This cultural change affects how teachers see their work and their pupils (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010). While it may have a positive cultural impact, the literature shows that it may not necessarily translate to impacting directly the work of teachers, e.g., when using an Individualised Education Plan (IEP) with pupils (Lambrecht *et al.*, 2022). A leader must firstly identify their own vision and apply this to a vision for the school and its community. This is akin to the idea that leadership is a practice in influencing others to follow the path to a shared goal (Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2002). A leader must also be cognisant of their own limitations as well as those of the school and work within these limits. Changing a school culture can be a slow process that may take many

years. A principal must develop a vision, taking into account their school setting, for example rural, urban, DEIS. A principal who wants to change and develop a school culture needs a strong background in professional development and experience in order to justify methods and approaches that many may not believe in. It is this bravery that will make the difference to pupils and transform a school over time to best serve its pupils (Situmorang and Situmeang, 2022).

3.5.2 Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership has been considered the ‘gold standard’ of school leadership and has grown in popularity in recent years (Hickey, Flaherty and Mannix McNamara, 2022). While there is a lack of consensus as to a definition of distributed leadership (Hickey, Flaherty and Mannix McNamara, 2023), it is understood that in this instance it is the idea of sharing of the workload and responsibilities (Harris and Spillane, 2008). It is claimed in research that distributed leadership is the ‘default leadership response implemented by schools to manage increased pressure’ such as the COVID 19 crisis (Hickey, Flaherty and Mannix McNamara, 2023, p. 388) Spillane (2005) cautions that distributed leadership is more than the sum of its characteristics, but rather it is the result of the interactions between people and their situations. Jones and Harris (2014) further this point by connecting the development of social capital and distributed leadership. This leadership style is based on the belief that every member of the school is a leader in their own right (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020). This can have a positive impact on student achievement and teacher job satisfaction (García Torres, 2019). It concentrates on expertise and not position, reflecting schools as professional organisations where the knowledge base is wide (Bush and Ng, 2019). The shared responsibility within a school increases the prospect of *buy in* from staff and may increase the likelihood that an inclusive culture will be formed within a school.

Distributed leadership can be misjudged as ‘divvying out the work’ and the leader may be perceived by staff as lazy, incompetent or not carrying out their role to the full extent. Hickey, Flaherty and Mannix McNamara (2023) found that there is ambiguity around the understanding of the sharing of leadership amongst staff. It can be argued that distributed leadership, when implemented correctly, can allow for a greater number of staff to develop leadership skills and enhance their own professional capacities as well as that of the school (García Torres, 2019). The lack of empirical evidence of the impact and effectiveness on educational outcomes from distributed leadership is considered a weakness with the model (Spillane, 2005). However, if this model is employed by the principal it allows for leadership development in staff (García Torres, 2019). They become leaders in their own professional journey and a culture of collaborative professional learning and development can ensue (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020; Bush and Ng, 2019).

3.5.3 Instructional Leadership

This model of school leadership emphasises the importance of curriculum through goal setting and evaluation of teaching and learning (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020; Munna, 2023). Much of the research shows that the most effective way to improve learner experience is to improve teachers’ pedagogy (Hariyati *et al.*, 2023). Instructional leaders do this by putting the structures in place to allow teachers to improve their practice through collaboration and innovation (Kools *et al.*, 2020; The Teaching Council, 2011). A major challenge for this type of leader is how to identify with teachers and their needs, as most principals leading schools with special classes no longer have teaching duties as part of their remit. Many principals wish to be instructional leaders but are overwhelmed by administrative responsibilities (Irish Primary Principal Network, 2022). There is a danger that they may be viewed by

teachers as imposing ideas unless teachers are a key part of the process. A collaborative approach and the leader's role in facilitating it are seen as key attributes of the instructional leader (Lambrecht *et al.*, 2022). Positive collaboration can lead to improvements in teaching, such as the use of the IEP with pupils, with direct impacts on learner experience (Lambrecht *et al.*, 2022). As an instructional leader, the principal needs a strong background in pedagogy themselves in order to have a thorough understanding of curriculum. They have high expectations for all students including those with additional needs (Mbua, 2023). The instructional leadership principal has a thorough knowledge of the professional development offered by Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)¹ or National Council for Special Education and can direct staff as necessary to appropriate training. This pedagogical viewpoint improves teaching capacity in teachers which has a direct impact on student attainment (Lambrecht *et al.*, 2022).

3.6 Combining models of leadership

While leaders themselves would state that they may have a dominant leadership style, this style may vary depending on the situation (Vroom and Jago, 2007). Variance in the employment of different leadership styles can be seen in previous literature. While various styles were identified, no particular style was highlighted as being more inclusive than any other. What is more commonly evident is the idea of combining styles of leadership in order to better implement inclusive education (Lambrecht *et al.*, 2022). Óskarsdóttir *et al.* (2020) considered an inclusive leadership style which combines the three styles and highlights how these styles co-exist with three necessary practices for leadership: building a vision, human development and organisational

¹ From September 2023 a new professional service OIDE will encompass PDST, NIPT, JCT & CSL.

development. The idea of organisational development as a key practice reflects previous literature that identified it as a key role and responsibility of the principal for inclusive leadership. Setting direction speaks to the idea of culture and developing the inclusive culture of a school for its community. Human development speaks to developing the human resource capital within the school through professional development and organisational systems. It is clear to see from this vision of inclusive leadership that a variety of skills is required to carry out the myriad of tasks involved.

3.7 Coaching and Mentoring in Leadership and Learning

Coaching and mentoring has been seen to have an enormous positive benefit in education for students, teachers and leaders (van Nieuwerburgh, 2018). Stokes, Fatien Diochon and Otter (2021) outline a theoretical framework for coaching and mentoring. They suggest that coaching and mentoring takes place in a learning or socio-cultural context. While both coaching and mentoring have similar characteristics (DiGirolamo and Tkach, 2019) it is important to remember the distinction between both (Stokes, Fatien Diochon and Otter, 2021). Coaching is a way of supporting specific performance development through the individuals' self-discovery (Whitmore, 2017) whereas mentoring is more associated with a development enabled by an expert (Clutterbuck, 2008). Coaching and mentoring can be described as the 'how to' (MacLennan, 2017, p. 3). Stokes, Fatien Diochon and Otter (2021) argue that although there are differences between coaching and mentoring it is impossible to separate them. They suggest that trying to separate them is futile as 'as practitioners will inevitably borrow from both discourses when identifying practical behaviours that work best for them' (Stokes, Fatien Diochon and Otter, 2021, p. 151). It is argued that if coaching and mentoring are carried out with skill that it can 'inspire people to want to' carry out their work rather

than be ‘directed to’ which can have ‘inferior results’ (MacLennan, 2017, p. 3). Mentoring is an identified way to provide teacher professional learning (Cullinane *et al.*, 2022). It can attract teachers to roles and has the capacity to retain good teachers in the profession as well as challenging more experienced teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Both mentor and mentee can benefit from the relationship in terms of increased satisfaction and knowledge (Talley and Henry, 2008). It can support the wellbeing of both teachers and students (Kutsyuruba and Godden, 2019).

3.8 Conclusion

From the literature it is clear to see that principals have a variety of roles and responsibilities when it comes to leading for inclusion. A key skill or practice a principal needs to demonstrate is organisation within the school of human capital, resources and the structures necessary to carry out the task. They were also identified as a partner or collaborator within the school. This partnership between principal and child, or parent and teacher, ensures that all are supported by the principal within the school. The principal as conflict resolver/ arbiter and visionary also appeared frequently within the literature. It is clear from the literature that a number of conflicts can arise when looking to inclusion in education. These conflicts are often mediated by the principal. The principal as a visionary develops the vision of inclusion for the school and develops the framework to promote this vision. In order to lead for inclusion, it is recommended by previous researchers that the principal uses a combination of styles including but not limited to transformational, distributed and instructional leadership.

4 COVID 19

On 12th March 2020 what was previously unconceivable happened (Colum and Collins, 2021). The Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced that in order to contain the spread of COVID-19, all schools would close down with effect from 6 p.m. that day until 29th March 2020. On 24th March, the Taoiseach confirmed that all schools would remain closed to students until 19th April. Clarification was issued on Sunday 29th March that school buildings could not be accessed by any staff from Monday evening 30th March until 12th April, with the exception of schools facilitating provision of school meals to disadvantaged pupils. The school closure occurred very suddenly, giving school communities very limited time to prepare. What followed from March 2020 to December 2021 was a spell of intermittent closures (Mohan *et al.*, 2021; Mallon and Martinez-Sainz, 2021), a real and present threat to life within the turmoil of the unknown. Education was highly impacted by the COVID 19 crisis (Hall *et al.*, 2021b). COVID 19 created the conditions for a 'natural educational experiment' (Kilcoyne, 2021, p. 247). From the research, there was a clear negative impact for students as a result of school closures during the crisis internationally (Hammerstein *et al.*, 2021; Donohue and Miller, 2020) and in Ireland (Crushell, Murphy and de Lacy, 2020). Some research suggests pupils disengaged with their learning during the COVID 19 pandemic (Thorn and Vincent-Lancrin, 2022). The most common type of instruction made available to children during closures was remote or online teaching (Thorn and Vincent-Lancrin, 2022; Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). Following initial fears and a growing body of evidence that suggested transmission of COVID 19 in schools could be controlled, on-site schooling became a priority for children's health and wellbeing (White *et al.*, 2021). The wellbeing of school communities was impacted by the pandemic (O'Toole

and Simovska, 2022). Teacher burnout and stress has increased as a result of COVID 19 and the move to online teaching and learning (Minihan *et al.*, 2022). There were challenges for parents when learning shifted online and in the home (Bates, Finlay and O'Connor Bones, 2021). School principals felt highly stressed during the COVID 19 crisis (Leksy *et al.*, 2023).

COVID 19 had an impact on autistic children and their families (Kreysa *et al.*, 2022). Teachers of autistic students were challenged during the pandemic to meet the needs of their pupils remotely (Hurwitz, Garman-McClaine and Carlock, 2022). Parents of autistic children reported feeling stressed and anxious during this time (Kreysa *et al.*, 2022). Parents found some positives during this time, such as increased family and leisure time (Kreysa *et al.*, 2022) and positive interactions with their children (Bozkus-Genc and Sani-Bozkurt, 2022). However, parents did report some children's difficulties with engaging with online learning (Bozkus-Genc and Sani-Bozkurt, 2022).

5 Situated Learning, Legitimate Peripheral Participation and Learner Identity

5.1 Sociocultural Theory

Learning as embedded in social interactions is referenced frequently in research (De Felice *et al.*, 2023; Kasperski and Blau, 2023). Sociocultural theory builds on this conception of learning, arguing that learning is an entirely social phenomenon. Sociocultural theory encapsulates a number of ideas such as mind as mediated (Vygotsky, 1934), communities of practice (Wenger, 2011), legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

The traditional idea of learning as acquisition of knowledge can imply that there is an endpoint (Allie *et al.*, 2013). Participatory learning is an ongoing process whereby learners become members of a community and develop a particular identity within that community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The goal of learning changes. The goal becomes the ability to act or be part of the community. As this learning is an ongoing process it is not possible to view the learning without considering the educational context in which the learning takes place. Such consideration could include the educational context, the backgrounds of the learners, the communities that currently exist, their history and the community in which the learners will need to function (Allie *et al.*, 2013). The community in the context of this study is the mainstream school to which the learners belong. The term learners in this case is not just confined to the pupils but the other learners in the school including teachers, SNAs, parents, ancillary staff and the principal. All of these learners are learning on an ongoing basis to function within the community of the school. Learning as an activity that occurs in a particular situation is

the central tenant of Legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) Legitimate peripheral participation is investigated within this study, to identify if there is meaningful participation of the learners in the context of the autism classes within the mainstream school.

5.2 Schools as learning organisations

Organisations can be defined as ‘collections of people joined together in some formal association in order to achieve group or individual objectives’ (Dawson, 1996, p. 43). A primary school can be considered a learning organisation (Kools *et al.*, 2020; Kools and Stoll, 2016) where a number of different individuals such as the principal, teachers, SNAs and ancillary staff work together on a formal basis in order to provide an education for the children who are enrolled. The school is a workplace which is ever-evolving, given that it is people-centred. Not only are the children learning but everyone involved in and with the school is also learning. It is a learning organisation where ‘people continually expand.... where new expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured...where people are continually learning to see the whole together’ (Senge, 1990, p. 3). In the context of this research, the focus is on the school principal and their position within the learning organisation, concentrating on the autism classes which are only a part of the greater ecosystem that is a primary school.

5.3 Situated Learning

The concept of situated learning originated from the Vygotskian psychology of active learning and personal transformation (Penuel and Wertsch, 1995). It takes inspiration from the idea of the zone of proximal development. Lave and Wenger (1991) describe this process as situated learning. Learning is situated in a context and the meaning derives and develops in a community of participants. Lave and Wenger (1991) do not

directly refer to schools but rather they discuss apprenticeship as a type of learning or coaching that can occur within an organisation. Using legitimate peripheral participation, the roles of master and apprentice are more fluid in the context of autism classes. Principals, staff and pupils are on a spectrum of skill and knowledge level in this model of a learning community. This model can support the staff to support the children with additional needs (Raftery and Brennan, 2021). The staff can move between being apprentices and masters (Lave, 2010) in relation to their role in the autism classes. The caveat in this situation is that mastery can never truly be achieved, given that learning about autism is continuous and complex. In situated learning, the masters are looking towards the apprentices and hoping to broaden the field of current knowledge. Situated learning can be useful in understanding the contextualised nature of learning about special classes and the complex learning relationship between principals and special class teachers. The master-apprentice relationship is important in order to perpetuate a culture of developing knowledge and skills within a field. This relationship also denotes a hope of learning from past stories or experiences and building on them for better outcomes. Stories are a useful learning tool for ‘interpreting the past’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 84) and using these to learn for the future. Probing into the master apprentice relationship to explore how people are participants within their own learning is key to discovering how the process impacts on participation. Situated learning is complex, messy and sometimes non-hierarchical. It includes learning in the situation with others, sometimes leading and at other times being led. However, in the case of the special class it is the teacher, who may have more exposure to specific autism training (Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2019) that may be considered the master and the principal the apprentice, but both participate

simultaneously in the learning. How this participation happens and what is the locus for learning can have an influence on the learning itself (Handley *et al.*, 2006).

Apprenticeship in its historical form is a more traditional mode of learning. It can be a very positive and successful approach, as demonstrated by a number of case studies of different workplaces (Lave and Wenger, 1991). However, it can be an exploitative relationship, given that there is a hierarchical structure traditionally assumed within the process where the learning takes place. In this study of principals, the hierarchical structure of the school is more complex than a linear master-apprentice relationship (Fuller *et al.*, 2005). Traditionally the principal would be viewed as the person holding the most power in the school, with the teacher in a less powerful position. A situated learning approach assists us in interrogating hierarchical practices in leadership. The relationship in this instance places the (perceived) most powerful person in the position of the apprentice while the special class teacher is in the powerful position as the master (Handley *et al.*, 2006).

5.4 Legitimate peripheral participation

Legitimate peripheral participation was developed from a number of studies by Lave and Wenger (1991). This is a form of cognitive learning and is a key component in this process as it illustrates how people learn in their work (Fuller *et al.*, 2005). The term peripheral refers to the position of the learner in the task or knowledge to be gained and how it evolves. A structured approach to developing mastery may be taken. The apprentice may begin at a position on the outside, or edge, observing the task then slowly be drawn in, then given more responsibility, more trust as needed until such time that they achieve mastery and are no longer peripherals (Handley *et al.*, 2006). In the case of autism classes, the principal is on the periphery in a physical sense. They are

not directly involved in teaching or working with the children, other than the occasional class cover they provide. The administrative principal will never have teaching responsibilities for the class. However, what can happen is the principal can become more a part of the process through their inclusionary leadership. This definition of peripheral is not a detached placement but rather a measured or purposeful distance which is used as a positive tool within the learning process.

Legitimate peripheral participation is a type of active learning that enables a personal transformation (Dewing, 2010) through social interactions between people and the wider world. It denotes that learning is something we do (an action) by learning something in the real world. To learn, the learner has to be active. They are not merely absorbing, but rather the learner is doing and they utilise available resources to achieve a task (Thompson, 2010). Situated learning has a social dimension in the real world; it is a social process which has to be legitimate, peripheral and has to include participation. Learning is happening for a goal or purpose. It has a broader purpose (Penuel and Wertsch, 1995). As learning is happening, the community is reproducing itself but also changing as the learners change. In the process of learning and participating there is learning and changing as well as conflicts. The learner is changing themselves within the learning (Handley *et al.*, 2006). They are becoming part of something more than just observing. Being part of social relations is core to the learning.

5.4.1 Learning as acquiring an identity

Learning is all about acquiring an identity. The notion of identity is central (Allie *et al.*, 2013) when investigating learners in their community. Language is a very powerful tool in the world of autism (Sterponi, de Kirby and Shankey, 2015). The discourse of the

language used within the community of learners in the autism classes is very important. Learning is not just about developing one's knowledge and practice. It involves the participants developing an understanding of who they are and in which communities of practice they belong (Handley *et al.*, 2006). Thus, learners can present themselves in different ways and be members of multiple communities. The language used by learners helps to shape who they are and how they are viewed by others. 'The notion of identity is thus central, for being in a discourse community implies taking on an identity as a member of that community' (Allie *et al.*, 2013, p. 8). Allie *et al.* (2013) proffer that 'the classroom community is clearly an important resource in providing a safe space where students can start to experiment with new identities' (Allie *et al.*, 2013, p. p). It can be argued that the autism class community is a safe space for all learners, pupils and adults alike, to experiment and develop their new identities. They have an opportunity to re-examine who they are in education within the learning community (Lieberman, 2009) and challenge traditional ideas of their roles. In order to develop a new identity within the autism class community, previous identities must also be considered. What are the backgrounds of each of the participants within the community? They each bring preconceived learnings from other areas of their lives to the community. While everyone is a member of the community there may be different aspirational outcomes for each. For learners to be successful they need to authentically participate in the community.

5.5 Development of a Theoretical Framework to underpin the study

This study examines leadership practices of principals with an emphasis on the implications this inclusive leadership may have on their experience and their practice. In developing a theoretical basis for the study, a framework emerged from a review of

relevant literature in the area. Two major pillars which support the research were identified and are put forward as underpinning the study. Sociocultural theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 230; Hodgkinson, Biesta and James, 2008) is one of these pillars. Within sociocultural theory, communities of practice (Wenger, 2011) is an appropriate theory for this study, given the shared learning nature within the context of leadership of autism classes. Situated learning theory (Korthagen, 2010) reflects the learning opportunities afforded to the leaders at their place of work. The second pillar of the framework is current theories of leadership, particularly those based around distributed leadership as a wider structure or spectrum rather than a specific practice in itself (Spillane, 2005; Spillane and Diamond, 2007; Spillane and Camburn, 2006) and how inclusive leadership is visible along this spectrum (Hargreaves, 2004; Kuknor and Bhattacharya, 2020; Cameron, 2016). Hartley (2009) combines both of these pillars in his research. This combination of theories of leadership and sociocultural theory encompasses the overall theoretical framework utilised in this study. Therefore, the theoretical framework that underpins this study is theories of leadership through a sociocultural theoretical lens. This framework reflects the situated, participatory and reflexive nature of the work of principals in schools (see figure 2, below).

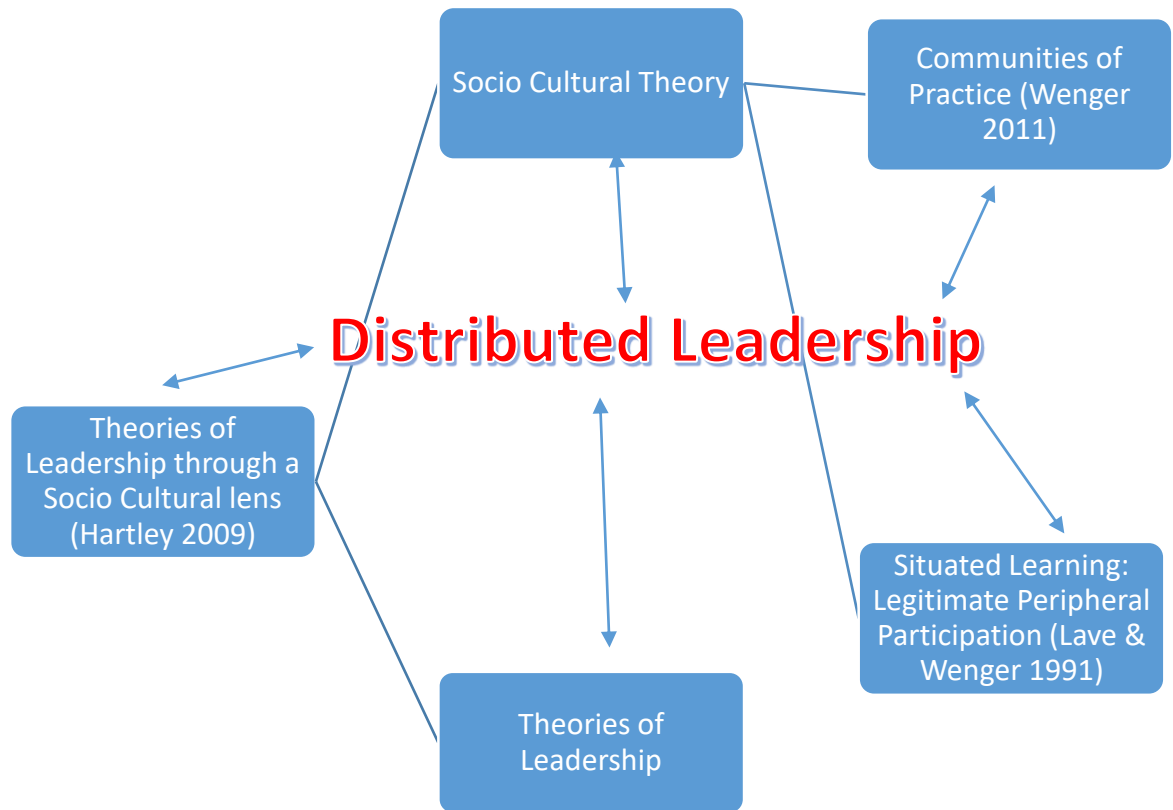


Figure 2: Theories of leadership through a sociocultural theoretical lens

5.6 Conclusion

Lave and Wenger (1991) maintain that the three aspects: situated learning, legitimate peripheral participation and communities of practice must be employed together in order to achieve successful learning. Every practice produces and depends on relations of people within it. Relationships between people around a task is called a community. People doing and talking to each other is how a community reproduces itself.

Legitimate participation is where the learner does not just learn, rather the learner becomes a social member of this network of relationships. Power and inequality are built into any community of practice. 'Engagement in communities of practice provides opportunities for teachers to collaborate with others and share good practice in their own school and beyond' (Cullinane *et al.*, 2022, p. 211). Learning to do something well is part of who the learner becomes. Participation involves development of the participant through active learning rather than learning as something the learner acquires. The learner will never become a master without full participation. The learner must have a deep personal investment in order to learn. The learner is entwined in what is happening to become knowledgeable. There is something at stake for the learner and community. Learning in this way has a social dimension. It is continuous. If the learner does not have access to the practice the learner will not learn. In order for the learner to learn they must have a knowledge gap that they wish to fill with new knowledge. Full unbridled involvement is important in communities of practice. The skill and competence of the master combined with the conditions of the environment are the ingredients for a good learning opportunity. The opportunities and resources that exist to allow the person to learn are central to what can be learned. The way in which participation is structured is an important consideration. Simple tasks need to be given to the novice to work through, followed by more complex tasks. The learner does not only learn from the master; the learner learns from everybody in the community. Learning happens transversally. The master learns from the apprentice. The apprentice learns from the master. The relationship changes as the learning occurs. Everyone is moving continuously and relationships are in constant negotiation. Distributed leadership can occur because of the situated learning aspect of the legitimate peripheral participation (Fiesler *et al.*, 2017) in the community of practice, where the principal

may lead but equally can be led in this context giving rise to agency for all individuals in the community (Woo, 2015). There is also the possibility that tensions can emerge through negotiation and participation, for example the principal versus other staff, but this is most probably inherent to any social activity. However, committing to the community of practice for the benefit of the children allows all members of the school community to access the community equally.

6 Research Methodology

6.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology utilised in the study. The rationale for this study is to give voice to the views of primary principals regarding their leadership of schools with autism classes (Thomson and Walker, 2010). The research questions are reflective of the aims of the study. A framework of the philosophical foundation is explored and described, and the theoretical perspective of ontology and epistemology are outlined. A further focus on the constructivist paradigm, phenomenology and interpretive genre are explored within the confines of the study. The sampling and selection of the principal participant cohort is explained through the recruitment process. The use of interview as a method of data collection is outlined and justified.

6.2 Research Questions

The aims and objectives of the research were carefully deliberated upon when considering the research questions which would inform the research. Research questions were developed to ‘indicate what the research is about and what it must address’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p. 165). Ultimately any doctoral study aims to contribute to new knowledge in the field (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Thomson and Walker, 2010). This study seeks to contribute to the bank of knowledge that exists in the areas of leadership, autism and inclusion within the context of the Irish primary school principal role. The three areas were carefully considered during the process of devising the questions, by reviewing the body of literature that currently exists. It was found that there were gaps in the knowledge base, as suggested by Cobb (2015) and Banks and McCoy (2017). The answerability of the questions was examined with the design process in mind (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). The

questions needed to allow for the examination of the phenomenon of leading autism classes in primary schools (Thomson and Walker, 2010). As practising primary school principals were the focus of the study, the questions needed to be ‘do-able’ for them (Thomson and Walker, 2010, p. 177).

Following advice from the field, three questions were formulated to frame the research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p. 172).

This study asks the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of current primary principals of leading schools with autism classes in the context of their professional life history and present lived experience?
2. What advice would current primary principals give to other principals who are leading or are about to lead schools with autism classes?
3. What is the principal’s own reflection and understanding of the meaning of their experience of leading schools with autism classes?

6.3 Qualitative research

This study is concerned with the human experience of the primary school principal in a humanistic, interpretive approach (Jackson, Drummond and Camara, 2007). Therefore, this research is qualitative in nature as it seeks to develop an understanding of how the principal experiences being a principal (Taylor *et al.*, 2007) when leading autism classes. A number of researchers have attempted to develop a definition of qualitative research (Gibbs, 2018; Jackson, Drummond and Camara, 2007), which centres around the idea of studying the human experience. Aspers and Corte (2019) argue that it is too difficult to define what qualitative research is. Instead, they argue

that there are nodes and ideas to what constitutes qualitative research. They put forward the idea that qualitative research is an iteration of how the researcher gets close to the knowledge and develops this knowledge to improve the scholarly knowledge of the subject area. This study seeks to develop knowledge in the area of leadership of autism classes. This knowledge development will enhance practices of principals and in turn enhance the experiences of pupils. The transferability of the knowledge created in this study to the wider principal population in Ireland and internationally is a key characteristic of qualitative research (Jackson, Drummond and Camara, 2007). Answering the research questions developed is attempted through a narrative style of data collection and subsequent interpretation through analysis. This use of narrative data lends itself to the idea of qualitative research rather than the more traditional view of quantitative research as research which uses numerical data to develop new knowledge (Hyde, 2000). Deductive reasoning is an approach which claims to find solutions for a problem with little generality (Clark, 1969; Cramer-Petersen, Christensen and Ahmed-Kristensen, 2019). Hyde (2000) speaks about using deductive pattern making from data using deductive reasoning. This study looks to go beyond the information collected in the data and make meaning from it, using patterns which can be generalised. Therefore, inductive reasoning is used (Oaksford and Chater, 2020). This research uses a reflective thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2022) which is well suited to using an inductive reasoning approach.

6.4 Interpretivist approach to research

6.4.1 Constructivist Paradigm:

Paradigms are ways of viewing or researching phenomena (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Kuhn, 1970; Hammersley, 2007). These ‘paradigms’ may include

positivist, constructivist, interpretive, mixed methods, post-positivist, post-structuralist, post-modernist and complexity theory (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). This research lies within a constructivist paradigm as it looks at people's own 'lived experience' of the world as 'agentially constructed' by themselves (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p. 23). This research allows principals to tell their story as they see it. They have the agency to describe their personal experience. My role initially was as scribe to accurately record what they were trying to convey. I then went on to make meaning and develop an understanding from their thoughts. This research was akin to creating a patchwork quilt. Participants provided the material to create the squares. I patched the sections together to create a piece that made sense, was functional and could be used for the purpose it was intended. The thread I used to sew the pieces together was the overall interpretations of the data collected. Therefore, this research is constructivist in nature and lies within the interpretative genre of research.

6.4.2 Ontology

Ontology refers to the idea of the nature and structure of being or reality (Rawnsley, 1998; Goertz and Mahoney, 2012; Thomson and Walker, 2010). Ontology can be understood and interpreted by philosophers in radically different ways (Rawnsley, 1998). For example, while Husserl focused more on the epistemological question of the relationship between the knower and the object of the study, Heidegger moved on to the ontological question of the nature of reality and 'being' in the world. Both Husserl and Heidegger agreed that there should be no distinction between the person and the world. While Husserl believed the distinction did not exist, Heidegger went further suggesting that the 'lived reality' was a co-construction of the lived experience of the individual and the world. The individual could not be devoid of consciousness and

cannot stand outside the pre-understandings and history of one's experience (Heidegger, 2010). The overarching aim of the research is to 'attempt to understand the work from the subjects' points of view' (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015, p. 3). In quantitative research, the ontology centres around data and measurement to define a concept and not meaning-making. In qualitative research, discussion and debates are put forward to develop the meaning of a concept (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012). Goertz and Mahoney (2012) argue that qualitative researchers have more freedom without the constraints of needing a large sample to gather numerical data. They caution, however, that the complexities of the concept can pose a major difficulty for the researcher. The assortment of ways in which a researcher can develop their research can act as a barrier. Qualitative research is having a more linear pathway with the coding of data producing indicators that are measurable against a concept. In the absence of clear structure for qualitative researchers, they must rely on defining concepts independently of measurable data (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012). This research seeks to interpret meaning from what people present and perceive about their professional lives as principals of schools with autism classes. My ontological orientation is that I do not believe there is a single truth out there, rather people make meaning of their own daily lives given their perceptions of their environment and how they are in it (Mertens, 2010), which is at the heart of hermeneutic phenomenology. This belief that people 'select and construct' their own views falls under the constructivist paradigm of research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p. 23). My study seeks to make sense of the experiences and meanings primary school principals make about their worlds. The focus is on how principals lead autism classes in their primary schools. Each school has a distinct setting and culture, while all are primary schools. All of these schools serve children in the age range of five to twelve years old. There were variances in their structure, settings and

sociocultural constructs. These differences were reflected in the principal's experiences of leading in their particular school setting. This lived experience was central to the study.

The perspectives of other stakeholders such as teachers, staff, pupils, parents, board of management or anyone else associated with the schools, were not sought. The study strives to build an understanding of the role of the principal when leading autism classes.

6.4.3 Epistemology

Epistemology can be understood as the origin and structure of knowledge (Rawnsley, 1998). What does the researcher know and how have they developed this knowledge (Thomson and Walker, 2010)? Epistemology can appear differently for the qualitative and quantitative researcher. For example, when looking at statistics, which would be considered quantitative in nature, any difference or error may have an epistemological concern by questioning the nature or quality of nature of knowledge (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012). In the case of qualitative research, the focus is on a smaller number of data sets for coding purposes. Goertz and Mahoney (2012) argue that the quantitative researcher is less sure of the epistemology of the knowledge they create given their reliance on accuracy of numerical findings compared to the qualitative researcher, who appears more confident in their initial coding and therefore the knowledge created. In this study, the constructivist paradigm underpins the approach to the research. The study is based on people and their school contexts. As a practising primary school principal, I have a knowledge of the role of the participants. This knowledge and bias is recognised. As a researcher my role is to construct new knowledge from the data collected through the study. While my professional role allows for an understanding of

some areas of the role which the principals spoke about, such as acronyms or general school structures, the study is constructed through the voices of the principal participants.

As a doctoral student, I developed my skills of enquiry through ‘conversations about the nature of knowledge’ particularly as it pertains to my research’ (Thomson and Walker, 2010, p. 45). I consistently reflected and refined my study within the confines of the PhD programme. Given the nature of this study, relying on social construction is situated in the qualitative sphere of educational research.

6.4.4 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is central to this research as it is the study of newly created phenomena through the openness of the researcher to the research participants (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015, p. 61). My ontological perspective is borne out of ‘Husserl’s phenomenology’ and ‘Heidegger’s hermeneutics’ (Mertens, 2010, p. 12). It is constructivist, as defined by Bryman (2016, p. 16), who stated that ‘there is no one reality but a constant flow of revision’ which ‘mirrors the reality of a school principal’s work; dynamic, uncertain and in part socially constructed’ (McHugh, 2015, p. 43). Edmund Husserl developed and pioneered phenomenology in 1870. He is often referred to as the ‘father of phenomenology’ (Lavery, 2016, p. 22; Cohen, 1987). Husserl’s philosophy is holistic as it postulates phenomenology, epistemology, ontology and logic as dependent entities (Woodruff Smith, 2013, p. 12). It is the study of lived experience and does not delineate or separate the external environment to the person. This type of inquiry asks "What is this experience like?" (Lavery, 2016, p. 22). Lavery (2016) purports that this type of study intends to revisit and re-examine possible taken for granted experiences and perhaps uncover new and/or forgotten meanings. The

principal is the subject of many researchers' work (Spillane and Diamond, 2007; Fisher, 2015; Harris and Jones, 2020; Sugrue, 2014). These researchers looked at the principal role from different vantage points, such as leadership styles (Spillane and Diamond, 2007; Harris and Beycioglu, 2011; Gronn, 2000), how principals respond to crisis such as the COVID 19 pandemic (Harris and Jones, 2020) or how principals develop their early career skills (Murphy, 2020). There is limited research available regarding principals' inclusionary practices (Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004; Horrocks, White and Roberts, 2008) and less regarding principal inclusionary practices in the Irish context (Tiernan, 2022), although some exists related to special classes (Banks and McCoy, 2017). This research seeks to investigate the phenomenon of the inclusionary Irish primary principal.

Phenomenology is a move away from the dualism of a reality being 'out there' separate to the person. The reality for principals is in their schools. Their reality is in their everyday work. It lies within how they carry out their roles in keeping with their values and moral beliefs around autism special classes and their place within their primary school. It is not *out there* or separate to the person. The principal cannot function without working in a way that links their belief system to their way of working. They utilise their head, hand and heart when leading their schools (Sipos, Battisti and Grimm, 2008). These cannot be separated, as they make up the whole person and the essence of what they do and who they are.

Hermeneutic phenomenology was developed by Martin Heidegger. It is based on Husserl's original phenomenology, in that it is concerned with the lived human experience. While Husserl focused on understanding humans or the phenomena being studied, Heidegger focused on the 'situated meaning of a human in the world' (Lavery, 2016, p. 24). Husserl was interested in humans as observers of the world, whereas

Heidegger viewed humans as ‘concerned creatures with an emphasis on their fate in an alien world’ (Lavery, 2016, p. 24). He viewed humans as not just thinking about the world but how humans *are* in the world. Munhall (1989) described Heidegger as having a view of people and the world as inextricably related in cultural, social and in historical contexts. Meaning is constructed by the world but at the same time we are constructing this world from our own backgrounds and experiences. This co-construction of meaning occurs between the individual and the world in which they live (Munhall, 1989). The professional world of the principals is their school context. Meaning is constructed from how they are in their world (the school) and who they believe themselves to be when working in their school contexts. Their values and beliefs frame how they work in this school context. How they see their schools is an interpretation of their observations of phenomena such as social status or pupil diversity. How they work or lead is how they believe a leader should lead within the school context. This study seeks to understand the phenomenon of leading autism classes through the eyes of the principal which is self-constructed in their world.

6.4.5 Interpretive Genre

Interpretation is evident in a number of ways within the research. As a hermeneutical philosophical approach is taken in this study, initially I engaged in a process of self-reflection to highlight my biases and assumptions as a researcher. These are ‘not bracketed or set aside, but rather are embedded and essential to the interpretive process’ (Lavery, 2016, p. 28). I will travel a journey with the participants, traversing the landscape of their lived world. By the end of the journey, I will return with a new story developed by the many tales shared by those who travelled with me. It is inevitable that I will also be changed by my travels given my related professional role (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). I am of the ontological belief that there is no one single truth. Pupils

and their families are people. Principals are people. They are fallible and come from all different walks of life. They bring a variety of professional and personal experience to the role. Schools are also situational. Small rural schools who are at the heart of their communities can vary greatly to large urban schools who are seen more as a service availed of by pupils and their families. Personal interpretations by the research participants of their professional contexts, skills, challenges and opportunities lies at the heart of the study. This relationship between the professional, their personal history and the situational context allows for a co-creation of their interpretation (Heidegger, 2010). As researcher, I hold a role of interpretation. I reviewed the data presented and interpreted the meaning for the study taking into consideration my own stance within the research and the emerging themes.

6.5 Sample Selection

The aim in participant selection within hermeneutic phenomenological research is to select participants ‘who have lived experience that is the focus of the study, who are willing to talk about their experience, and who are diverse enough from one another to enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience’ (Laverty, 2016, p. 29). Participants for this study were sought from the primary school sector in Ireland. An initial call for participants was made in September 2021. The Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) and Centre for School Leadership (CSL) included my research in an email to its members, calling for participants for my research. A number of principals responded to this initial call. In October 2021, the Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA) circulated an email to all Catholic primary schools outlining this research project with a call for participants (see Appendix A). In total, 18 interested principals made initial contact for participation in the project. Following detailed discussions about the format of the study, a total of 15 principals committed to

the project. The principals were asked to fill out a Google form prior to taking part in the interview. The form consisted of nine questions and took less than five minutes to complete. The purpose of the form was to gather basic data about the participants as a group. From this data it was clear that the principals interviewed had a varying degree of experience as principals of schools with autism classes. The greatest number of principals had ten or more years' experience, closely followed by those with up to ten years' experience. There were principals who had less than five years' experience but no principal was in their first year as principal. Figure 3 (below) outlines the background experiences of the principals.

How many years experience do you have as Principal of a school with asd classes?
15 responses

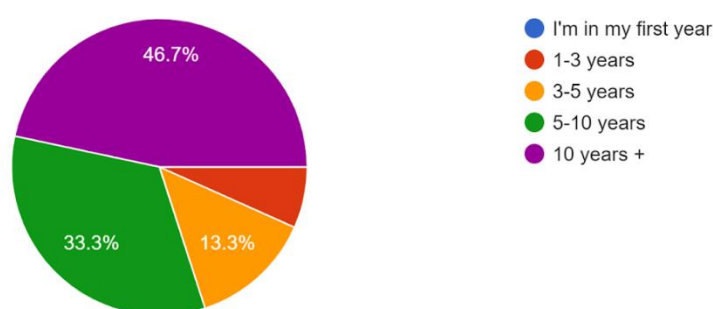


Figure 3: Background experiences of the principals

6.5.1.1 Primary School Sector

The education system in Ireland is divided into sectors or levels that span from the age of four years old until legal education ceases at sixteen years of age, but most pupils continue further beyond this point. For the purpose of this study the focus is on the primary school sector which begins when a child enrolls in Junior Infants and continues for eight years until they complete sixth class and go forward to second level education. The first inclusion criteria for participants was that they had to be a serving principal of

a primary school in Ireland. In 2020 the Department of Education reported that there were 3,277 primary schools in Ireland (Department of Education, 2020a). The Central Statistics Office (CSO) online gives a further breakdown of the schools, according to the number of pupil enrolments (table 1, below).

Number of pupils	Number of primary schools
Less than 50 pupils	578
50-99 pupils	673
100-199 pupils	742
200-299 pupils	546
300-499 pupils	429
500 pupils and over	138

Table 2: Breakdown of school types in Ireland (Central Statistics Office, 2020)

Figure 4 illustrates that the schools in this study were almost evenly balanced between Urban and Rural schools.

Is your school
15 responses

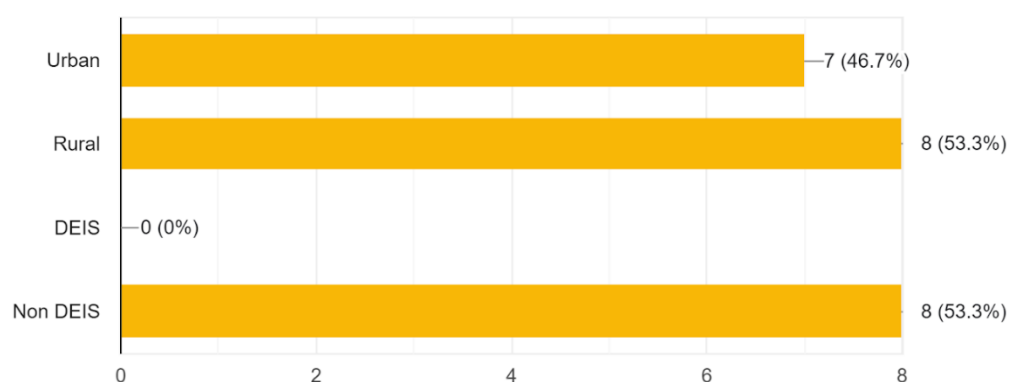


Figure 4: School Types

6.5.1.2 Administrative or Teaching Principal

In the primary school sector, there are two types of principal positions: an administrative principal and a teaching principal. An administrative principal is sometimes referred to as a ‘walking’ principal. This position is office-based and by DE standards this is a principal of a mainstream school with 169 pupils or more, or if a school is operating with two or more special classes then the threshold for administrative is automatic and undefined as of September 2021 (Department of Education, 2021). A teaching principal is a principal that works in a school with less than 169 pupils without two special classes. This type of principal has teaching duties as well as their leadership role. A number of both teaching and administrative principals were sought initially to participate in the project in order to give a broad range of perspectives of the role. However, no teaching principal volunteered for the study, therefore all principals in this study were administrative principals and their schools operated two or more special classes. Given that all principals were administrative it is not surprising that the lowest enrolment of any of the schools was between 100 and 200 pupils. The largest enrolment was up to 800 pupils.

What is the overall enrolment of your school?

15 responses

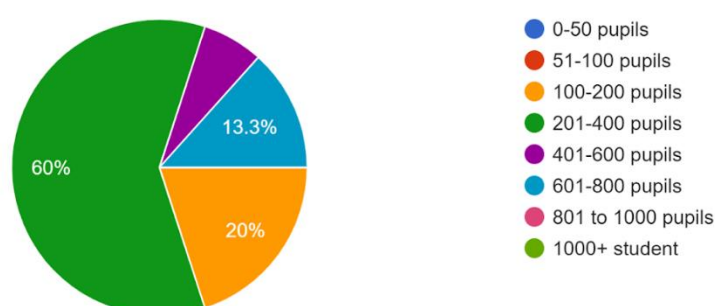


Figure 5: Overall enrolment numbers in schools

No specific gender representation percentage was sought from participants. The call to volunteer was open to all. When principals were asked to identify their gender, all participants chose to do so. The percentage of male and female participants is outlined below. Figure 6 outlines that the majority of participant were female.

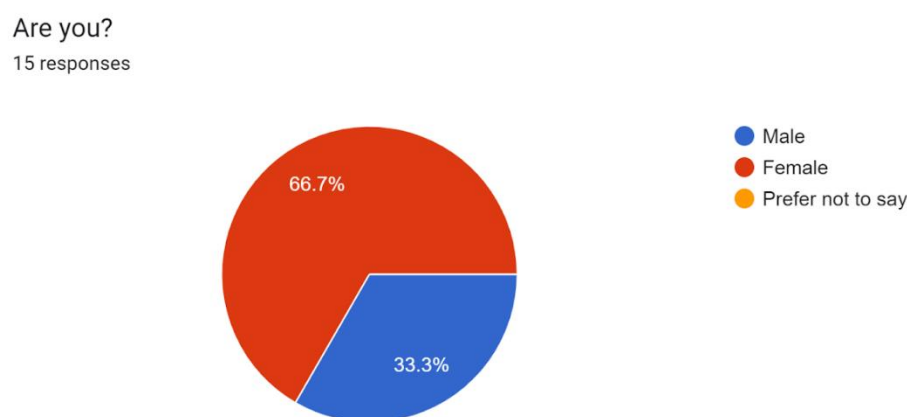


Figure 6: Gender breakdown of participants

6.5.1.3 Schools with autism classes

Special schools and mainstream primary schools without autism classes were excluded from the study as the focus was mainstream primary schools with autism classes. Many primary schools have special classes attached to their mainstream school for a variety of additional needs such as emotional behaviour disorder or EBD classes, classes for specific learning difficulties, language classes or classes for those hard of hearing and autism classes. In 2019 the DES reported that 6,822 pupils were attending special classes in primary mainstream schools (Department of Education, 2020a). For the purposes of this study, only mainstream schools with classes specific to autism were included. In March 2021, the NCSE confirmed that of the 1,312 special classes at

primary level, 1,126 or close to 86% were Autism classes and of these 134 are Early Intervention classes. Early Intervention classes were also included as they are designated for autistic children from 3 to 5 years old. While some schools may have only one autism class on site, some schools may have five or more special classes which could include some autism classes. Most of the principals in this study only had autism classes in their schools. Figure 7 outlines that only one principal had special classes other than autism specific classes:

Do you have special classes other than ASD classes in your school?
15 responses

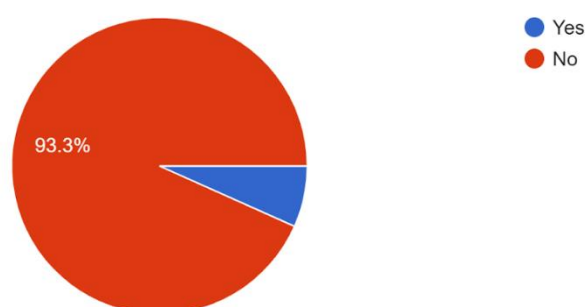


Figure 7: Breakdown of special classes other than autism classes

A primary school with five or more autism classes is automatically entitled to an administrative deputy principal regardless of school size (Department of Education, 2021). In the case of the principal with a variety of classification of autism classes in their school, they were asked to focus on the autism leadership element of their role but some overlap with other classes was unavoidable. All of the principals in the study had between one and four classes in their schools. We can infer from these data that all of the principals were working with a teaching deputy principal.

How many ASD classes are in your school?
15 responses

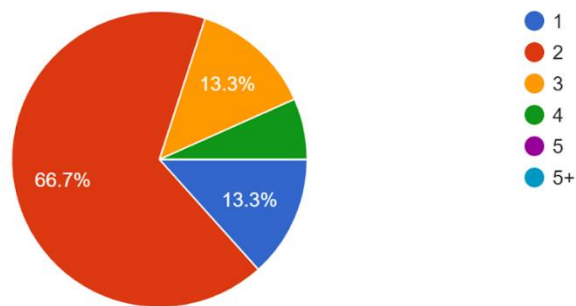


Figure 8: Number of autism classes in each participant's school

6.5.1.4 School type and patronage

Primary schools in Ireland come in a variety of shapes and sizes, from one teacher rural schools, island schools, single sex, vertical, junior and senior schools. Along with type there is a variety of school patronage visible in primary education. While 90% of Irish primary schools are under the patronage of the Catholic church (Department of Education, 2020a), there are a number of other patronages visible in the primary landscape including Church of Ireland, Educate Together, Community National Schools and *An Foras Pátrúnachta*. There was no specific search for patronage within the participant cohort. Given the larger percentage of Catholic schools and the specific call through the CPSMA, it stands to reason that the majority of principals were from that patronage while only one principal was from a non-Catholic school. A breakdown is shown below in figure 9:

What is your school Patronage?

15 responses

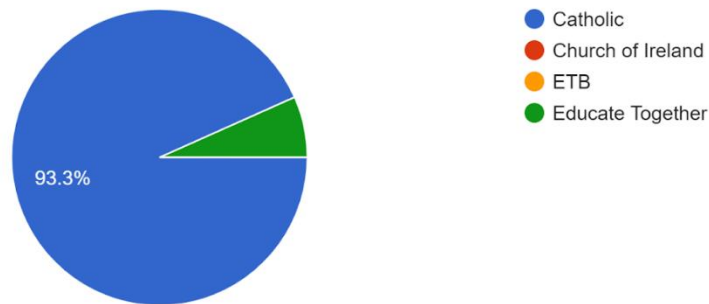


Figure 9: School Patronage by school

Patronage was not a focus of this research. No question on patronage was part of the study. Any mention of patronage was initiated unprompted from a participant. The question on patronage in the initial Google form was with a focus on giving a broad picture of the participants as a group.

6.5.1.5 Leadership and leadership for autism preparation

The principals were asked if they had had any leadership-specific preparation prior to taking up the role of principal. Nine of the 15 answered that they had undertaken some sort of professional development, as outlined in figure 10 (below).

Did you undertake any leadership professional development prior to taking up the role of Principal?
15 responses

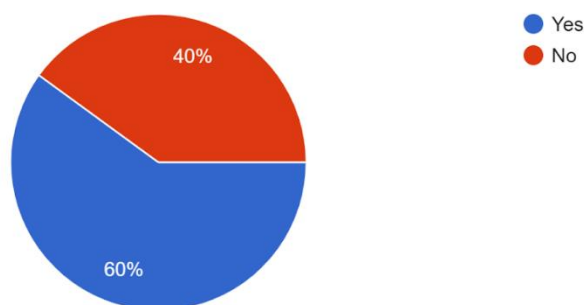


Figure 10: Professional leadership development undertaken prior to principal role

When asked to outline what type of professional development they had undertaken, the answers included completing a PhD, Masters in Education and/or Leadership, Postgraduate Diplomas in Special Education, Diploma in Educational Management and one principal had completed the IPPN *Ciall Ceannaithe* course.

When the principals were asked if they had completed autism-specific professional learning, two thirds answered that they had, as shown in figure 11 below.

Have you undertaken professional development specific to the area of autism?
15 responses

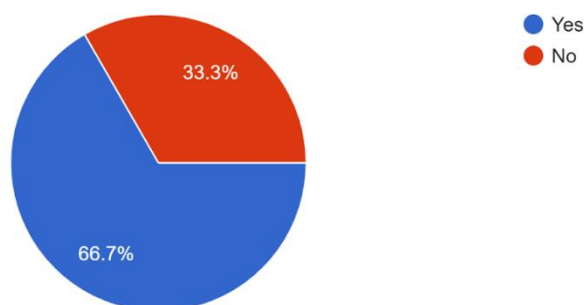


Figure 11: Specific professional learning in autism

The principals were asked to outline their experiences of autism-specific professional learning. The answers were varied in terms of course choice. A number of the principals had engaged with SESS, NCSE, PDST, Education Centres and Middletown Centre for Autism to undertake courses. One principal undertook regular autism-specific webinars and attended the relevant seminars at the IPPN Conference. One principal had completed a Graduate Certificate in the Education of Pupils on the Autism Spectrum, while another principal commented that the question was not applicable as *‘the teachers here in our school have taught me a lot about teaching children with Autism’* (SC).

6.6 Data Collection

The data collection for this study took place over the academic year 2020/2021. The method chosen for data collection in this qualitative study was interview. Interviews are an appropriate method of enquiry within the qualitative sphere of research. The purpose is to ‘obtain knowledge of the phenomena being investigated’ (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015, p. 48). Interviewing helps to maintain a warm and conversational tone, assisting participants to feel you are both in the conversation together with safety and trust (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019; Lavery, 2016). In an interview it is the interviewer that constructs the meaning from what the interviewee states. The interview is built on questions the interviewer has decided upon after careful consideration. Koch (1996) stresses that while direct questions should be asked, the interviewer must be open to what may reveal itself within the interview. Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) caution that there is a real danger of the interview becoming unethical. The interviewer must mitigate against this by affording the interviewee an opportunity to question what the interviewers do and say about them (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2005, p. 170). The researcher must learn to give voice to what they observe but allow the ‘object object’

(Brinkmann and Kvale, 2005, p. 179) within the interview ensuring a more robust reflection on both the experience of the interviewer and interviewee. Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) look deeply at the interview and break the word in to ‘Inter’ and ‘View’. This gives rise to the idea of interview as an experience between two people rather than an act that is foisted upon the interviewee. Meaning from a phenomenological interview is a co-creation between interviewer and interviewee (Flood, 2010; Lavery, 2016). In phenomenological research, the interview is reflective rather than observational. In the interview the participants' descriptions can be explored, illuminated and probed (Kvale, 1996) using reflection, clarification, requests for examples and descriptions, and listening techniques (Jasper, 1994). Seidman (2019) suggests that the interview process will pass through the following three structured stages: 1) Establishing the context of the interviewee's experience 2) The construction of the experience 3) Reflection on the meaning it holds. These three steps allowed for the development of a process for interviewing participants within this research. Early questions in the interview were aimed at establishing the context and experience of the principals. Further questions explored how principals constructed this experience through their backgrounds, experiences, education or other indicators. Finally, reflection was key for the co-construction of the desired meanings for these principals. Development of themes from initial interviews as well as opportunities afforded to each participant to comment on initial findings proved very fruitful in extending meaning and challenging initial ideas or perceptions.

6.6.1.1 The interview

The interview process was initially envisioned to be based on a three interview series (Seidman, 2019). As the COVID 19 global pandemic reached Ireland during data collection, an adaptation of the original three series interview structure was undertaken

as ‘life sometimes intervenes’ (Seidman, 2019, p. 25). The interview would still form the main mode of data collection. Following the main individual interviews, focus groups were held to further investigate topics of interest from the main interview. The adapted Seidman (2019) three interview series for this study took the following form:

Step 1: Brief questionnaire to outline professional background and school context on Google forms.

Step 2: Individual interviews focussing on research questions

Step 3: Follow on focus groups with a focus on specific areas of interests arising from interviews.

6.6.1.2 The interview questions

It was decided that the three series interview was to be adapted to allow for practical consideration of data collection during a global pandemic. The interview questions were constructed to answer the research questions in a way that would incorporate the three interview series themes of focused life history, details of lived experiences and reflection of the meaning within the framework of the research questions.

6.6.1.3 Pilot Interviewing

Piloting was an important step in the study. Interview questions were prepared after the research questions had been refined. Completing a pilot provided an opportunity to step back, reflect and revise the questions based on learnings (Seidman, 2019). Two pilot interviews were held in August 2021. The first pilot interview was held face to face. The first observation by the participant was that the questions around the school context would perhaps be better placed in an initial information email prior to interview. On further reflection, it was decided that a Google form could be used to obtain basic

information such as school size, number of special classes, number of years' experience of the principal and a question seeking information on any professional development undertaken by the principal. The participant felt that questions 1 and 2 could be combined but later suggested that use of a Google form would render these questions unnecessary. The participant referred to question 4 and suggested it should refer specifically to leadership, as autism training is explored in later questions. Overall, she felt that there were too many questions and future participants may lose interest as the interview continued.

Pilot interview 2 was held online. Principal 2 agreed that a Google form with basic details regarding school and participants would enable better use of time during the interview itself. The information would allow the researcher to concentrate more on the experiences within the interview. This participant again cautioned that there were too many questions and this would cause a number of issues including participant fatigue, overlap and she suggested that the researcher may be under pressure to ask all questions to all participants which may hinder the flow of the interview process. Her suggestion was that six to seven questions would be more appropriate for an hour-long interview and that many of the current questions could be used more effectively as prompts within the interview. This principal also cautioned on the onerous task of transcribing a large amount of lengthy interviews, given her experience as a current PhD student.

The face-to-face interview allowed for a more relaxed setting however given the reliance on online meetings in the context of COVID 19, it was surprising at the time how at ease the interviewer and interviewee were within the interview in the online context. This was likely a result of the reliance on online meetings for a variety of events given the restrictions around meeting in public during the COVID 19 pandemic.

The interview questions were refined and Seidman (2019) three stage interview process was incorporated. The final iteration of interview questions was as follows:

Research Questions	Seidman (2019) Three Interview Series	Interview Questions
Q: What is the principal's experience in the context of their professional life history?	Focused Life History	1. Tell me about your principal experience to date?
Q. What is the principal's present lived experience in leading schools with autism classes? Q. What advice would current primary principals give to other principals who are leading or are about to lead schools with autism classes?	The details of lived experience	2. What do you understand by the term inclusion? 3. How do you perceive your role in leading and managing autism classes? 4. What are the challenges for you as the leader? 5. What are the opportunities for you as the leader?
		6. Tell me about the skills or roles you utilise or take on when leading autism classes? 7. What supports are in place for you? How can you be better supported to become a more inclusive leader?
		8. Is there anything you wish you knew before taking on the role? And what advice would you give to someone about to take on the role of leader of a primary school with autism classes? 9. How has the COVID 19 global pandemic impacted on your leadership particularly in relation to leadership of autism special classes? Is there anything you would like to add or something you wish I had asked you? As you are aware I will be transcribing your interview and we will meet again next spring to discuss any major themes or findings. In the meantime, if you think of anything more you would like to add please feel free to email me.
Q. What is the principal's own reflection and	Reflection on the Meaning	Developed through optional reflective statement. Reflection on interview themes that have emerged from interviews and revisited in focus groups.

understanding of the meaning of their experience of leading schools with autism classes?		
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Table 3: Interview Questions

6.6.1.4 Interviewing during a pandemic

This research was conducted as part of a four-year PhD programme in the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic. Considerations were taken given the restrictive nature of close human contact due to public health advice, which at this time was in ‘Level 5’ whereby no unnecessary meetings between people were permissible (Government of Ireland, 2020). In Ireland, the school systems experienced a number of lockdowns where the school buildings were closed and students and teachers taught and studied from home. In many cases, schools had to embrace the use of technology and online meeting platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet. These platforms were commonly used for staff meetings, online professional development and so forth.

In order to comply with government and World Health guidelines, it was decided that an online platform would be used to interview research participants. UCC approves the use of ‘Google Meets’ or ‘Microsoft Teams’ meetings. It was decided that ‘MS Teams’ would be used. The use of an online platform had the advantage of opening my research to accepting participants on a more national basis.

An important element of using interview in phenomenological research is the context of a relationship between the interviewer and interviewee (Laverty, 2016). The use of

an online platform was somewhat prohibitive in forming relationships with participants as it makes it difficult to observe what goes unsaid, what is really said and the body language of the participant (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). In an effort to build a relationship with subject participants and allow them more time to explore and reflect on what they as principals ‘really experienced’ (Laverty, 2016, p. 29), the participants filled out the Google form. Using their school information, I researched their contexts generally by studying their school website as all of the participants were unknown to me prior to interview. I prepared a remark specific to their schools which allowed for a rapport to build, to encourage as rich an interview as possible in terms of data and responses while being mindful of my role as a researcher and interviewer (Seidman, 2019). As Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) outline, the first few moments of the interview are ‘decisive’ where ‘interviewees will want to have a grasp of the interviewer before they allow themselves to talk freely and expose their experiences and feelings to a stranger’ (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015, p. 154).

Prior to interviews I made contact with each principal initially by email, sending a photo of myself and some basic professional information as well as a list of the interview questions that would be asked. In this contact I asked interviewees if they could offer me a few times that might suit them to interview. Interviewees were offered a choice of interview times that were mutually acceptable. A few days prior to scheduled interviews, I ‘checked in’ with participants by email. In between interviews, participants were afforded the opportunity to email any further insights or reflections they would like to share but this was not mandatory to the study. All interviews took place during Autumn 2021.

6.7 Data Analysis

The process of data analysis in hermeneutic phenomenology is a two-way process that involves co-construction of meaning between interviewer and interviewee, building a ‘circle of understanding’ (Lavery, 2016, p. 30; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). ‘The researcher and participant work together to bring life to the experience being explored, through the use of imagination, the hermeneutic circle and attention to language and writing’ (Lavery, 2016, p. 30). In this way the data emerges from the lived experiences of the participants and the construction created between them and the researcher. A procedure was required to frame the data analysis. Kinsella (2006) contends that a hermeneutic philosophical approach can be partnered with another approach. A grounded theory approach was considered initially as it mirrors many of the concepts within hermeneutic phenomenology but has an explicit procedure for analysis. Corbin and Strauss (1990) contend that in grounded theory the research participants ‘are seen as having, though not always utilizing, the means of controlling their destinies by their responses to conditions’ (Corbin and Strauss, 1990, p. 5). However, on further research it was decided that a reflexive thematic analysis approach would be best in this study as it offers ‘robust process guidelines, not rigid rules’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.10) while being mindful of the knowledge created as being grounded in the data.

6.8 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Data analysis in thematic analysis begins with data collection and both processes are interrelated. The interview questions were constructed in order to satisfy the research questions but also aid data analysis. The questions were organised under subheadings within the interview which were easily mapped when analysing the data afterwards. The structuring of the interview questions in this way helped somewhat with an initial

crude analysis of the data. An inductive orientation to the data was employed. The analysis was ‘located within, and coding and theme development driven by, the data content’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 10). Delving deeper was a messy and iterative process. The data was revisited continuously over time to aid ‘immersion and depth of engagement’ while also ‘giving the developing data some distance’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 8). The data was read and re-read for several months before developing codes. Using the initial coding that emerged from a surface level reading all of the data, useful quotations that supported the development of codes to categories were identified. Several categories were illustrated in the first draft of analyses. These categories included support, time management, resources management, parents, placement, teacher education and training and principals supporting or mentoring. For example, training initially emerged from the data. The initial code to category looked as follows:

Code

	• encouraging people to go for CPD release time for CPD, • sending a teacher on CPD or online training • CPD would be good • go to any CPD that's available • I suppose training • if the behavioural challenges training, • And definitely spend some time in there to get to know how they work. If you don't know how they work already. I think the experience you get is invaluable, by just even stepping into the room and releasing the teacher as well
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Category

	Teacher education & training
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All interview transcripts were merged into one document. When a code was identified a search for the code was undertaken using the search function in Word. For example, a key search term was performed on 10th February 2022 in the pursuit of developing ‘training’ in the data:

- Key search term 1 ‘training’ -80 matches
- Key search term 2 ‘professional development’ - 3 matches
- Key search term 3 ‘CPD’-16 matches
- Key search term 4 ‘upskill’- 15 matches

Each category was given a different colour highlight. Blue highlight was used to identify the ‘training’ within interview transcripts. The entire interview transcript document was reviewed and when a search term appeared in the data it was highlighted in blue following key search terms. Quotes for each category were merged into a separate document. These initial analyses were further reflected upon and refined through dialogue with supervisors to ensure analysis went ‘beyond data summary’ and themes were ‘appropriate and each theme presented in depth and detail’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p 264). The data analysis was underpinned by theoretical assumptions that underpin the study. The theoretical underpinning of this study is theories of leadership through a socio cultural lens (Hartley, 2009). Through reflexive thematic analysis the initial code to category ‘training’ metamorphosed into the theme of ‘Professional Learning’. The full code to categorising of ‘Professional Learning’ through interviewee quotes can be seen in Appendix E. Every initial code to category to theme went through the same process of reflexive thematic analysis until the data resembled the visual representation (see p. 94).

6.9 Transcribing the interviews

Analysing data is one of the most crucial steps in qualitative research (Basil, 2010). An initial systematic review of data informs the results of the study. Following semi-structured interviews, the interviews were transcribed using Otter, which is a voice recognition software. Use of voice recognition is used commonly amongst different

disciplines for transcription purposes (Sajjad *et al.*, 2021; Hopper *et al.*, 2021). Following initial transcription, the transcripts were examined and any corrections were completed by re-watching the recorded interviews and crosschecking.

Reflexive thematic analysis is the method of analysis chosen in this research (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Constant reflexivity and constant revisiting of the data allowed for patterns to emerge, developing coding. Coding allowed for a variety of initial concepts to be explored but not all concepts became categories (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Development of the reflexive thematic analysis procedure, where the major emerging themes was evident in a number of the interviews as well as current literature, gave validity to their existence and protected against researcher bias as much as possible (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

6.10 Focus groups

Following initial review of the data, a number of interesting insights were revealed. In Summer 2022 all participants were invited to take part in focus groups to discuss these insights. The focus groups started with an opportunity for participants to make comments or reflections on previous interviews. The insights were discussed as a group. No participant chose to email after interview with any further insights but participants were keen to take part in the focus groups. The protocols for the focus group mirrored those of the interview. Participants were contacted by email regarding the format of the focus group. The information outlined that up to a maximum of four participants would be in attendance at any group. A number of dates were provided to participants and they chose a time and a date most suitable to them. There was less formality in these groups, with five questions being put to each group. Three groups were carried. A total of ten

principals participated in this follow up. The following questions emerged from the interviews for further exploration:

1. Who ends up staffing (teachers/ SNAs) in special classes in your school and how to you go about it?
2. How has your involvement in the classes impacted your own professional learning?
3. What suggestions would you have for principal professional development?
4. Who supports you in leading the autism classes?
5. What further supports would help you to be a more inclusive leader?

The group were free to discuss the questions at they wished within the group. The focus groups were conducted online and recorded as before. While interviews lasted up to 60 minutes in length, the focus groups were restricted to 30 minutes given that they were conducted in term 3, which is a busy time for school principals. The focus group data served to corroborate much of the data that was offered during the individual interviews.

6.11 Trustworthiness and Ethics

Ethics “concerns that which is good and bad, right and wrong” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p. 111). Yin (2009) maintains that “the study of a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context obligates you to important ethical practices akin to those followed in medical research” (Yin, 2009, p. 73). Human experiences are at the forefront of my research. One of the core ethical considerations for the study is the

protection of the research participants, or “do no harm” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p. 127; Spillane and Diamond, 2007; 1964), all the while creating space for the individual to reveal their thoughts in an honest and fair way (Spillane and Diamond, 2007). In order to upskill in the area of ethics I completed an online research and ethics course entitled “Research Integrity - Social and Behavioural Sciences” provided by UCC and delivered by Epigeum. This is in line with the *UCC Code of Research Conduct* which suggests “periodic training in ethics and research integrity” (University College Cork, 2021, p. 10).

As my research is “non-clinical research involving human participants (including behavioural experiments, interviewing and surveying)”, it had to be approved by the Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) (University College Cork, 2021, p. 9). Approval from SREC was sought in May 2021. Following some minor amendments, full approval from SREC (Log 2021-103) was granted in July 2021.

6.11.1.1 Informed Consent

Informed consent, as first outlined in the Nuremberg Code (1947), is key when involving human research participants (Shuster, 1997; *European Convention on Human Rights*, 1953; 1964; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Spillane and Diamond, 2007). In this study, participants were fully briefed on the subject of the research, what their participation would look like, my expectations as the researcher and what would happen to the data they provided (see Appendix B). They had time to review all information and have any questions answered. Participants were free to leave the study at any time. They were informed that this research would form part of a PhD thesis and would likely be published on the UCC Cork Open Research Archive (CORA), site and possibly other

journals as appropriate. This consideration to informed consent is in line with UCC Code of Research conduct 7.7 (University College Cork, 2021, p. 15).

6.11.1.2 Confidentiality & Anonymity

The confidentiality of participants ensured that they were not identified by any information they provided towards the project no matter how sensitive (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). In order to protect the research participants, they have been anonymised in the study using a code and pseudonym. Principals are referred to by letters, i.e., a code instead of their name. Any names that appear within the research have been changed to protect the person's identity.

6.11.1.3 Data Storage

In order to satisfy the UCC Code of Research Conduct, all data was stored on UCC OneDrive as provided to students. All data was accessed using a password encrypted device. Logging on to this OneDrive also requires a password. This careful storage of the data was carried out in order to protect participants and their privacy. Participants were not allowed to view data from other participants. Different data from individuals was not stored in the same location, to ensure the participant was not identifiable. Privacy, which restricts sharing, is protected under the *European Convention on Human Rights* (European Convention on Human Rights, 1953) and the *European Data Protection Directive* (1995) which are reflected in the *Irish European Convention on Human Rights Act 2003* (2003).

6.11.2 Reporting

Reporting and communication of research findings should be substantive, accurate and novel (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). It is expected that this research will be used by professionals within the education sector to support and improve their practice. The wider audience for the research findings will include international educators, policy makers, stakeholders within the education field and researchers. Reporting of the research will allow for the opportunity to inform others of the work completed. It will establish inclusionary leadership development as a priority within the educational field and shine a light on this important aspect of a principal's work. It will allow others to build on this research. Most importantly, the aim of the project was to improve the lives of children who are at the centre of our education system. It is envisaged that the research will firstly form part of a PhD. Future publications may include journals and educational publications. Presentation at conferences, particularly focused upon primary school leadership, such as the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) Annual Conference will be considered as an appropriate medium for sharing the work. It is hoped that this research will be built upon by future researchers as this study is built on the current research within the education field. Plagiarism is defined as "misconduct" according to UCC's *Code of Research Conduct* (University College Cork, 2021, p. 7). All research used has been fully and appropriately referenced and cited within this thesis paper.

6.11.3 Ongoing Ethical dilemmas

This research aims to advance practice within the field of education. It looks to the inclusionary practices of the primary school principal and how these can be emanated to promote best practice. I hoped to improve my own professional practice as well as

the wider practices of other primary school principals. There was an ethical dilemma for me within that position. In this context, I am the researcher. I acknowledge an awareness of a potential conflict between my own values and opinions as opposed to what may emerge from the research. I had to consider and disclose a possible ‘power differential’ when interviewing my professional colleagues (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p. 136). To mitigate this bias, I kept a reflective research journal specifically for this purpose. When I examined the data collected, I kept my own biases to the forefront and continuously referred back to the data to ensure that all patterns were grounded in the data. I referred to the Code of Research Conduct and acted with “integrity” declaring my possible conflict of interest as a “close professional interest in the work” (University College Cork, 2021, p. 13; Gilbert, 1997). I had to acknowledge my limitations as a researcher. I am a researcher at an early stage in my academic career. I must ensure that all work I conduct is carried out in a manner that is true, to ensure it stands up to public scrutiny (University College Cork, 2021, p. 5). My research is important for the professional capacity of primary school principals and the pupils with autism who enrol in their schools. By doing this, I defend the choices that I made while researching and show the integrity by which I completed the research in the context of social responsibility (University College Cork, 2021, p. 4).

6.12 Conclusion

In this chapter I outlined the methodological components of my study. A detailed account of data collection methods, participants and ethical issues was explored. An awareness of epistemological, ontological and ethical aspects of research were outlined and I plotted where I stand as a researcher in terms of my own values and how these values will impact on the research. Rationales for decision making throughout the

research process were outlined and justified. Reference was made to adjustments that were necessary in light of COVID 19 restrictions were explored and explained.

Visual Representation of Data Findings

This visual representation below aims to highlight the data analysis while enhancing the reading and comprehension of the study (Verdinelli and Scagnoli, 2013). Major overarching themes that emerged from data analysis included Leadership, COVID 19, Professional Learning and Tensions & Dilemmas. The below diagram outlines the themes and subthemes. The data within each theme and subtheme are discussed in detail in the chapters that follow.



Figure 12: Data Findings

7 Leadership

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter the data are examined under the lens of leadership. Firstly, the attitudes, values and beliefs that underpin the principals' leadership were explored. The role of coaching and mentoring was a feature in leading autism classes. Principals take on many roles and approaches when leading autism classes (Cobb, 2015). These roles were outlined and reviewed. Leadership styles utilised by the principals were explored and investigated. The autism class was identified as a model of distributed leadership where all members could legitimately participate (Lave and Wenger, 1991), to learn and lead together. How staff could support their principal and the impact this made was outlined by the principals in the data.

7.1.1 Principal beliefs and values

The principals outlined their thoughts on how they envisioned special education in the school they were leading. Their own beliefs and values underpinned their approach. Most principals emphasised the importance of resources and resourcing. They felt that these should be shared out or distributed as fairly as possible, in ways such as timetabling '*timetabling of support... to support equally*' (BD). It was acknowledged that the development of the pupils in the autism classes may take a different trajectory to that of neurotypical pupils and an understanding of this was important '*but that's not to say that their development goals as such, are, aren't equal, especially for what they can achieve*' (BD). For other principals, it was important that the children who attended the autism classes were involved in all aspects of school life, with shared experiences as much as the mainstream cohort: '*that they would feel part of the group, you know,*

when they go to the hall for music generation, they absorb it too... that everything is just, you know, ... equal'(MH). Principals acknowledged that this vision for equity and equality was a broad aspiration *'there is far more about trying to get everybody on to some sort of a level playing field, it's an equality I suppose as much as anything else'*(CK). CK cautioned that this aspiration could be the cause of a social dilemma in the future due to its complex nature:

'I think that's going to be a huge equality issue down the line, if there's going to be children who maybe could have done better in life in terms of maybe having held down a job or held down relationships or whatever... Because the support and therapy that they needed, wasn't there, there was only so much the school can do' (CK).

BD spoke about opening the autism classes as a moral action as there was a need in the community for the service: *'we opened our autism classes was because there was children that should have been coming to our school... their siblings were going through the school. And there wouldn't have been a place in their local community for them to attend school'*. BD explained that the school made the decision to *'support those families'* by opening autism classes. He went on to say that in their school *'it wasn't a case of somebody seeing or approaching us as to whether we were happy to open a class, we approached them and said, Look, we felt morally obliged, to some degree'* (BD).

7.1.2 A broader vision of inclusion

The vision of inclusion and the perspectives of the principals were expressed in a variety of ways. Their ideas of inclusion were broader thinking in terms of inclusion in the wider school context and not just the autism classes. The idea that acceptance as the

core of inclusion was put forward by a number of principals: *'it's just part of our ethos... just one of our pillars that we will do our best to include everybody'* (FC) and *'education for all'* (MH). *'I think of inclusion, as pupils, learning together with their peers'* (KR). AW thought of inclusion as a *'kind of acceptance'* for *'children who are aware that there are children with autism or complex needs or children from different backgrounds, but they might not always be accepting of that'*. SC spoke about inclusion as *'taking people's individual differences'* and she aspired to *'making it somehow seamless accepting people's differences.'* SC talked about her role in *'making accommodation for people so that they can...be the same as everybody else'*. She tries *'making things 'accessible', accepting cultural differences and special needs. I suppose accepted people's opinions I suppose acceptance really I suppose of differences and making accommodation for same'* (SC). SF spoke about inclusion in school in terms of learning and she felt that every child should have *'access to the curriculum in school and appropriate access to the curriculum'*. LD also put an emphasis on curriculum access for developing a model of inclusion: *'...so we include everybody, and we try to come up with a solution, be it a differentiated learning plan,so that everybody can access education and people of all levels of need, can access education, to the best of their ability when they're here.'* CK argued that the Irish education system pays *'lip service'* to inclusion and she believed there was a narrow vision of inclusion as *'differentiating academic work'*. It is her belief that a more *'holistic approach'* (CK) needs to be taken to create inclusion. Like some of the other principals, SF spoke about a wider diversity of children than just children with additional needs when outlining her vision for inclusion. She felt that *'the special needs children, the children from foreign countries, our own children, gifted children, you know, that, that everybody has access to the curriculum, and that we're providing good teaching for them'* (SF) in order for

inclusion to be present. The importance of having an understanding of autism in order for inclusion to work was highlighted by DC when she stated *‘first of all, inclusion will only work if people are educated... people need to know about autism...they need to understand it.... we’ve come a long way, but there’s still a lot of ignorance around autism.’* CK’s definition of inclusion was transformed because of the autism classes and their influence on her knowledge. She spoke about it as follows:

‘I think over time, my attitude to that word has changed entirely. Primarily, probably because of the autism classes here. So I would say that we’re including them in other ways other than the academic way. ...and I can definitely see inclusion. There is far more about trying to get everybody on to some sort of a level playing field, it’s an equality I suppose as much as anything else’ (CK).

7.1.3 Strategies to promote inclusion

Strategies such as reverse integration were used to support inclusion in schools although the COVID 19 pandemic has affected this. *‘Pre COVID, we did reverse integration so the children from our mainstream went down there and they cooked and so there was all of this walking up and down the corridor the whole time and they were all involved’* (DC). Supporting children as much as possible with resourcing such as SNAs was put forward in support of inclusion: *‘...for me, inclusion is where every child has the right to access learning in our schools, and that the resources and supports that are needed for that child are there and available’*(MS). MW defined inclusion with a similar emphasis on resourcing for access: *‘inclusion for me is ensuring that every child has the opportunity and the support to access education, and any activity that’s going on to the best of their ability’*. LD spoke about helping children to feel included through resources such as *‘SNAs in the classroom environment’* but cautioned that it is *‘dependent on support, and it’s dependent on having the right level of support available*

at a time that you really need it'. The idea of a sense of belonging was put forward as a vision for inclusion. BH spoke about *'trying to create a sense of belonging'* in the school so *'that everybody feels part of ... the school... and that not only do they feel part of it, but they benefit from it'*. JL talked about building a sense of belonging by trying to make *'sure that everyone in the school feels like they're a legitimate part of the school'*. She spoke about organising the school year events and that the autism classes were *'a central part of our thought process, and all decisions that we make'* (JL). BD spoke about providing a place and a welcome for every child in the local community: *'all children are welcomed into their local school, in their age-appropriate classes, and they're supported to participate in all aspects of life of the school, and I think it's about celebrating the diversity of all our students'*.

7.1.4 Inclusion as a means of diversity

SF discussed the idea of bringing the autism classes to the school in order to promote inclusion through introducing the diversity of additional needs to the school, which was very homogenous in nature prior to this point. She explained that the school she leads is a *'very middle-class school'* and they *'would have very academic children... very little international children, with very little children of different faiths, and very little special needs children, ... we do have them but we don't have the ordinary curve'*. SF believed in developing inclusion through the introduction of the autism classes *'so ... we brought these children and brought them into our school'*. SF believed *'it was good for the other children as well. Because they saw well not everybody is like everyone else in the classroom. No, we're not all wonderful and brilliant and very academic.'* SF reflected that the opening of the autism classes *'was good for everybody. You know, it brought probably a lovely relationship between the children in the class and the children in the autism classes'* (SF).

7.1.5 The risk of exclusion

BH identified the possible risk of exclusion when trying to promote inclusion in a school: *‘I suppose it's something you have to be careful about too is inclusion at whose expense...if you're including people that it isn't excluding others’*. DC alluded to this when she gave the example of pupils in the autism classes getting an Easter egg at Easter time, however the mainstream children do not get this as the school could not afford it. This inequity played on her mind as a possible form of exclusion for the mainstream pupils while trying to be inclusive of the autism classes: *‘every year the children there are getting Easter eggs to bring home now our children in mainstream don't get an Easter egg to bring home.... I questioned like you have to be careful with inclusion that you don't overcompensate’* (DC).

7.2 Discussion

7.2.1 Leadership attitudes, values and vision

Values have a multi-layered effect on inclusionary leadership (Vlachou and Tsirantonaki, 2023). As Kinsella (2020) states, a ‘definitive definition of inclusion has thus far proved elusive’ (Kinsella, 2020, p. 1), while Azorín and Ainscow (2020, p.59) describe inclusion as an ‘ongoing, active process.... a messy compromise’. What the principals described in this research is their personal experiences and vision. Caution must be exercised when working within the absence of a definition that some of the practices described are seen as being inclusive, when in fact they may further compound exclusion (Florian, 2019). Giving an Easter egg to each child in the autism classes but not the mainstream children may emphasise difference even though it is done with the best of intentions. The idea of school leadership promoting equity within the school has been previously mooted in research (Lambrecht *et al.*, 2022; Blackmore, 2006; Precey

and Entrena, 2011). The idea of equity and equality was strongly outlined by a number of the principals as the heart of how they envision inclusion in their schools (Slee, 2018b). The principals spoke about serving all of the children in their local community so that they can learn together (Tiernan, 2022; Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020). This sense of equality within the local community is akin to the vision the UN has outlined for inclusive education, whereby all children have access to an inclusive education without segregation (United Nations, 2007). The principals spoke about differentiation or adapting curricula to allow all pupils to access no matter what the level, implementing effective individualised teaching (Hornby, 2015). As researched previously, school principals are pivotal in promoting the best educational experience for all of the students enrolled in their schools (Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004; Precey and Entrena, 2011). There was a sense within the interviews that principals were grappling to do the best that they could but they were making educational settlements (Slee, 2018b), particularly with reference to resources such as SNA support, which had to be distributed judiciously to best serve the children. Kinsella (2020) stated that children with disabilities and special needs dominate the inclusion debate. Lindsay *et al.* (2013) found that a lack of knowledge or understanding inhibits the vision for an inclusive school. This research concentrates on autism classes, however a number of principals spoke about other societal groups for whom they felt responsible. Kinsella (2020) echoes the sentiments of some of the principals in this research when he speaks to the idea that how a person might see inclusion may be perceived as exclusion by another. Inclusion has to be understood in relation to the context in question (Azorín and Ainscow, 2020). This situated learning context (Lave and Wenger, 1991) gives rise to the different visions principals had for inclusion as they were speaking about their own school context. These different visions varied from providing a place in the community for

children with additional needs to the principal who perceived her school lacking in diversity, with the classes acting as a way to introduce a more varied pupil population. Azorín and Ainscow (2020) stress the ‘importance of addressing inclusion in relation to particular contexts’ (Azorín and Ainscow, 2020, p. 68), reflecting how the principals addressed inclusion in their own contexts, overcoming the proximal challenges to develop inclusion. Many of the principals returned to the question on inclusion later in the interview as they assimilated their thoughts further about it. Inclusion is a never-ending process of learning (Azorín and Ainscow, 2020), as demonstrated by the principals during interviews as they reflected deeply on their stance on inclusion.

7.2.2 Inclusionary Leadership- Attitudes and Values

Leadership lies in the relationships between leaders and those with whom they work (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020). The language used to describe how principals lead inclusion in schools is often narrow and focuses on the end product of an inclusive school without acknowledging the actions undertaken by the principal (Taylor *et al.*, 2007). Inclusionary leadership is the chosen term for this area as it combines inclusion and visionary (Lipsky and Gartner, 1997). Kinsella (2020) refers to the principal’s role as managing the change inherently needed to develop inclusive schools. Lambrecht *et al.* (2022) describe how pivotal principals are in inclusive education. This research seeks to identify the principal’s vision for inclusion and how they enact and lead in an inclusive manner. There can be challenges to leading an inclusive school with autism classes (Lindsay *et al.*, 2013). The research focuses on what practices the principals undertake to enact their vision for inclusion.

When examining the inclusionary principal, it was clear that the principals have strong moral values that underpin their inclusionary leadership. They had a positive attitude

towards inclusion in their schools and worked towards this goal (Cullinane *et al.*, 2022). They spoke about fairness and equity of resources when supporting the autism classes. There was a strong emphasis on developing a culture of acceptance of all through education and practices. Serving the local community was evidenced as a crucial part of their inclusionary leadership. Some principals focused on academic access while others leaned more towards the social inclusion and diversity aspect of inclusion in their schools. All agreed on the core purpose of facilitating everyone to be part of the learning community. All principals embraced inclusion and their positive disposition towards inclusion was central to this (Cullinane *et al.*, 2022). A view of inclusion as a much broader concept than supporting children with additional needs was the impetus for principals to work towards developing a school-wide culture and vision as part of their inclusionary leadership. An idea of the servitude of the inclusionary leadership was evident within the study. The servant leader (Cerit, 2009) has a purpose and vision, in this case it is inclusion (Taylor *et al.*, 2007). The servant leader puts the needs of the organisation before their own (Cerit, 2009). Principals put the needs of the children at the heart of what they do. This servant leadership with its moral purpose allows others to be loyal to the mission and motivates them beyond their potential, which in the primary schools allows for the best outcomes for the children. It also offers an opportunity to others in the learning community to develop their own conception about what inclusion should look like and what they can do to serve on this mission (Taylor *et al.*, 2007). Reflection on their ways of working informed the inclusionary leadership of the principals. They contemplated on some of their practices and questioned whether they supported their aim of inclusion. This process of reflection promoted the ‘seeing and understanding’ that the principals felt was needed to ‘act and hopefully to change for the better’ (Taylor *et al.*, 2007, p. 270). In summary the inclusionary leader is

someone who reflects continuously on their practices, they hold a moral mission to always do better and they think of others before themselves and act to serve all members of their school community.

7.3 Coaching & Mentoring

A significant theme that emerged from the analysis was the value of coaching and mentoring. The role of the school principal has become more expansive and multifaceted in recent times. Only well-equipped individuals who have the skills to deal with rapidly changing environments and complex situations will be in a position to sustain their role (Fullan, 2002). Mentoring and coaching have been recognised as important development tools (Kay, Hagan and Parker, 2009) which can encourage good practice and sustainability in the role. Mentoring was presented by some of the principals as a way of supporting themselves in their work and a way in which they in turn support others. KR believed that '*mentoring colleagues*' was one of the opportunities that came with working as a principal of autism classes. He found great satisfaction in helping other colleagues to succeed and this is the method he used. SC, as an early career principal, felt that there was not enough support available, but mentoring was accessible through the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) Leadership Mentoring Programme. MH joined CSL in an effort to upskill and got involved in '*mentoring*'. LD utilised a teacher who was a '*teacher mentor*' on staff to support a teacher colleague who was struggling within the autism class at the time. The teacher mentor helped the autism class teacher to put more structure in place through mentoring which in turn supported the teacher and the students. LD commented that the mentor did '*a fantastic job*' of supporting the struggling teacher. BH was so adamant about the importance of mentoring that he explained how upon retirement he intends to give his time '*to volunteer to come and speak to or mentor a principal or even come and talk to*

a staff, if they're opening up a special class'. He felt this type of support is currently absent from the system and he sees the need for it. Only one principal used the term 'coaching;' within the interviews. KR believed that depending on the staff experiences, that 'coaching' was something which may come into his work as principal of autism classes supporting and developing others.

Many of the principals spoke about a principal support group as a mechanism that supports their work in leading the autism classes. BH is involved in a local support group with IPPN and feels that being part of a collective '*opens up ... so many more doors.*' MH picks '*up little nuggets of information*' at her local principal support group. JL is a member of a support group in the local Education Centre but sometimes finds that '*it's a bit you know the same thing*'. She suggested '*a termly meeting of like local principals who [have] Autism classes*' would support her work in this area. Both SC and BH are members of groups specifically for principals with autism classes. BH maintains that a group like this '*is vital*'. He spoke about it as being a necessary tool for principals like '*the way you have your mentoring for newly appointed principals*' (BH). He felt that when opening a new autism class or taking on principalship of a school with autism classes, the principal should be offered supports such as '*mentoring or something similar to a newly appointed principal*' (BH). AW was not currently a member of a specific group for principals of autism classes but feels that '*a group of principals who have autism classes, rather than just your general principal support group, you know, it's probably a good idea now that I am thinking about it...*'.

The idea of seeking support from principal colleagues in an informal way was articulated by some of the principals. SC suggested cold-calling as an informal avenue where '*peer colleagues, would be supportive. You could ring somebody up and ask a question*'. CK has a principal '*buddy*' she can ring and ask if she '*can...have some*

advice on this’ particular issue or concern. BH spoke about the increase in support since he became principal in 2000: *‘there’s an awful lot of informal support, where I can pick up the phone and just ring one or two principals that I trust and even if they can’t advise me ...you’ll have somebody to talk to ...to lend an ear’*. DC stressed the importance of speaking to a principal with experience in leading autism classes to gain advice in the area and advised: *‘the most important thing is to speak to a principal ...who has experience’* of the area.

7.3.1 Discussion

Coaching and mentoring (Garvey, Strokes and Megginson, 2010) were cited by some of the principals as a way of working and to provide support. While both have similar characteristics (DiGirolamo and Tkach, 2019) it is important to remember the distinction between both. Coaching is a way of supporting specific performance development through the individuals’ self-discovery (Whitmore, 2017) whereas mentoring is more associated with a development enabled by an expert (Clutterbuck, 2008). Mentoring is an identified way to provide teacher professional learning (Cullinane *et al.*, 2022). Both mentor and mentee can benefit from the relationship in terms of increased satisfaction and knowledge. (Talley and Henry, 2008) The situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) experience for principals within their own school contexts allows them to grow and develop as leaders of autism classes. These principals work specifically within the autism class domain in primary schools. The principals want to build and extend their practices through their shared repertoire of experiences. They exchange their knowledge and experiences in a social context by phone or meetings. The exchange can be in a smaller one-to-one setting or in larger support group meetings. This socio-cultural context develops the principals’ leadership. The

community of principals of autism classes can be viewed as a community of practice with all the necessary constituent parts (Wenger, 2011a).

The common shared interest within the groups is leadership and leadership of autism classes as the principals engage in the sharing of information (Printy, 2008) between themselves within support groups or more informally amongst trusted colleagues. Ryan and Mathews (2022a) recommend that principals should be encouraged to join professional organisations which are specifically related to SEN, as was suggested by a number of the principals interviewed. The social and relational aspect to the role of principal reflects the idea of a community of practice. Both mentoring and coaching are used within the exchange between participants in the principals' community of practice. More experienced and knowledgeable principals mentor principals who are just beginning their journey (Daresh, 1997) in autism class leadership through exchange of information in a directional flow from the expert to the apprentice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). However, the more experienced principals are developing their own practice and knowledge from the encounters with the less experienced principal (Duncan and Stock, 2010). The community of practice model allows for the multi directional knowledge exchange of all participants. Coaching is also used when principals seek out information from another. While the principal may not have the information required or experience of the situation of the autism class, they were reported to support the self-development of each other or their staff, reflective of a coaching approach.

A number of the principals were part of CSL programmes, which inferred that they had knowledge of coaching and mentoring. However, they may not necessarily have engaged with the mentoring and coaching that CSL offer. If they have fully engaged with CSL, then they themselves may use a coaching and mentoring approach to their work following training in skill development. The type of coaching and mentoring

programme offered by CSL to leaders is in existence internationally (Hopkins-Thompson, 2000; Robinson, Horan and Nanavati, 2009). The use of coaching as a tool to empower people is creating a new paradigm for leadership and management (Evered and Selman, 1989). The term coaching was cited once within the data, suggesting that the paradigm shift from authoritarian leadership towards a coaching culture (Gormley and van Nieuwerburgh, 2014) is still taking place (Evered and Selman, 1989). Hawkins (2012) proposes that a coaching culture:

‘...exists in an organisation when a coaching approach is a key aspect of how the leaders, managers, and staff engage and develop all their people and engage their stakeholders, in ways that create increased individual, team and organisational performance and shared value for all stakeholders’ (Hawkins, 2012, p. 21).

Coaching may not be the common vernacular in primary schools yet, despite its growing popularity (Sugrue, 2014). None of the principals spoke about undertaking the professional coaching on offer through CSL, which is highly regarded by principals who undertake it as a professional exercise (Fitzpatrick-Associates, 2021) while Murphy (2020) found that newly appointed principals were very satisfied with the availability of coaching in Ireland. This is not to imply that the principals in this study had not undertaken coaching but perhaps they did not see the correlation between developing leadership capacity of leading autism classes through the mechanism of coaching. A lack of principal engagement in coaching may echo staff not wanting to be coached and a preference for being told what to do (DiGirolamo and Tkach, 2019), reflective of the need for a cultural shift towards coaching. However, DiGirolamo and Tkach (2019) found that the leaders’ use of coaching was a form of participative leadership and coaching can help to support improvements in vital teaching skills (Cohen *et al.*, 2020) which supports the individual within the learning organisation

(Anthony, 2017). This study suggest that the principals did engage in participative leadership as the principals reported a very good relationship with staff in the autism classes. Whilst there may not have been a formality to the coaching and mentoring employed, the principals referred to working as part of the team within the autism classes, which mirrors the idea of staff development together in a participative coaching and mentoring relationship.

7.4 Roles Principals assume when leading autism classes

Within this research the principals discussed the variety of roles and styles they enacted or employed when leading autism classes as part of their daily work.

7.4.1 Principal as Advocate

A number of principals spoke about viewing themselves as advocates for the children in the autism class. Firstly, when speaking about allocating children to an autism class in their school if more than one existed, principals spoke about the thought process that surrounds a decision like that in terms of the most suitable place for the child. SC said she had *'to advocate for the child'* so as *'to try and put them where they will benefit the most'* (SC). MK proffered that the increased number of autism classes opening may have the appearance of supporting children with autism adequately but she cautioned that it is not always the case and the principal has the role of trying to navigate and *'to advocate for the child'* (MK). She finds this task difficult. She argued that *'building a building and opening classes is the easiest thing you ever did. But, but to ... properly educate, the children is the hardest, you know'* (MK). Once a child has enrolled in the class, principals continued to advocate for what programme or resources the child would need in order to reach their potential. DC spoke about the management of staffing in terms of the personalities of the adults that would be best suited to working in the

autism classes and of benefit to the children. She stated that she tries *‘to advocate for what's best for the children in this class, and you work...from there’* (DC). BD also talked about advocacy in terms of staffing the autism classes: *‘I suppose the staffing of the classes ... getting that right, is critical’*. This is a time consuming and arduous process whereby the principal gives a huge time investment *‘to make sure the pieces all fit together... the personalities work together. I suppose that really what we're saying is that that experience meets the demands of advocates’* (BD). FC outlined his definition of advocate as someone who really knows the children very well and works with the children rather than at a distance as the administrator in the office. He described himself as *‘kind of an advocate, I suppose’* (FC). He gave a practical example of what he views an advocate: *‘I’m down there every day.... I’m hands on rather than just sitting and sitting in the office, you know. So that's an advocate’* (FC).

7.4.2 Principal as Partner

Partnering with parents was outlined as part of the role. Principals in this study discussed their role as partner to the many stakeholders involved in the autism class. This partnership approach supported the best learning environment for the child where all partners worked together. BH spoke about *‘establishing and maintaining a strong parent-school relationship.’* Central to this was the *‘whole idea of trust, openness and partnership’* (BD). BD hoped that people felt that they were *‘on the same page and on the same team’* (BD). He hoped that they would feel comfortable if they needed to come to him *‘with something, that might work better’* (BH). Principals highlighted that they were going on the journey with parents, for example supporting professional appointments: *‘I think we're having to support the parents with the HSE piece all the way’*(LD). The initial diagnosis for parents can be very difficult. They are often left bereft and will contact the local school for support. It is at this point that the principal

becomes a partner to parents who are set to embark on this lifelong journey with their child. BH outlined the experience for parents getting a diagnosis of autism for their child, which is often accompanied with a lack of information and direction *'it's like as if they're left'* asking *'where do I go? Who do I turn to?'* (BH). BH is cognisant of this lack of information, so if a parent rings or *'gets in touch with me about enrolling their child, I will always give them the time.... I think it's important...I'm the first contact with them'* (BH).

Principals become partners with the children, ensuring parents take them to their professional appointments such as occupational therapy or speech and language therapy. One principal described how the speech and language therapist was facilitated to carry out appointments at the school. As a result of the reduction in visitors to the school during the COVID 19 crisis, this arrangement ceased. The principal reported a noticeable decline in parents taking children to their appointments without the support of the school. This is particularly significant in areas of disadvantage, where parents may not have access to travel or other barriers may be in place: *'there's less parents bringing their children to the clinic, because we (the school) were following up on making sure the parents would come'*(MS).

7.4.3 Principal as Interpreter

Interpreting was recognised as a role the principals take on when leading the classes in their schools. Principals take Special Educational Needs policies and interpret them for the different stakeholders within the school. As SC described, the principal takes the policy and is *'kind of disseminating stuff to the ISM (In School Management) team'*. A principal spoke about meeting the needs of the pupils through policy: *'I just underlined challenges and how they could be met going forward through policy or practice will be*

explored' (BH). MS had a unique need to interpret policy from a number of different sections within the Department of Education (DE), given his particular context which spanned a number of government departments. His setting is very unique and hence he has to interpret and often contend with incompatible requirements from a number of different agencies. He explained that his school gets *'an annual budget from the department, and we're under the Early Years education policy units'* (MS). Originally the school was under *'social inclusion'* but was then *'moved to the early years' education policy unit which is a colocation with the Department of Children. But they're under the Department of Education'* (MS). This level of intergovernmental governance gives a distinctive perspective into the complexities of interpretation for some principals.

Principals of established classes found themselves in the role of interpreting current policy around autism classes for other principal colleagues who were just about to open classes. This interpretation of the myriad of policies and the dearth of information was particularly useful to teaching principals who reached out for the support *'I find myself and I suppose there's a different role, where teaching principals will contact me, because we're long established here are they're establishing classes'* (KR). Interpreting for parents was another facet to the role expressed by principals. Principals spoke about parental misconceptions about the function and role of the autism class, this can be the starting point of the interpretation *'I think parents don't understand what an Autism classes is ... in a mainstream school... I feel they hear special setting, and they just go I want my child to be normal, because she can talk and she can read'* (LD). For parents who are not familiar with the education system coming to terms with the myriad of acronyms can prove a difficult barrier to overcome. Principals discussed how parents of newly diagnosed children may contact them for support, even without their child

being enrolled in the school, as they are overwhelmed by the whole situation. It is at this point that the principal interprets the points of contact for the parents and translates it into terms they can understand: *'I find that ... a lot of parents are floundering; they don't know their SENOs'* (BH).

7.4.4 Principal as Negotiator

The idea of the principal as a negotiator was put forward by a few principals: *'I'm how do you say it like a negotiator'* (MH). MS describes his role as *'negotiating on behalf of the parents, and that goes for on behalf the children to make sure that additional supports are there for the children'* (MS).

7.4.5 Principal as Helper

The principal in the role of helper was demonstrated by a number of principals in their way of working. FC spoke in a broader sense about how principals leading school with autism classes *'are very happy to help'* (FC). MH saw herself as *'a helper ...an assistant'* (MH). SC described how she tries to see *'what can we do maybe to help a situation'*. AW spoke about she tries supporting inclusion in the mainstream by *'helping teachers with ...and managing the integration of the kids into their mainstream classes as well'* (AW). BH spoke about *'trying to help'* parents as much as possible given the current intricate system to access support. JL described listening as a way of helping. She explained that when someone wants *'a bit of help'* that she is *'a listening ear'* (JL). JL also highlighted the issue of staff giving more than they can. She felt that part of her role was to help them *'realise their limits'* for their own long-term good. JL talked about collegial support in helping other schools. She recalled the scenario where she *'got a call out of the blue for help from another fairly local school'* (JL). MS talked about helping out during a period of summer provision: *'I would have been here for the month*

of July helping out.' MH helps the staff and pupils during summer provision by '*making sure during the summer they have some support*' (MH). FC spoke about the importance of practical help for teachers and how they value it. He stated that teachers do need his help, sometimes it could just be his '*physical help*'. KR really liked the idea of helping in order to see people progress in themselves. He explained it as: '*...yeah. I think the opportunities are, about helping others to succeed*' (KR).

7.4.6 Principal as Supporter

The principal's role in supporting others was mentioned in the study by a number of those interviewed. LD saw herself as supporting everyone in the school. She outlined that she's '*supporting everybody... supporting teachers... supporting the staff...supporting the parents.... supporting the child*' (LD). Many of the principals spoke about supporting teachers. AW spoke about supporting them in their planning. She supports '*them with their, you know, their IEPs*' (AW). SC saw part of her role as supporting '*the teacher really*' and as the '*conduit*' to '*supporting them to do the job*' (SC). BH talked about '*supporting the staff within ... the autism classes.*' MS spoke about '*supporting the staff there and then*'. BD described his support as an investment in the staff. He stated that '*it's investing in and knowing your staff members, knowing really knowing what's going on in their lives and supporting them is so important in this area*' (BD). Supporting staff in the autism classes was seen as necessary, given the complexities of the role. '*I think supporting of the staff, because it is an exhausting role at times*' (CK) is an important function of the principal. Supporting parents was seen as a role by principals: '*...and me there as principal just supporting them and giving them advice where possible*' (MS). DC supports the '*parents*' and MC is also there '*to support the parents*' (MS).

7.4.7 Principal as Organiser

Principal as organiser was identified within this research: *‘obviously the whole thing of being organised as an organiser’* (BH), MH spoke about the summer provision programme and her role in organising it: *‘I’m the one who has to organise this’* (MH).

7.4.8 Principal as Conflict Resolver

MH outlined the issue of conflict within a school and how she was supported by her chairperson to develop skills to deal with it. She outlined that her chairperson *‘would see me a lot, and see how it all plays out’* (MH). MH explained that the chair has *‘management experience herself, ... she would have recommended’* MH *‘go further into it, and improve ...go to Prone Communications in Dublin’* as *‘they have like conflict resolution, you know, and courses that you can do on conflict and communication’* (MH). This example exemplified the need for the principal to have skills in resolving conflict.

7.4.9 Discussion

This study emanated from the Cobb (2015) article review on the different roles principals play when leading for inclusion in their schools. There were many similarities between Cobb (2015) and the Irish context but also some differences. Looking firstly at the results that Cobb (2015) outlined:

Table 6. Roles.

	Inclusive programme delivery	Staff collaboration	Parental engagement
Visionary	✓	✓	
Partner		✓	
Coach		✓	✓
Conflict resolver		✓	
Advocate	✓		
Interpreter	✓		✓
Organiser	✓	✓	✓

Figure 13: Roles Principals Play (Cobb, 2015, p. 221) ✓

Comparing findings in this study to Cobb's findings highlight that all of the seven roles identified by participants, indeed a further number of roles, were outlined as summarised in the table below:

Role	As identified by Cobb (2015)	As identified in this research (2023)
Visionary	✓	✓
Partner	✓	✓
Coach	✓	✓
Conflict Resolver	✓	✓
Advocate	✓	✓
Interpreter	✓	✓
Organiser	✓	✓
Negotiator		✓
Assistant/ helper		✓
Supporter		✓

Table 4: Comparison of Cobb's findings to this research

The legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) of principals in utilising different roles (Cobb, 2015) depending on the situation within the school and stakeholders gives rise to the idea of the school as a community of practice. The principals are experts or masters in leadership and take on different roles depending on the need and situation. The variety of roles identified by the principals signifies a deep understanding and a requisite skill set. Principals enact these roles in a relational context (Eacott, 2020) and are supporting others in the community of practice, such as staff or parents to navigate and become more expert in the area of autism special education in this case. The supporting role of the principal as identified here has been identified in other research and its importance in reducing isolation of staff outlined (Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2019; Thornton, Peltier and Medina, 2007)

How the principals viewed their schools and what inclusion looked like to them gave an insight into the culture and climate they envision for the learning environment (Apple *et al.*, 2022). School climate is broadly based on the perceptions of staff of their general working environment, the structure of the learning organisation and personalities of the participants within the school (Hoy, 1990). Hoy (1990) summarises climate as the internal factors that distinguish one school from another and how this may influence the members of the organisation. In a school with autism classes the climate is founded on the disposition of the principal and staff towards inclusion.

Culture is personality; a way of thinking based on values and beliefs (Gruenert, 2008). A belief may be that a school exists for the pupils (Hoy, 1990). The inclusionary principal believes that the school is for all children. They strongly believe in the power of the autism classes and see the place of the autistic child as being with their peers.

The principals in the study sculpted their culture through their values and beliefs. Educational leaders play an important role in shaping vision, strategy, and the path into the future, in ways that must be responsive to local needs and contexts, while recognising the particular challenges facing education settings within their broader communities. The contemporary challenges facing society are the questions that educational leaders must face in the everyday enactment of their roles in schools. Similar to Cobb's analysis, some of the roles were identified by a number of the principals when they spoke about their rationale for inclusion and what that might look like in their schools (Cobb, 2015). The similarities of roles between the studies highlights that there is a pattern or perhaps a predetermined pathway of working when leading for inclusion which might be of use to principals in the future. The addition of negotiator in the Irish context could perhaps be a nod to the complex system that currently exists to access supports which was until recently under the guise of a number of different agencies such as the HSE, the NCSE and other agencies. This has been somewhat transformed by the umbrella agency of Child Disability Network Teams (CDNT) teams which are currently in place to provide services to children with autism. While the principals here spoke about their vision for inclusion in their respective schools their interpretations varied somewhat in a broader definition of inclusion to a more practical way of working for inclusion yet each encompassed a broad view of including every child in their schools as much as possible (Kinsella, 2020). They were acutely aware of the challenges of meeting the needs of all their pupils (Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2019).

The school principals interviewed were highly aware that they are in a space of 'fierce accountability and fiscal pressures, while coping with a larger political environment' (Jean-Marie, Normore and Brooks, 2009, p. 20), particularly in relation

to autism classes which are a very politicised topic in the current Irish landscape. In spite of these pressures the principals were determined to act as advocates for these pupils to ensure they were receiving the best and most appropriate education they could be offered. Just as Biesta (2017) asks educators to think about their moral purpose in education, the principals in this study identified their purpose (Deal and Peterson, 1999) as that to use their leadership so that social justice could prevail and the pupils in the autism classes would be afforded the best experience that could be provided for them. The principals in the study spoke about partnership as a collaborative relationship to ensure the best outcomes possible for the pupils (Dahir *et al.*, 2010). Principalship is a relational activity. School leaders see the importance in building relationships with all of the stakeholders within the school (Rieg and Marcoline, 2008). For the purpose of this study, the principals were focusing on partnership for the best outcomes for the children in the autism classes. There was no single way to describe how this relational action was achieved. Eacott (2020) uses a relational theory to analyse how principals work and what they see as important. Principals in the study viewed relationships as being important and worth investing their limited time in in order to best serve the pupils in the autism classes.

7.5 Leadership styles utilised when leading autism classes

Within the research a number of leadership styles were evident. Transformational leadership was demonstrated by the principals who spoke about opening the autism classes in their school and the steps they took to ensure its success. AW opened the autism classes in her school. She felt that they '*needed to make...the school more diverse*' through the opening of autism classes. She outlined how the school is '*sitting in a little corner of Ireland, and is 97% Catholic*' all of the children are '*from the same kind of backgrounds*' (AW). As part of the process of opening the classes she spoke

about having to '*bring ...staff along*' (AW). Due to the success of her leadership she explained that the staff believe that opening the autism class was '*one of the best things we've ever done*' (AW). However, she did caution that if a school were to be '*compelled*' to open a class that she was unsure as to how the teachers would feel about it. Transforming continues long after the classes have opened. MW spoke about inheriting autism classes but working very hard to improve the running of the classes given her own personal experience of having an autistic family member. She transformed the classes by creating a '*change in the setup in the Autism classes*' and she '*provided leadership for teachers that were there*'. Following her work on this she declared that she was '*very proud of what we've done*'. One principal reflected on how he hopes to employ transformational leadership to develop the school even further. KR explained that he had been looking at theory and that he hopes to use transformative leadership to develop '*a model of quasi classes*' whereby everyone in the school will work '*together inclusively not just on integration, but on all our approaches*' (KR). This model of the autism class would not be as structured as they are now. There would be much more fluidity between the autism classes and the mainstream. DS told the story of her school being one of the first schools in the country to open autism classes. As a teacher in the school at the time she was observing that change. The classes are now very well established with a staff that were employed directly to work in the classes. Staffing was never an issue as the teachers employed had restricted recognition qualifications so could not work in the mainstream setting. She now finds herself transforming how the staffing is viewed as one of the autism class teachers was '*poached*' by another school. She now has to adopt some staff rotation which is a change for the school but DS views it positively saying it is '*nice to have a little bit of movement over and back*' between

the classes and mainstream. This may denote DS' assumptions about inclusion and may be viewed as separation, segregation and othering of the autism classes.

Instructional leadership was evident within the research. Most of the principals spoke about developing the teaching and learning of staff in their schools. SC spoke about supporting a teacher to help a child by *'sending a teacher on CPD or an online training'*. DS felt that the most important role for the principal is *'people skills and managing people'*. She tries to *'get people to want to work together and to be enthusiastic coming into school and to want to do a good job'*(DS). If this positive leadership is in place, DS believed that *'everything else will look after itself, then they'll investigate methodologies, and they'll go on and Continuous Professional Development (CPD)...and they do well if they're enthusiastic, if they feel they want to do their best.'* BD explained that he felt the principal had to *'be very mindful of CPD ... that CPD is given to the staff and staff are supported at all times in in those areas.'* CK acknowledged that *'there's a lot of training opportunities in terms of professional CPD around having the classes.'* She engaged with *'Middletown Centre for Autism'* and the *'NCSE autism advisors'* which have been a *'fantastic help'* to their school. BH encouraged his staff to *'to do courses'* because they want to *'to upskill and to learn more.'* JL spoke in an instructional leadership sense when she looked towards identifying *'who wants to teach in the autism classes next year'* and supporting them by sending them on some introductory autism courses. This is not an option currently available to them *'unless you're in the setting'* (JL). She was frustrated by this and exclaimed *'so much of that makes no sense'* and questioned whether *'there could be something for before teachers go in so you're not turning up on day one?'*(JL). Principals used instructional leadership in the development of their own pedagogical growth. SC would feel more supported with CPD specific to the area of *'leadership and*

autism'. MH urged principals taking on autism classes to have *'a bit of CPD behind you'*. Her experience was that she would *'probably be lost if I hadn't started the Masters'*. MW highlighted an obstacle for principals professional learning. She explained that if there is any CPD available *'you're going to send your teachers'*. BH acknowledged that the teachers in his school have *'done way more courses than I have ever done on... ASD...so both of them have way more knowledge, way more understanding of ASD than I do'* but that they can tackle issues together in an *'informal'* manner. BD spoke about the importance as a principal in *'informing yourself of best practice of methodologies of courses, guideline circulars.'* FC urged principals to *'definitely do some professional development prior to taking on the role'*.

7.5.1 Discussion

Teachers agree with the principals' observations that professional learning in the area of autism is needed prior going in to the autism class (Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2019). Further training is needed to support inclusion of autistic children in the school (Lindsay *et al.*, 2013). Principals are *'committed to developing a continuum of expertise relevant to inclusive special education'* (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020, p. 1000). The context of the autism classes lends itself to a situated learning experience for all involved (Lave and Wenger, 1991). All staff have the opportunity to grow their knowledge and professional skills. Teachers are encouraged by principals to attend courses to further their knowledge. In this context the principals are the gatekeepers to implementation of best practice (Lambrecht *et al.*, 2022). Principals acknowledged the importance of collaboration when working in the autism classes (Lindsay *et al.*, 2013) and aligned this to best practice for the students, which reflected their inclusive leadership practice (Dorczak, 2011) in spite of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (2023) finding that collaboration is *'one of the greatest challenges in schools'* (Irish

National Teachers' Organisation, 2023, p. 2). 'Sharing of knowledge and competency with colleagues' is highlighted as a best practice model for professional learning (Cullinane *et al.*, 2022, p. 211). Lambrecht *et al.* (2020, p.12) proffer that 'transformational and instructional leadership practices have a positive effect' in inclusive education. The idea of a combination of leadership styles is reflective of the outcomes in this study. Principals employed both types of leadership styles and identified when it was appropriate to employ the style as a result of their conscious thought process. The principals in this study were at different stages of their leadership and inclusive leadership journey. Some were at the beginning and developing the school's vision for inclusion while others were aware of where they stood and wanted to employ transformational leadership to extend the idea of inclusion in the school as an organisation (Kinsella, 2020). This awareness of where they were on their journey allowed for self-reflection within this study. The sharing of practice as a means of developing instructional strength between staff and principal was used widely by a number of principals (Ainscow, Dyson and Weiner, 2014; Azorín and Ainscow, 2020). Principals acknowledged the teacher as expert and recognised themselves in an apprentice role (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The opportunity to develop leadership from below and alongside was presented in the data. The principals were happy to revert to the teachers in terms of expertise in the area while they saw themselves as bringing other skills to the setting, such as facilitating. This legitimate peripheral participation gave rise to the principals leading their own instructional development. The principals were highly motivated and interested in the area (Azorín and Ainscow, 2020), and advised any future principals to undertake some professional learning in the area. Some 46% of principals recommended that anyone new to the role should undertake a specific leadership courses in the area of autism if it became available.

7.6 Autism classes as a Model of Distributed Leadership

One of the key ideas emerging from interviews with principals is the idea of a shared or distributed leadership practice model as being preferable when leading and managing the autism classes. Principals referred to the idea that they were in fact taking the lead from the staff within the autism classes. When it comes to the area of the autism classes many principals felt that they were at a knowledge or experience deficit given that they may never have worked in one of these classes or have prior knowledge of the area. As principal AW described: *'there's no point in me offering support in what they're doing because half the time I wouldn't know ...and I also obviously I take my lead from them...'* (AW). This acknowledgement of the staff in a leadership role within the school gives rise to the idea of multiple leaders within the organisation (Spillane, 2005). This openness, as ascribed by AW, coupled with a vision of multiple leaders, lends itself to a distributed model of leadership within the autism class.

Distributed leadership is lauded as the most beneficial style of leadership for any organisation but particularly schools (Harris and Beycioglu, 2011). The vulnerability of principals when reflecting on their place within the realm of autism classes perhaps allows for a true example of distributed leadership in action in schools. Principals spoke about how the autism classes were akin to a school in its own right: *'it feels like it's almost like its own little school'* (JL), where staff had to lead and manage. The image mirrors the *'feeling of a small school'* (JL), where everyone knows each other. This idea allows staff to take ownership and responsibility for leading the learning in the autism classes. Staff working in the classes embark on professional learning to become adept in knowledge and practice in the field. This endeavour renders them more expert than the principal of the school. Most principals interviewed acknowledged and embraced this idea. The staff lead the way in the classes. The principal in a sense

relinquishes the manager role to become part of the team. Their role is revolutionised. The preconception of them as all-knowing is diminished. However, they bring a set of skills to the team. Their role may be better conceived of as coach. They create space for the team to discuss difficult issues and come up with solutions. There is no hierarchy within this example. All staff levels - teacher, SNA and principal are working together with the common goal to support these autistic children. *'I work as a team approach with room seven our autism class and then talk with the teacher and the SNAs ...what do you feel we should be doing so it's more like leading the conversation'* (MS).

7.6.1 A school within a school

While the idea of a school within a school nods toward the tensions that exist between special and inclusive education (Kinsella, 2020) it lends itself to a sense of exclusion if the autism classes are seen as a separate entity within the same learning organisation. DS, when describing the movement of pupils *'over and back'* between mainstream and the autism class, further compounds the idea of segregation. It demonstrates educators' positivity towards inclusive education without a total inclusion approach as seen in the research (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002). Structuring the autism class with its own staff and referring to it as an independent entity further compounds this idea. It reimagines what the classes could be in terms of them becoming their own entity and hence allowing a complete transformation of the traditional roles of the staff. It must be questioned whether this idea in fact is exclusionary (Kinsella, 2020). While placement in the autism classes allows access to more favourable resourcing in terms of staffing, the idea of a separate school within a school goes against the legitimate peripheral participation of the child with their peers in the mainstream class (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The principals' outlook on the idea of the inner school correlates with Avramidis and Norwich (2002) conclusion of teachers' attitudes as 'although positive towards the

general philosophy of inclusive education, do not share a ‘total inclusion’ approach to special educational provision’ (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002, p. 142). A reciprocal trust and faith between principals and staff was evident in principal voice.

7.6.2 Principal taking the lead from staff

The principals’ responses indicate that they see themselves as a ‘support’ to the staff and the classes. The idea of directly leading the classes was not mentioned by any participant. One principal spoke about going into the classes to gain experience and a knowledge base. While principals referred to themselves as a support for the staff within the autism classes, no principal spoke about leading from the front within this environment. It could be proffered that the principals are abdicating responsibility to the staff in the autism classes, given their open admissions to having much less expertise in the area. The idea of distributed leadership blurs the power relationships between leaders and followers (Gronn, 2000). Distributed leadership may be a convenient curtain for the principals to hide behind in the case of the autism classes. Teachers are expected to teach in any area of the school, be it mainstream, support or autism classes. If we apply this point to principals then it could be argued that a principal is expected to lead all areas of a school, including mainstream, support or autism classes.

7.7 Reciprocal support from others to the principal

Some principals identified themselves as being in a co-leadership capacity. While they felt they lacked the pedagogical knowledge in the area of autism they did acknowledge their role was primarily organising and obtaining much needed resources in order to support staff. SF hoped she assisted staff and considered herself ‘*as equal to them*’ (SF). Principals saw themselves as having a supportive role with staff whereby they encouraged staff whose self-belief may be tested. SC saw her role as to ‘*support the*

teacher really, and make them feel good'. She supported their self-efficacy by building their self-belief so they are *'capable of tackling the issues in an Autism classes'* (SC).

Additionally, some of the principals looked towards seeking staff support for their own role. The idea of staff supporting the principal was muted by BD when he spoke of the staff supporting each other and a feeling that *'we're there for each other'*. He went on to highlight that his deputy principal is an *'unbelievable'* support to him and that he very much felt like he had support *'in house'* in the school he leads. SF spoke about gleaning support from her *'own colleagues at school'*. MK stated that she gets *'huge support'* from her staff and that *'they're utterly supportive, they're great'*. MH spoke about looking for practical support for tasks that are not her strengths. She is aware that she finds administrative tasks difficult so has asked the teacher representative on the Board of Management to support her with *'recording the minutes'* (MH) and typing thereafter. CK described the staff in her school as *'amazing here'*. She detailed how all staff whether in the autism class or not would work together if for example a child was running from a class *'on a break for freedom'* (CK) any staff member would intervene to help the child to safety. CK believed that *'as a group we are very supportive of each other'*. MW spoke about the support she gets from her chairperson in terms of the autism classes in spite of her *'limited experience'* she finds her chairperson *'would be very supportive in terms of listening'*.

7.7.1 Discussion

The idea of co-leadership within the inclusive education sphere has been proposed in Irish research (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020, p. 995). Supporting staff are seen as an integral part of the job of principal (Cobb, 2015) and their use of support as central to staff contentment (Hughes, Matt and O'Reilly, 2015). This was acknowledged by a number of principals in this study. What is not as common within the research is what support principals need from staff for their contentment in the role. Circular 16/73 (Department of Education, 1973) outlines the roles and responsibilities of the principal teacher. This method of describing what a principal should do paints a picture of the role that is a more traditional top-down perception of the principal as being all knowing and all giving to their staff and their schools. This idea is being challenged and a shared - distributed leadership approach is muted (Fullan, 2015; Lambrecht *et al.*, 2022; Sugrue, 2009; Spillane and Diamond, 2007; Spillane and Camburn, 2006; Spillane, 2005). The principals in this study highlighted the importance of the support they received from their staff. The idea of co-leadership between principal and deputy or teacher leaders is a recommendation to ensure the sustainability of the role of principal in the longer term (Irish Primary Principal Network, 2022). The idea of principals looking inward at their schools shows a level of deepening trust between the adults within the organisation (Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008), moving towards the idea of shared leadership (Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008; Lambert, 2002) or leadership from the middle (Fullan, 2015). It goes deeper into recognising the need to build sustainability in the principal's leadership (Hargreaves, 2004) from within the learning organisation. Using both *top-down* and *bottom-up* leadership approaches can have a positive effect on the happiness of staff (Williams, Kern and Waters, 2015, p. 14). Hargreaves and Boyle (2015, p.5) speak about being 'uplifted by the inspiring words and actions of

others'. A concept of the responsibility of staff to support and sustain their principal is put forward here. It challenges the idea of the principal as the 'heroic leader' (Sugrue, 2009, p. 1). Indeed, it paints a picture of the staff becoming the heroes as the principal helps them to navigate the everyday complexities of the job. The role of the staff is integral to the happiness of the senior leader (Friedman, Friedman and Markow, 2008). The principals not only recognised this and were grateful but also conceded that this staff support was central to their leadership sustainability. This suggests not only the idea of the master seeking support from the apprentices but that anyone within the learning community can be an apprentice or master at any stage depending on their knowledge (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Support is given freely from the principal to the staff as outlined in this research. It is reciprocally received with great appreciation by them. Principals recognise themselves as ordinary mortals who have a desire to make a difference (Sugrue, 2009). It is this emancipation from the idea of being the all-powerful hero that allows them to rejoice in the conditions developed by the staff that allow them to lead confidently.

7.8 Disposition of the inclusionary principal

It was clear in this research that the principals who participated were positively disposed to the autism classes in spite of the challenges and difficulties that they outlined. BD described the autism classes as *'such a positive in terms of our value system'*. He went further and personally reflected that the autism classes have *'been the single best initiative that I've ever been involved in, in education. And I feel it really works'* (BD). BD has been an educator for over 20 years. MK found the experience of opening autism classes positive. She described it as *'very wonderful, in that it's a brilliant thing to bring to the school...to serve your local children, your local community'* (MH). MH was very

positive in terms of *'giving back to the community'*. She took great pride in it and spoke about how lovely it is to *'be able to work with people who, you know, might have special needs at home and you feel like you're helping them, and that is brilliant'*(MH). She viewed it as an opportunity for herself *'as a leader, you feel like you're helping, and it's rewarding in my job is to help or support them...'*(MH). The principals were eager to share stories of positivity that emanated from having the autism classes in their schools. CK told the story of a pupil based in the autism class who was preverbal. This pupil was integrating with the mainstream class but with no verbal communication. The mainstream class he was attending had a teacher who was very musical and played the guitar with the class. One Christmas the school held an assembly where the whole school attended. There was a boy soprano in the school who performed for the school with great aplomb. At that point the autistic pupil approached CK the principal and asked *'John sing?'*. CK recalled that she had never heard the child speak and was unsure as to what to do. She looked towards the staff for support. The mainstream teacher interjected that John had been mouthing to an Elvis song in the class the previous week. So CK invited John to sing for the school. John sang *'Love me Tender'* perfectly for the whole school. CK reminisced that *'every staff member was crying and half the boys as well'*. She explained that the school gave the child a standing ovation and that from that moment on the child became very engaged with school. She spoke about *'how rewarding it can be to just can have a lightbulb moment'*(CK). She talked about how she wished that people had *'more stories like that'* (CK) rather than negative ones.

7.8.1 Discussion

Kinsella (2020, p. 1354) argues that *'communication, consultation, collaboration, co-ordination and collaborative enquiry are central to the endeavour of inclusion'*. He speaks about the processes that are essential for inclusion but this does not take into

account the people involved. Dispositions in teachers' matter (Talbert-Johnson, 2016) and teachers generally have a positive attitude towards the idea of inclusion (Avramidis and Toulia, 2020) and special classes (Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2019), although teacher attitudes can still be a barrier (Tiernan, 2022). Gay and Howard (2000) state that students are more motivated and perform better when they have caring and positive relationships with their teachers. It could be argued autism classes perform better when they have a caring and positive principal at the helm (Horrocks, White and Roberts, 2008). The principals were clear on their educational purpose (Biesta, 2017) in relation to the autism classes and they believed that they were serving the children in their community. Many of the principals spoke about the classes in terms of their providing inclusive and meaningful education for all pupils in their local community, as seen in previous research (Drew and Cahill, 2020). If we envisage the local school as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) the principals play a part alongside teachers, parents and children. All of the principals highlighted the opportunities provided to them by the autism classes. One principal described it as the most important initiative he had ever been involved in, such was the personal impact he felt. The principals were proud of this work in spite of the many challenges they faced. They found joy in working with children from the autism classes and were honoured to share in some of their '*light bulb*' (CK) moments. The legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) of principals working with autistic children in a genuine way was illustrated in the story of the assembly. Assemblies are commonly conducted in schools in Ireland. The principals who spoke about them talked about inviting all children in the school to take part. The story of John who used his voice for the first time demonstrates how the principal used their place as head of the assembly in consultation with teachers to give that opportunity to John and develop their own

professional learning (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004 8). John used his voice. All staff and children were elated for John. This community of practice where principal, teachers, staff and children all worked together to support John illustrates a community of practice in action where all individuals have a part to play and all individuals can learn and grow from the experience. A little boy found his voice.

7.9 Conclusion

In this chapter the term Inclusionary Leadership was developed from the data. The principals held strong values of fairness and equity combined with a belief in a servitudinal style of leadership that supported the most vulnerable pupils in their communities. A number of different roles and leadership styles were outlined that when combined create the correct conditions for the inclusionary leader. The principals were cognisant of the importance of support from their staff. This study goes further and suggests that staff have a responsibility to create the right conditions for the principal to lead in order for the school to flourish. The disposition of the inclusionary leader develops the necessary skills and attributes to create an inclusive learning environment.

8 The impact of COVID 19 on Autism classes

8.1 Introduction

Education was highly impacted by the COVID 19 crisis (Hall *et al.*, 2021b). COVID 19 created the conditions for a ‘natural educational experiment’ (Kilcoyne, 2021, p. 247). Throughout this period, primary school principals had to adopt a crisis leadership approach as they navigated this uncharted territory for their school community. This chapter analyses the principals’ experiences of leading their autism classes during this period up until 2022. The impact of COVID 19 on the autism classes is examined under communications styles, leadership styles, staffing, wellbeing of the school community and opportunities that COVID 19 presented.

8.2 Communication

Communication was a theme that emerged throughout many of the conversations had with principals around COVID 19. DS described her experience of managing COVID 19 was *‘like managing anything else in school, it was a case of communication as central’*. SC described the general difficulties of trying to keep up to date with the constant changes in information. Information updates were delivered by the Health Service Executive (HSE) or Department of Education (DE). SC outlined the challenges of *‘trying to keep up to speed with the various changes’* (SC). DS emphasised the importance of communication during the time of school closures: *‘First of all, the most important for certain with special classes was communication, ... that I was in constant contact with parents’* (DS). While principals made the effort to communicate as much as was practicable there was a feeling of loss of incidental parent communication that would have been in existence prior to COVID 19. MS outlined this

as being *'the biggest thing, I suppose, is the loss of communicating face to face with parents.'* His school made phone calls to parents but the lack of onsite meetings at the school was a loss. Prior to COVID 19 his school organised *'special class parents meeting on a regular basis'* as they felt that *'the sharing amongst them ... phenomenal'* and *'they could support each other that peer support'* (MS). MS saw his role as supporting the parents *'and giving them advice where possible or getting experts people to talk, you know, simple thing, like should I put my child on Melatonin? You know, things like that, and sharing that'* (MS). The lack of the ability to support parents during lockdown was described by another principal. FC recalled a time when they *'weren't at school'* and *'it was particularly difficult, because all we could do really was ring these parents and offer support over the phone'*(FC). He recalled how they suggested *'activities'* but he felt that *'it was difficult'* (FC). FC was mindful of parents and spoke about the parents being with the children full-time and getting *'no break'* (FC).

While a number of principals highlighted the importance of regular and open communication with stakeholders (Stone-Johnson and Miles Weiner, 2020), COVID 19 curtailed some communications as confidentiality was required. Principals were required to be discreet while trying to operate with limited staff due to COVID 19 diagnosis and subsequent isolation and recovery. MH described the experience for her *'as a leader trying to communicate with everybody was hard... you know, the whole confidentiality thing, if someone did have COVID in that room, you can't tell anyone you know'* (MH).

8.2.1 Department of Education (DE) communication during the pandemic

One principal described how during one of the difficult periods of lockdown when schools were at the point of reopening that the senior members of the Department of

Education (DE) used the topic of autism classes for their own political gain. A policy to open special classes earlier than the rest of the school was put forward by DE. FC felt the Minister of Education at the time was using *‘special ed kids to kind of boost her own political standing*. He spoke about the Minister coming on the radio saying *‘I did this, and I did this and, you know’*(FC). FC felt that this was to serve to set herself *‘up as kind of, special children's parents’ best friend. Whereas I thought was quite shallow, actually. It was only for her own gain’*.

There was further criticism of how the DE got their messages across to principals. Principals were under pressure given the pandemic. Sometimes they heard very important messages from the media first rather than directly from DE, which further compounded their stress as the person with the responsibility to undertake the change at school level. MH gave the example of the way the DE *‘announced that summer provision was taking place last year’*. She felt that once it *‘went out in the media they gave me a couple of days’ notice to get it all up and running’*(MH). This put her under pressure and added to her workload.

The lack of communication and clarity from the DE was identified as a source of stress by Mohan *et al.* (2020). The fluid nature of the trajectory of the disease was examined by Harris and Jones (2020, p.244) who describe how the *‘responses, processes, procedures, and protocols can change, almost overnight, depending on how the virus develops’*, as was described by the principals in this research. It was the ever-changing cyclical channel of processes that principals suggested were at the root of the challenge of leadership at that time along with the frequency of leaking of information via social media (Beauchamp *et al.*, 2021). Parents, like principals, wanted more clear communication from the DE during the pandemic (Flynn *et al.*, 2021) which would

have supported their work as they navigated the remote learning period with their children.

8.3 Adapting the COVID 19 Response Plan in the autism classes

While it was stated that the autism classes were not that different to the mainstream classes when it came to developing a COVID 19 response plan, SC felt that *‘with regard to special classes, I don't think it's changed that much. Maybe it's the same thing, really just adding in PPE (personal protective equipment).’* Others felt that there were some adaptations needed for the special classes, particularly in terms of a cleaning regime given how hands-on the children within the classes can be with resources and equipment. MW described in her COVID Response Plan that they *‘would have been quite particular about resources’* but that this couldn’t happen *‘...in the autism classes’* given the *‘amount of resources they use.’* MW had to adapt the plan for the autism classes as there would have been *‘an impossible workload, to wash every resource after each child in an autism class’* (MW).

8.4 Leadership Style adopted by principals

The COVID 19 pandemic meant a swift change in approach for leaders, to a direct authoritarian leadership style at times whereas at other points they embodied a distributed leadership approach. Preservation of life was a common worldwide goal at that time and schools were no different. A crisis of this global magnitude was new to everyone. Principals had to make decisions without a road map and often with very little time or information. They had to reinvent who they were while calling on the expertise they had previously developed in their experience. The two ingredients for this process were described by DS as *‘communication and trust yourself’*.

Principals had to adopt a direct leadership style where they were bound by the information as released by HSE and DE. Courage and bravery were required on the part of the principal as they led their schools through the crisis and made decisions that would affect a large number of people. This type of leadership juxtaposed with the purpose of their leadership. *'I wasn't able to lead and manage because I wasn't leading teaching and learning. I wasn't leading'*(DS). The safety of their staff, students and communities was highlighted by principals as the main priority during the time of school closures and when schools reopened and continued working during the global pandemic. MH described the dual challenge of *'keeping the staff safe and well'*. In their school, COVID 19 *'did get into one of our rooms'* which resulted in a rise in *'anxiety level'*(MH). MH felt that *'every teacher needed a bit of counselling after all of this, especially in those ASD rooms.'* SC spoke about *'the whole general running of the school and making sure that there's enough PPE, etc, in the school'* so that the mental health of those in the school was taken care of and *'people are comfortable and not nervous, because if you have a nervous staff, where are you going with that'*. MS held *'care meetings once a month'*. He saw his role as leader during this time was *'to listen to how staff'* were *'getting on or what problems they'* had *'or what care issues and to try and respond. That's a challenge during the pandemic, when everybody's tired as well'* (MS).

During this period of uncertainty, principals had to make difficult decisions while at the same time trusting in their own judgement and abilities as they traversed uncharted waters. DS spoke confidently when she stated: *'Again, as I said, it's back to same thing again. It's about backing yourself, what's the right thing to do? What's not the right thing to do?'* (DS). This courage to act was demonstrated by DS when she made the decision along with the Board of Management of the school not to reopen the autism

classes after one of the closures as parents were worried about the consequences for their children. The lead-up to the decision affected DS as she described how she *'lay awake at night, wondering about it'*. After careful consideration of her school community, she decided that her special classes were *'not opening...when the government were telling us initially'* (DS). Her rationale for this decision was that it was *'the right thing to do'* (DS). The government subsequently reversed the decision to open the autism classes at that time and the classes *'didn't open up'* (DS).

All of the principals interviewed spoke in a general sense about the importance of inclusion and integration of the autism classes as part of the whole school. This looked different for different schools. The COVID 19 crisis inherently changed how inclusion could be achieved given the restrictions placed on schools. For some principals this impacted on how they lead their school *'I didn't really know how to lead inclusion in that because remote learning doesn't allow ... for inclusion'* (CK). CK cautioned that remote learning allowed for an appearance of inclusion but the reality was that it was inclusion *'but on a very superficial level...the level of engagement that those children needed, we weren't able to provide'* (CK).

While it is contended in this study that in relation to COVID 19 measures, principals acted mainly in a deliberative leadership style in relation to the autism classes as leaders, wanting to protect their school community as much as possible. The use of deliberative as the chosen leadership style over distributed during the COVID 19 crisis can be seen in research (Brown *et al.*, 2021). Harris and Jones (2020) and Burke and Dempsey (2020) argue that distributed leadership was the default leadership style used during COVID 19. Distributed leadership in the broader context of the primary school was enacted by principals as they heavily relied on the stakeholders to carry out the day to day running of the school in the remote context. For example, teachers were teaching

from their own homes at this time. DS was making difficult decisions around whether the autism classes should reopen or not from home. If we view distributed leadership as a practice rather than a role and the principal as leading rather than the leader we can then surmise that the principals, by choosing a more deliberative pathway during this time, were enacting distributed leadership in their decision making (Spillane and Diamond, 2007; Spillane, 2012).

8.5 Implications of COVID 19 on staffing

Given the contagious nature of COVID 19 there was a high absence rate of staff due to illness during this time. This high absence rate had an impact on how principals led their schools: *'staffing was a major issue'* (LD). One of the main duties of the principal was the constant recruitment of substitute staff: *'I felt I was just a sub seeker last year'* (DS). Even if principals could get substitute staff they were careful around who they allowed to work in the autism classes, given that change is a major challenge for children with autism. LD found staffing *'an issue'* as she felt that you couldn't *'just put anyone from the outside into an autism class'* to negate this issue she always tried to *'to get a substitute that the children at least know (LD)'*. To achieve this, LD would put one of the school's *'staff members into the autism classes and take the substitute to backfill their class'*. LD went on to explain that she would not use a stranger the children had never seen before as a *'substitute teacher in that class'*. LD had an awareness of the importance of consistency in the special classes and knew that bringing a stranger in changes their routine and *'changes to their routine are difficult for them to deal with. So even having a substitute that's not their normal teacher coming in is very traumatic for them.'*

During the global pandemic principals were ‘dealing with fluid and changing staffing situations meaning they are having to do much more with less’ (Harris and Jones, 2020, p. 244) which was a regular occurrence during the height of absences for any school. Staffing was an issue (Brown *et al.*, 2021). As described by the principals, they were playing a game of chess each morning in their schools as they moved around the people like pieces on the chess board to fill any of the gaps that were appearing daily in the school. This constant need for adaptability, flexibility and strategic thinking in terms of staff was one aspect of their work that caused stress and anxiety for the principals (Beauchamp *et al.*, 2021).

8.6 Wellbeing during COVID 19

8.6.1 Staff Wellbeing

Principals were on high alert monitoring how their staff were doing. MW reported that *‘the anxiety levels of the staff, that was quite difficult at the start’*. During the pandemic MS recounted how staff were visibly tired after a short time back in school. She said *‘by the time of midterm came, everybody was just wrecked. Going home, ready for the week’* (MS).

Mohan *et al.* (2020) identified teacher wellbeing as a major concern from many participants of their study in the Irish educational context. The principals in this study were no different. They talked about looking after their staff and checking in on their staff. A priority for principals was staff wellbeing (Brown *et al.*, 2021). This was an onerous task but at least in a general sense, all staff were within the school building itself. During school closures all staff were working at home. This relational connection was not in existence so this worry about staff weighed even more heavily for the principals who were powerless other than Zoom or phone check-ins with their staff.

8.6.2 Principals' own wellbeing

It was during the interview questions around COVID 19 that two principals became emotionally distressed and we had to stop the interview momentarily to allow them to gather themselves. This reaction stemmed from their frustration at not being able to support parents and families as much as they would like to. The sense of guilt from DS was palpable in her response when she spoke about how *'It probably impacted on us whereby the tremendous guilt that we all felt by not able by not being able to open last January, February and the mess that went on'*. Such was the guilt felt by staff that DS explained that *'there were two of us nearly going to come up here and just open the school...because we felt this awful guilt'*. DS expressed her care and concern for everyone: *'I suppose parents just I felt so sorry for them. I felt sorry for everyone'*. DS explained that in 2021 *'January, February, were the hardest two months'* and that this not only affected the autism classes but her own *'leadership'*.

MS also became upset when he tried to describe how the summer provision 2021 was a respite for many parents. He explained that schools and special classes *'are the only respite that parents get in supporting their children. And that was very much in evidence during July'*. (MS became visibly upset) *I don't know why I'm getting upset. Stupid. But you know that, that four weeks that we fought for to get, was so important for the children and the parents'* (MS).

Parental conduct during COVID 19 impacted on some of the principals' wellbeing. DS described a scenario at the end of the first of year of COVID 19 when she was exhausted. She was setting up school-based provision for the autism classes. This scheme allows for a minimum of two weeks and a maximum of four extra weeks' tuition on the school grounds during the month of July. DS employed staff from outside

the school as the school staff were too exhausted following the school year. There was a child with particularly extreme challenging behaviour who needed one to one SNA support which was difficult to organise but DS did manage to provide a shorter version of the programme. DS was upset when the parent complained and demanded the child be offered the full programme.

DS explained that when she contacted the parent, she was exhausted at this point in the year telling the parent that she was on her '*knees*' and that she was in a position to give the pupil in question '*a good two weeks*' but the parent said no and wanted three weeks. DS explained that she found this '*hurtful because it's kind of implying that you don't care about him* (the child). *And I'm kind of going have you any idea how much we put in*'. DS ended up paying privately for an SNA to allow the child to attend the full programme. The incident hurt.

The sudden change to leadership communication styles was hard for some principals: '*it was very, very heavy*' (MH). The new immediate and necessary tasks that had to be undertaken impacted on principal's wellbeing. SF explained that COVID 19 '*has been a disaster for principals...it's taken up a huge amount of our time between contact tracing and provider*', referring the practices in place at the time she felt like she was akin to '*a sergeant major going around making sure everything is done: sanitising masks, to major distancing, pods, everything, all that kind of stuff*'.

Despite the difficulties of leading during COVID 19, Mohan *et al.* (2020) found that principals had a high satisfaction level during this time. This level of satisfaction was not referenced by principals in this study, which echoes Dempsey and Burke (2020, p.8) who found that 'not one of almost 1,000 respondents sees themselves as thriving psychologically'. Perhaps this highlights the timing of the study in autumn 2021 when

principals had been dealing with the COVID 19 situation for over eighteen months and any initial positivity may have waned by this time. Principals were described as the ‘pinch point in the system’ (Harris and Jones, 2020, p. 244) during the COVID 19 crisis. It is possible that the prolonged position of being the pinch point wore down the resolve of principals and any good will was overshadowed by a weariness at the continued uncertainty of the COVID 19 situation. The research shows that that Irish primary principals were emotionally impacted during the COVID 19 crisis (Murphy and Devine, 2023; Brown *et al.*, 2021). Burke and Dempsey (2020) clearly identify the idea of impacted principal wellbeing in their study. Many of the leaders’ responses indicated a high level of stress at the early stages of the global pandemic in 2020. Harris and Jones (2020) caution that school leaders must now make their own wellbeing a priority going forward.

8.6.3 Wellbeing of parents

The thoughts of many of the principals reverted to the impact that COVID 19 had on the parents of pupils with autism. Principals were ‘*contacting them you know, children and parents*’ (MH) and enquiring about their welfare ‘*checking in how are they? How are they getting on?*’ (DS). Understanding the parents’ perspectives during this time was paramount and their voice was held in equal esteem to that of the staff in terms of decision making ‘*if you're communicating with the staff and parents, and you know where they're coming from, and you know what's going to work...then you're going to make the right decision*’ (DS). Principals, while concerned for autistic children, were also worried about parents ‘*you were more concerned about these children, but also not only the children but the parents*’ (BH). The need for social distancing to reduce the spread of the disease resulted in parents being unable to engage in the informal communication that so often happens in schools whereby the parent may approach the

teacher or principal with a concern. One principal described how parents missed out on that opportunity of when they might approach him *‘when I had parents coming to me upset’* (MS) or parents who approach classroom staff wondering how their child is getting on in school. *‘I noticed that has affected the parent involvement, the parent engagement parents coming into the classroom for everybody, but especially for parents with children with autism, they’re always wondering if my child, okay. And just to see how well they are’* (MS). The importance the school plays in supporting parents of autistic children can be seen in how children’s diets can differ from home to school. Parents may find it difficult to encourage their children to eat a wide variety or healthy foods, the school can support this *‘and so we’ve even noticed that diet is different in school than it is at home. So the parents can’t get them to eat healthy foods’* (FC). This home-school support was lost during school closures and remote teaching. One principal extended the July summer programme in order to support parents: *‘...so we did a summer camp for them. Just to extend the school year, I think more for the parents than for the children themselves’*(FC). Parents were anxious and worried about getting their children back to the autism classes *‘you could see in the parents’ faces coming back. So worried to get these children back in to school’*(MH). The function of the autism classes as a respite for parents was mentioned by a few principals. These principals worried about the support parents were receiving for themselves during school closures. FC described how this time was *‘difficult for the parents’*. He felt that parents *‘need respite as well, they need a break from the kids because they’re constant. And when school wasn’t on, you know, they missed out on that’* (FC).

Harris and Jones (2020, p. 244) described how *‘All those informal, important, moments where social relationships are built, and leadership is enacted simply vanished overnight’* which echoes what the principals in this study described about the disruption

caused to parents of pupils in autism classes. Principals had to upskill in digital technologies to support their students (Roulston, Taggart and Brown, 2020; Hodges *et al.*, 2020). Principals during this time became digital leaders (Karakose, Polat and Papadakis, 2021). Prior to COVID 19 principals would meet the parents of autistic students to build and support relationships. The principals interviewed placed great value on these relationships (Rieg and Marcoline, 2008). During COVID 19 used digital technologies as a mode of communicating with their school communities including parents (Karakose, Polat and Papadakis, 2021). The principals felt that autistic students were not catered for by digital learning while it has been reported that some parents of autistic pupils felt learning at home was better for them (Hill, Keville and Ludlow, 2021; Heyworth *et al.*, 2021). Principals had a deep sense of worry for parents whom they felt went unsupported without direct school involvement (Bellomo *et al.*, 2020).

8.6.4 Wellbeing of pupils attending the autism class during COVID 19

Schools began to introduce and utilise different platforms to support remote communication with families and pupils *‘we can... have more contact with parents remotely...there's much better communication, and we're using Seesaw Platforms’* (MK). The Zoom platform was mentioned by a number of principals as the tool used for home school communication. LD’s school *‘had to do a lot of zoom, a lot of calls where they could see teacher, you know’*. They *‘were sending packs, and we were doing lots of zoom calls, maybe you might have two or three zoom calls a week’* (LD). While Zoom calls were on offer to parents and pupils of the autism classes there was mixed reviews on their effectiveness, for example one participating principal commented that, *‘trying to attend daily classes on zooms ...it worked for some, for some it didn't’* (BM). Other principals were more adamant about the lack of value of these types of calls for

the children in the autism classes, the argument set out by the principals was that these children would rarely sit at tables for long period as per a traditional classroom setting so the expectation that they would be in a position to sit during a Zoom call was untenable. BH spoke about knowing *'that these children were struggling but there was very little you could do because zoom wasn't going to work... or doing a live cast with these children, ...because these ...children's needs are hands on'* (BH). In MK's school they *'had joint breaks, you know, where they all zoomed in for the break time, then the teacher would work with one than the, like, system that was working in the room was more or less put in'*. She was aware of the limitations of this exercise and gave the insight that *'but like remotely, some of those children, you know, wouldn't sit at a table remotely'* (MK). As a result, she acknowledged that the children in the autism class *'lost out hugely, because the practical, hands-on doing things that you do with those day to day, you can't do that over zoom. You know, where you're following a functional curriculum. You can't do that over zoom'* (MK). FC had a similar experience of working on zoom. He described it as *'like talking to the child over a zoom call...they might last two minutes. You know, they need physical hands-on doing things and doing things regularly in the same way'* (FC).;

There was consensus amongst the principals interviewed that online teaching was not a good teaching methodology for the pupils of the autism classes: *I would say that remote learning was very unsatisfactory for pupils'* (KR). *'So when we had locked down for months on end, those children couldn't engage very well in online learning'* (LD). It did not suit pupils as their needs are met through individualised programmes which involve lots of movement and are tailored to their specific needs and challenges. LD outlined that instruction in the autism class has *'very limited time frames where'* the children are *'sitting doing one on one instruction with teacher, you know, because it's*

constantly moving and changing. There's gross motor movements, there's individualised time for their puzzles and their timetable, one on one. And then there's the group circle. In the classes they try 'to do a lot of hands-on activities with' the children 'like baking, rockets, cooking, things like that, and you know, things like that, that they get in school, they can't do that with online learning' (LD).

One principal commented that it was *'very sad to see those children trying to learn online. And their parents coming on and you know, turning on the screen and whatever. And they're just not getting the same as in school'* (MW). Principals were worried about the children even though there was little they could do under the circumstances of the pandemic. BH commented that, *'I suppose it was that sense of knowing that these children were really needy, but also the frustration that there isn't an awful lot I can do'* (BH).

The school closures affected how these pupils reintegrated back into school life once reopening occurred. SF spoke about *'the children I feel lost out because of being at home. They lost out socially, because it was very difficult for them. When school reopened the staff tried to 'integrate them back in' and tried building up their 'social skills that because they hadn't met their friends and they lost the routine of school. It's very, very difficult, you know?'* (SF)

Inclusion and integration were affected during this period. Mixing of classes was discouraged as per the COVID 19 guidelines. Many autism class pupils who were integrated into the mainstream classes were now confined to their autism class on health and safety grounds. This did not sit well with some of the principals who work very hard on the area of inclusion within their school. MS described how this time *'killed our integration policy.... we would have had children going into mainstream classes*

for maybe half an hour before, especially children who are more able and willing, that has all stopped'. BM had a similar experience. He spoke about the challenge of not being able to fully engage in their integration strategies as *'the whole idea of integration, integration worked, and was working very well for us. And the fact that that we had to pull back on that, obviously, ..., that was challenging'* (BM). KR commented *'that the inclusion of pupils, even when we returned, of pupils of our special class into mainstream that stopped completely because of the I suppose the genuine fear and anxiety and our lack of knowledge about virus in the early months'*. KR explained that he uses the word *'integration but the inclusion of pupils in group activities within the classroom'*. Reverse integration was a methodology in the school he leads. He explained that this might look like a group from the mainstream may go into the autism class *'for example, a birthday party, a group of the little pupils from the mainstream or ASD, then we'll go into the special class for an hour and have some fun'* (KR). The use of reverse integration shows an emphasis on life skills along with the academic curriculum. Many of the usual opportunities afforded to the pupils were curtailed or even cancelled due to the imposed restrictions *'You know we would have done trips they were all gone, you know, even swimming, we couldn't control it and keep them safe so we cancelled everything'* (MH).

'COVID 19 has dramatically altered the everyday lives of children, with many experiencing isolation, worry, loneliness, and uncertainty about the future' (Mulholland and O'Toole, 2021, p. 329) The importance of schools to its students was outlined by Mohan *et al.* (2020). To the autistic students, the school provides a regular routine. Education during this time had to change drastically to try to meet the needs of pupils (Flynn *et al.*, 2021). The education of almost one million children was affected (Central Statistics Office, 2020).

Regression of pupils with additional needs during school closures was confirmed in recent research (Mohan *et al.*, 2021). Bray *et al.* (2021) undertook a study of pupil engagement during COVID 19 school closures at second level. They found that meaningful connections for pupils with a trusted adult are at the heart of a good education for children with a disadvantage. This point was echoed by the principals in the study who argued that they knew their pupils, they could cater for their needs and the pupils had relationships with the staff that supported their learning. Some pupils just cannot adapt well to online learning and will not be successful (Leidner and Jarvenpaa, 1995). This was echoed by the principals in this study. They worried about the pupils at home who were not able to access the individualised programmes created by the school (Mohan *et al.*, 2021). The closing of the autism classes weighed heavily on the minds of the principals.

8.7 Opportunities in times of crisis

While the many challenges that COVID 19 created were outlined by the principals in this study there were some opportunities that were borne out of the crisis.

8.7.1 How COVID 19 necessitated staff upskilling in the area of technology

A principal spoke about the opportunity the global pandemic presented in enabling staff to upskill in the use of technology in their work. MK described how they '*can use technology far better as a school*'. MH spoke about setting up an online platform. She admitted that she was not knowledgeable in this area but that a '*lot of the staff just stepped up to the mark, they kind of self-taught how to use the seesaw, it's worked well for some*' (MH).

The place of technology in schools has turned on its axis since the closure of schools and the commencement of remote teaching and learning. Online learning which before

now was perceived as being daunting was now a necessary part of school life (Ní Uigín and Cofaigh, 2021; Winter *et al.*, 2021). Going forward, technology will be part of the everyday vernacular of schools more than it ever was. School leaders will need to strike ‘a balance between pedagogy and technology’ (Harris and Jones, 2020, p. 245) while others argue that online learning must become part of teaching going forward to provide a more rounded learning experience (Ní Uigín and Cofaigh, 2021). Burke and Dempsey (2020) found that an advantage for school staff during school closures was the opportunity to ‘embrace the digital world’ (Burke and Dempsey, 2020, p. 13). This change can be seen in schools at this point where more use is made of platforms to communicate with home even though schools are open. Teachers are more confident in using technology to share their classroom work with parents allowing them to become even more involved in their child’s learning in the modern everyday world.

8.7.2 The joy of the summer programme

The extension of the summer programme was a source of joy for some of the principals. While they acknowledged that they were tired at the end of the school year, they took some fun and joy from the programmes. MH’s school undertook the summer programme. She described how it was wonderful ‘*having it for four weeks in the month of July*’ (MH). She admitted that she was tired and that she was there for the ‘*month of July helping out and just making sure that if anybody was late or sick that I will be there to step in. But it was great fun*’ (MH).

8.7.3 Reopening of autism classes prior to full school reopening

One principal spoke about the time that the autism classes opened two weeks earlier than the whole school reopened. CK reflected on this time as an opportunity of the crisis. She described the reopening of the autism classes before the rest of the school

returned as *'the best period'*. There were ten pupils in the autism classes and she was in the school leading the other classes remotely. She spoke about being in the school during this time as *'such a joy because they were coming in and out showing me things that they've been doing or saying, you know, coming up and saying, would you come down for lunch with us? we just had the loveliest two weeks.'* When the mainstream did reopen the autistic children felt a sense of ownership having had the run of the school to themselves prior to this. She observed that the autism class children were saying to the mainstream children *'you're welcome back now to our school ... They got more of a sense of ownership and inclusion...in a positive way. Like it was we're so important that we were here for two weeks before the rest of the plebs'* (CK).

8.7.4 Staff bonding and adaptability

A principal reported that the COVID 19 crisis brought staff closer together: *'I felt a pandemic brought us closer as a staff definitely'* (BH). Staff developed flexibility and adaptability towards working in the special classes: *'until the pandemic, you know, if we had staff off, it would be kind of hard to get cover... people would be a bit reluctant to go in and cover. But I have seen more and more people have come to me willing to cover'* (BH). These staff may not have worked in the autism class before now but were willing to put themselves forward and get experience of the autism classes: *'I was really surprised and really impressed with the number of staff people who hadn't even worked in ASD, who said, put me on a rota to cover ...so I think that's a really, really positive...'* (BH).

8.8 Discussion

A sense of rising to the occasion by schools was recorded by Mohan *et al.* (2020). This sentiment was reiterated by a number of principals in the study who spoke about how adaptable and kind staff were during the time. It was with a great sense of pride that principals spoke about how many staff members offered to help in any way they could. The principals highlighted the many challenges and opportunities that emerged during the COVID 19 global pandemic. Communication from the DE was scant and ill-timed which led to pressure and confusion. This lack of clarity served to compound the confusion and anxiety of those who were directly involved with education. Tremendous strides were made by school staff in embracing digital technology. Most of the principals spoke about the move to online platforms which was often staff led. While the online platforms served to make some connection with families while school buildings were closed and remote teaching was in operation, the principals felt this offered little support to the students in the autism classes. During the COVID 19 pandemic schools were required to implement a COVID response plan to keep the school community as safe as possible. Often this plan was in conflict with the autism classes given the nature of how they operate and the level of resources used. Tension arose for principals as they felt they were placing staff and students in the autism class in a vulnerable position due to the need to augment the plan to make it workable in the setting. Staffing was a huge issue for principals. Staff absences were drastically increased due to the understandable increase in illness. This left a chasm for principals to try and fill. There was increased pressure in terms of replacing staff in the special classes as the principals were very aware the effect change has on autistic pupils. The principals had to develop strategies such as using other staff within the school to fill these positions in the first instance.

Wellbeing featured heavily for the principals in relation to COVID 19. The principals spoke about all the worry they carried for their school communities (Mohan *et al.*, 2020). They worried about the children who they felt were not being adequately supported during this time. They worried about the staff who felt unsafe and anxious by the whole situation. They worried about parents not getting a break from children who need high levels of constant care. They reflected on how difficult the time was for them. How exhausted they were at the end of the year but carried on to organise summer provision to support these children and their families. Two of the principals got upset with frustration at parents. One principal felt frustrated to not be able to support parents while the other became frustrated that a parent could not see how much she was doing to support the children.

There were opportunities to emerge from the pandemic. The upskilling of staff in digital technology is something that principals grappled with for years prior to the crisis. Remote teaching was a catalyst for all staff to engage and upskill on this area. Some of the principals spoke about the joy of taking part in the summer programme. Even though they were tired and exhausted after a difficult year, participation in the programme was described as '*wonderful*'. The reopening of the autism classes two weeks before the mainstream school gave principals an opportunity to embrace working closely with the classes. One principal was invited to have lunch with them on a regular basis during this time. This principal took great pride in the ownership the autistic children took of their school when the mainstream returned. The principals were extremely proud of the commitment of their respective staff during this time. They spoke about how the crisis bonded the staff more closely and in an effort to support one another, staff became much more ready to volunteer to take on a role in the special class. Staffing the special class can be a challenge for principals (Banks, 2016). This

was an opportunity for principals in staff rotation and exposing more people to the autism classes in light of future staff allocations.

8.9 Conclusion

It is clear that COVID 19 had an impact on the autism classes. The principals' leadership styles evolved and they had to enact a more deliberative style to lead in the time of crisis. Communication was a central tenant during this time and was hugely impacted by the health and safety guidance at the time. When schools were closed the autism classes were no longer in the position to meet parents or children face to face. Remote teaching and learning became the method and it was agreed in this study that it was not suitable for children attending the autism classes. Staffing was a major concern for the principals. There was a staffing shortage at the time and this added to the principals' workload. Wellbeing was a huge focus for the principals. They worried about the children, their families and the staff. Their own wellbeing was impacted. Two of the principals recounted experiences of the time and were visibly upset by them. While there were many challenges of the global pandemic the principals did outline some opportunities. The crisis provided the perfect opportunity for staff professional learning in the area of digital technologies. Due to the nature of remote teaching and learning, all staff had to develop skills to ensure they could still work with their children. The extended summer programme provided an opportunity for the principals to engage with their children and their families following the prolonged closures. The most prevalent positive the principals outlined was the staff bonding that occurred during the crisis. They were extremely proud of how their respective staff worked together and supported each other during this period.

9 Professional Learning

9.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the theme of professional learning (PL) and teacher education through the continuum of initial teacher education (ITE), teacher education and leadership development programmes. Professional learning is a ‘core part of the teacher education journey’ (Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 2023, p. 2). This is a presentation of empirical findings which are discussed within the analytical framework of situated learning, legitimate peripheral participation and communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

9.2 Teacher education or Continuing Professional Development (CPD) or Professional Development (PD) or Professional Learning (PL)?

Developing the art of pedagogy is an ongoing process that begins at the initial teacher education (ITE) phase and continues long after a teacher has obtained their teaching qualification. This continuum of learning post-qualification enables the teacher to enhance and enrich their teaching practice throughout their career. What has emerged in the last number of years is a change in terminology used to describe the evolution of this process of learning. CPD or continuing professional development is a global term commonly used in the teaching profession to describe the ongoing need to engage with the ever-changing landscape in order to best serve the needs of children. O’Brien and Jones (2014, p.648) ascribe how this terminology has progressed to professional development and then to professional learning in ‘forward-looking educational systems’. Webster-Wright (2009) emphasises the importance of moving from development to learning. While professional development denotes a performative, passive approach (Stewart, 2014) to career progression, professional learning embodies

the idea of life-long reflection, which echoes the nature of education as a non-linear, long-term self-improvement journey which is ‘active, consistent, based in the teaching environment, and supported by peers in a professional learning community’ (Stewart, 2014, p. 28). Easton (2008) encourages educators to become learners themselves. Professional learning (PL) is the term chosen to describe the learning in this research, as it reflects the practitioners’ openness and commitment to change and development within their own professional sphere (Zimmerman, 2011) and the need for principals ‘to maintain their enthusiasm, motivation and, in doing so, leverage their unique professional capital’ (O’Neill and Glasson, 2018, p. 888). In the following sections key findings relating to autism training in initial teacher education (ITE), principal preparation, teacher and staff training as well as principal professional learning will be discussed.

9.3 Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

9.3.1 Critiques of ITE programme content

The majority of the principals interviewed were critical of special education provision in current initial teacher programmes. BD believed that the ‘*teacher education colleges are doing very little*’. He felt that ‘*very little*’ was being taught to student teachers ‘*on ASD or on special ed*’ (BH). All ITE programmes were re-accredited from 2012, involving a lengthening of the programme and reconfiguration. A number of principals echoed BH’s concern and they were also very disappointed that the recent extension of the Bachelor of Education (B. Ed) to a four-year programme did not include more of an emphasis on special education or autism-specific teacher education: ‘*I mean, they increased it 4 years and for what? The teacher education is the very same stretched over four years, special ed, it's the way it's going to be, there are more and more of*

these children' (MK). Special education has developed exponentially in the past few decades since many of the principals completed their own training (Garner, 2000). While significant welcome changes have occurred in developing inclusive practice in newly qualified teachers, it must be remembered that the area of special education is vast, and providing an adequate and appropriate experience for trainee teachers is a complex and challenging endeavour (Symeonidou, 2017). Even with the evolution of the ITE curriculum, student teachers still report feelings of inadequacy, particularly regarding their dealing with behaviours of concern (Clarke and Fournillier, 2012). One principal suggested that a full year of teacher education should be dedicated to special education in order to properly equip teachers for the classroom: *'when courses went to four years nearly one of the four years should be about special ed'* (MK). Symeonidou (2017) concluded that there is no one way to ensure a comprehensive initial teacher education in the area of special education. When Clarke and Fournillier (2012) asked teacher education students about redesigning their ITE, the focus for the students was on the structure and not the content, intimating a contentment with the programmes as they stand.

ITE is the beginning of what a teacher needs to know. True expertise is something that can only come with significant experience and commitment to further professional learning. A disposition by the teacher towards professional learning will enable them to seek out and develop the skills necessary to work within their environments and with the pupils they teach. NCSE undertook a review of initial teacher education for inclusive teaching (Hick, 2019). The authors of the report found that there was 'broad evidence of a commitment to inclusive teaching across ITE programmes in Ireland' (Hick, 2019, p. xi). The report also highlights the need for consistency amongst all inclusive education programmes and a gap between values and skills in the area of

inclusive education. This juxtaposes with the beliefs held by the principals interviewed about ITE. What they perceive ITE to be and what it actually is needs to be considered. There is a broader issue here about the function of ITE. ITE is the beginning of a teacher's career. It is not the function of ITE to build a fully formed teacher. As Irish National Teachers' Organisation (2023) describes, professional learning and development is at the core of the teacher's professional journey. ITE is just the starting point.

9.3.2 The impacts of the historical ITE on experienced teachers currently in the system

The historical absence of autism specific teacher education has impacted the more experienced teachers on the staff. These teachers did not have the confidence to take on the special classes in spite of many years of teaching experience. MK explained it as *'teachers are daunted because they weren't trained, you know what I mean, it goes back to the fact that they wouldn't do it, they just don't feel comfortable doing it, because they, it's not part of any teacher education that they had'* (MK). This could be viewed as resulting from a deficit in teacher education but it also relates to the teachers' attitude and disposition toward inclusion (Hong, Ivy and Schulte, 2009). This impacted on the principals' staff allocation and reduced the richness of teaching staff that could be considered for placement in the special class. Difficulties in staffing the special class is reflected in research (Banks, 2016). The special class is viewed as a distinctive teaching post within the school by teachers and it could be possible that principals see this also. DC's school is an example of a school where there is a view of the special class as a stand-alone post. The previous principal employed staff whose qualification would only allow them to teach in special classes. There is much less hesitation in the appointment of staff to the special education teacher (SET) role than to role of the special class

teacher. The SET role could be considered a role that teachers do not have specific training for from their ITE, other than perhaps a voluntary observation period. A teacher about to take on the role of a SET teacher for the first time has been described in the research as a ‘qualified beginning special education teacher’ (Brownell *et al.*, 2016, p. 249). It could be pondered that a teacher taking on the role of autism class teacher for the first time could be described as a ‘qualified beginning autism class teacher’.

Clarke and Fournillier (2012) argue that the attitude of the teacher is central as it pertains to all interpersonal interactions. What may be needed here is the shining of a light on the issues surrounding staff appointments to the role and how any negative connotations can be addressed so a teacher has the opportunity to build their own capacity in their career lifetime by taking on the role of special class teacher. Teachers themselves regard the role of the autism class teacher very differently to other roles. They perceive it to be more challenging and demanding than these other roles (Drew and Cahill, 2020). This narrows the opportunities for professional learning for themselves. Contrary to this belief, Drew and Cahill (2020) found that teachers in the special class setting developed a very positive attitude towards professional learning. These teachers became more ‘reflective, critical and much more willing to engage in further learning’ (Drew and Cahill, 2020, p. 68). This idea could act as a way of encouraging teachers who did not encounter training in special education as part of their ITE to develop a positive attitude towards professional learning as a lifelong journey as well as the opportunity to develop their knowledge base through a situated learning experience (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in the autism class.

9.3.3 Principal perspectives on their own ITE:

The principals identified Initial Teacher Education (ITE) as an area of deficit in terms of their own teacher education. All of the principals interviewed were trained before 2012 so would not have encountered the ITE programmes that were reconfigured to include pedagogy of SEN in schools. CK reported that she had not encountered any teacher education in the area of autism in her own pre-service teacher education. She wished that she *'had more knowledge on autism itself'* (CK). She reflected on her college experience and stated that she did not remember autism *'being mentioned in college'* (CK). This lack of teacher education impacted on principals' confidence levels when dealing with the classes. *'I wish I had more teacher education with children with autism, just myself, because I felt I lacked confidence'* (MK).

There was a strong consensus amongst the principals that there needs to be a review of the current model of special education provision for teachers in initial teacher education. The principals stressed the importance of ITE in the development of any teacher's pedagogy and that currently newly qualified teachers (NQTs) were ill equipped for the classrooms they were expected to lead. Ware (2009) found principals they interviewed considered the importance of ITE for NQTs in their report. Hick (2019) reported that principals felt that more attention could be paid to preparing teachers for special class settings within ITE. Some researchers proffered that *'collaborative planning needed to infuse SEN expertise across the breadth of the ITE curriculum'* (Kearns and Shevlin, 2006, p. 38). Further to the idea that currently *'teachers emerging from pre-service courses do so with different experiences, levels of knowledge and competencies in terms of teaching pupils with SEN'* (Ware, 2009, p. 24; Kearns and Shevlin, 2006). A suggestion in the literature *'for ITE providers to further develop consistent approaches to inclusive teaching across a whole programme'*

(Hick, 2019, p. 146) would help to mediate the lack of substance in the current programmes on offer as perceived by principals. It is argued that in order to improve the ITE experience for trainee teachers, the staff and teacher educators themselves must be supported to become more confident and qualified in their practice (Lambe and Bones, 2006; Florian and Linklater, 2010), ensuring that the trainee teacher learns the best possible methodologies and strategies to equip them to lead any class that inevitably will have pupils with additional needs. Kearns and Shevlin (2006) contend that caution needs to be taken when looking at improvements in teacher education as there may be issues around the leadership of such change and they also caution that there may be a tendency for SEN specialists to act as guest speakers rather than being part of the teaching staff cohort (Kearns and Shevlin, 2006, p. 38) intimating that a wider approach to addressing the issue needs to be taken. This professional development could take the form of collaboration of current teacher trainers and persons with subject-specific skills and looking at these people becoming part of the staff (Hick, 2019; Kearns and Shevlin, 2006).

While MK may have lacked confidence due to a lack of training, perhaps looking towards professional learning may address the gap between ITE and teacher competence. Rather than viewing ITE as the completion of a teacher's training perhaps looking at it as the beginning of the apprenticeship (Daresh, 1997) where specific professional learning that can evolve with the ever-changing landscape may be a route that leads the teacher to mastery of the field (Lave and Wenger, 1991). An understanding that the school provides the perfect learning setting for both pupils and staff lends itself to legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice. In this scenario, the staff, including the principal, become proactive and reactive to the continually changing trends in education. This view of never-ending learning allows

for a space where mastery is never the destination as knowledge development continues to be an ongoing process. If principals take this viewpoint, they can see themselves as learners. Much like the children they support, the principals will need to repeatedly review where their knowledge currently stands and what knowledge they would like to learn next in a targeted fashion. A knowledge deficit is never viewed as a negative. In fact, it is quite the opposite as the knowledge deficit is the catalyst to creating new knowledge. Given the fast pace of educational change and the developmental nature of teacher competencies, ITE can never be an avenue for mastery. MK attended college over twenty years ago. Given the changes in policies and practices in a plethora of areas it could be surmised that her ITE experience could not equip her with the knowledge she needs now for special classes as it did not exist at the time. This is also true of other areas such as changes to curricula; for example, the recent focus on health and wellbeing and other such policy interventions. It is professional learning that equips the teachers to work in these areas, so applying a similar approach to the special classes would lead teachers to gain knowledge, mastery and confidence in the area.

9.4 Current Teachers

9.4.1 Pre class appointment teacher education

The current policy of no access to autism specific teacher education until a teacher is based in the class was a source of frustration for principals. One principal made a comparison of this expectation to a medical practitioner being expected to take on a specialism without any specialist education. BH likened it to a General Practitioner (GP) who had been in general practice for five years. He gave the analogy that if the GP was asked to specialise in liver complaints in September but that the GP would not receive any training in the area until September when they're *'already seeing a patient'*

(BH). He continued by making the comparison that when specialist training would be afforded to the GP that a sub would be hired to come in their place but they will know *'nothing about liver either, they have just your general'* (BH) training.

BH suggested that autism class teachers should be offered significant teacher education and should be excused from their current duties to undertake it. He said that teachers are *'not allowed to take time off to be seconded'* (BH). He felt that *'they should be given three months' teacher education, at least when you're going into this very specialised position'* (BH). The lack of teacher education prior to taking on or opening a class was a cause of difficulty for principals. BH felt that if teachers were afforded some teacher education before they took on the classes that it might support them in some of the issues that arise. He went on to explain that if *'you could get some decent teacher education in first, at least people will even know about some of the issues as they come along. And they might say, Oh, I remember we discussed as a teacher education on the first day'* (BH). In contrast, FC argued that the current model is an appropriate system suggesting: *'that it's easier to take on teacher education if you're in the middle of something because you can relate it you can you can connect.... So there is that advantage'* (FC). KR agreed with FC's stance on taking on the teacher education when *in situ* in the class: *'that actually makes total sense that it's only when you're in there, as you can you connect the teacher education and apply it'* (FC).

Experienced teachers working with children feel a lack of confidence when supporting autistic children as they do not have professional development in the area of autism completed (Lisak Šegota *et al.*, 2022). However, research in the Irish context shows that current autism class teachers are relatively confident in their roles (Ryan and Mathews, 2022a). Appropriate and relevant autism professional development is a vital prerequisite to supporting children with autism (Smith and Smith, 2000) and directly

correlates between practice and teacher self-efficacy (Ryan and Mathews, 2022a). A belief that teachers are underprepared leads to lack of confidence and a belief that teachers are not equipped to support these students (Lisak Šegota *et al.*, 2022; Barry *et al.*, 2022). This belief was echoed by BH who believed that teachers should be provided with some training prior to taking on the role in the autism class, whereas KR and FC both felt that a teacher needed to be in situ to get value from any training. Ryan and Mathews (2022a) agree with BH in their research and suggest that access to professional learning for teachers prior to their transition into the autism class needs to be improved.

Lisak Šegota *et al.* (2022) argue that teachers need to be provided with appropriate professional learning at both ITE and post-appointment. This lends itself to the idea of a continuum of learning where learning is continuous and mastery is not achieved at ITE but rather ITE is just the beginning (Ryan and Mathews, 2022a). Quality post-ITE professional learning equips the teacher to engage with evidence-based practices to support autistic children (Barry *et al.*, 2022). Further investigation focussing on the lack of teacher confidence in the area of supporting additional needs is needed (Lisak Šegota *et al.*, 2022). Supporting teacher confidence at ITE might position teachers to have the necessary disposition even if they don't quite have the necessary knowledge to take any role within the school. Coupling teacher education while in the autism class with some basic preparatory professional learning would allow the teacher to have an initial knowledge base to support their confidence with further learning within the class to support their pedagogy.

9.4.2 Staff currently teaching in the special class

The importance of teacher education for current special class teachers and SNAs was mentioned by all principals interviewed: *'I think teacher education is so important, like it can't be overemphasised'* (BH). The teacher education available to teachers was discussed in a positive light by principals. For some principals, available professional learning opportunities offered a support for teachers to inform their own practice and develop their skillset in working with autistic children. In particular, it was noted by a principal that the professional learning on offer was an avenue for teachers to work on specific challenges some pupils may have, such as behaviour. SC spoke about facilitating the teacher to access *'behavioural challenges training'* if needed. One principal outlined how she sent a teacher with over three years' experience in the class on a professional learning programme to upskill on her behaviour management skills: *'she went to the CABA (Contemporary Applied Behaviour Analysis) teacher education, and she went to teacher education for behavioural management, managing children with difficult behaviour, and any courses that were available, you know, that she could go to as a day course here and there'* (LD) this was regarded as a positive option for the teacher in question and facilitated improvement in her practice. While most principals were positively disposed to professional learning, the challenges around releasing the teacher were noted. These professional learning days occur during the school year. One principal described it as *'a hassle for schools to release teachers from the ASD class'* (LD), while principals were aware that part of their roles was to *'encourage people to go for release time for CPD'* (SC). The difficulty arose in the disruption to the pupils in the class who rely heavily on continuity and change of any kind can affect their regulation. In order to facilitate a teacher's professional learning and in an effort to maintain some semblance of continuity for pupils, principals moved other teaching staff

around, for example from the Special Education Team (SET). A number of principals took on teaching duties in the special class themselves.

While it could be a challenge to release teachers to attend professional learning, the principals were adamant that it was important that they did attend. The positive impact of professional learning is well established in previous research. Ryan and Mathews (2022a) found that teachers working in autism classes had high levels of teacher self-efficacy because of the access and quality of autism training programmes in Ireland. The principals agreed that the professional learning available to teachers is useful to their practice (Daly *et al.*, 2016). Engagement with professional learning enhances a teacher's efficacy which in turn improves their confidence in working with autistic children (Corona, Christodulu and Rinaldi, 2017). The importance of teacher professional learning was made clear by principals in terms of teachers attending courses to support their general work in the autism class and further supporting specific issues. Principals spoke about teachers accessing courses on behaviour if a particular issue had arisen in the class. Principals themselves were adamant that the teacher was to be facilitated to attend as much professional learning as possible by releasing them through substitute cover, as seen in the research (Daly *et al.*, 2016) and in some cases the principals themselves taught the class while the teacher was out as it was at times difficult to source substitute teachers (Raftery and Brennan, 2021). Facilitating teacher release time, while seen as necessary by the principals, was also a burden on their already busy schedules.

9.4.3 SNA professional learning

A few principals spoke about the need for training for SNAs. MS highlighted the issue of lack of formal professional learning for SNAs who work closely with teachers in the

class: *'...SNAs, who are wonderful, it's very hard to try and find additional courses for SNAs'* (MS). MS highlighted the new UCD accredited course which has been designed specifically for SNAs and that a member of his staff had enrolled: *'one of our SNAs got on the UCD course. Now, she's great in the sense that she has level six in childcare, which would be a major award QQI level six, she has the SNA course also.'* (MS). This SNA had already held an abundance of qualifications, all of which were voluntary on her part given that an SNA does not need any formal qualifications to be appointed to the role, while they are desirable they are not deemed essential as part of the recruitment process. BH felt that *'training for the SNAs is vital'*. CK concurred with this view as she said she would like *'more training for the SNAs around autism ... I do think they need to be upskilled around it'*.

The issue of SNA professional learning opportunities has been raised in research from Hick (2019) who speak about SNAs as being a vital part of the team. Roddy and O'Neill (2019) concur regarding the importance of SNAs in autism education, but highlight the lack of mandatory training for their role. Boards of management are to ensure that SNAs are trained to carry out their role in the autism classes (National Council for Special Education, 2016). The principals spoke about the importance of the role of the SNA and their disappointment at the lack of professional learning opportunities for them, given the centrality of their presence within the special class, which concurs with other research (Zhao, Rose and Shevlin, 2021). One of the positive aspects of COVID 19 was that most teacher education and professional learning events went online which allowed for greater capacity and variety of attendees. Many courses which were previously offered to just teachers were now being opened to SNAs to attend also. A number of SNA specific courses were run by education centres, thus recognising the SNA as an important entity in their own right within the education system. While the relatively

new course National Training Programme Special Needs Assistants (Inclusive School Support) offered by University College Dublin (UCD) is a welcome development in SNA professional learning, it is a voluntary course that SNAs have to complete outside of their working day while autism specific courses on offer to teachers are completed within the working day, making them more attractive to individuals with busy lives outside of their professional domain. One of the principals mentioned their disappointment that the UCD course was not recognised. This has subsequently been reversed and the course is now accredited by the college. The call remains for specific SNA professional learning for different aspects of autism such as behaviour management, emotional support, and sensory regulation. This recommendation is also mentioned in previous research (Kerins *et al.*, 2018; Zhao, Rose and Shevlin, 2021; Daly *et al.*, 2016).

9.4.4 Whole School professional learning

Principals mentioned how the whole school closure day for professional learning of all staff proved to be a very positive experience for a school: *‘And the staff we had one day’s teacher education. And the school was closed for the day’* (BH). While this was welcomed it was seen as falling short of yearly whole staff professional learning. The one-day closure is awarded in the first year of opening the first special class in a school. BH’s school opened their first class in 2008. BH remarked that he had a number of new staff so with this staff turnover, *‘half of staff here haven’t had any training’* (BH). BH suggested that schools should get a one-day closure every year for professional learning with perhaps a different focus each year. This would ensure that all staff would receive regular up to date professional learning. BH proposed that *‘the least there should be every year as at least one-day closure, ... or even two half days or something just for staff’* each year the school could *‘pick a different area’* or look to at a particular topic

or prepare for an incoming student. BH felt this would be of value to the school and improve student outcomes.

A whole school vision of inclusion requires all staff to have a shared understanding of what inclusion is in their school (Symes and Humphrey, 2011; Eldar, Talmor and Wolf-Zukerman, 2010; Huang and Diamond, 2009; Raftery and Brennan, 2021). When the necessary training and resources to support autistic children are not met their inclusion is undermined (Batten, 2005). The principals in this research were adamant that in order to support the children in their autism classes, everyone needed the most up to date training. Whole school training was part of the suite of inclusive practices that they wanted to take part in. To develop an understanding of how to best support autistic pupils benefits the child and whole school community (Batten, 2005). National Council for Special Education (2016) outline that a good practice for schools with special classes is to identify staff training needs and address them. BH outlined that his staff need an annual closure for whole staff professional learning but he is not in a position to support this as there is no time allocated to inclusionary development after the first year of the classes. The quality of autism professional learning through facilitation or attending courses is recognised (Ryan and Mathews, 2022a) and BH wants to ensure that all staff are afforded the opportunity to engage no matter at what stage they join the school. The whole school training would allow all personnel teachers, SNAs and ancillary staff to feel included and share the in the school's vision for inclusion (Symes and Humphrey, 2011).

9.5 Principals' professional learning

9.5.1 Leadership development prior to taking on the role of principal

Some of the principals interviewed had taken part in some semblance of an initial principal or leadership development programme. '*Misneach*' (courage) is offered to all newly appointed principals by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). Principals were very strong in their general praise for the programme however they did highlight that it did not go into any detail on setting up or leading autism classes. '*Like, when you go to those new principal trainings, it just doesn't really come up, like, you know, it's not that big of a deal*' (JL). The follow-on programme for experienced principals, '*Forbairt*' (development) was mentioned by two of the principals. Positive aspects of the programme were mentioned: '*you do a lot wonderful training with Misneach and Forbairt*' (MS). They again highlighted that there is no specific professional learning or module on special classes within this programme. A principal suggested that perhaps the current *Misneach* programme could be expanded to include a specific day for principals who are in schools with special classes: '*maybe it's something that you get a five days Misneach teacher education, when you come in as a principal. But if you're a principal of a school with special classes, you get six days*' (SC).

In order for principals to become effective instructional leaders the programmes they engage with must reflect this need, in order to adequately prepare them (Hayes and Irby, 2020; Gumus, 2015). The principals in this study felt that their pre and early principal training did not reflect their requirements for professional learning in the area of autism classes. To be competent to lead in an inclusionary way any pre-service training they undertake must reflect the current needs (Collins, 2001). Internationally,

principals who undertook pre-service training were in a better position to undertake their role. Interning under an experienced school principal was an effective way of delivering that training (Gumus, 2015). Walker, Bryant and Lee (2013) found in an international study of pre-service training programmes for principals that all of the training programmes had three commonalities, namely: framework, content and operation. In Ireland the Department of Education part-fund an aspiring leaders programme called the Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership (PDSL) / Dioplóma Gairmiúil i gCeannaireacht Scoile (DGCS). This course is ‘designed to prepare aspiring leaders with the knowledge, skills, confidence and qualifications for senior school leadership positions’ (University of Limerick, 2023). None of the principals interviewed mentioned completing this programme prior to the commencement of their roles as principals.

9.5.2 Leadership development for principals

A dearth of availability of professional learning specific to the role of principal in leading special classes was highlighted within the study. LD described the lack of principal specific professional learning of special classes. She felt that there was ‘*there was teacher education available to principals*’ (LD) where principals could send teachers. However, LD felt any principal training ‘*wasn't practical. It was very...here's how autistic children behave. And it was more generic teacher education on autistic children*’. For her it was not what she needed. It ‘*wasn't how to set up the class. What to avoid? Who do you need to be engaged with?*’ (LD). This principal’s sentiments were echoed by others within the research who spoke about the need for bespoke professional learning for principals given their unique perspective and position within the special class realm. A principal spoke about their lack of confidence in relation to the special class and while they may wish to attend professional learning events, they prioritise

their staffs' attendance and miss out on the opportunity to attend. MW explained that when dealing with the autism classes she *'wouldn't feel as confident. So that's the challenge, I suppose for me, in terms of self-confidence'*. MW echoed LD's sentiment about *'teacher education is available for the teachers who are in the classrooms in the ASD classes'*. However, MW felt that there was not *'a lot of ongoing CPD for principals in relation to managing and leading the teaching and learning and ASD classes.'* *'When CPD is available'*, she prioritised the attendance of teachers, she really wanted her *'teachers to avail of it for the children to get maximum benefit, because ... they're the people who are working with the children all the time'* (MW).

The self-confidence issue in relation to special classes was mentioned by a few principals within the study. These principals spoke about their initial lack of confidence, and a lack of knowledge of the specifics of autism. For example, one principal commented: *'I didn't know enough myself'* (MK). These principals took this as an opportunity to take advantage of the professional learning currently on offer. By opening themselves up to this new learning they afforded themselves the opportunity to open their minds to a completely new area within the education system. A number of principals spoke about their own knowledge development:

'I wouldn't have known much about ASD classes. And now I've learned more about how they run' (SC).

'Upskilling, in terms of my own knowledge of, you know, working with people with autism, you know, because I wouldn't have that experience that before I came here' (JL).

'When I came to this school, I didn't have a clue what I was getting myself into' (BM).

‘...but just to have that have that kind of a deeper knowledge of autism and how the children minds work’ (FC).

This development of knowledge enhanced the principals’ practices as they then developed a better understanding of the complexities of autism: *‘parents are very different, you got to kind of deal with them in a different way. But once you have a good understanding of autism, you can see their perspective’ (FC).*

While some principals highlighted their professional development, AW spoke about having not undertaken any courses due to time constraints of the role: *‘when it comes to principal supports for running autism classes, I mean, there are probably courses I could do through NCSE or education centres, I find I don't have time for them’ (AW).* LD explained that when she did attend these principal specific courses that they were not what she needed and not tailored to the needs of principals: *‘you do go to training courses, but then there’s a lot less practical advice around setting up a class and then upskilling teachers to be able to work in that environment happily’ (LD).* MS spoke about the possibility of saturation when trying to undertake many courses: *‘...and I suppose as, again, going to do courses that you could get laden down, we're trying to feel the need to know everything about autism and autistic classes’ (MS).*

FC recommended that principals about to take on the role of leading special classes should consider undertaking a course to support their confidence in the area: *‘...and it will give you a certain confidence if you certainly do a few courses prior to taking on the role’ (FC).*

Some of the principals interviewed spoke about the prospect of extending and expanding their own learning through the special classes for autism. MK described how she had *‘upskilled profoundly’* so that she *‘was meeting the needs of children’*. JL had

upskilled ‘*in her own knowledge of dealing with people with autism*’ through her work in the autism classes. While principals acknowledged the importance of professional learning there was a sense of excitement and wonder at the possibility of a new place for them within the school. The principal can be viewed as the hero (Sugrue, 2009) in their own school context with the knowledge and skill to do everything. They are the day-to-day managers on behalf of the board of management and the leaders of learning for the staff and pupils. However, for many of the principals interviewed they had little or no knowledge of autism prior to taking on the role as principal of a school with special classes for autism. Only one of the 15 principals interviewed had worked in a special class prior to taking on the role of principal. All of the principals interviewed were working in an administrative capacity so they did not have any direct teaching responsibilities. Involvement in the special classes provided them with a renewed focus on teaching and learning. It represented the opportunity to grow and engage in meaningful professional learning. As principals in their own school they were afforded the opportunity of situated learning within their own context (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The principals, by their own admissions, were by no means experts so their role within the special class realm was reimagined and realised and they became learners and students. For a number of the principals this represented a rejuvenation in their careers. They felt realigned with their core role as a teacher which can often become lost within the bureaucracy and administration burden of the role of principal. ‘Learning . . . implies becoming a different person [and] involves the construction of identity’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 53). Principals were allowed to become apprentices to the mastery of the special class teacher. They developed their practices within the learning community (Lieberman, 2009). The principal whose role it is to lead the learning in the school becomes the learner in this community. This role reversal not only re-energised

the principals in their original role as a teacher but also extended their role as principal through a greater understanding. Their legitimate peripheral participation allowed them the opportunity to learn about the workings of the special classes. They gained in knowledge and this community of practice where they learned in a social setting allowed them to develop as a person through their commitment to the children and the school. Following this situated learning opportunity, a number of the principals reported that they felt refreshed and invigorated in their roles. Working as part of the special class team allowed them to return to their core purpose of teaching while maintaining their position as principal.

Principals need high quality professional learning to support their ‘pivotal role as leaders of learning in their schools’ (Cullinane *et al.*, 2022, p. 212). Ryan and Mathews (2022a) recommend that principals should be encouraged to access autism professional learning so they have the knowledge necessary to support staff and pupils in the schools. While two of the principals suggested developing the current leadership development programmes to include content on inclusion and special education, KR suggested that there needed to be a specific programme available for principals to undertake, centred on additional needs and how to manage and lead special classes. Research highlights the ‘importance of the availability of CPD for principals in their management, administrative and instructional-related duties specific to ASD-provision’ (Daly *et al.*, 2016, p. 19). If an educational system is to ‘start from the needs felt by the teachers themselves’ in designing long-term professional learning plans (United Nations Educational, 2003, p. 25), then perhaps a specific programme could be developed which could include theories of autism and other additional needs as some of the principals in this study proclaimed to have little theoretical knowledge of autism prior to taking on their current role (Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2019). These principals regret not

having this knowledge. A key gap for principals in this study was the lack of practical knowledge surrounding the opening of classes and day to day management of the classes. If the programme were to include this, it would address the needs of current principals. The Supporting Inclusive School Leadership (SISL) project recommends that along with specific professional learning that principals should be afforded wider opportunities to learn through secondments or sabbaticals ‘to enable school leaders to increase their capability through reflective, practical and collaborative professional programmes, exchanges, research and study’ (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2019, p. 57).

9.6 Conclusion

This chapter has followed the cycle of professional development of the teacher, to the development of the leader, and then looked at the role reversal of the principal becoming a learner through the opportunity of the special class. Knowledge, skills and attitudes have the potential to be developed throughout the continuum of teacher education (Drew and Cahill, 2020, p. 69). The principal becomes the apprentice while working with the teacher who is the master within the community of practice that is the special class setting. It is this situated professional learning experience that allows the principal to use and extend their current talents and knowledge base. Principals in this research project discussed the positive implications of becoming a learner in their own setting and how it raises their professional self-esteem. The Teaching Council’s continuum of teacher education details that professional development ‘should be designed having regard to the settings in which teachers work’ and it ‘should be constructivist in nature, involving both formal and informal ways of learning’ (The Teaching Council, 2011, p. 20). This professional learning is based in the principal’s

own setting or professional learning community with reciprocal learning for all members.

10 Tensions & Dilemmas

10.1 Staffing

As previously highlighted, staffing special classes is seen as a challenge (Banks, 2016). This challenge was highlighted by a number of the principals interviewed for this research. The dilemma for the principals was ensuring that the autism class were staffed by those who would be suitable for the post while being mindful of the demands of their staff. This dilemma is compounded by a staffing that is finite. The principals have to appoint individuals from the staff at their disposal. There is an anxiety for a principal when making these often difficult decisions. As BD described: *‘one of the biggest challenges, that has certainly been staffing’*. LD termed the staff feeling of taking on the role of special class teacher as one of *‘reluctance.’* She said she needs to be *‘mindful of staffing’*. MK finds *‘staffing the unit’* a challenge. BH had a warning for anyone starting an autism class and cautioned that *‘your staff are the ...biggest thing, your SNA & teachers, and having the right people in there.’* LD spoke about the difficulties that arise when staff do not enjoy working in the class as she once *‘had a teacher who hadn't enjoyed working there’* and because of this *‘the dynamic between the teacher and the two SNAs in the room wasn't working well.’* This did not make for a good working environment. When she spoke to the SNAs about their reasons for being unhappy, they replied that *‘they didn't really feel the teacher was communicating what they needed in the room, and therefore they weren't really sure what they were meant to be doing.’*

LD talked about inadequate staffing levels, which is currently two SNAs and one teacher in the autism class. She described that *‘sometimes in that environment, you do need more than two SNAs, depending on the children's needs’* (LD). AW agreed with LD in terms of staffing levels in the classes: *‘two SNAs, it's just not enough’*.

LD spoke about her staff's lack of understanding about how autism classes work within a mainstream school when they first opened their class. Even though they had the '*best intentions*' it didn't work in that first year. The importance of the situational awareness of the staff was of vital importance to its success. COVID 19 compounded the issue of covering staff absences in the special classes and the policy that some principals use of ensuring that the staff are not strangers to the children. LD says that '*you can't just put anyone from outside into an ASD class*', so she tries to '*get a substitute that the children ... know ...I would always put one of our own staff members into the ASD class and take the substitute to backfill their class...bringing a stranger... changes to their routine are difficult for them*'. BD foresees the '*mobility and staffing as this evolves*' as a possible future challenge as his school will be opening another class in the near future. He is trying to develop a culture where there is rotation of staff and the special classes are seen as '*the same as any other class*'. DC currently utilises a rotation policy where the staff '*move around a bit*' but she is conscious of trying to get '*the right SNAs*' for the classes as some are '*more suited to some roles*'. To ensure staff don't become '*pigeonholed*' JL likes '*to try and move the SNAs*'.

Hong, Ivy and Schulte (2009) put forward the idea that administrators are inclined to hire staff who may be strong on accountability but may lack the humanistic side necessary for teaching. This was not the case with the principals interviewed in this study. They were vehemently agreed upon the importance of having the right staff in place in the special classes and consistently tried to hire staff who would be a good match to students and their needs (Daly *et al.*, 2016). The principals deeply appreciated the work of the staff in the autism classes (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020). Disposition of staff appeared as a common theme amongst the principals in relation to successful staffing outcome. Years of experience did not determine a better trained or more

suitable staff member (Lushin *et al.*, 2020), rather it was the perspective of the individual regarding autism and how they worked as a team determined their capabilities within the class setting. Effective leaders ensure their team have the necessary skills and disposition to address the complexities of the special classes (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran and Walther-Thomas, 2004). The example of a staff member not working as a team member was evidence of how important this aspect of the role is to the success of the class and therefore the children. Daly *et al.* (2016) found that principals went to ‘significant trouble to find staff’ (Daly *et al.*, 2016, p. 202), which is consistent with the views of the principals in this study. A disposition of cooperation, flexibility, and understanding is important in building the relationship of the special class team (Biggs, Gilson and Carter, 2016). If we take the special class setting as a particular example of a community of practice where people work in a certain way and we look to the disposition of the people who work in that setting, we can surmise that disposition is what links the situated sociocultural (Lave and Wenger, 1991) idea of the special class as a unique community of practice and the staff’s ability or openness to learning to work within a team and with autistic children (Carr and Claxton, 2010, p. 12).

10.2 Resources

Resourcing the special classes was widely mentioned by principals in this study as an area of contention. The principals spoke about challenges accessing and managing the resources needed by the special classes. The disparity in resourcing was evident in the different settings. Some principals were very well resourced in terms of a purpose-built building while other principals struggled with inadequate environments for their pupils. The dilemma presented for principals was struggling to support their pupils while wrestling with the knowledge that they were inadequately resourced. SC described it

as *'the biggest challenge is accessing resources.'* DC explained that the special classes in her school were open for a number of years so the school *'was so early on they gave us those resources'*. The resources DC referred to include a Jacuzzi. DC advised aspiring special class principals who are at the beginning stages of a build to *'plumb for a Jacuzzi!'* (DC), although she knows that Jacuzzis are a luxury that will not be bestowed upon many schools which was a dilemma for her. In contrast MH has *'no sensory room'*. She went on to explain that *'resources is a big challenge'*. The mechanism for accessing of resources was a source of tension for the principals. FC suggested that he would find it useful if there was *'an easier way to access money towards getting things like a fence so they can't you know, scale a wall or that'*. SC concurred with FC's point when she stated *'sometimes it's a minefield actually trying to figure out how do you access resources.'* Adequate financing was a source of tension for principals. AW spoke about the difficulties around financing resources. In her school they have to fundraise for *'all the equipment and resources that you don't have any money for'* whereas for DC *'money isn't an issue'*. MK felt it was her role to ensure that the staff of the special classes *'have the resources that they need'* however she believed the *'challenge as well is that resources first of all, aren't there'*. MK advised schools about to open a special class to *'get a commitment to what are the resources that are coming in'*.

Kenny, McCoy and Mihut (2020) argue that there has been a misuse of resources in the Irish special education system, which has resulted in a slow change to policy enactment. The principals here did not report misuse of resources but rather a lack of the availability of resources coupled with a complex system of accessing the resources needed. Lack of availability of resources for autistic children has been found in research (Lindsay *et al.*, 2013). Greenwald, Hedges and Laine (1996) found that increasing

student resources resulted in better student achievement. This is the argument the principals were trying to make when they spoke about the difficulties in accessing the appropriate resources to support the achievements of the children in the autism class. Irish National Teachers' Organisation (2023) found that applying for resources was adding to the workload of Irish principals. One of the INTO recommendations is for NCSE who are charged with the deployment of resources to look to 'reduce the workload associated with these processes' (Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 2023, p. 8). Raftery and Brennan (2021) recommend that there is clearer communication and collaboration for accessing specialist resources and supports.

10.3 Placement

Placement was an issue raised within the study by a number of the principals. LD spoke about the difficulties as *'a lot of resourcing and placement...they're huge challenges.'* There was a personal dilemma for some of the principals who struggled with the idea that any placement would suffice for a child. They felt that sometimes an autism class placement was not sufficient and they wrestled with this knowledge. SC described the illusion of having a place in a special class as perhaps the key to a child's education however she felt that once a place was found for a child, whether it was the correct placement or not, that outside professional agencies were less likely to support the child as there was an illusion that the needs of the child were being met solely by the school placement. She commented that:

'I think you can see when the children are correctly placed that they can integrate more, etc. When the child is wrongly placed, I don't know, do they benefit as much plus the fact that then, when the child is seen... as having a place, there isn't a push for outside agencies maybe to find that child place, a correct place' (SC).

The dearth of places in special schools was mentioned as a reason for the belief that some children were incorrectly placed in mainstream schools almost as a holding cell until a place actually became available in a special school. LD spoke about a pupil whose needs could not be met in the school so his day had to be reduced *‘for health and safety reasons.... he was on a reduced day for two years. SENO knew about it... We were four years trying to get that child into a special school’*. MW described the difficulties when she encounters a child in her mainstream special class setting who may be more suited to a special school placement, in order to access specialised services such as OT or SLT that she does not have the ability to provide. She proffered that parents may send their child to the local school in order to make friends and play: *‘it’s really because they want to make friends or playing with children in their local environment’* but she argued that if they cannot do that then perhaps her mainstream setting is not the best place for them: *‘and if the children can’t even do that... I just feel they’re being denied the services that they really need. And they’re still not getting the social engagement that the parents kind of wanted for them in the first place.’*

BD described how managing placements can be challenging, with different SENOs requiring different levels of paperwork to confirm placements:

‘SENOs ...we’ve had two here. The first one was really, black and white, and you always knew where you stood. Second has been very pedantic and particularly on the small stuff ...you know, elements of paperwork. And that’s made life a little ...a little trickier, just in terms of managing, you know, you need to say in terms of placements’ (BD).

The current diagnostic model was a source of tension for a principal. She felt that diagnosis was too crude without review. MK argued that the current model of diagnosing a child with autism at an early age and recommending placement in a special class should be questioned given the age and development of the child. MK’s argument centred around the age of the child and if making a recommendation for a child as a

toddler for the long-term was the correct model to use: *‘placement at two or three years of age, you would need the wisdom of Solomon to say, this is the right placement for a child ...and yet, that's when it's made. And there should be something done around that’* (MK). MK went on to suggest that there should be a review in place that would revisit the validity of the recommendation and the current special class setting for the child *‘and I would feel that as soon as children are in school, they should have access to NEPs so that the placement can be checked. And is there a better placement’* (MK). She was adamant that there should be a rescreening or at least a review for the child in order to assess the suitability of the placement: *‘there should be much more rescreening and reviewing the placement.... the review, will say, absolutely the child is properly placed, but there should be a review of placement in a child's career to be sure that they are in the right place’*(MK).

The transition from primary to secondary was a source of tension for principals. Their belief that there was less placement available at second level meant that a dilemma presented itself when trying to find places and supporting parents in this goal. MW spoke of the difficulties of finding placements once children are transitioning out of the school, most especially at sixth class, and trying to find a placement for pupils at second level. She helps and supports parents with this as it is such a difficult area to navigate: *‘it's become very much part of my role this year to have a very active part in their transition from the school and look at school placements and assisting parents with the whole process of enrolling somewhere else’* (MW). SC concurred with difficulties of transferring to second level: *‘when children are transferring on to secondary school... the challenge of that’* as did MH *‘other challenges... the transfer secondary students.’* Often when a place was found the difference in enrolment between primary and secondary was a source of tension. MH highlighted the differences in enrolment

practices whereby second level school require more paperwork which puts pressure on parents, stating that *'they shouldn't have to fight to get that paperwork to get to secondary school.'* She described how the focus on the transfer to second level used up the scarce specialist resources that could be used in other ways to help a particular pupil. She spoke about *'resources like that each year I find NEPS is... caught up with transfer to secondary rather than maybe the emotional needs of the child'* (MH). CK spoke about the lack of places at second level for pupils transferring from primary special classes: *'that's a huge problem because there are no secondary school places.'* The lack of available places means that parents cannot presume places will be available for their child once they transfer to second level and they have to investigate all the options in terms of schools in order to secure a place. CK has supported parents on this journey by *'having to go and literally go round schools with parents on occasion or ring round schools or do research on schools.'*

The dilemma of placement centred around the principals' belief that the placement procedure was initially too simplistic, where the child may get the recommendation for a special class as a toddler and this is carried through for their school career without much oversight or review to ensure the child's needs are being met. This concurs with the research which suggests that placement may not be reflective of the student's need (Bolourian, Stavropoulos and Blacher, 2019) and an overall annual review should be conducted (Cullinane *et al.*, 2022). The principals in this research focussed on the children with more complex needs when speaking about placement, who in their opinion may be better placed in a special school rather than a special class, but as placements were unavailable the primary school special class was seen as the optimum available option. The practice of limiting placement to children who have the potential to be included in mainstream has been discussed in research (Finlay, Kinsella and

Prendeville, 2019). Kim, Bal and Lord (2018) found that reviewing the placement for autistic children led to a change in levels of need and resourcing, concurring with the principals' wish for placement review in the Irish education system. Bolourian, Stavropoulos and Blacher (2019) found that principals' beliefs and experiences were a significant factor in pupil placement. The principals in this study felt strong conviction towards the best type of education they could provide for the children in their school. The research suggests that autistic children perform better in school when they have access to their peers, whether they are based in the mainstream or special class (Kim, Bal and Lord, 2018). This would lend itself to the belief that the local school may be best placed to cater for the needs of these children despite the principals feeling that their setting may not be adequate.

The lack of school placement at special school level was mirrored with a lack of places at second level for pupils. This was a source of stress for the principals who were actively trying to support pupils and parents source a place following the primary school years. According to the NCSE there are 1,789 primary school Special Educational Needs (SEN) classes as of September 2022, and 740 at secondary school level. McCoy *et al.* (2014) found that in 2014 the percentage of schools with special classes was higher at second level than at primary. This was not the experience of the principals in the study, who were based in larger urban areas where there is more demand for places. McCoy *et al.* (2014) found that post primary principals cited inclusion as the reason that they do not have special classes in their respective schools. This jars somewhat with the needs of the pupils who may have been recommended a special class setting. A lack of a class at second level could be a barrier for them attending their local school and accessing their peers, which is cited as an important factor in the development of the child with additional needs (Kim, Bal and Lord, 2018).

10.4 Managing Expectations

A variety of ‘*managing expectations*’ (AW) scenarios were explored within the study by the principals. These expectations added to the tensions felt by principals. Managing parental expectations was discussed. LD told the story of a pupil in a mainstream setting who presented with traits of autism but because an older sibling had a placement in a special school, the parents were not in a place to consider the possibility that this child could perhaps have a diagnosis of autism. The dilemma for LD was that she believed the child needed access to supports but that this was restricted by the parents’ prior experience. Managing the parents’ expectations around what the school could do to support this child was challenging:

‘I have a child in first class mainstream, who has an older brother with a very severe diagnosis, who’s in a special school placement. When he came into school, the only needs that he had were speech and language. And we could see straight away traits, changes, transitions, wasn’t going to work for him. Now he was very high functioning very bright. But Mom and Dad didn’t’ (LD).

LD went on to describe how she asked for NEPS to become involved and at first the parents were very slow to accept there may be a need and they ‘*dragged their heels on it*’. The school began the exploration of a possible additional need in Junior Infants and now in First Class because of COVID 19 delays to services the child still has no services and ‘*no class and SNA support*’ (LD). LD really felt strongly that the child had ‘*missed out on the benefit of being able to access the environment he needed.*’ DC spoke about the difficulties in managing parental expectations, as parents of children with additional needs often ‘*have to fight every battle.*’ The equity versus equality dilemma was evident for DC in the following example of an autistic child starting school and how she tried to manage teacher efficacy, parental expectations and supporting a child but conflict arose:

'we had ... five junior infants starting in one of our classes And the teacher in the class for the upcoming year had said to me last June, you know, she was going to stagger them starting. She didn't want five of them starting on the one day because she'd done her research. So she staggered them to start. So two started the first day got them settled into schedules, another day...and the child to start last... So the day before... So the bus driver rang to say this child thinks they're starting tomorrow and I went no they're not. So I phoned the mother and mother had said, she didn't get the email. ... And she was really disappointed and I explained to her over the phone as best I could, and I could really understand that she was very disappointed because she'd have thought the child was starting the next day. So she wanted to come in to talk to me the next day'.

DC did her best to explain to the parent during the meeting the rationale for the approach the school was taking with the introduction of the new pupils:

'So she came in, and I talked to her, explained, you know, we were trying to do this because we needed to make sure it worked for everybody and whatever we she wasn't really cooperative. Eventually she asked why was her child left until last. So because she was pushing so much. I said, Look, I said we don't know all the children yet, but the teacher has read over the report. She has spoken to their preschool teachers, and we feel that your child will need the most support from the start initially, right? Because and that's why she wants to be able to give herself and see like I mean, I nearly cried that day with the mother kind of going ... We are really doing our best. I mean, this child who came in is nonverbal, is not toilet trained'.

DC stood by her decision to start this child last as this child requires a lot of support from the school:

...It's all deep pressure massage, it's Jacuzzi, it's hammock. It's music, it's play, it's...And I got a phone call from SENO asked me, why the child hadn't started. And she understood what I was saying and accepted it. When the child did arrive I was delighted he came last because the child screams all the time. And if he had come day one with the other four children, they might never come back to this'.

DC wrestled with the parent's questioning of the approach. As a school they strive to do their very best but these parents were understandably seeing things from the perspective of their own child being targeted as neediest amongst the new cohort:

And you're trying to say look, I promise you we're doing our best, and I promise we will. And that's why we're doing this...you're kind of trying to justify yourself, even though you know, ...doing the right thing, you know'.

BD spoke about managing parental expectations in terms of 'what they want from their children'. He spoke about the children's 'development goals as such...aren't equal,

especially for what they can achieve'(BD) and this takes management from the principal. MW spoke about parents being so broken by the system as a whole that she felt they did not trust her or the school and *'will expect you to, to let them down and almost make that happen'*. In fact, her experience of parents of autistic children is that *'they're not all going to be grateful for what you do. You know, and some of them will make your job very difficult'* (MW).

Management of the principals' own expectations was explored. They wrestled daily with dilemmas presented to them by the autism classes. SC explained that prior to taking on the role of principal her expectation was that there would be a plentiful supply of professional supports available to her to support children in the special classes. This has not been her experience so she would advise any new principal to *'lower your expectations'* (SC) when it comes to professional supports. SC was surprised by the limitations of integration, something she had expected to see much more of in the special classes: *'before I entered the job, I would have expected more integration. While some children in the school would never, I could never see the integration because the needs are so great'*. The Summer provision introduced as part of measures to combat any educational gaps from COVID 19 school closures highlighted the expectations others have of principals for MH. She felt that there was an *'expectation that we're expected to stay on and manage it and run it and the whole lot, that's a huge challenge'* (MH).

DC discussed the difficulties for staff transitioning from the class to mainstream and *vice versa* because of their *'different expectations.'* In her case, because of qualification restrictions, she had a number of staff for years who could only work in the special classes and this eased the burden of expectations as there was little staff rotation needed. MH also spoke about *'teacher's expectations.'* In this case she was speaking about SET

teachers having to cover a special class during COVID 19 due to a lack of sub cover. Her opinion was that asking a SET teacher to cover a special class ‘*with no paperwork in front of her. I mean, like, that's not fair*’ (MH). She went on to say that when the *ad hoc* cover continues, a sense of resentment builds up within the staff.

Pressure on principals can come from parents (Raftery and Brennan, 2021). Parental expectations play an important role in the social and academic life of the child (McCoy *et al.*, 2016). The principals interviewed acknowledged that parents had expectations of their child. What was less clear was the struggle the principals had with parents expecting too much of the school or their child (Glashan, Mackay and Grieve, 2004). The principals in this study spoke about the difficulties of managing parents, yet both parents and principals had the identical objective of wanting what was best for the child. The positive impact of parental expectations (Zhan, 2006) was not felt by the principals. In fact, parental expectations were impeding their work. A number of principals acknowledged the stress that parents of autistic children are under due to the perceived necessity that they need to demand and fight for services for their child (Krakovich *et al.*, 2016). This stress was seen as a factor in the expectations parents placed on the school. Krakovich *et al.* (2016) found that ‘school-based interventions may be an especially important tool for reducing parent stress when caring for a child with ASD generally, and have the further potential to reduce disparities in access to these needed supports for families from disadvantaged backgrounds’ (Krakovich *et al.*, 2016, p. 2051). Perhaps the expectations parents put on the school is an avenue for them to reduce the stress they feel as parents of autistic children.

DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003) found that the principals’ expectations when it comes to children with additional needs must ensure that the pupils are receiving the best instruction and supports that they possibly can. All the principals in this study felt

that they had the best interests of the children at heart no matter what level of experience of autism they had. The idealised perception of principalship, whereby limitless resources exist to support children with autism, was quickly replaced by the reality of the burden on services (Trnavčević and Roncelli Vaupot, 2009). This process forced the principals to manage their expectations within the resources available to them.

While ‘teacher education programmes strive to prepare new teachers for a demanding, ever-changing career’ (Bigam, Hively and Toole, 2014, p. 212), principals of special classes are also striving to prepare and support their teachers to take on the role of the special class teacher. Oliver and Reschly (2010) found special education teachers may not be adequately prepared for their role, while Park and Chitiyo (2011) found little difference in teachers’ attitudes to mainstream or special education. It is against this backdrop that principals are managing the expectations of teachers who may not believe they are trained in this area although they may have a positive attitude towards inclusion. These teachers may have expectations that are appropriate to the mainstream but not to the special classes, which is where conflict may arise. It is conflict of expectations that principals find themselves navigating.

10.5 Professional supports

The perceived lack of professional supports resounded as a challenge with a number of the principals interviewed. When discussing professional supports, the principals referred to speech and language therapists (SLTs), occupational therapists (OTs), behavioural specialists, psychologist, NCSE, SENOs and NEPs. BD named the challenge as lack of ‘*external professional care*’ and stated that these services are so ‘*overloaded*’ that children with specific needs are ‘*battling for physio, battling for SLTs*’ in order to support their access to school. MW described her assigned NEPS

psychologist as being ‘*overwhelmed*’. MW went on to describe a scenario where she feels sorry for NEPS psychologists and their workload and almost ‘*apologises*’ when she asks them to do a piece of work for the school. The NEPs services was generally positively lauded amongst the principals but it was noted that it was a limited service and that schools need greater service. MK had a particular behavioural need in the special class that NEPs were coming to support her with in the near future. MK lamented that ‘*that’s our NEPs gone for this year to that class*’, intimating that there would be no service available to any other need of the school should the need arise.

MH spoke about the two-year waiting list for services and that there are ‘*not enough psychologists, speech therapists, OTs*’. CK wanted to see a more ‘*holistic*’ approach with outside professionals where everyone would work as team. At the moment CK has ‘*no SLT support, no OT support, no psych support, no behavioural support.*’ She questioned whether the children in the autism class were ‘*really being included properly in the education system?*’ without these professional supports. CK reminisced about a time almost ten years previously when she first took on the role and she worked with other external professionals in the special classes. These paraprofessionals were attached to the local resource centre and included an OT, a SLT and a psychologist. In the past when she rang for support she would have ‘*had somebody in by the end of the month, and the children would have had the support, and the staff would’ve had the support that they needed to support children*’(CK). This is no longer her experience of external professionals. MK also remembered a time when ‘*it used to be that there was a schedule in place whereby the OT came once a fortnight with the speech therapist came once a fortnight and those supports were just there.*’ This is no longer the case. MK felt she had no professional supports: ‘*we got little or no speech therapy supports, we got no OT support*’. SC, who is relatively new to special classes, explained how she

presumed that there would be *'access to OT, speech therapists, psychologists'*, but she has found that the reality is that this is not the case and not how the classes operate. MS privately sourced a psychologist through the National College of Ireland, who supported the staff *'on the peak relational training'* which compliments their work in the special classes. MK spoke about a particular child with challenging behaviour. She spoke about how the services just *'pass the buck'*. These services included DE, NCSE and NEPS. She was adamant that the root of the child's behaviour was that *'he was getting none of the OT psychology, speech therapy'* that he needed. MK believes that schools have been asked to take on a *'very therapeutic role'* and does not believe they should, as she needs *'the input of behaviour therapists, speech therapists, psychologists and occupational therapists to run that room'* and at the moment she does not *'have any of that'*. MH spoke about the restrictions of the once off visit of the psychologist and suggested that *'a regular psychologist, speech therapist, OT maybe linked in with the school, that would be so much more beneficial'* much like what was described as MK and CK in the past.

The NCSE was criticised by BH: *'the NCSE is a difficulty for me, though, as well. I used to find the SESS were great. They were amazing'*, referring to the Special Education Support Service who were subsumed into the NCSE. He particularly criticised NCSE in relation to the role of the SENO: *'I just feel the role of the SENO is being undermined by the NCSE'*. He alluded to a recent personal experience to support this allegation but did not feel comfortable sharing it within the interview: *'I've had an experience of that myself recently. I obviously I can't go into it'*. MS uses the NCSE advisor service but cautions that *'everything is unique'* particularly given his specific setting.

Managing challenging behaviour is a challenge, as seen in research (Lindsay *et al.*, 2013). A reduction in professional services in schools was previously reported and a negative impact was found amongst participants for services such as OTs, SLTs as reported by the principals in this study (McCoy *et al.*, 2016). Collaboration and engagement with educational and health professionals can enhance the quality of experience for pupils in the autism class (Cullinane *et al.*, 2022). Much of the experiences of the principals in this study are reflected in parental experiences captured by AsIAM (2021), when they found:

- 42% of parents and guardians have had to wait over two years to receive an autism diagnosis for their child.
- 54% felt very dissatisfied with the support services from the HSE for their autistic children, with as many as 65% of respondents going on to express dissatisfaction with broader Disability Services.
- 79% said that they were not in receipt of any support from either the Early Intervention or School Age-Going Teams (AsIAM, 2021, p. 4).

The wait period for accessing services was highlighted by parents as being at least two years (AsIAM, 2021) and this was also noted by the principals. Both teachers and principals remarked on the need for professional supports for children with special educational needs (Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 2023). Parents paid privately for professional supports (AsIAM, 2021) just as MS when he sought out the psychologist to train his staff. The AsIAM (2021) report recommends an increase in resourcing of these professional support services for children as well as a clearer pathway for access. The School Inclusion Model is a pilot project that was developed from a review of the current SNA scheme (National Council for Special Education, 2018). The pilot project involves providing in-school therapy services, to include occupational therapists and speech and language therapists. This model was a result of

the recommendation for more supports for schools (National Council for Special Education, 2018). This model of in-school therapies appears similar to the historical model MK and CK spoke about and both principals found this model of service very beneficial to the pupils and the school. The model of therapies being delivered in schools may also counteract the barriers some parents may find in terms of navigating the information about supports (Chu *et al.*, 2020) or finding time to attend appointments with other commitments (Smith *et al.*, 2020). The principals interviewed in this research were very willing to welcome the services into their schools to support the pupils on site.

10.6 Conclusion

In the current context of a principal's work it is difficult for them 'to make well-balanced decisions' which leads to tensions and dilemmas in their work (Lüddeckens, Anderson and Östlund, 2022, p. 218). Professional learning is a lifelong journey. While it may begin at ITE it does not end here. ITE should aim to equip the teacher with the confidence and dispositions needed to develop the sense that they have the capability to continue to learn and develop as practitioners. While attendance outside of school can be a source of professional learning, learning onsite in the school should also be viewed as a legitimate means to develop their skills. The autism classes were highlighted as a source of tension and dilemma for the principals. The principals wrestled with issues specific to the class. Staffing from their cohort of staff was both a dilemma and a source of tension as they struggled to find the solution to staff the class and support their staff. A lack of resourcing, inequity in resourcing between schools and difficulties accessing available resourcing was a difficulty for principals. Supporting correct placement and finding suitable second level placement was highlighted by the principals. A variety of expectations need to be managed in the

context of the autism classes. Principals who worked really hard to support the children in their care found it very difficult to manage the expectations of parents. At times parents wanted more from the principals while at other times parents were not accepting of the limitations their children were facing. The principals found these scenarios difficult to traverse. This led to the dilemma of managing their own expectations within the system in which they work. While realistic expectations were needed, the drive for principals to do everything in their power to best serve their children meant an internal struggle to have high expectations within a system that often did not support this with resources or support.

11 Conclusion and Recommendations

11.1 Introduction

The original aim of this research was to explore the practices of current primary school principals through their own voices and lived experience. In this chapter the original research questions will be revisited as they frame the entire study. Each of the research questions will be addressed and a framework of current good practice with recommendations will be proffered along with recommendations for future research.

11.2 What are the experiences of current primary principals of leading schools with autism classes in the context of their professional life history and present lived experience?

The principals involved in the study reflected on their professional life history and offered insights into their prior experiences of working with and learning about autism classes. While there is an acknowledgement of the importance of professional learning in the area of inclusion for pre-service teachers (Hick *et al.*, 2019; Kearns and Shevlin, 2006) there is little research on the need for principals to engage in pre-leadership professional learning in the area of inclusion. The Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership (PDSL) which is a programme for aspiring leaders and is part funded by the Department of Education (DE) does not include a specific module on inclusion or additional needs within the programme. The *Misneach* (Professional Development Service for Teachers, 2023b) programme for newly appointed principals did not contain a module specific to additional needs or inclusion when those in this study were undertaking it. In *Misneach*'s current iteration, the NCSE address the principals for a session on their role and services. *Forbairt* (Professional Development Service for Teachers, 2023a), which is the follow-on programme for more experienced leadership

teams, does not specifically contain any professional learning on inclusion or additional needs but schools complete a self-directed project as part of the programme which could focus on leadership development within inclusion, if that was a priority need for their school. These DE leadership programmes were lauded by the principals who spoke about them within the study. The principals suggested an expansion to these programmes to include specific modules on special education, special classes and inclusion.

Professional learning specific to autism in principal development was identified by the principals as a central need in their professional life history. The principals identified their professional priority needs in developing their knowledge of autism classes. The principals had engaged in some autism specific learning through short courses and one principal had engaged in a formal qualification in the area of special education. The principals were positively disposed towards the content and quality of courses currently on offer but outlined that they would like to see more specific leadership courses in autism on offer. The tailoring of specific professional learning would make it most effective in the opinions of the principals in the study as also identified by Cullinane *et al.* (2022). Currently, there is a formal course on offer for Special Education Teachers, which is fully funded by the DE. During this course, practicing teachers are allowed release time to complete study within their respective school settings in a situated learning experience (Lave, 2010) and engage with high quality learning in a college setting.

The principals spoke about the value they place on being part of a local principals' support group. As outlined, these support groups act as professional learning communities outside of the school. Two of the principals were part of principal support groups that were specifically for principals who were leading autism classes. These

principals felt that being part of this group was particularly beneficial for their work in relation to the autism classes.

Throughout this study the principals outlined the roles they assume when leading the autism classes. Reflective of existing research, the following roles were outlined: advocate, partner, interpreter, negotiator, helper, supporter, organiser and conflict resolver (Cobb, 2015). They also identified that they use transformational, instructional and distributed leadership styles when leading the autism classes. These styles have been identified in the research as best practice for leading for inclusion (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020).

Professional Learning Communities have been recognised as being impactful for pupils with additional needs in the Irish (Raftery and Brennan, 2021) and international (Schechter and Feldman, 2019) educational contexts. Similarly, in this research it is contended that the model of autism classes can be viewed as a community of practice where everyone within the community is active in terms of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The principals were very happy to be part of this model and enjoyed the journey of learning along with everyone else without the sense or need for mastery. This model not only develops the principal, but everyone involved. Having an openness to engagement in communities of practice widens the skill development possibilities within the wider school domain.

An extensive number of tensions and dilemmas were outlined by the principals within the study. Staffing of the classes was a source of stress for the principals. Finding staff with the disposition to work in the autism classes was a source of tension within this study. Some of the principals spoke of the classes as almost a separate entity within the school. This led to the idea of specific training needed for the staff. Principals did not

view the current model of ITE as sufficient to equip teachers with the necessary skills to teach in the autism classes. They also felt that access to training for SNAs was essential. The principals felt that SNAs were a vital part of the team and that they should be offered short term training to reflect the professionalism of their role.

Access and lack of resources were explored. The principals were dismayed by the lack of clarity around accessing of resources necessary to support children in the autism classes. One of the principals spoke about her experience of a previous iteration of a professional team of SLTs, OTs and physiotherapists being available to the team. This model appears similar to the School Inclusion Model currently being piloted in a number of schools (National Council for Special Education, 2018).

The principals spoke about the importance they placed on the support they received from their staff in work. This was particularly evident with reference to the period during the COVID 19 global pandemic. This reciprocal support was highly valued by the principals and central to their work. The idea of being a good follower and being easy to lead is also evidenced in the research (Peters and Haslam, 2018; Mullen, 2016). The idea of reciprocal leadership was borne out through the comments of the principals. While the traditional assumption that the leaders' actions affect those they lead might be the basis for many theories of leadership, *reciprocal influence theory* outlines a two-way outlook where leadership affects staff but staff behaviour equally affects leadership (Lunenburg, 2010). The principals considered the importance of the staff in undertaking their role effectively. The leaders were employee-centred and this influenced the positivity towards their leader (Likert, 1961).

11.3 Recommendations for professional life history and present lived experience

11.3.1 Specific autism training for principals

‘It is incumbent on education policy-makers therefore to re-evaluate the availability, quality and relevance of leadership training programmes for aspiring and newly appointed principals’ (Ummannel, McNamara and Stynes, 2016, p. 69). This assertion can be applied to autism classes. Specific autism training for principals should be provided (McCormack, 2019). The current *Misneach* programme is deemed to be a positive professional experience by the principals in the study. However, they felt it could be expanded upon to improve the learnings for principals who have special classes in their school and are newly appointed. A specific standalone professional learning day for principals who are in schools with special classes was thought to be a prudent proposal by the principals. They suggested that the content of the day should cover managerial aspects such as setting up the class, accessing grants and resources as well as the leadership of school culture. The principals felt that building on the current *Misneach* programme would give newly appointed principals an insight into how they work and would help equip them with the tools they need to lead special classes and thus reducing their stress load. To further this recommendation, the Department of Education could allow principals release time away from their schools to complete a specific inclusionary leadership education programme akin to the current model of the Post-Graduate Diploma Programme of Continuing Professional Development for Special Education Teachers which is fully funded by the DE and practicing teachers are allowed release time to complete study within their respective school settings in a situated learning experience (Lave, 2010).

11.3.2 Support groups for principals leading autism classes

It is a recommendation from this study that principals who are leading autism classes in their schools should start or join principal support groups specifically for supporting each other around autism classes. In Cork, there is a countywide group of principals of autism classes which provides a strong network of support. This group meets termly and support is offered through a WhatsApp group between meetings. This group support each other in a community of practice model where everyone learns from each other and new knowledge is created. The group also use their voice collectively to advocate for autistic children and services. This model could be applied nationwide with each county developing an autism class principal group which could bring learning for all through the model of professional learning communities (McCormack, 2019; Schechter and Feldman, 2019). These groups could be attached to an Education Centre where applicable providing a learning space for the development of the group.

11.3.3 Inclusionary leadership as the act of leading towards inclusion

This study recommends that the act of principals striving to create an inclusive school should be referred to as inclusionary leadership. This denotes that the principals are employing the most inclusionary leadership styles as well as having the ability to adapt to the roles necessary for developing an inclusive culture in their setting. Similarly, it lends itself to the principal always developing professionally, that the mastery of inclusion is not the end goal. It can never be fully attained as purported by Vlachou and Tsirantonaki (2023). The act of being an inclusionary principal is most important to support pupils and the school community. It provides a pathway for the principal. It is a goal that is achievable for all. The goal of inclusion is a constant work in progress and

not an endpoint. It is recursive and iterative in nature. It requires constant review and redevelopment. It is a lifelong professional journey.

11.3.4 Autism classes as a model of community of practice

Within the research there was a recognition of the power of the learning community or community of practice could hold in the lives of pupils with additional needs, as reflected in the research (Raftery and Brennan, 2021). This idea of a community of practice could be applied to other areas within the school to equally support the skill development of staff. Communities of practice as part of the wider structure of school would support this idea. These communities could take the shape of class level communities, SET communities or communities that involve both mainstream and SET teachers. It is recommended that further research regarding the developing of the autism class community of practice idea in a wider school context should be undertaken.

11.3.5 Lifelong professional learning as a pathway for all educators

This study also recommends that further work should be undertaken to develop the conception of ITE as the beginning of the learning journey for teachers. An expectation that a teacher will be fully equipped with all of the skills necessary to teach for their lifetime is no longer an appropriate stance given how fast paced societal change is in Ireland and across the world. A broader idea of ITE as the beginning and then moving towards *Cosán* (The Teaching Council, 2016), a journey of professional learning, allows the teacher to adapt and develop according to the needs of the children. It also proposes the idea that an early career teacher should be ready to teach in any position within the school with the understanding that they will have to further develop their skills and attitudes as they progress in their careers (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002). This is also true of the principal. There is an imbalance between pre and post-

appointment learning opportunities for principals (Ummannel, McNamara and Stynes, 2016). Pre-principal professional learning supports the work of the principal. There is a raft of organised post-appointment opportunities with less consistency and less importance placed on what is available pre-appointment (Ummannel, McNamara and Stynes, 2016). The community of practice model gives the principals the opportunity to continue to learn in both their pedagogy and leadership roles.

11.3.6 Increase in professional supports

The access to professional supports was a challenge for the principals. They were of the view that there were not enough professionals available and access to these types of resources was difficult to navigate. This study recommends an increase in the availability of professionals such as SLTs, OTs, physiotherapists and psychologists to support the work of the autism classes. The principals identified the need for a pathway to access of resources such as professional learning or equipment. The study recommends that a document is produced outlining the type of resource required and steps on how to access or apply for such a resource. This quick guide would reduce the stress on principals who are unsure about where they need to go or who they need to contact to procure a necessary support for an autistic pupil.

11.3.7 Reciprocal leadership to support sustainable leadership

The sustainability of the role of principal is currently under scrutiny (Irish Primary Principal Network, 2022). The idea of reciprocal leadership places a responsibility on staff to create the conditions in which a principal can lead effectively. This shift in mind-set encourages all staff to participate in the leadership of the school. Staff do not have to be in a formal leadership role in order to influence how they are led. The onus is not on the principal alone to develop the conditions and culture. They can lead the

vision but it takes everyone in the school to act in a way that creates the conditions for the leadership to enact the vision. The principals' role is to support their staff and students as well as the day-to-day management of the school. Principals cannot adequately carry out this role if they are stressed and overburdened. Staff must support their principal and develop conditions that create a good working environment for the principal. Reciprocal leadership provides a space for the principal to lead and others to follow in a positive and productive manner (Lunenburg, 2010).

Ireland is at a critical point when it comes to the recruitment of primary principals. On 29th May 2023 there were 45 principal roles advertised on the main education recruitment website Educationposts.ie (Irish Primary Principal Network, 2023) a number of which are re-advertisements indicating a lack of interest in, or suitability for, the post. This number of advertisements has been consistent in the last few months, a likely symptom of the extreme pressures on senior leaders during the recent COVID 19 crisis coupled with an ever-growing workload that expands year on year. The complexities were highlighted by the former Chief Inspector Dr. Harold Hislop when he spoke of 'the extent of the burden of the principal's role' (Hislop, 2022, p. 231). To ensure the stability of the education system and the best possible student experience, the sustainability of the role of principal needs to be addressed to ensure longevity and continuation within the profession. The Irish Primary Principal's Network (IPPN) recognise the need for a more manageable workload for principals. They have initiated the 'Sustainable Leadership Project' (Irish Primary Principal Network, 2022) to examine more closely the sustainability of the role as well as to identify key challenges and opportunities to help sustain leadership into the future. The model of distributed leadership to lead autism classes as outlined in this study could act as an exemplar to increase leadership capacity within schools and allow principals to become part of the

team without the burden of always leading from the front. The use of professional networks available within the school could lead to a greater sense of wellbeing for the principal who could be in a position to share their role with competent and confident members of the team in a confident and collegial manner (Beausaert *et al.*, 2021). Allowing the staff to take the lead in running the classes has led to their success. Staff are afforded the responsibility and trust of the principal to undertake such an important task in the lives of these children. As the Chief Inspector expressed ‘it is the ambition of all education systems to ensure that optimal leadership practices are developed and fostered in their schools’ (Hislop, 2022, p. 230).

11.4 What advice would current primary principals give to other principals who are leading or about to lead autism classes?

The idea of professional generosity and collegiality was most notably put forward when giving advice to principals who were about to be appointed or were about to open autism classes. Many of the principals voiced the opinion that talking to current principals in the role was the best form of support that one could access. A number of the principals in this study were often contacted for advice by principal colleagues. These principals were very happy to support the knowledge development of others and were encouraged by the endeavour. One principal supported cross-sectorally by advising a post primary principal who was about to open their first autism class. The principals suggested that visiting other schools with classes currently in existence was a good idea to see the autism classes in action. Mentoring and coaching and knowledge development was vital to this support according to the principals in this study, which aligns with findings from other studies such as Kutsyuruba and Godden (2019). The principals were involved formally in some organisations such as CSL where they were exposed to the idea of coaching and mentoring. Other principals used a coaching and

mentoring approach with staff and principals new to autism classes. The principals advised that a principal new to autism classes should consider undertaking some professional learning in the area of autism to build their knowledge base as suggested previously by McCormack (2019).

11.5 Recommendations for principals who are about to lead or open autism classes

The most pertinent advice that the study proffered to principals who are new to autism classes was to speak to a principal who was currently in the role of leading autism classes. Many of the principals did this and now they are the point of contact for others beginning on their journey (Talley and Henry, 2008). This professional generosity currently happens ad hoc. This study recommends that this professional generosity is recognised and framed. It could become part of the current model of leadership development provision. The recommended *Misneach* autism class day could include some element of current principals speaking to those about to embark on the role. Further, the CSL and IPPN currently provide a one-to-one mentoring service and group mentoring to newly appointed principals (Fitzpatrick-Associates, 2021). Perhaps the group mentoring model could be developed for a group of principals about to open or lead autism classes. Visits to classes for principals about to open autism classes was a key step, as outlined by the study. The experienced principal mentor could organise a trip for the support group to visit their school which might enhance and formalise the process. This would act to give principals equal access to the supports as not every new principal may feel comfortable or confident enough to make contact with an unknown principal at the beginning of their leadership journey. This would satisfy the previously outlined desire to have specific principal support groups for principals leading autism classes.

11.6 What are the principals' own reflections and understanding of the meaning of their experiences leading autism classes?

For principals leading autism classes, in spite of the difficulties they outlined, the role was seen as positive and they viewed the many opportunities it afforded them. The emotion of the two principals who became upset during the interviews when speaking about the autism classes demonstrates how important the classes are to their work and the care they had for their school. None of the principals interviewed expressed any regret at either opening an autism class or taking on the role even with the many challenges that they encountered. One of the principals remarked that for him, the opening of autism classes was a pivotal point in his career. The principals viewed the opportunities afforded to them by the autism classes which is indicative of their dispositions towards inclusion (Kuknor and Bhattacharya, 2020). Their commitment to school wide inclusion was evident with the inclusive leadership styles they employed which were identified within this study. Evidence of this commitment was even more pronounced during the COVID 19 pandemic reflective of the research (Harris and Jones, 2020; Hall *et al.*, 2021a). The principals reflected on the worry they felt for the pupils, their families and staff which can be found in the research (Colum and Collins, 2021). The principals had a strong commitment to supporting autistic pupils by leading the classes, ensuring the correct staff were employed, sourcing resources needed and advocating for them. They wanted to support parents by ensuring the classes operate and by running the July Provision programme to afford them the respite they needed. The principals encountered stressful situations when leading the autism classes. These stresses included encounters with parents, staffing issues and difficulties in accessing necessary resources. However, the autism classes were a great sense of pride and joy for the principals and offered them many opportunities. Some of the principals in

administrative roles with non-teaching duties enjoyed the occasional opportunity to teach in the class when covering teacher release days. Being part of the community of practice in the autism classes gave some of the principals a sense of reinvigoration. They were presented with an opportunity to upskill and learn in their own schools. This was a source of stimulation in their professional lives. The principals took joy from working on the July provision and Easter provision programmes even though they acknowledged that they were tired and this extended their working year.

The story of John finding his voice (in Chapter 7) illustrates the transformative effect the inclusion of autistic children can have on an entire school. For one principal, the classes were a way of bringing diversity to the school which had quite a homogenous pupil cohort until the special classes were formed. At no point in the interviews did any principal question the existence of the autism classes. However, one principal described how he was looking to progress inclusion even further by developing ‘quasi classes’ where the children may be based but would move back and forth from mainstream as needed during the school day in a more informal basis than is currently in place. This vision for inclusion is something he is striving for within his school. There is an indication here of a move away from the traditional idea of autism classes without their extinction.

11.7 Recommendations from the meaning and experiences of current principals

We cannot say for definite if it is the autism classes that influenced the principals to become inclusionary principals or that these principals were inclusionary prior to leading the classes and taking on this role was a natural progression. What we can say from this study is that the principals in this research who are leading autism classes are

employing an inclusionary principal approach. Further to the SISL study, more research is required to dig deeper into the area of inclusionary leadership, to develop a definition to support leaders in their work. Appropriate leadership styles for inclusion have been identified but more work is needed to look at characteristics of inclusive leaders (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020). This study argues that disposition plays an important part in the inclusionary principal role. All of the principals were positively disposed to inclusion in the autism classes and most spoke about it in terms of the wider school and community sphere. The current review of the EPSEN Act (March 2023) is timely given it is asking the opinions of staff, parents and pupils on how they view inclusion and what they would like to see in the future.

11.8 Limitations to the study

This study forms part of a doctoral thesis study, and therefore there are a number of limitations. Due to the part-time nature of the study, there were limitations as to what the researcher could achieve within the research. The number of participants (n=15), while offering an insight, may not be representative of the full cohort of principals leading autism classes at present. When studying primary school principals, it must be remembered how expansive their role is and the many demands on their time. A number of principals showed initial interest in the project but declined involvement as they felt that they could not commit the time needed for the interviews. The principals who did volunteer were eager to do so in order to expand the current knowledge that surrounds leading autism classes. All of the principals, while measured in their responses, were positively disposed towards the autism classes and their place in inclusion. In the future, it would be interesting to research those who are not as positively disposed to autism classes to understand a contrasting point of view.

11.9 The original contribution of the research

This research contributes to the existing body of research of leadership in an Irish context. Traditional theoretical and leadership concepts are somewhat challenged within this research with a view to the development of new ideas for inclusionary leadership. Inclusionary leadership is a new term coined from this study. It builds on prior knowledge of inclusive leadership practices (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020) and traditional theories of leadership (Spillane, 2012; Sugrue, 2009). It signals an evolution in school leadership which parallels the changing landscape of Irish education (Banks and McCoy, 2017; Shevlin and Banks, 2021). There is thought and intentionality behind what leaders do when striving for inclusion in their schools (Moloney and McCarthy, 2018). The study disputes previous ideas of the *hero* principal (Sugrue, 2009) and proffers that principals see themselves as part of the larger school ecosystem. They understand that they have a role and skills but the top-down leadership approach is not how they carry out their work. They see value in identifying and articulating a vision to ‘create shared meaning and strengthen school culture through the development of collaborative practices and processes’ (Shevlin and Flynn, 2011, p. 129). The inclusionary principal values working with others and in turn developing the strengths of the entire staff. To achieve this, principals recognise the central role staff play in the organisation. This understanding of *Reciprocal Influence Theory* gives the unique perspective of how staff can influence the success of a school (Lunenburg, 2010). Power is not the objective of the inclusionary principal. They recognise that everyone in a school is valued. Principals valuing and trusting their teachers in a symbiotic relationship was evident in this study (King, 2017). This way of working in a professional learning community (Schechter and Feldman, 2019) as a legitimate peripheral participant in the situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) context of their

own school is how an inclusionary principal carries out their work. They become re-energised by an expansion of their leadership. The values of inclusion are what drive them (Morrissey, 2021). Reimagining the emphasis from power to relationships leads to the development of more inclusive school cultures.

Viewing the autism classes as a way to build a professional learning community (Raftery and Brennan, 2021) may provide a powerful opportunity for enhancement in education (Harris, 2003). Professional learning communities are a way to build human capital within the learning organisation (Senge, 1990). Fitzgerald and Radford (2020, p. 995) concur in the sense that ‘teamwork, flexibility, collaborative and reflective practices are required to create effective learning organisations.’ A team approach in the autism classes is important to ‘reduce the sense of isolation and disperse decision making responsibility’ (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020, p. 1003). The principals openly declared their inexperience in the area of autism classes but emphasised their belief in their importance. Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville (2019) argue that it is worrying that principals do not have the knowledge needed to support the autism classes. This study argues that while they do not feel comfortable leading in the area, they want to be part of the process of learning together with the staff. The principals self-declare as not being the most powerful person in the autism class community though they are aware that the position of principal is most powerful in the school. This separation of the person from the role of principal affords an opportunity for the power hierarchy to be broken down. All of the constituent voices of the school become more equal and therefore the principals voice speaks with colleagues, rather than to colleagues. The principal becomes a genuine part of the team, and not the team leader. This not only is a model of distributed leadership but an example of legitimate participation where non-principal staff members get to use their voice and develop their professionalism (Lave and

Wenger, 1991). It is contended ‘that teachers have the agency to lead change and to guide organisational development and improvement’ (Harris, 2003, p. 322). The autism classes have the potential for teachers and SNAs to guide development and improvement as the principal wholly gives over the leadership capacity in this area and enacts a ‘collaborative affirmation’ stance (Moynihan and O'Donovan, 2022, p. 25). Raftery and Brennan (2021) recommend the use of professional learning communities to support pupils with additional needs in Irish primary schools. This successful model could be applied to other areas in the school for a wider school human capacity development which could have tremendous consequences for the wider education system.

This research provides useful insights that can be transferred across other sectors. With the aging pupil population there is an increase in the number of special classes opening at post primary level. Many post primary principals are about to take on the role of the inclusionary leader. Principal colleagues at second level can learn lessons from the experiences of their primary counterparts. This information can enable them to be the best leaders they can be and support them as they embark on their inclusionary leadership journey.

11.10 Inclusionary leadership - towards a definition

In this study what we have learned about the inclusionary leader is that they employ transformational, distributed and instructional leadership styles. They take on a variety of roles in their work, such as advocate, partner, interpreter, negotiator, helper, support, organiser and conflict resolver. They utilise these roles as and when they are needed within their work. Their moral values underpin the work that they do (Vlachou and Tsirantonaki, 2023). They have a strong sense of fairness and equity. They enact a

servant leadership style overall. They want to serve the children, the staff, the parents and the wider community as best they can. They understand that they work within a system and use the resources they have, while striving to better the resources at their disposal. They are vulnerable in their approach. They become part of the community of practice to support everyone and develop their knowledge and skills. They illustrate a positive disposition towards including everyone in the school community. They show understanding and benevolence towards children, parents and staff. They build a culture of trust and vulnerability so everyone can develop their potential. They want to extend their knowledge through professional generosity by supporting newly appointed principals and taking part in studies such as this one.

11.11 Potential for future research

This study offers empirical insights into the reality of inclusionary leadership practices in primary schools. Consistent with the literature, it indicates that principals are carrying out their role in a way that best supports students and the schools in light of their lived reality in an increasingly complex world of education and the accelerated change. The evidence highlights that it is essential that we explore new ways of thinking about leadership in order to enhance the profession and the experience for all. The current study has brought forward some issues which require further research.

While there is some leadership research from the Irish context, further research into leadership and inclusion is essential. While this study concentrates on autism classes, further research could look into special classes in general. The ideal of access for all is fast becoming a major issue in Irish education. Research into good leadership practice is needed to support this.

Looking towards the sustainability of the role of the principal, the notion of reciprocal leadership is put forward. There is a dearth of research on this topic and its impact on leadership and the wider educational landscape. Further research on this topic in an Irish context could uncover insights into the value of this approach for all stakeholders.

The autism class as a community of practice model is put forward in this research. This model is gaining traction in the research. Deeper research into the use of this model in the autism classes, special classes and wider school is necessary in order to explore its relevance and use for practitioners.

Theories of leadership are explored in this study. A new leadership style, inclusionary leadership, is proffered. This is built upon previous leadership models. Distributed leadership is advanced as an umbrella term rather than a singular style. Further research is needed to build on current theories of leadership and develop them so they align with the current needs of the school system.

It is recommended from this study that, similar to many of the online offerings of short-term professional learning courses that are now open to SNAs to attend, that they should be invited to face-to-face courses like their teacher peers. The quality of the courses offered by NCSE and Middletown Centre for Autism were held in high regard by the principals and these courses could be expanded to allow for the inclusion of SNAs. Principals viewed SNAs as being as important as teaching staff in the autism classes and were anxious that their professional learning was as accessible and equivalent to that of the teacher. The DE hosting SNA focus groups for the review of learning and development is a positive step in this regard (Department of Education, 2023b).

As mentioned earlier, all of the principals who participated in this study were positively disposed to the autism classes and inclusion. Future research should seek principal

participants who are not as positively disposed to these ideas. Their insights would support the building of a wider picture of the lived experiences of principals and the challenges that they may face.

11.12 Conclusion

Echoing other studies ‘principals in this study demonstrated a clear commitment to inclusive education’ in their schools (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020, p. 1002). It has been an honour to peer inside the world of the primary school principal and glean what inclusionary leadership looks like through their eyes. The complexity of the autism classroom and the school in general requires leaders to continually learn to solve the problems they face. There can be many obstacles to leading a school as a learning organisation (Senge, 1990). To successfully lead the autism classes, the inclusionary principal must have a clear vision of what they want to achieve. They lead with vulnerability, with the sole purpose of ensuring the best outcomes for the children. In the case of autism classes, the inclusionary principal becomes part of the community of practice to support and care for all members of the school community, including staff and children. The inclusionary principal cares.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Letter to School Principals

4th October 2021

Dear Principal,

My name is Linda Dennehy. I am the Principal of Scoil Íosagáin Infant NS, Mallow, Co. Cork, and a current Cohort PhD student in University College Cork.

I am undertaking a research study of **primary school principals' experiences of leading autism special classes in their schools**. The purpose of the study is to create greater awareness and understanding of principal perspectives to enhance leadership skills and student learning experience.

The study will involve speaking with primary Principals who lead mainstream schools with special classes for autism attached. Each participant will participate in one interview (c. 1 hour) at a time convenient to you during autumn 2021 with a follow up interview to be held in spring 2022. Given current circumstances these interviews in all likelihood will be held online. The anonymised data will form the basis of my PhD thesis.

If you would like to participate in this study or if you require any further information, please contact me by email to 119226432@umail.ucc.ie or by phone to (087) 7940913. I will then provide you with full details of the study.

Kindest Regards,

Linda Dennehy

Appendix B: Information Sheet

Thank you for considering participating in this research project. The purpose of this document is to explain to you what the work is about and what your participation would involve, so as to enable you to make an informed choice.

The purpose of this study is to reflect on current Primary School Principal practices when leading schools with autism special classes attached. It is hoped that good practice and challenges will be highlighted in order to support future good practices in leaders. Challenges and how they could be met going forward through policy or practice will be explored. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked take part in two one-to-one interviews with a researcher. The initial interview will be audio/video-recorded online, and is expected to take 60 minutes to complete. You will be asked to take part in a follow-on interview approximately 6 months later to discuss a transcript of your initial interview as well as general findings from the study so far. This interview will take approx. 40 minutes to one hour to complete. This interview will also be recorded online. You will have the option to complete a simple reflection in between interviews should you wish to do so.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no obligation to participate, and should you choose to do so you can refuse to answer specific questions, or decide to withdraw from the interview. Once the interview has been concluded, you can choose to withdraw your details at any time in the subsequent two weeks.

All of the information you provide will be kept confidential and anonymous, and will be available only to **THE RESEARCHER and MY SUPERVISORS**. The only exception is where information is disclosed which indicates that there is a serious risk to you or to others. Once the interview is completed, the recording will immediately be transferred to an encrypted laptop and wiped from the recording device. The interview

will then be transcribed by the researcher, and all identifying information will be removed. Once this is done, the audio-recording will also be deleted and only the anonymized transcript will remain. This will be stored on the University College Cork OneDrive system and subsequently on the UCC server. The data will be stored for **A MINIMUM OF TEN YEARS**. The information you provide may contribute to research publications and/or conference presentations. The data will contribute to the publication of a PhD thesis.

We do not anticipate any negative outcomes from participating in this study. **SHOULD YOU WISH TO DO SO, YOU CAN CHOOSE NOT TO ANSWER QUESTIONS, OR TO BRING THE INTERVIEW TO AN END AT ANY TIME.** At the end of the procedure, I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. Should you experience distress arising from the interview, the contact details for support services provided below may be of assistance.

This study has obtained ethical approval from the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee.

If you have any queries about this research, you can contact me at 119226432@umail.ucc.ie or my Supervisors Dr. Kevin Cahill at k.cahill@ucc.ie and Dr. Joseph Moynihan at joseph.moynihan@ucc.ie.

If you agree to take part in this study, please sign the consent form overleaf.



Consent Form

I.....agree to participate in **Linda Dennehy**'s research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my interview with Linda Dennehy to be audio/video-recorded.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box:)

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

Signed:

Date:

.....

PRINT NAME:

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Research Questions	Seidman (2019) Three Interview Series	Interview Questions
Q: What is the principal's experience in the context of their professional life history?	Focused Life History	1. Tell me about your principal experience to date?
Q. What is the principal's present lived experience in leading schools with autism classes? Q. What advice would current primary principals give to other principals who are leading or are about to lead schools with ASD classes?	The details of lived experience	2. What do you understand by the term inclusion? 3. How do you perceive your role in leading and managing autism classes? 4. What are the challenges for you as the leader? 5. What are the opportunities for you as the leader?
		6. Tell me about the skills or roles you utilise or take on when leading autism classes? 7. What supports are in place for you? How can you be better supported to become a more inclusive leader?
		8. Is there anything you wish you knew before taking on the role? And what advice would you give to someone about to take on the role of leader of a primary school with autism classes? 9. How has the COVID 19 global pandemic impacted on your leadership particularly in relation to leadership of autism special classes? Is there anything you would like to add or something you wish I had asked you? As you are aware I will be transcribing your interview and we will meet again next spring to discuss any major themes or findings. In the meantime, if you think of anything more you would like to add please feel free to email me.

Q. What is the principal's own reflection and understanding of the meaning of their experience of leading schools with autism classes?	Reflection on the Meaning	Developed through optional reflective statement. Reflection on interview themes that have emerged from interviews and revisited in focus groups.
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Appendix D: Follow on focus group invitation & questions

Dear Principal,

I am getting in touch with a final opportunity to reflect on the initial data collected in a focus group session.

Thank you again for committing to partake in my research. I now have initial data analysed and I am returning to you with a follow up Focus Group opportunity. This Focus Group will take place online.

This Focus Group will be in a group setting of a number of participants (confidentiality assured). I will present the initial findings and ask a short number of follow on questions.

It is intended that the focus group should last no longer than 30 minutes.

The follow-on questions are:

1. Who ends up working (teachers/ SNAs) in special classes in your school and how do you go about it?
2. How has your involvement in the classes impacted on your own professional learning?
3. What suggestions would you have for principal professional development?
4. What further support would help you to be a more inclusive leader?
5. Who supports you in leading the ASD classes?

As a principal myself I absolutely understand the pressures at this time of year but I would really appreciate it if you could commit to a focus group as your voice is so important in this research. I will send meeting links prior to the meeting.

If you have any questions or queries, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

If you are unable to attend, thank you again for your participation.

Wishing you a wonderful summer break!

Kindest Regards,

Linda Dennehy

Appendix E: Initial coding and categorising of 'Professional Learning'

Code	Category
I suppose training I suppose help If the child or sending a teacher on CPD or a online training she went to the CABA training, and she went to training for behavioural management, managing children with difficult behaviour, and any courses that were available, you know, that she could go to as a day course here and there, (LD) Making sure that the people that were going in there got the training so that they would feel competent in what they were doing, And like that, not a lot of...there was training available to principals Don't get me wrong. But it wasn't practical. And it was more generic training on autistic children. Our support staff training, learning about the autism s to good work, what are good working models of an ASD class, because you do go to training courses, but then there's a lot less practical advice around around setting up a class and then upskilling teachers to be able to work in that environment happily attended much of training for principals. I didn't understand what training might have been involved. a programme for training principals coming into the job, maybe build into that programme of module, establishing special classes maybe, maybe as part of new principals training because you have two days training before you start the job as a principal, and then in year two, you get two more days training Misneach training, when you come in as a principal. But if you're a principal of a school with special classes, you get six days	Teacher training Teacher training Leadership learning Staff Training Leadership learning Preparatory Leadership training

I think the biggest the biggest issue is training for staff. And you're being told that in September, you're going to specialise in liver complaints so that we're not giving you any training before September. It's only in September, that you can get training, when you're already seeing seeing a patient. And then when, when you do this training, somebody is going to come in and take your place. Now they have no idea. As sub is going to be coming into your role they're going to know nothing about liver, either there they have just your general training as well they should be given three months training, at least when nobody asked me, you're going into this very specialised position and the staff we had one day's training. And the school was closed for the day. But since then we've had... we've had no, can you imagine that? How many new staff we have since then, you know, it's meant to turnover of staff. So half our staff here haven't had any training. And then the teachers who have training are the ones who have been in the special class, and they've gone and they've done their training (BH) the teacher training colleges are doing, they must be doing. Very little, very little done on ASD or on special Ed, like that should be like the I know they have four years now. Like the amount of children every year that are coming that are enrolling in school with ASD, behavioural issues, you don't mean it's a massive part of any teachers role in a mainstream class dealing with this. And to me that the exposure that they get to that in teacher training is minimal. So, like, there's so much information on it, but to actually put somebody into that, maybe that person having just that much experience, or that much training or that much knowledge about it, and expect them to be able to cope with all of this. It's, it's To me, it's, to me, it's it's, it's, it's crazy....	Staff Training Comparing lack of training to a doctor specialising without training Staff Preparation training Whole school training Teacher Preparation (ITE)
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level the difficulties that that teachers are having, principals are having, when they do open special classes, and those have issues coming up, and how do we deal with it? You know, to me, because they don't have the basic, you know, the basic training and, and it's, it's not helping anybody, you know what I mean? But at least if you could get some decent training in first, at least people will even know about some of the issues as they come along. And they might say, Oh, I remember we discussed as a training on the first day. And they might say, Oh, I remember we discussed as a training on the first day. SNAs, you know, to mean, that SNAs would be would be given that support too & that training. And the thing, the advice that I would give to anybody is to get as much training and get as much information and read as much about it and talk to people. I think training is so important, like it can't be overemphasised. To me, what that that training, the training for the staff, or the SNAs is vital. Tapping into the knowledge that is there. Nobody, like, when you go to those new principal trainings, it just doesn't really come up, like, you know, it's not that big of a deal. And there's so many schools with a class now, I think it should there should maybe be a module on that as well. You do a lot wonderful training with Misneach and Forbairt All staff training about what Autism means you're entitled to that that hasn't happened yet, because of COVID. ut we were, we weren't given any training. But we found a psychologist in the National College of Ireland, who worked with us and gave us training on the peak relational training that tells you we're on professional where the area of work that needs to be done with a particular child and the key milestones that they need to reach	Difficulties for teachers even with training Lack of training leading to difficult issues for teachers& principals Training as a preventative measure and support SNA Training Principal Preparation through training Importance of training Principal Preparation Training Principal Preparation Training
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Yeah, we weren't given any training on that. And our teacher missed out. Someone just about to take on the role is to do the preparation that take advantage of those webinars. And these are the things that you need to do in order to be to make it successful. And that would be good learning and getting that training And for the teacher who's taking on the special task that they have that initial introduction first and then when they start the new school hear that they get other training there that it should happen automatically as a right The challenge from me is that before I was In this school, I mean, I have literally had no experience of working with children with autism, there's no training there And I think what's even sadder is that there doesn't seem to be any great improvement in that in the colleges. Now thought when courses went to 4 years nearly one of the four years will be about special ed. But it isn't. So you know, to have properly trained and qualified and interested teachers, is a huge challenge. And often, why that's challenging is because teachers are daunted because they weren't trained, you know what I mean, it goes back to the fact that they wouldn't do it, they just don't feel comfortable doing it, because they, it's not part of any training that they had. So for me, the challenge was to staff properly, to meet the needs of the children to provide this resource they have. And I, you know, talk to a number of members, staff who would have done some autism training and asked them, you know, whether you don't want to push because you know, your time's up to the ends, do people have their plans in place for the year? But she is I think it would say living her best life. She's upskilling. She's training she's loving it There's huge management skills, and there should be training to manage	Whole School Training Day School seeking outside training Webinar as principal preparation Teacher training Principal Training Historical lack of teacher training in Special Ed. Current lack of provision in ITE.
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I think I was gonna say, Well, I wish I had more training with children with autism, just in myself, because I felt I lacked confidence in even dealing with teachers or supporting them, because I didn't know enough myself. So definitely. It's a real cart being put before the horse Like before a person opens the unit, there should be somebody who has done an autism specific piece of training So in advance of the department, asking school to open they should provide time and training for teachers in, I would say, all teachers to tell you the truth, so that when the teacher who wants to do it has had four or five years and is exhausted, that there's somebody else itching to take their place, the school should be trained, the facility should be built. And then you should open 2 classes. Not one but two and do it properly, but put training first building next so in advance, of it being opened there should be training and then there should be building in that order. That everybody that was I mean, they increased it 4 years and for for what the training is the very same stretched over four years, special ed, it's the way it's going to be there are more and more of these children. And we should be trained. And no one should be afraid to be in an autism class. I really think, I suppose things I would say teacher training, I just want to emphasise them again support for teachers with special skills. So that would be my training for teachers, that's, they're the things I'll fix I want. I wish I'd known then what I know now as opposed to trying to learn on my feet. Okay, okay. Well, I would, you know, you can you can train prior to taking on the role, that there's a virtue in that, but there's also a downside to it in that it's easier to take on training if you're in the middle of something because you can relate it you can you can connect.... So there is that advantage. But definitely, there's no there's no harm. And it will give you a certain confidence. If you	Reluctance of teachers with some training to take on the class last minute before the term starts Change of class for experience teachers offered training seen as an opportunity. Training in management of class needed Desire/importance of principal training before opening a class/taking on role of principal of special classes Training in advance of opening/all staff trained so replacement staff are ready ITE
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certainly do a few courses prior to taking on the role Interestingly the department, they would sanction. They would give approval and sanction for teachers to upskill themselves, but only when they're actually teaching in the in the end special classes, not that say like, oh, I might do it in two years time. Sure I'll do the training now and see how it goes. And so I used to wonder about that. But I know now that that's that actually makes total sense that it's only when you're in there, as you can you connect the training and apply it. I would say that making suppose doing are to go do my best to to to encourage to facilitate training for staff. There's a lot of training opportunities in terms of professional CPD around having the the classes I do think as well, in terms of the training of the staff going in there. It can be quite piecemeal like if I wasn't kind of constantly watching the NCSE website to see what training was coming up. And forwarding it on to them saying, Oh, this might be good for you working with Billy or jack or whoever. I think that sometimes they don't have the time to go looking for it themselves a lot of the time. I'd like probably more training for the SNAs around autism as well. I do think they need to be upskilled around it, we still even some of our most experienced ones, I will still hear them say he just know he just needs to be told no. Or like he just needs this firm hand. Even Jesus Christ, you're doing this 15 years and you're still not getting it. And that's our fault think of them to have to sit down and say no, hang on. This is why he's doing this. But if they had more training, I think they'd have a better understanding of where things are coming from. In terms of other supports To be honest, I don't ever remember it being mentioned in college when I was in St. Pats. But then we only have one module on special ed because children when I was doing more training, children with special	Advantages of current model of CPD where teacher needs to be in the class to access training Option for teachers to 'try out training'. Advantage of current model of class teachers accessing training Training as an opportunity Lack of consistent training plan. Principal directing staff to training opportunities Need for SNA training
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ed were in special schools. For the most part they hadn't integrated a such. So we didn't have a huge amount of it And I suppose, I wouldn't feel as confident. So that's the challenge, I suppose for me, in terms of self confidence, also. So the training is available for the teachers who are in the classrooms in the ASD classes. And I suppose there wouldn't be a lot of ongoing CPD for principals in relation to managing and leading the teaching and learning and ASD classes So I definitely do some professional development prior to taking on the role. So, yeah, definitely professional development But I would say that supporting and encourage continuous professional development is is very, very important So I suppose it's that it's that supportive role in that maybe encouraging people to go for CPD release time for CPD CPD would be good. Probably in the area of autism, in leadership and autism. Sometimes it's a minefield actually trying to figure out what how do you access resources as well, you kind of learn that as you go along. But I suppose there could be CPD, to have if it there was more of it That's to get advice, go to any CPD that's available Everything else will look after itself, then they'll investigate methodologies, and they'll go on and CPD. And they do well if they're enthusiastic You know, I think we have to be very mindful of CPD that that CPD is given to the staff and staff are supported at all times in in those areas you definitely would need, I would feel a bit of CPD behind you. Before you take on definitely I know, I probably would be lost if I hadn't started Masters	ITE historically has little ASD training Lack of training opportunities for principals Principal Role to support CPD in staff CPD to support principals
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And when when, when CPD is available, you really want your teachers to avail of it for the children to get maximum benefit, because for me, they're the people who are working with the children all the time But then you can't really access the CPD and the CPD available, you're going to send your teachers, And I would say also trying to, when I don't have to with them t won't encourage them to do courses, and that because they are always used to me they're always want to, to upskill and to, and, and to learn more. Yeah, I suppose , like, you know, upskilling, in terms of my own knowledge of, you know, working with people with autism, you know, because I wouldn't have that experience that before I came he They've upskilled themselves, you know, for the past four years, we have the classes now I have upskilled profoundly, that I was meeting the needs of children, special Ed and understanding their needs, and understanding the skills that it takes getting that is an opportunity for anybody I think you need to upskill, o that's the advice I would give upskill your staff, you know, when you're in the driving seat, which is before you open it upskill your staff So then I decided to master the Leadership Management Trinity I decided I needed to upskill so to join CSL there was mentoring teaching them a... Interestingly the department, they would sanction. They would give approval and sanction for teachers to upskill themselves, but only when they're actually teaching in the in the end special classes, not that say like, oh, I might do it in two years time. Sure I'll do the training now and see how it goes. And so I used to wonder about that. But I know now that that's that actually makes total sense that it's only when you're	Enthusiastic staff will seek out CPD Importance of CPD prior to taking on the role Important that teachers are prioritised for training Staff training Leadership learning Leadership learning
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in there, as you can you connect the training and apply it. Interestingly the department, they would sanction. They would give approval and sanction for teachers to upskill themselves, but only when they're actually teaching in the in the end special classes, not that say like, oh, I might do it in two years time. Sure I'll do the training now and see how it goes. And so I used to wonder about that. But I know now that that's that actually makes total sense that it's only when you're in there, as you can you connect the training and apply it. But at the same time, you do have to be very conscious of supporting them through that. supporting them upskilling and things as well so that they are at the top of their game when they go in there also maybe upskill on dealing with parents in terms of parents who are going through the process on the journey of having a child with special needs. because that's that that was a real learning curve for For me, and also knowing I suppose winter, where's the line? Like, how much abuse will you take? Because they're upset before you draw the line, oh, hang on a minute now you're directing this at the wrong person. That was a big one.	Staff Training Leadership learning Training when in the class allows teachers to connect training & apply it Principal role to support staff Principal upskilling in people management
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