

# An Evaluation of Education Provision for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Ireland

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Anne O'Byrne; Siobhán O'Sullivan; Marie Ryan; Eugene Wall  
with Ruth Madden and Sarah Gibbons: Research Associates

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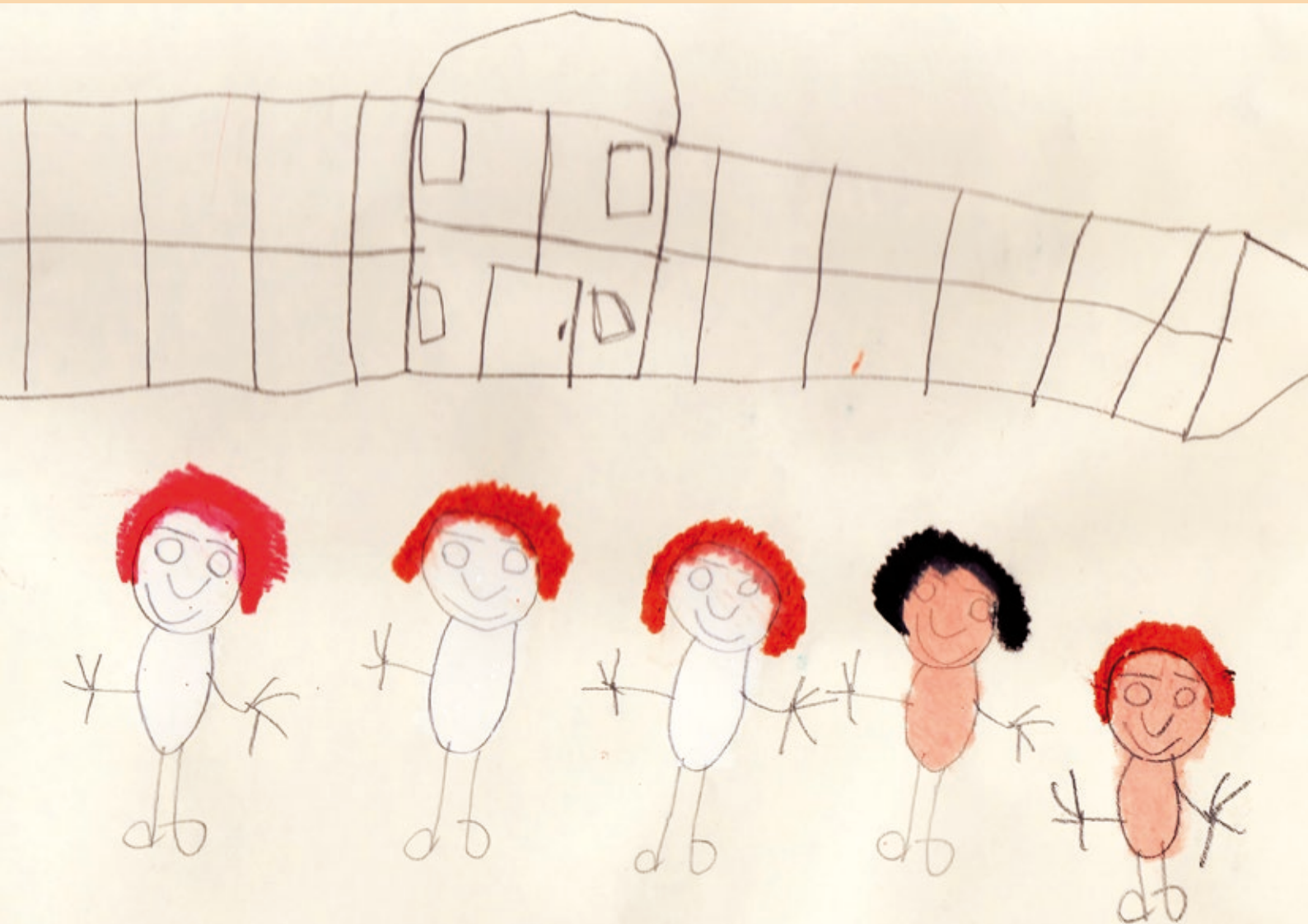




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*The picture on the front cover was drawn by one of the children in the study, which they drew  
during the course of the research. We are very grateful to have permission to use this picture.*

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# Foreword

It has been 14 years since the Task Force on Autism Report was published and 18 years since the educational needs of students with autism were formally recognised as a distinct category by the Department of Education and Skills.

This piece of research was commissioned by the NCSE to evaluate the educational provision that is now in place for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD).

The researchers evaluated what was happening in schools: in mainstream classes, special classes and special schools. They considered the Home Tuition scheme and the Extended School Year scheme, also known as the July Education Programme (JEP). The researchers looked in-depth at teaching and learning, school management, school culture, staff development in 24 locations – interviewing school principals, teachers, SNAs, parents and students – as well as observing practice and reviewing documentation.

Education provision was evaluated against a framework of indicators of good practice in the education of students with ASD, which was developed specifically for this study by the Middletown Centre for Autism in partnership with the NCSE.

This research is small in breadth. However, it does provide detailed information on what is happening in the schools and schemes evaluated. The researchers have highlighted good practice and areas for improvement.

I would like to thank all who gave of their time to the researchers – the students, parents, teachers, principals, tutors and school management – which enabled them to carry out and complete this research. I would also like to thank the external academic who provided the independent peer review of this work.

**Teresa Griffin**  
*Chief Executive Officer*

May 2016



# Table of Contents

Foreword	i
Table of Contents	iii
List of Tables	vii
List of Figures	vii
Acronyms	viii
Executive Summary	1
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>22</b>
1.1 Background to Evaluation	22
1.2 Methodological Approach	23
1.3 Education Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Ireland	24
1.3.1 The Legislative Context	25
1.3.2 The National Council for Special Education	25
1.3.3 A Continuum of Education Provision for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder	26
1.4 Research Design	28
1.5 Limitations	33
1.6 Report Structure and Sequence	33
<b>2 Methodology</b>	<b>34</b>
2.1 Introduction	34
2.2 Middletown Centre for Autism and National Council for Special Education Evaluation Framework	34
2.3 Research Approach and Strategies	35
2.4 Research Design	39
2.4.1 Strand 1	39
2.4.2 Strand 2	43
2.4.3 Strand 3	43
2.5 Data Analysis	45
2.6 Research Validity and Reliability	46
2.7 Ethical Considerations	47
2.8 Report Outline	48

<b>3 Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Early Intervention Classes</b>	<b>49</b>
Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning	49
Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture	59
Statement 3 – School Management	62
Statement 4 – Staff Development	65
<b>4 Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Primary Schools</b>	<b>69</b>
Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning	69
Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture	83
Statement 3 – School Management	90
Statement 4 – Staff Development	94
<b>5 Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Post-Primary Schools</b>	<b>99</b>
Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning	99
Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture	109
Statement 3 – School Management	117
Statement 4 – Staff Development	119
<b>6 Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Special Schools</b>	<b>126</b>
Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning	126
Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture	141
Statement 3 – School Management	145
Statement 4 – Staff Development	147
<b>7 Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: July Education Programme</b>	<b>154</b>
Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning	154
Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture	160
Statement 3 – School Management	165
Statement 4 – Staff Development	171



<b>8 Home Tuition</b>	<b>176</b>
Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning	176
Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture	182
Statement 3 – School Management	186
Statement 4 – Staff Development	188
<b>9 Findings, Discussion, and Implications for Future Practice</b>	<b>193</b>
Introduction	193
Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning	193
Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture	198
Statement 3 – School Management	201
Statement 4 – Staff Development	203
Conclusion	206
<b>References</b>	<b>210</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>215</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Middletown Centre for Autism/NCSE Evaluation Framework to Underpin the Evaluation of Educational Provision for Students with ASD</b>	<b>215</b>
<b>Appendix 2: Data Collection Instruments in English</b>	<b>227</b>
Principal Information Letter	227
Principal Consent Form	229
Teacher Information Letter	230
Teacher Consent Form	232
Special Educational Needs Assistant Information Letter	233
SNA Consent Form	235
Parent/Guardian Information Letter	236
Parent/Guardian Consent Form for Child to Participate	238
Parent/Guardian Consent Form	239
Student Information Letter	240
Student Consent Form	242
Documentary and Class-Room Analysis Schedule	243

School Principals' Semi-Structured Interview Schedule	253
Teacher's Semi-Structured Interview Schedule	254
Special Needs Assistant Semi-Structured Interview Schedule	256
Parents'/Carers' Semi-Structured Interview Schedule	256
Student Conversation Questions	258
Teaching Experience Form	259
Pupil Profile	260
<b>Appendix 3: Data Collection Instruments in Irish</b>	<b>261</b>
Litir Eolais an Phríomhoide	261
Foirm Toilthe an Phríomhoide	263
Litir Eolais an Mhúinteora	264
Foirm Toilthe an Mhúinteora	266
Litir Eolais an Chúntóra Riachtanais Speisialta	267
Foirm Toilthe an Chúntóra Riachtanais Speisialta	269
Litir Eolais an Tuismitheora/an Chaomhnóra	270
Foirm Toilthe an Tuismitheora/an Chaomhnóra maidir le Rnpháirtíocht an Pháiste	272
Foirm Toilthe an Tuismitheora/an Chaomhnóra	273
Litir Eolais na Daltaí	274
Foirm Toilthe an Dalta	276
Sceideal um Anailís Seomra Ranga agus Faisnéise	277
Sceideal Agallaimh Leath-structúrtha le Príomhoide na Scoile	284
Sceideal Agallaimh Leath-structúrtha le Múinteoirí	285
Sceideal Agallaimh Leath-structúrtha le Cúntóir Riachtanais Speisialta	287
Sceideal Agallaimh Leath-structúrtha le Tuismitheoirí/le Cúramóirí	287
Foirm Toilthe an Dalta	289
Foirm Taithí Teagaisc	290
Próifíl Dalta	291
<b>Appendix 4: Participant Codes</b>	<b>292</b>

## List of Tables

<b>Table 1.</b> Research Sites	3
<b>Table 2.</b> Summary of Data Sources	5
<b>Table 3.</b> Specific Measurement and Weighting Criteria for Data Collected	5
<b>Table 4.</b> Research Sites	24
<b>Table 5.</b> Summary of Data Sources	32
<b>Table 6.</b> Overview of Middletown Centre for Autism and National Council for Special Education Evaluation Framework's Statements and Criteria	35
<b>Table 7.</b> Details of School-Based Research Sites	36
<b>Table 8.</b> Details of Home-Tuition and July Education Programme Home-Based and School-Based Sites	38
<b>Table 9.</b> Details of Children who Participated in the Study	38
<b>Table 10.</b> Extract from Documentary and Classroom Observation Schedules	40
<b>Table 11.</b> Specific Measurement and Weighting Criteria for Data Collected	41
<b>Table 12.</b> Range and Quantity of Data Sources in Sites A-I	43
<b>Table 13.</b> Range and Quantity of Data Sources in Sites J-K	45
<b>Table 14.</b> Data Analysis (adopted from Braun and Clark, 2006)	46

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1.</b> Geographical Distribution of Research	31
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# Acronyms

## Acronym

<b>ABA</b>	Applied Behaviour Analysis
<b>ABC</b>	Antecedent-Behaviour-Consequence
<b>ABLLS-R</b>	Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills – Revised
<b>ASD</b>	Autism Spectrum Disorder
<b>CAMHS</b>	Child and Adult Mental Health Service
<b>CPD</b>	Continuing Professional Development
<b>CPI</b>	Crisis Prevention Intervention
<b>DARE</b>	Disability Access Route to Education
<b>DES</b>	Department of Education and Science [Ireland]
<b>DES</b>	Department of Education and Skills [Ireland]
	The Department of Education was renamed the Department of Education and Science (DES) in 1997, and again renamed as the Department of Education and Skills (DES) from May 2010.
<b>FBA</b>	Functional Behaviour Assessment
<b>FETAC</b>	Further Education and Training Award Council
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communication Technology
<b>IPPN</b>	Irish Primary Principals’ Network
<b>JEP</b>	July Education Programme
<b>JCSP</b>	Junior Certificate School Programme
<b>LCA</b>	Leaving Certificate Applied
<b>MCA</b>	Middletown Centre for Autism
<b>MIREC</b>	Mary Immaculate College Ethics Committee
<b>NBSS</b>	National Behaviour Support Service
<b>NCCA</b>	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
<b>NCSE</b>	National Council for Special Education

**Acronym**

<b>NEPS</b>	National Educational Psychological Service
<b>PE</b>	Physical Education
<b>PECS</b>	Picture Exchange Communication System
<b>PEP-R</b>	Psychoeducational Profile – third edition
<b>RSE</b>	Relationships and Sexuality Education
<b>RFT</b>	Request for Tender
<b>SENO</b>	Special Educational Needs Organiser
<b>SESS</b>	Special Education Support Service
<b>SNA</b>	Special Needs Assistant
<b>SPHE</b>	Social, Personal and Health Education
<b>TEACCH</b>	Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children
<b>TTAP</b>	TEACCH Transition Assessment Profile
<b>TY</b>	Transition Year



# Executive Summary

## Introduction

In 2013, the Minister for Education and Skills requested that the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) prepare policy advice on education provision for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Ireland. In response to this request, the NCSE commissioned an overview and empirical evaluation of the range of state-funded education provision for students with ASD in Ireland. This range of provision included placement in mainstream classes with support, placement in special classes (including early intervention classes), placement in special schools, state-funded early intervention in the home under the Home-Tuition scheme<sup>1</sup> and the extended school year as provided for by the July Education Programme (JEP) both at home and in school.<sup>2</sup>

The evaluation research study evaluates state-funded provision for students with ASD against a framework of principles and indicators based on identified good practice in relation to education provision for students with ASD developed by the NCSE in partnership with Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA).<sup>3</sup> The research was conducted by a team of researchers from Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick.

## Research Background and Context

Policy and provision in relation to education provision for all students with special educational needs, including students with ASD, have continued to expand and develop. The legislative context, the establishment of the NCSE and the elements of the continuum of education provision for students with ASD are key features in this expansion and development. Current education provision for students with ASD comprises a continuum of provision at pre-primary, primary and post-primary levels. While a presumption in favour of including students with special educational needs in mainstream education is enshrined in legislation, special school provision is also available for students aged four to 18 years. Provision includes 19 dedicated special schools for students with ASD, 95 special classes at pre-primary level, 378 special classes at primary and 152 special classes at post-primary. There are also special classes for students with ASD in special schools. Staffing is allocated to special schools on the basis of the school's student profile. There are currently 3,137 mainstream primary schools, 141 special schools and 732 post-primary schools in Ireland.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2014a) Circular 0048/2014: Home Tuition Scheme 2014/2015 – Special Education Component, Athlone: DES.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2013a) July Education Programme 2013. Frequently Asked Questions – Revised April 2013, Athlone: DES; Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2013b) July Education Programme 2013. Revised April 2013. School Based Programme – Key Terms and Conditions, Athlone: DES.

<sup>3</sup> Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) and National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2013) Evaluation Framework to underpin the Evaluation of Educational Provision for Students with ASD, Trim: National Council for Special Education.

In the 2014-15 school year, there were 8,739 students with ASD included in mainstream classes at primary and post-primary levels.<sup>4</sup> A total of 190 schools provide the JEP and 1,215 children avail of HomeTuition.<sup>5</sup> In 2013, 2,128 children availed of the school-based JEP and 3,470 children availed of the home-based JEP.<sup>6</sup>

Special classes and special schools are established with a staffing ratio of one teacher and a minimum of two special needs assistants (SNAs) for every six children, with a requirement that all new mainstream school buildings provide special class accommodation.<sup>7</sup> Additional SNAs may be allocated as determined by the care needs of individual students. The role of the SNA is to assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs.<sup>8</sup> Where a student with ASD is included in a mainstream school, an additional 4.25 hours of resource teaching and, if necessary, SNA support and/or assistive technology are provided to support the student's education placement.<sup>9</sup>

### **Middletown Centre for Autism and National Council for Special Education Evaluation Framework**

The Framework was developed for the specific purpose of the evaluation research, to provide a shared understanding of best practice in education provision for students with ASD. This Evaluation Framework sets out criteria and performance indicators with reference to four key statements against which provision can be systematically measured. A range of evaluations, policy and best practice guidelines produced in Ireland, Northern Ireland, the wider United Kingdom, the USA, Canada and Australia was consulted and informs the Evaluation Framework. The Evaluation Framework has been designed for use in all education settings including mainstream schools, special classes in mainstream schools and special schools. Relevant elements of the Framework are also applicable to pre-primary early intervention classes, home-tuition settings and the extended school year as provided for under both the home and school-based July Education Programme (JEP). The Evaluation Framework consists of four structured themes, referred to as 'Statements' relating to education provision for students with ASD: Teaching and Learning, Inclusive School Culture, School Management and Staff Development. Each theme has a number of linked criteria and associated performance indicators. Within the four statements, there are 19 criteria and 84 performance indicators. The 'Teaching and Learning' statement is considered as the core statement in the Framework. See appendix 1 for a copy of the Framework.

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Education and Skills (2015a) Data on Individual Schools, Personal Correspondence, Friday 17th July 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2015) Data on Individual Schools, Personal Correspondence, Friday 24th July 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2015b) Design Guidance, Accessed online on Thursday July 16th 2015 at <http://www.education.ie/en/School-Design/Design-Guidance/Primary-and-Post-Primary-Design-Guidance.html>

<sup>8</sup> Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2014b) Circular 0030/2014: The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) Scheme to Support Teachers in Meeting the Care Needs of Some Children with Special Educational Needs, arising from a Disability, Athlone: DES.

<sup>9</sup> National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2015b) For Schools: Applications for Resources: NCSE Guidelines for 2015/2016 Allocations, Accessed online on Wednesday February 19th 2015 at <http://ncse.ie/for-schools>



## Methodological Approach

The methodological approach adopted was influenced by the Evaluation Framework and the criticality that the research strategies selected enabled data relevant to the Framework to be collected. In this context, therefore, a multiple case study research strategy comprising an empirical investigation using multiple sources of evidence from 24 sites as detailed in Table 1 below was adopted.

**Table 1. Research Sites**

Site Type	Site Details	Number of Sites
A	Children with ASD in ASD-Specific Early Intervention Classes	2
B	Children with ASD included in Mainstream Primary Schools	3
C	Students with ASD included in Mainstream Post-Primary Schools	3
D	Special Classes for Children with ASD in Mainstream Primary Schools	2
E	Special Classes for Students with ASD in Mainstream Post-Primary Schools	2
F	Students with ASD in a Special School for Students with Mild General Learning Disability	1
G	Students with ASD in a Special School for Students with Moderate General Learning Disability	1
H	Students with ASD in a Special School for Students with Severe or Profound General Learning Disability	1
I	Students with ASD in an ASD-Specific Special School	3
J	Students with ASD availing of Home Tuition	3
K	Children and Students with ASD availing of the July Education Programme	3

The selection of sites reflected the range of state-funded education provision for children with ASD in Ireland.

## Sampling

A stratified sampling process was used in selecting school-based sites to ensure they were reflective of the range of state-funded provision for students with ASD in Ireland. School level data, with no student identifying information, was obtained from the NCSE to inform this process. These stratified subgroups comprised:

- geographical location (urban/rural);<sup>10</sup>
- gender composition (boys/girls/mixed);
- socio-economic grouping (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools initiative (DEIS) and non-DEIS);
- language medium (Irish/English medium schools);
- early intervention provision;
- provision type – mainstream provision, special class provision in mainstream schools and special schools (ASD and non-ASD special schools).

Sites within these categories were selected from the database randomly. This random sampling approach was informed by the necessity of capturing a distribution of sites that reflected a wide geographical area.

The DES provided the research team with contact details of schools participating in the school-based JEP. These sites were stratified by the provision type comprising special class provision in mainstream schools and special schools. Due to the time constraints at this point in the evaluation, the JEP school sites were selected from the strata based on the geographical proximity to the researchers.

The selection of JEP Home Sites was based on a self-selection process as parents were contacted directly by the DES and invited to participate in the research. Sites were then selected pragmatically based on geographical proximity to the researchers.

Home-tuition sites were stratified by the home-tuition provision being provided individually in the home and on a pooled basis delivered by a provider. Similar to the JEP home sites, a self-selection process was involved as parents and centres providing home tuition were contacted directly by the DES and invited to participate in the research. Sites were then selected pragmatically based on geographical proximity to the researchers.

In selecting research sites, attention was directed to accessing sites that encompassed a wide geographical area nationally. However, pragmatic sampling decisions were also made to accommodate both the geographical location of the researchers and the time-line for the research.

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<sup>10</sup> Urban/rural locationIreland is divided up into eight strata based on population density. These areas are further classified into urban and rural areas as follows:

**Urban**

- Cities; Suburbs of cities; Mixed urban/rural areas bordering on the suburbs of cities
- Towns and their environs with populations of 5,000 or over (large urban)
- Mixed urban/rural areas bordering on the environs of larger towns
- Towns and their environs with a population of 1,000 to 5,000 (other urban)

**Rural**

- Mixed urban/rural areas

Rural areas Source: Central Statistics Office (2015) Surveys and Methodology, Accessed on Friday 17th July 2015 at <http://www.cso.ie/en/surveysandmethodology/information/society/e-commercehouseholdsurvey/backgroundnotes/>

## Research Strategies

Research strategies included semi-structured interviews conducted with principals, teachers, special needs assistants (SNAs) and parents; observation of practice in classrooms; review of documentation related to education provision for children with ASD and child conversations. A summary of data sources is provided in Table 2 below:

**Table 2. Summary of Data Sources**

Principal Interview	Teacher Interview	SNA Interview	Child Conversation	Child Drawing	Parent Interview	Document Review	Observation of Practice
21	48	33	29	41	60	24	35

While 61 children participated in the classroom observations that were conducted, only 41 children participated in the child conversations as parental consent was only received in the case of 41 children. Consent and assent was received for all children who participated in the research in the context of observation of practice and in participating in child conversations, where the child was also provided with the option of drawing a picture of his/her school. Child conversations were conducted in groups and 29 conversations were conducted with 41 children.

## Data Analysis

Data was uploaded electronically and analysis with reference to the Evaluation Framework<sup>11</sup> was conducted electronically using Nvivo software.<sup>12</sup>

A quantitative recording mechanism was applied to each subsection of the Documentary and Classroom Analysis process with numbers 1-5 used to evaluate the practice and equated with a scale of unacceptable to excellent as illustrated in Table 3 below. This scale was equated with the percentage of data sources which confirmed the relevant findings.

**Table 3. Specific Measurement and Weighting Criteria for Data Collected**

1	2	3	4	5
never/almost never	rarely	sometimes	often	always/almost always
Confirmed by Findings from 10% of Data Sources including Classroom Observation	Confirmed by Findings from 20% of Data Sources including Classroom Observation	Confirmed by Findings from 50% of Data Sources including Classroom Observation	Confirmed by Findings from 90% of Data Sources including Classroom Observation	Confirmed by Findings from All Data Sources
Unacceptable	Acceptable	Good	Very Good	Excellent

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> QSR International (2013) NVivo 10, Melbourne: Australia.

## Research Validity and Reliability

The validity and reliability of the data were supported by methodological triangulation, in which multiple sources of evidence were used, which allowed for converging lines of inquiry through adopting a corroboratory approach.<sup>13</sup> The quantitative reporting element used in analysing the data at Table 3 above was applied to each individual research setting with reference to the frequency with which the practices delineated in the MCA/NCSE Framework<sup>14</sup> was evidenced. In this context also the percentage of inter-rater agreement was calculated for each subsection of the Documentary and Classroom Observation Schedule, through calculating the percentage of incidences in which both the principal investigator and team researcher agreed.

## Limitations

Particular attention was directed towards meticulously adhering to the MCA/NCSE<sup>15</sup> Evaluation Framework, recording the characteristics of the students with ASD, the environment in which the research was conducted, measurement, data, ethical and moral considerations. The research findings, however, are compromised by a number of limitations which should be considered in interpreting the research findings and in any future replication of this research. A number of methodological decisions were made based on expediency and the time-frame available for the research. The sample size presents limitations in terms of the generalisability of the findings. The heterogeneous needs of students with ASD may further contribute to the difficulties inherent in generalising the research findings as they may represent the particular responses of parents, teachers, SNAs and principals to students' particular needs and abilities. The selection of participants for the home-based JEP and home-tuition provision was also based on a process of self-selection. The research team wishes to acknowledge the limitations in using the Framework over other validated tools, while the Framework was piloted for this research, it has not been used previously and was developed specifically for the purposes of this evaluation research.

## Research Findings

### Profiles of Research Participants

As detailed in Table 1 above, the research was conducted in 24 sites and 61 children with ASD participated in the classroom observations. Children had a range of ability and a number of children had co-occurring needs such as sensory processing differences, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), attention deficit disorder (ADD) and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD).

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<sup>13</sup> Cohen, L. Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2011) *Research Methods in Education* (7th ed.), London: Routledge Falmer.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

## Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning

A variety of practice in relation to assessment was evident across sites with elements of practice variously identified as ranging from unacceptable to excellent. Assessment practice in early intervention sites was very good in both sites. In all primary school sites assessment information was collected, reviewed and evaluated, with practice variously identified as very good, good and acceptable. However in one primary school site, assessment related specifically to ASD was unacceptable as ASD-specific assessments were not used nor was there reference to differentiating existing assessments to meet the learning and teaching needs of children with ASD. Differentiated methods of assessments were in evidence in three post-primary sites to maximise student participation in the assessment process. ASD-specific assessments were a feature of practice in special classes in three post-primary sites and in all special schools and were used to inform planning, instruction and monitoring of progress. In special schools, differentiated methods of assessment comprised ASD-specific assessments and school-specific assessments. While all children's individual strengths and needs were acceptably considered in the assessment systems evidenced in the JEP, there was no evidence of specific differentiated assessment methods which was unacceptable. Excellent formal and acceptable informal assessment approaches were used in providing home tuition for students. Autism Spectrum Disorder-specific assessments were used in the pooled site only. The home sites used assessment information from the diagnostic reports provided by early childhood services in addition to informal methods. Unacceptable levels of documentation were observed in all post-primary sites with no site having a specific assessment policy related to provision for students with ASD. Four special schools were observed to have formal assessment policies in place, which were either very good or excellent. The two schools without a formal assessment policy in place relied on class-based tests and State examinations as measures of progress. A wide variety of assessment tools was used in all the special schools including ASD specific assessments. Teachers and principals referred to the challenges of identifying assessment measures that were relevant to the needs of their children particularly for older students with complex needs. The implications of children's co-occurring special educational needs, such as a general learning disability, for assessment was acceptable in both early intervention sites and unacceptable in all the remaining sites, requiring further elaboration in school documentation.

The assessment processes for managing challenging behaviour ranged from acceptable to very good in all sites with assessment being unacceptable for students in mainstream classes in post-primary schools. In almost all sites assessment was observed to be on-going and part of the daily routine in relation to both curricular and behavioural areas. A positive approach to supporting children's behaviour was evident in almost all sites and almost all staff members were aware of potential triggers for behaviour with prompts and token-economies used to promote positive behaviour.

A variety of practice was observed in relation to elements of the individualised planning process across sites, ranging from unacceptable to excellent. The individualised planning process in both early intervention sites was very good with parents almost always expressing satisfaction with the process. In three of the five primary school sites the individualised planning process was very good, good in one site and unacceptable in one site, where the process was insufficiently developed and documented. Documentary evidence of individualised planning

based on students' strengths and needs was available in all post-primary sites but unacceptable overall. Individualised planning was a feature of practice for all students in special school sites, where the level of detail was unacceptable in two sites and good in the remaining four. While individualised planning was very good for the school-based JEP, it was unacceptable that the child's individualised planning was not available to the teacher and parent in the home setting during the JEP programme. The level of involvement of the children in planning for the JEP was acceptable. All three home-tuition sites had acceptable individualised plans in place for children with ASD. Parents expressed satisfaction with the individualised planning process in the primary school sites where practice was identified as very good. The formal involvement of children in this process was excellent in one primary school site and unacceptable in both early intervention sites and in four primary school sites. Parental and student involvement in educational planning, both formally and informally, was often a strong feature of practice and acceptable in most post-primary sites. All special schools had good structures in place for consulting with parents in compiling individualised planning for their child. Student input and participation was solicited in two special school sites and children's likes and dislikes influenced target setting in the remaining sites. Overall, direct or indirect student input was facilitated well by all special schools. Parental involvement in individualised planning in all home-tuition sites was acceptable. Children were not involved in the individualised planning process in any home-tuition site, although their interests were included in goals in the home site, which was acceptable.

All special schools reported the involvement of external services when planning for individual children, although the levels of support received varied considerably depending on availability. External services were involved in developing or contributing to the individualised planning in the two home-tuition sites. In the pooled site, while welcomed, input from external services was unacceptable in evidence and provided only through the parents. Overall, external services were not equally available to all sites and the level of availability of external services to inform planning was unacceptable.

Practices in relation to transition both between and within sites ranged from excellent to very good in almost all sites. Planning for transition was excellent in both early intervention sites and very good transition protocols were in place. Four of the five primary school sites demonstrated an excellent awareness of the importance of clearly signalling transitions within the school day for children. The challenges experienced by children with ASD in transitioning were less well understood in one site, where practice related to transition was unacceptable and may have been linked to the limited experience of the school in relation to ASD. In three sites, where there were ASD-specific classes, transitions for children to mainstream classes in the school were carefully planned, monitored and reviewed. In four sites, there was evidence that excellent attention was directed towards transitioning children from pre-primary settings and also to post-primary settings, which reflected best practice in this area. Excellent practices were noted for transitions into and within post-primary sites. Transition practices for post-school sites was good at two sites, unacceptable at one and not required for students with ASD to date in two sites, therefore not developed. Transition programmes for admission to special schools were very good and sensitive to the individual needs of the children involved. Transition programmes for existing special schools were excellent in five sites and the sixth site was developing procedures as the school was relatively new and very few students had left for post-school placements. Late notification of placements, and the difficulty of obtaining placements for students with complex

needs, were the two challenges to successful transition identified by three principals in special schools. In both school sites, there was evidence of the transfer of information between class teachers and the providers of the JEP. In the home setting, it was unacceptable that there was no formal additional planning in place for transition from the child's school to the JEP. School sites were aware of the complexities of introducing new staff to work on the JEP. In one setting, staff delivering the JEP were employed in the school or had been involved in the JEP previously and demonstrated an excellent understanding of children's needs in the context of the JEP. An excellent transition programme for the staff was in place in one setting. There were no formal processes in place for staff induction for provision in the home setting and the practice was unacceptable. Transition plans were not viewed at any of the three home-tuition sites, which was unacceptable. However, evidence from interviews and documentation suggested that the process of transitioning out of all the sites was very good, carefully managed and individualised in nature. Parents in all three sites were involved in transition planning. The pooled site noted that delays in notification of appropriate primary school placements were unacceptable in terms of planning and preparation of children for the transition. Parents also considered unacceptable the lack of autonomy in choosing a suitable provision for their child in their local schools.

There was an excellent focus on adopting a child-centred approach to the curriculum and addressing children's holistic development through the provision of a wide range of learning areas and experiences in both early intervention sites and in all primary school sites. Differentiation of children's curriculum experiences observed was very good in four primary school sites and acceptable in one site in relation to the level of SNA support provided, the level and pace of the lesson, utilising children's interests, children's access and response, teaching style and lesson sequence. The contribution of SNAs in terms of supporting children's care needs in both early intervention classes through toileting programmes, self-care programmes and behaviour intervention programmes was excellent. Some concern was articulated by the principals in three primary school sites and the class teacher in one primary school site with regard to the complexities involved in enabling children with more complex needs to access the curriculum. While both early intervention sites were familiar with *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*,<sup>16</sup> the use of the Framework to support children's curriculum experiences was unacceptable. Children with ASD did not have access to the Aistear curricular framework in any of the home-tuition sites, which was unacceptable. Aistear was used to very good effect in two of the five primary sites with practice being unacceptable in one site. The availability of, and support for access to all curriculum and subject areas was acceptable at four post-primary schools and not acceptable at one. Where it was unacceptable, mainstream teachers, satisfying timetable requirements with learning support hours, supplemented teaching in the special classes. This was unstructured and led to a fragmented provision including no curriculum content being covered for up to 25% of the day for many students. It also meant that more than 16 teachers worked in the special classes with the students with ASD, contrary to best practice. There was evidence of differentiation based on language and sensory needs, pace, responses and outcomes in all settings and differentiation was observed in practice in two sites. Differentiation practice was more developed in special classes than in mainstream classes. Overall, differentiation methods were acceptable in four sites and not observed in the fifth, therefore unacceptable. In accordance with

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<sup>16</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (1999) Primary School Curriculum. Dublin: NCCA.

the range of special schools in the research, there was considerable variation across the content areas students had access to. All students accessed the general curriculum at a level relevant to their individual needs. While there was evidence of very good differentiation in most sites, there was scope for further development to meet the individual needs of students in two schools where it was not acceptable. There was clear evidence that special interests were incorporated in lesson planning and implementation in special schools. In all sites, the programme for the JEP was a continuation of curriculum relevant to the student's experience in the previous academic school year. The focus on curriculum continuity was excellent in the mainstream site, very good in the special-school site and unacceptable in the home setting. A good differentiated approach to children's learning and teaching was evident in all sites including the home site. Children in all home-tuition sites had access to educational programmes which were individualised and differentiated based on children's interests, level and pace. Curriculum guidelines were not used by the tutors in the home sites which was unacceptable.

The selection and use of generic and ASD-specific teaching methodologies was excellent, based on best practice and the individual needs of each student in all early intervention classes and in almost all primary and special schools. Practice ranged from excellent to acceptable in school-based JEP sites. An acceptable variety of activities and methodologies was used to teach core skills and concepts to students with ASD in all post-primary sites although differentiation methods were unacceptable in some mainstream classrooms. In mainstream subject teaching in post-primary schools, attention to interests and preferences was less in evidence and not acceptable. Excessive adult-to-adult communication and disproportionate SNA input in one post-primary site were observed to reduce student active engagement and participation in learning activities at this site and were unacceptable. In all JEP settings, staff members were aware of, and had been informed of students' sensory differences, their impact on learning and teaching and strategies required to accommodate these differences. This awareness was excellent in the school sites and acceptable in the home setting where the parent was the sole informant on the child's needs. Applied behaviour analysis (ABA) was the approach adopted in the pooled home-tuition site. This included excellent attention to the sequences and structure of activities and the use of Discrete Trial Training (DTT). The availability of naturalistic learning opportunities at this site was unacceptable. In the two home sites a variety of teaching methodologies, activities, experiences and materials was used at a very good level to engage students in meaningful learning. Learning through play was a dominant feature of practice in both of these sites. Methodologies specific to ASD that were observed across sites included the Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication Handicapped Children<sup>17</sup> (TEACCH), the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS),<sup>18</sup> Social Stories,<sup>19</sup> Floortime,<sup>20</sup> and ABA. Almost all classroom and school environments were well-structured and students navigated the environment comfortably and confidently. Particular attention was directed towards visual approaches to learning and accommodating students' sensory differences in almost all sites. Information and communication

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<sup>17</sup> Schopler, E. (2001) TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children), in The National Autistic Society (ed.) *Approaches to Autism*, London: The National Autistic Society, p. 68.

<sup>18</sup> Bondy, A. and Frost, L. (2002) *A Picture's Worth: PECS and Other Visual Communication Strategies in Autism*, Bethesda: Woodbine House.

<sup>19</sup> Gray, C. (1994) *The New Social Story Book*, Arlington: Future Horizons.

<sup>20</sup> Greenspan, S. and Wieder, S. (2006) *Engaging Autism*, Cambridge: Da Capo Press.



technology (ICT) was identified as an appropriate methodological approach to support students with ASD and was used widely in all sites exempting early intervention sites, where the JEP was delivered in the home and in home-tuition sites.

The level of joint planning and sharing of expertise and information varied within and between sites and ranged from unacceptable to excellent. Excellent practice was evident in early intervention sites and good in most post-primary and special school sites. It was very good in the primary sites. Overall, the level of availability of external professionals such as psychologists, occupational therapists and speech and language therapists to support teaching and learning was unacceptable in all sites. Very good daily communication was evidenced between tutors and parents in the context of the delivery of home tuition and the home-based JEP. In the two school sites, there was evidence of excellent communication between class teachers and staff involved in delivering the JEP. Special needs assistants considered that their input was recognised and valued in almost all sites. At the pooled home-tuition site all tutors shared information on the performance and progress of each child. At the home sites the tutors collaborated with the parents to the extent parents wished.

Formal and informal processes for data-collection and monitoring ranged from unacceptable to excellent. Practice was very good in all early intervention classes and ranged from good to very good in the primary and from acceptable to excellent in the special school sites. In these sites, data were collected at regular, identified intervals and used for planning and review purposes. In the post-primary sites, acceptable levels of data were used to inform instruction of an academic nature but data collection procedures for non-academic areas such as communication or social domains were unacceptable at all post-primary sites particularly for students with ASD included in mainstream schools. While sufficient attention was directed towards monitoring and recording children's progress and using data to inform teaching and learning for the JEP, this process was less systematised than would be expected during the schools' academic year. In the pooled home-tuition site, there was a clear emphasis on monitoring and recording students' progress and there were excellent extensive data-collection and recording systems in place. There was an informal approach to monitoring and recording progress in the two home sites which was unacceptable although both tutors used their observations to inform teaching and learning. Overall, all sites demonstrated good to excellent practice in relation to sharing information with parents.

## Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture

### 2.1 School Culture

Aspirations and high ambitions for children with ASD were in evidence ranging from excellent in early intervention, most primary, post-primary, special school, JEP and Home Tuition sites, to good in one primary site. Unacceptable levels were in evidence at one post-primary site.

In the early intervention sites excellent attention was directed towards developing children's key skills and independence. All principals in primary sites saw the provision for children with ASD in the school as being linked to the school's ethos and mission statement. Barriers to inclusion of

children with ASD in two primary school sites were identified as the school's limited knowledge and understanding of ASD and the difficulty in maintaining confidentiality in a small school, which impacted on discussions in relation to the child's placement at school management level. Most post-primary schools valued making provision for students with ASD not only because of its impact on the students, but for what it contributed to the skill enhancement of all teachers in the school and teaching practices in all classrooms. Excellent attention to considering and accommodating children's strengths and needs was observed in all the JEP sites. The culture of the Home-Tuition sites was informed by an understanding of the individual needs of the children which was commendable.

## 2.2 Communication

Communication systems between sites and parents were excellent in all but one post-primary site where they were acceptable. These ranged from home-school communication books, open door policies, telephone and email communications and parent-teacher meetings. Parents tended to trust the JEP and Special School sites to develop appropriate programmes for their children and were less directly involved in these sites. At the acceptable site some prior negative parent-school experiences had impacted on the school administration, which was more cautious about valuing parental involvement. School personnel in all post-primary schools described the challenges of involving parents and cited time constraints, varying expectations and attitudes, poor parental engagement, or excessive parental engagement as potential barriers to collaboration with parents. Daily communication with parents was an excellent feature of practice in all the home tuition sites.

Whereas all sites affirmed the advice and support of external professionals and services, they all expressed concerns about the availability of external services and this was particularly challenging for schools in remote areas and for post-primary schools. Also the systems in place to communicate with parents and professionals tended not to be evident in planning documents in all sites.

## 2.3 Learning Environment

Purpose-built classrooms and schools presented excellent well-structured, spacious, aesthetically pleasing and bright learning environments with work spaces designed to promote individual, small and large group learning. The location of ASD classrooms in primary and post-primary sites was intentionally central and visual supports were used to excellent advantage throughout all sites. Excellent primary and post-primary sites demonstrated a recognition of the importance of creating an ASD-friendly environment throughout the school. Adaptations to mainstream classrooms were not in evidence in most primary and post-primary sites. School-wide adaptations were rarely in evidence in mainstream schools with two exceptions, and students experienced difficulties navigating some environments. Special schools used careful judgment in the prominence of visual displays to acknowledge the distraction these might be for some children with complex needs. Older buildings provided challenges to staff who recognised the need for space when students needed to self-regulate. The sensory needs of students were recognised and catered for in special classes and special schools with scheduled movement and sensory breaks, less well attended to in most mainstream environments. Structured use of

teaching environments, through adopting the Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication-handicapped Children (TEACCH)<sup>21</sup> approach was an excellent feature of practice in special classes and special schools where staff were also cognisant of the need to use reduced language during instruction.

## 2.4 Extra-Curricular Activities

Extra-curricular activities in terms of activities taking place outside of the school day are not a feature of the Irish Education system. In this context, co-curricular rather than extra-curricular activities are reported.

Excellent levels of differentiated access to school-wide activities were observed in all but one site where they were acceptable. In the excellent sites, supports such as careful use of SNAs, detailed and individualised preparation, and partial participation were some of the ways schools included children with ASD in school-wide events. Students' level of interest in the activity, the social demands of the activity and whether the students had significant behaviours that challenged and might comprise a health and safety concern were the key factors identified by both parents and teachers in determining the extent to which students with ASD participated in extra-curricular activities at four of the five post-primary sites. At these sites parental involvement in these activities was excellent and student choice was respected. Special schools paid particular attention to providing interesting alternative activities for students who chose not to engage in some school-wide activities. Limited opportunities to engage in such activities existed in the home-based JEP and the Home-Tuition sites. However, students' access to co-curricular activities in the context of the school-based JEP was excellent.

## 2.5 Student Wellbeing

Staff at all sites demonstrated excellent levels of awareness of the importance of student wellbeing and this was fostered and affirmed in many ways in all but one environment. Here a combination of the dearth of availability of external services, the complex needs of the students and the timetabling decisions by the principal were significant barriers to promoting student wellbeing at acceptable levels. There was an awareness in most sites of the potential for children to experience anxiety related to their social, communication, inflexibility of thought and behaviour and sensory differences. Child-protection and anti-bullying policies were available in all sites. Whereas all sites were proactive in seeking support about mental health issues experienced by students with ASD, the level of support from external services such as psychiatric, psychological, occupational therapy and speech and language therapy services in this regard was unacceptable. At all primary, post-primary and special schools and one of the early intervention sites, staff expressed their need for support in dealing with high-stress situations involving self-injury, puberty and sexual behaviour or suicidal thoughts and considered their competence in these areas to be unacceptable. A designated person as a resource for students worried about mental health was not a feature of practice at any site.

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<sup>21</sup> Schopler, E. (2001) TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children, in The National Autistic Society (ed.) Approaches to Autism, London: The National Autistic Society, p. 68.

## Statement 3 – School Management

### 3.1 Leadership

Excellent managerial and administrative structures were in place in all sites with the exception of one post-primary site and the Home-Tuition home sites. Principals welcomed provision for children with ASD in mainstream schools. They experienced particular additional leadership tasks in order to provide for children with ASD including appointing teachers and arranging appropriate transport for the JEP, managing SNA use in the school, sharing difficult information with parents, and retaining confidentiality of information in very small schools. Principals in mainstream and special schools built capacity among their teachers using rotation systems which involved a degree of flexibility and sensitivity to the teachers involved. Principals also expressed concerns about meeting their duty of care to children whose 'fit' in the school was difficult to manage due to significant and complex needs or where language difficulties were compounded in Gaeltacht provision. Timetable management was a particular challenge for principals in the post-primary sites. Where this was not managed acceptably, educational provision in special classes for students with ASD was overly reliant on mainstream teachers with little knowledge of ASD fulfilling timetable hours there. Principals fully understood the changing developmental needs of students with ASD progressing through schools and flexed supports to meet those changing needs. In the home sites for both the JEP and Home Tuition, parents had responsibility for leadership and all found it unacceptably challenging to set up these provisions and secure appropriate tutors.

### 3.2 Responsibility

Responsibilities and roles were understood and carried out in an excellent manner in all sites with the exception of one post-primary site. Roles were clearly articulated and there was appreciation and respect for the tasks that were shared and those that were specific to professionals within schools. Close-knit teams were developed in some special schools and in mainstream schools with multiple special classes for children with ASD. Special needs assistants formed valued members of these teams in some sites but were less included as team members in other sites where they reported their input was not welcome unless requested. At the one site with unacceptable practice, special classes were the responsibility of mainstream teachers for unacceptable amounts of time, and SNAs engaged in some teaching roles.

In most sites, school personnel had a good clear understanding of where they might access additional support, expertise and resources for children with ASD. This was not evident in one primary site and in the home-tuition home sites.

### 3.3 Appointment of Staff

Principals at all school sites demonstrated an excellent awareness of the importance of recruiting staff with knowledge, experience, expertise and qualifications related to the learning and teaching of children with ASD and reported that they made every effort to recruit such staff. All principals reported that it was not always possible to recruit staff with appropriate qualifications and/or

prior experience in working with children with ASD due to panel arrangements. Principals also acknowledged difficulties hiring substitutes for specialist teachers in ASD. New or replacement teachers had to be 'suitable' for their schools, which was defined in terms of having good insight into how students with ASD see the world. Hiring teachers for the JEP was particularly difficult for primary schools and for some special schools when teachers in the schools did not want to continue to teach after the end of the school year. Also payment for this additional teaching was not prompt. Appointment of tutors in the home settings for home tuition was very stressful for parents who received no guidance on how to select a tutor appropriate for their child.

### **3.4 Review of Provision**

Review of provision was excellent in two sites, a special school and the home-tuition pooled site. Here data-based instructional decisions were made daily. Good review of provision existed in the early intervention, primary and JEP sites. In post-primary and the other special school sites review was informal and data on progress in individual targets was unacceptably absent. Overall, efficient and structured methods of provision review were significantly absent from most school documents and practice.

## **Statement 4 – Staff Development**

### **4.1 Understanding and Knowledge of ASD for All Staff**

Understanding and knowledge of ASD was at excellent levels in all sites for special class and special school teachers. Mainstream teachers in primary and post-primary sites depended on specialist teachers in the schools for expertise and sought information depending on their particular involvement in the education of children with ASD in the school. In some sites mainstream teachers acknowledged their need for cyclical whole-school input on ASD. Tutors in home-tuition provision had very good levels of knowledge in the pooled site and home tutors depended on prior experience and 'unofficial' sources such as the internet and friends. Principals, managers and overseers had levels of understanding and awareness that ranged from excellent to unacceptable. Principals of special schools all had qualifications in special education and ASD. Principals of mainstream schools relied on the expertise of their specialist teachers but demonstrated some good levels of understanding themselves. One principal did not demonstrate an acceptable understanding of the range of ASD and its impact on the potential for students with ASD to participate in mainstream subjects in the school. Special needs assistants demonstrated understanding and knowledge ranging from acceptable to excellent across the sites.

### **4.2 Continuing Professional Development (CPD)**

In all sites, principals were very supportive of staff accessing CPD in the field of ASD. Special school principals availed of CPD on ASD at high levels as indicated previously. Principals of mainstream schools devolved responsibility for developing knowledge and expertise to their specialist teachers as they used their own limited CPD days to access information of use to the whole school rather than for a specific portion of its population. Specialist teachers in all sites

availed of continuing professional development opportunities provided by the Special Education Support Service (SESS) at excellent levels and were considered experts in their schools. Other sources frequently mentioned positively as sources of CPD included the patron bodies of schools and Middletown Centre for Autism. One primary school site was not aware of CPD provided by the SESS and another experienced difficulty accessing this due to the remote geographical location of the school.

In post-primary sites, teachers in special classes reported their needs for CPD in their subjects as well as in ASD as they needed to remain current in both. External services and expertise was rarely available to any site for CPD. CPD opportunities were not extended to parents at any site. A key finding here concerned CPD for SNAs. All sites reported their dissatisfaction with CPD opportunities available to SNAs beyond topics such as health and safety. SNAs articulated a request for additional opportunities as many currently engage in CPD at their own expense and outside of school time. CPD for SNAs was further confounded by the number of SNAs who also served as bus escorts and thus were not available during typical Croke Park hours in their schools. Some of the primary and special school sites recorded the CPD undertaken by individual teachers but no site had individual or school-wide CPD plans. At the pooled home-tuition site CPD was provided internally and tutors did not have access to the department's approved CPD opportunities. Home tutors in the home sites were not aware they could apply to the DES for CPD through the Special Education Support Service.

### **4.3 Information Sharing and Access to Specialist Information on ASD**

Staff meetings, Croke Park hours and staffroom conversations were cited as the most commonly used informal methods of information sharing in all but the home-tuition sites. Formal systems for information sharing existed in the pooled home-tuition site at an excellent level and in two school sites, a post-primary and special school. In those sites, daily exchanges were scheduled and weekly meetings with administration took place to share information. When informal methods were used, some cascading of information took place in the sites. However, there was some dissatisfaction with the expectations that teachers who attended CPD would then share their experience with their SNAs without a formal mechanism for doing so. There was excellent sharing of information in the JEP to ensure continuity of teaching approaches in the school for the children. Principals described opportunities they had to engage with other principals at local and national meetings but similar opportunities were not a feature of teachers' practice. Some sites were open to visits by staff from other schools but this had to be managed carefully so as not to overwhelm the receiving site. Limited availability and input of external agencies were noted in all sites.

## Discussion and Implications

### Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning

Although on-going assessment information was gathered in all sites, the evaluation and use of those data to inform planning, teaching and learning should be extended beyond academic targets for students in primary, special school and post-primary environments. The use of ASD-specific assessments would beneficially support the development of relevant targets for younger children. Schools with older students and those serving children with complex needs do not have access to useful appropriate assessment instruments. Further assessment of co-occurring needs would constructively inform planning and instruction. School assessment practices could include student self-assessment protocols when appropriate to supplement planning. School assessment outcomes should be used to complement planning and teaching during the extended school year programmes to ensure continuity for students. All schools would benefit from the development of clear school assessment policies, which document the rationale for the selection of assessment instruments and provide detailed, clear and accessible information on the assessment processes for parents.

All schools would benefit from access to external professionals to support the process of individualised planning for children. The individualised planning process should ensure realistic targets are identified that the student has the potential of attaining and should extend students' involvement in the individualised planning process where possible. In post-primary schools' strategies, methodologies and materials required to achieve the learning targets require greater elucidation and learning targets should be specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-bound (SMART). In particular the environmental and instructional adaptations and accommodations required to support the student across subject areas in mainstream classes should be described in planning and be in place in classrooms. In early intervention sites, the specific targeting of play and leisure skills should be a key focus of the individualised planning process. Home tutors would benefit from developing expertise through CPD around individualised planning.

The transition protocols in place should be more clearly documented. Roles and responsibilities for transition should be clearly delineated and timelines identified for the completion of activities essential to the transition process. In post-primary schools, developing a flexible transition plan for post-school placement should be prioritised and included in students' individualised planning two years prior to their anticipated transition. Transition should feature more prominently in individualised planning and students should be allocated a more active role in the transition process. Schools need extensive collaboration with external services to plan for the transition of students with very complex needs to post-school options. Schools also need timely and reliable information regarding placement options available for students transitioning in and out of their settings.

The absence of specific curriculum guidelines for early intervention classes is creating uncertainty for schools and home-tuition sites in providing for children's curriculum experiences in the early years. The potential of Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for

Curriculum and Assessment<sup>22</sup>) and *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*<sup>23</sup> to contribute to children's experiences also should be further explored and developed. Guidance on children's access to Irish in the curriculum is required to alleviate the dilemma of access to Irish in the Gaeltacht areas. The Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities<sup>24</sup> could be further employed in post-primary sites to augment students' learning and teaching. Explicitly locating the curriculum provided for students in special schools clearly within the curriculum framework and experiences available to their peers in mainstream schools to support students' holistic development should be explored. Guidance is required in relation to the areas of the curriculum that should be focused on during the implementation of the JEP. This should allow for an emphasis on co-curricular activities in the context of the JEP that address the specific challenges associated with ASD. Similarly guidance is required on the curriculum focus for home tuition. The implications for a student's social skills when the JEP is being delivered in the home and in home-tuition sites should be considered and addressed.

Including reference to all teaching methodologies in use in the School Plan and clearly stating the rationale for the selection and use of teaching methodologies would further consolidate the positive practice evidenced. In post-primary sites, further documentary evidence is required to demonstrate the link between assessment and teaching especially in individualised plans for students. Assessment of individual targets should be part of post-primary practice. In the provision of the JEP, it is critical that at least one experienced member of staff is in a classroom to ensure continuity of teaching methodologies for students' experiences. In home-tuition sites, a need to support the development of knowledge and skill in the application of methodologies of greatest benefit to young children with ASD was identified.

The limited availability of external professionals and services to support a team approach to planning for specialised interventions emerged as the most pressing concern in all sites. In sites where information sharing was informal, there is a need to formalise these structures and a need was identified in all sites to ensure that communication with parents is in accessible, parent-friendly language. In a few post-primary sites, appropriate levels of information sharing within the schools was unacceptable due to timetable and staff deployment issues, which needed to be addressed at leadership level. Parents' involvement in planning for the JEP in school-based sites could be further extended on a more formal basis.

Robust systems of data collection and monitoring of progress/outcomes for children can potentially inform and enhance the quality of teaching and learning and thus should be developed and used. The processes related to data collection and monitoring of students' progress and outcomes should occur in postprimary and some home provision sites where this was identified as an area for development. Special needs assistants, under the direction of the class teacher, have a potential role in supporting data collection, which could further assist the process.

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<sup>22</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009) *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: NCCA.

<sup>23</sup> Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) (2006) *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*, Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education. Accessed on Thursday July 23rd 2015 [http://siolta.ie/media/pdfs/final\\_handbook.pdf](http://siolta.ie/media/pdfs/final_handbook.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2007) *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities*, Dublin: NCCA.



## Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture

Documenting the practices involved for cultivating communication with parents/guardians in the School Plan would further enrich the home-school communication process. This process would be enhanced by accessing CPD focused on promoting positive and effective communication with parents, promoting parental awareness in relation to the range of communication systems in place in schools and clearly articulating these procedures. Facilitating meaningful collaboration with parents at the post-primary level was identified as challenging and more complex than at primary level due to the numbers of teachers involved. Designating a key contact in school for parents and allocating time for this named person to communicate with parents during the school day presents as a possible solution to this dilemma that emerged. While high levels of satisfaction were expressed by parents with the school-based JEP, the role of parents could be extended beyond consultation to greater involvement, while simultaneously respecting parents' readiness to allow teachers to lead and deliver the programme.

The experiences of children with ASD are positively augmented by the creation of a school environment that particularly and purposefully supports their competence. The greater availability of visual supports such as simplified maps, clear labelling of areas, colour coding of corridors, thematic layout of subject rooms could provide support to students in navigating post-primary school buildings.

Schools provided for co-curricular rather than extra-curricular activities. Co-curricular activities were less a feature of practice where the JEP was delivered in the home or where home tuition was being delivered. This requires attention in view of the potential of these activities to ameliorate the social and communication differences experienced by students with ASD.

Clearly documenting the strategies adopted by the school in relation to students' wellbeing in the School Plan and outlining the system that is in place to detect and support children's potential mental health problems in school documentation would further extend the positive practice identified. Nominating a staff member as a resource for students who may be concerned about mental health issues would also be of assistance. An awareness of the issues for parents' wellbeing as regards their child with ASD is important for schools. Access to external expertise and services emerged as a key support for schools in dealing competently with mental health issues.

## Statement 3 – School Management

The importance of the availability of CPD for principals in their management, administrative and instructional-related duties specific to ASD-provision became evident. In all sites practices were more advanced than evidenced in documentation, and clearly articulating the rationale for progressive practices to better support students with ASD could potentially augment provision. At sites where there was a special class, principals were aware of the potential isolation of the teacher in the school and highlighted the importance of continuing to provide support for the teacher in the class. The presence of more than one special class at a site seemed to assist in reducing that isolation and increase the salience of the specialised provision among the general

staff. While it is not feasible or necessary to provide more than one class in every school, the findings underline the importance of whole-school support for a teacher in a special class. Harnessing the positive practice evidenced in rotating teachers and SNAs between mainstream and special classes, and articulating a transparent, consistent and clear rationale in school documentation in relation to this practice, could further support ASD provision in schools.

Post-primary schools would benefit from guidelines for managing teacher time-tables and the use of learning support hours to support teaching in special classes. All school sites commented on the limited availability of external services to advise and support them in working with students. This was particularly prominent in the school-based JEP site, where a majority of teachers did not have significant experience in working with students with complex needs. A clearer articulation of appropriate practices for SNAs at the post-primary level would provide greater certainty for schools and SNAs in this regard.

It would advantage principals appointing personnel for special classes to be able to recruit those most suitable without having to manage within the constraints of the panel system. When securing tutors, there are no public lists of qualified personnel available for parents who, themselves, may be in a very vulnerable state with children who have been newly assessed with ASD. Providing targeted assistance with this practice would be of significant benefit to parents.

All sites would benefit from functional systems for engaging in timely review of provision in appropriate-sized teams. In particular, post-primary schools would benefit from functional systems to rate the progress of students on their individual targets in addition to their examination performances. This practice of schools reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of current provision should be documented in school plans and consequent changes in practice recorded.

## **Statement 4 – Staff Development**

Many sites expressed their needs for specific targeted CPD in areas such as relationships and sexuality for students in puberty, working with challenging behaviours, and whole-school information on special education and the educational implications of ASD in particular. Tutors providing home tuition specifically were aware of their need to upskill and had to resort to using friends and colleagues who were more knowledgeable or the internet as sources of information. Providing information on the availability of CPD through the SESS for all teachers/tutors involved in home-tuition and the JEP would be a significant benefit.

The role SNAs play in classes for children with ASD might require more specific professional development as their support in managing behaviour is much more significant than when working with children with a variety of special educational needs. Special needs assistants participating in the research noted that they would be better able to support teachers in the application of ASD-specific interventions and teaching methodologies if they also received CPD tailored to this area. Appropriate CPD for SNAs would best be examined at the national level. Finally, it would be beneficial for all schools with expertise in ASD to consider extending opportunities to the parents of their children with ASD to develop skills and knowledge in the area.

Teachers and principals would benefit from systematic involvement in professional organisations such as the Irish Learning Support Teachers Association (ILSA) and the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE) and attendance at professional conferences pertinent to their school populations which would support the development of communities of practice around the demanding work of providing for students with ASD.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background to Evaluation

In 2013, the Minister for Education and Skills requested that the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) prepare policy advice on education provision for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Ireland. In this context, the NCSE commissioned a systematic review of national and international evidence relating to best practice in the provision of education for persons with ASD. In addition to this review, the NCSE also commissioned an overview and empirical evaluation of education provision for students with ASD in Ireland with a view to further informing the development of policy advice to the Minister for Education and Skills. These research projects can be contextualised and situated within the range of research reports related to education provision for students with special educational needs in Ireland commissioned by the NCSE from 2006. In particular, these research projects build on the *International Review of the Literature of Evidence of Best Practice Provision in the Education of Persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders* published in 2009 (Parsons *et al.*, 2009).

The Request for Tender (RFT) for the latter research, issued in September 2013, specifically stated that the proposed evaluation should consider the range of provision currently in place in state-funded recognised schools. This range of provision included placement in mainstream classes with support, placement in special classes (including early intervention classes) and placement in special schools. It was specified that the evaluation was also to include state-funded early intervention in the home under the Home-Tuition scheme (DES, 2014a) and the extended school year as provided for by the July Education Programme (JEP) both at home and in school (DES, 2013a; 2013b).

It was expected that the evaluation research study would evaluate current provision for students with ASD against a framework of principles and indicators based on identified good practice in relation to education provision for students with ASD. This framework of principles was developed by the NCSE in partnership with Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) (NCSE and MCA, 2014) and is available in Appendix 1. Current understanding of good practice in the area of ASD education is documented in this framework and it provided a benchmark against which education provision for students with ASD was evaluated in the context of this research. Middletown Centre for Autism was established in 2007 by the Departments of Education in Ireland and Northern Ireland and is funded by both departments.

In October 2013, a cross-departmental research team led by the Special Education Department and the Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, successfully submitted a tender to the NCSE for the research study entitled 'An Evaluation of Educational Provision for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Ireland'.

The combined research team has extensive knowledge, experience and understanding of the educational needs of students with ASD, including an in-depth understanding of the education system in Ireland and education systems internationally. The team included skilled evaluators who have developed their skills through their evaluation of practice in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, through conducting evaluations with reference to the Education Act, 1998 (Ireland, 1998) and in their participation in a range of research projects to date.

## 1.2 Methodological Approach

Evaluation research is described as a type of applied research that is designed to answer practical, real-world problems concerning the effects of some policy or programme (Kidder *et al.*, 1986). Evaluation is concerned with the process of collecting and analysing information with the purpose of reaching conclusions on specific questions (Department of Finance, 2007). In the context of this research the evaluation comprised a systematic process characterised by an inherent evaluative dimension, which was concerned with making judgements and assessing the quality of educational provision for children with ASD in Ireland within the limitations of the research sample and time-frame.

In this research, the MCA/NCSE Framework referred to earlier provided the benchmark against which education provision for students with ASD was evaluated. The data-gathering phase of the evaluation consisted of the following: semi-structured interviews conducted with principals, teachers, special needs assistants (SNAs) and parents; observation of practice in classrooms; review of documentation related to education provision for children with ASD and child conversations.

The research sample reflected the range of state-funded education provision for children with ASD in Ireland. A total of 24 sites within 11 site types, as detailed below in Table 4, were included in the sample. Both the selection process and the methodological approach adopted will be described in detail in the Methodology Chapter. It is important to stress that the sample size presents limitations in terms of the generalisability of the findings. In this context, therefore, the research does not purport to present findings for the purpose of generalisation but rather to produce evidence based on the exploration of specific contexts and particular individuals (Brantlinger *et al.*, 2005).

**Table 4. Research Sites**

Site Type	Site Details	Number of Sites
A	Children with ASD in ASD-Specific Early Intervention Classes	2
B	Children with ASD included in Mainstream Primary Schools	3
C	Students with ASD included in Mainstream Post-Primary Schools	3
D	Special Classes for Children with ASD in Mainstream Primary Schools	2
E	Special Classes for Students with ASD in Mainstream Post-Primary Schools	2
F	Students with ASD in a Special School for Students with Mild General Learning Disability	1
G	Students with ASD in a Special School for Students with Moderate General Learning Disability	1
H	Students with ASD in a Special School for Students with Severe or Profound General Learning Disability	1
I	Students with ASD in an ASD-Specific Special School	3
J	Students with ASD availing of Home-Tuition	3
K	Children and Students with ASD availing of the July Education Programme	3

### 1.3 Education Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Ireland

For the greater part of the twentieth century, students with ASD attended special schools according to their assessed level of general learning disability, and a significant number were enrolled in schools or classes for pupils with emotional and behavioural disturbance. In 1998, the then Minister for Education and Science, Mícheál Martin TD, introduced the concept of automatic entitlement to support pupils with special educational needs irrespective of their location or general learning disability (DES, 1998). Formal recognition was expressly given to the distinct educational needs of pupils with ASD and it was announced that special separate educational provision would be made for students with ASD on the basis of a student-teacher ratio of six to one and with the support of an SNA. In addition, all students with ASD included in mainstream settings were to be allocated additional teaching and SNA support. Policy and provision for the education of all students with special educational needs, including students with ASD, have continued to expand and develop. The establishment of the National Council for Special Education and the elements of the continuum of education provision for students with ASD have been, and continue to be, key elements in this expansion and development.

### 1.3.1 The Legislative Context

Ireland has moved from a position where there was a dearth of education legislation to one in which a robust legislative context provides a framework for education provision for all students. The Education Act, 1998, places a statutory obligation on the State to provide all persons, including those with disabilities, with support services and a high quality of education appropriate to meeting their needs and abilities (Ireland, 1998). The Equal Status Acts, 2000 to 2004 prohibit discrimination on nine grounds including disability (Ireland, 2000-2004). Access to education is stated to lie within the scope of the Act and schools are required to provide reasonable accommodation to meet the needs of a person with a disability. Reasonable accommodation applies to a range of barriers such as physical, communication and attitudinal. The Education (Welfare) Act, 2000, provides for the entitlement of every child in the State to a certain minimum education (Ireland, 2000). The provisions of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, 2004, include a statutory right to avail of, and benefit from, an inclusive education, the centrality of parental involvement, and the development and dissemination of good practice (Ireland, 2004). The provisions of the Disability Act, 2005, also provide for an independent assessment of individual needs, a related service statement and independent redress and enforcement for children aged 0-5 years. While it is acknowledged that both the EPSEN Act, 2004, and the Disability Act, 2005, have not been fully commenced at this point, the existing legislative context provides a structure within which students with special educational needs can access education provision appropriate to their needs.

### 1.3.2 The National Council for Special Education

The NCSE was formally established as an independent statutory body by order of the Minister for Education and Science in December 2003. From the first of October 2005, the Council has been formally established under the EPSEN Act, 2004 (Ireland, 2004). Special educational needs organisers (SENOs) are employed by the NCSE and are available to schools and parents in all geographical areas of the country. Special Educational Needs Organisers allocate resources to schools to support children with special educational needs. The functions of the NCSE are detailed in the EPSEN Act and include conducting and commissioning research relevant to its functions; dissemination of appropriate information relating to national and international best practice in special education; planning and co-ordinating the provision of special education support services, as well as providing policy advice to the Minister for Education and Skills on special education matters; making information available to parents with regard to their entitlements and those of their children; assessing and reviewing the resources required in relation to provision and ensuring a continuum of special education provision is available. The provision in the EPSEN Act regarding the NCSE's role in ensuring students' progress is monitored and regularly reviewed has so far not been formally commenced due to the fact that Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are not yet mandatory under the Act.

### 1.3.3 A Continuum of Education Provision for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

In accordance with the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), developed by the United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), programmes at ISCED level 0 refer to pre-primary education and target children below the age of entry to primary education, identified as ISCED level 1. In Ireland, six is the compulsory school starting age; however, the majority of five-year-olds and half of four-year-olds are enrolled in infant classrooms in primary schools in Ireland (Centre for Early Childhood Research at Mary Immaculate College (CERAMIC) and Centre for Educational and Social Research (CSER), 2015). In Ireland, therefore, students at ISCED level 1 range in age from four to 12 years of age and ISCED level 2 includes students aged 12 to the compulsory school attendance age of 16. In Ireland, provision at ISCED level 2 provides for students up to 18 years in a range of post-primary provision that includes community, comprehensive, vocational and voluntary secondary schools. While a presumption in favour of including students with special educational needs in mainstream education is enshrined in legislation, special school provision is also available for students aged four to 18 years. There are currently 3,137 mainstream primary schools, 141 special schools and 732 post-primary schools in Ireland (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2015a).

Current educational provision for students with ASD comprises a continuum of provision at pre-primary, primary and post-primary levels. Provision includes 19 dedicated special schools for students with ASD, 95 special classes at pre-primary level, 378 special classes at primary and 152 special classes at post-primary. There are also special classes for students with ASD in special schools. Staffing is allocated to special schools on the basis of the school's student profile. Special schools are provided with the autonomy to organise class groupings in accordance with the curricular requirements of students.

Special classes and special schools are established with a staffing ratio of one teacher and a minimum of two SNAs for every six children, with a requirement that all new mainstream school buildings provide special class accommodation (DES, 2015b). Additional SNAs may be allocated as determined by the care needs of individual students. The role of the SNA is to assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs (DES, 2014b).

Where a student with ASD is included in a mainstream school, an additional 4.25 hours of resource teaching may be provided to support the student's education placement (NCSE, 2015b). Where required, SNA support is also provided to support students' educational placement as is assistive technology and/or specialist equipment. In the 2014-15 school year, there were 8,739 students with ASD included in mainstream classes at primary and post-primary levels (DES, 2015a).

A school-based July Education programme (JEP) is also available for students with ASD and/or a severe or profound general learning disability. A total of 190 schools provide the JEP (DES, 2015a). In 2013, 2,128 children availed of the school-based JEP (NCSE, 2015a). Schools eligible to host the programme must have students with these assessed needs enrolled in the school



(DES, 2013a). In limited circumstances, and subject to the agreement of the participating school, students from a non-participating school may participate in the JEP, provided no additional resources are incurred. A specific minimum number of students is not required to run the programme; however, the DES specifies that classes should be viable and that schools should make every effort to maximise resources provided by the DES. The JEP is essentially a continuation of the normal school year for students with the duration of the school day aligned with normal school days, as per relevant circulars. The programme is required to be similar to the curriculum delivered during the school year and to be educational in content. Staffing resources allocated to the JEP reflect those provided for participating students during the normal school year. The length of the school day and the staffing resources are aligned with what is expected during the standard school year. An overseer is appointed in a supervisory capacity for the school-based programme and must be a principal, deputy/vice principal or permanent qualified teacher, employed by the school. A preparer is also appointed to oversee the administrative elements of the programme and, in view of the comparability of responsibilities, it is recommended that the overseer would also be the preparer (DES, 2013b).

Home-based provision is available if the school in which the student is enrolled is not providing the school-based JEP (DES, 2014c). In 2013, 3,470 children availed of the home-based JEP (NCSE, 2015a). Parents/guardians are responsible for recruiting a tutor/teacher. Tuition is provided for an approved child for a maximum of 10 hours a week for a maximum of four weeks in the month of July, totalling 40 hours' tuition. Tuition can be provided during Monday to Friday from 9.00 am to 6.00 pm to a maximum of five hours' tuition per day. Similar to the school-based JEP, it is envisaged that the programme comprises a continuation of the curriculum in place for the child during the normal school year. It is a requirement that the tutor/teacher providing the home-based JEP is registered with, and vetted by, the Teaching Council.

The Home Tuition Scheme provides a compensatory educational service and does not constitute an alternative to a school placement (DES, 2014a). Home Tuition funding is provided where children are unable to attend school for reasons such as chronic illness, for children with special educational needs seeking an educational placement and for children with ASD in the context of early educational intervention (DES, 2014a). Home Tuition funding is therefore allocated to children with ASD, aged between three and four years, in circumstances where a placement in an early intervention setting is not available. Home-tuition funding is also available for children aged between 2½ and three years who have been assessed with ASD, as these children cannot enrol in a school until they reach the age of three. In 2012-13, Home Tuition was provided for 625 children (NCSE, 2015b). Parents/guardians are required to apply directly to the DES for Home-Tuition funding and secure a tutor/teacher. The tutor/teacher must be registered with, and vetted by, the Teaching Council. It is specified that Home-Tuition funding is for educational teaching intervention only, and is not provided for therapeutic services such as speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and/or psychological services, which are considered to require the engagement of the Health Service Executive (HSE). The DES recommends that the provision of Home Tuition should take place between 9.00 am and 6.00 pm and should not take place during school holidays, bank holidays and weekends. The maximum number of hours that can be allocated for children with ASD in these contexts is 20 hours per week and, in certain circumstances, attendance at an early intervention setting, which is not a school-based setting, may be augmented by the provision of Home Tuition.

This continuum of education provision for students with ASD is underpinned by a range of support services. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) provides advice and support to schools in relation to students with special educational needs. A NEPS Psychologist is assigned to a group of schools and works in partnership with teachers, parents and students in identifying students' educational needs and supporting the school community (DES, 2015c). The Special Education Support Service (SESS) was established in 2003 (DES, 2012). The SESS aims to enhance the quality of learning and teaching for students with special educational needs; design and deliver a range of professional development initiatives and supports for school personnel and consolidate and co-ordinate existing professional development (DES 2012). The National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS) provides support for a number of partner post-primary schools on behaviour and focuses on addressing key elements of school-wide positive behaviour support for all students (DES, 2015a). In February 2015, the Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan TD, announced the development of an Inclusion Support Service within the NCSE to incorporate the SESS, the NBSS and the Visiting Teacher Service for children who are deaf/hard of hearing and children who are blind/visually impaired (VTSVHI) (DES, 2015d).

Post-graduate professional development programmes have continued to develop and are now provided in seven third-level institutions (DES, 2015e). The aim of these programmes is to provide substantial theoretical and practical continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers working with students with special educational needs and for teachers working with students requiring learning support teaching, thereby contributing to the school's overall capacity in this area. Post-graduate programmes specifically designed for teachers of students with ASD are also provided by St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin and St Angela's College, Sligo in collaboration with the SESS (DES, 2015f; DES, 2015g). A range of programmes is also available at the Autism Centre for Education and Research (ACER) at Birmingham University in the UK (School of Education, University of Birmingham, 2015).

## 1.4 Research Design

The research design was developed with reference to the principles of evaluation research outlined previously, which will be elaborated on further in the Methodology Chapter. This research design was linked directly to the research tasks specified in the Request for Tender issued by the NCSE and comprised three distinct strands.

### Strand 1

From the period November 2013 to January 2014, a comprehensive evaluation methodology was developed, incorporating the NCSE and MCA Evaluation Framework (NCSE and MCA, 2013). Data-collection instruments were developed, sampling completed and instruments were piloted.

### Strand 2

Troman (2006) observes that a necessary first step for those engaging in fieldwork involves gaining access to the setting which has been chosen for the study. The research team considered that access to settings was a privilege and a process that involved a range of converging factors related to the multi-faceted demands on education settings for children with ASD. Therefore,

access was managed in a sensitive manner and co-ordinated by both principal investigators. Particular attention was directed towards developing a rigorous sampling framework to generate research sites reflective of the range of provision for students with ASD in Ireland, as delineated in Table 4 above. Initially, school-level data in relation to education provision and where students with ASD were placed were obtained by the research team from the NCSE to support the development of the sampling framework for schools. No student-identifying information was provided by the NCSE with these data. In relation to home provision, the DES advised parents of students participating in the Home-Tuition and home-based JEP to contact the research team directly if they were interested in participating in the research. The DES also provided the research team with contact details of schools participating in the school-based JEP.

In relation to the school sites, a stratified sampling process was used to select the sample sites from the data provided to ensure they were reflective of the range of provision for students with ASD as outlined in Table 4. These stratified subgroups were based on:

- geographical location (urban/rural);<sup>25</sup>
- gender composition (boys/girls/mixed);
- socio-economic grouping (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools initiative (DEIS) and non-DEIS);
- language medium (Irish/English medium schools);
- early intervention provision;
- provision type: mainstream provision, special class provision in mainstream schools and special schools (ASD and non-ASD special schools).

Sites within these categories were selected randomly from the data base. This random sampling approach was informed by the necessity of capturing a distribution of sites that reflected a wide geographical area nationally, as demonstrated in Figure 1 below.

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<sup>25</sup> Note on urban/rural location

Ireland is divided up into eight strata based on population density. These areas are further classified into urban and rural areas as follows:

**Urban**

- Cities; Suburbs of cities; Mixed urban/rural areas bordering on the suburbs of cities
- Towns and their environs with populations of 5,000 or over (large urban)
- Mixed urban/rural areas bordering on the environs of larger towns
- Towns and their environs with a population of 1,000 to 5,000 (other urban)

**Rural**

- Mixed urban/rural areas

Rural areas Source: Central Statistics Office (2015) Surveys and Methodology, Accessed on Friday 17th July 2015 at <http://www.cso.ie/en/surveysandmethodology/information/society/e-commercehouseholdsurvey/backgroundnotes/>

The JEP school sites were stratified by:

- provision type – special class provision in mainstream school and special schools.

Due to the time constraints at this point in the evaluation, the JEP school sites were selected from the strata based on geographical proximity to the researchers.

The selection of JEP Home Sites was based on a self-selection process as parents were contacted directly by the DES and invited to participate in the research. Sites were then selected pragmatically based on geographical proximity to the researchers.

Home-Tuition sites were stratified by:

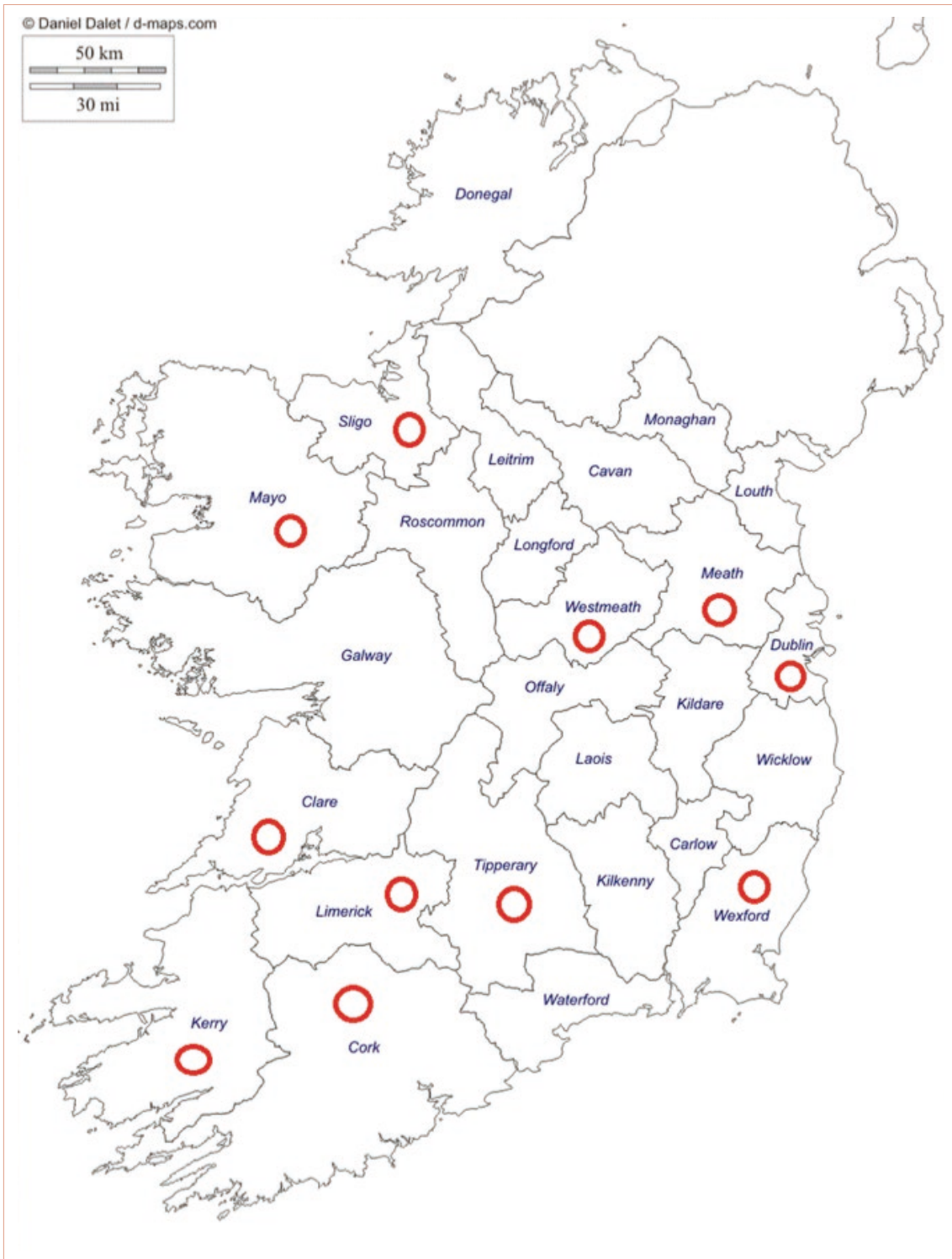
- Home Tuition being provided individually in the home and on a pooled basis delivered by a provider.

Similar to the JEP Home Sites, a self-selection process was involved as parents and centres providing Home Tuition were contacted directly by the DES and invited to participate in the research. Sites were then selected pragmatically based on geographical proximity to the researchers.

As illustrated in Figure 1 below, the research team prioritised accessing a wide national geographical area. However, pragmatic sampling decisions were also made to accommodate both the geographical location of the researchers and the time-line for the research.

Initially, the principal investigators contacted the selected research sites by phone and explained the research project to them. Only one of the sites contacted declined the invitation to participate in the research and this was due to the site not having a student with ASD in the school. Another school of the same category was randomly selected as a replacement. School visits were organised and co-ordinated by the research associate appointed to the project and a timetable of site visits was drawn up in consultations between the research team and the participating sites.

Figure 1. Geographical Distribution of Research



### Strand 3

In the period from February 2014 to July 2014, data collection, data input and analysis were conducted in a total of 24 sites within the 11 site types A-K. A summary of the number of data sources is provided in Table 5 below. More detail will be provided in relation to these data sources in the next chapter. Sixty-one students with ASD from pre-primary to post-primary level participated in the research study. Consent and assent was received for all children to participate in the research in the context of observation of practice and in participating in child conversations, where the child was also provided with the option of drawing a picture of his/her school. Child conversations were conducted in groups, and 29 children conversations were conducted with 41 children. While 61 children participated in the classroom observations that were conducted, only 41 children participated in the child conversations as this corresponded to the number of parental consents that was obtained. In accordance with the vision of the National Children's Strategy, the researchers were concerned to capture the voice of the child in the research. It was also of concern in this context that the child's autonomy and agency was respected (Department of Health and Children, 2000).

**Table 5. Summary of Data Sources**

Principal Interview	Teacher Interview	SNA Interview	Child Conversation	Child Drawing	Parent Interview	Document Review	Observation of Practice
21	48	33	29	41	60	24	35

A two-person research team conducted fieldwork in each of the research sites A-K, and in one of Site J, where Home Tuition was being provided on a group basis. In Sites A-I, fieldwork was conducted for the duration of two days in each site. On Day One, the research team consisted of one of the principal investigators and a research team member, and, on Day Two, the fieldwork was completed by a research team member. A two-person research team, comprising one of the principal investigators and a research team member, conducted fieldwork together for one day each in the remaining two J Sites and in all of Site K. Providing for one of the principal investigators to conduct fieldwork in each site for one day was designed to assist in contributing to the consistency of approach and to further enhance the evaluation process. Fieldwork involved the following:

- Observation of practice in all sites;
- Semi-structured interviews with class teachers;
- Semi-structured interviews with school principals;
- Semi-structured interviews with special needs assistants (SNAs);
- Child conversations and draw-a-picture activity with children. Parents were also invited to participate in telephone interviews and these were conducted in the period between February 2014 and September 2014 at a time suitable to individual parents.

## 1.5 Limitations

The research findings are subject to a number of limitations which need to be borne in mind and addressed in any future replication of this research.

A number of methodological decisions were performed based on expediency and the time-frame available for the research which may have potentially impacted on the research findings. As noted previously, all schools contacted, except one which did not have a student with ASD enrolled in the school, agreed to participate in the research. The sampling process adopted for this study and the resultant selection and profile of participants therefore may be particular to this sample and not reflective of the overall target population. As noted previously, the sample size presents limitations in terms of the generalisability of the findings. The heterogeneous needs of students with ASD may further contribute to the difficulties inherent in generalising the research findings as they may represent the particular responses of parents, teachers, special needs assistants (SNAs) and principals to students' particular needs and abilities. As referred to previously, the selection of participants for the home-based JEP and Home-Tuition provision was based on a process of self-selection.

However, particular attention was directed towards meticulously adhering to MCA Evaluation Framework, recording the characteristics of the students with ASD, the environment in which the research was conducted, measurement and data and ethical and moral considerations. In this context, therefore, the research has fulfilled its aim of producing evidence-based findings from the exploration of specific contexts and individuals, and the quantitative measurement elements employed have further enhanced this process (Brantlinger *et al.* (2005).

## 1.6 Report Structure and Sequence

The report is now presented with reference to Methodology; Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Early Intervention Classes; Primary Schools; Post-Primary Schools; Special Schools; Home Tuition; July Education Programme and Discussion, Findings and Conclusions. Findings related to individual research sites are reported with direct reference to the Statements, Criteria and Performance Indicators in MCA and NCSE Evaluation Framework (MCA and NCSE, 2013).

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Introduction

This research study comprised an empirical evaluation of educational provision for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The continuum of provision for students with ASD in Ireland was examined and judgments made in relation to the quality of the range of provision. The evaluation methodology was developed with reference to an Evaluation Framework developed by Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (MCA and NCSE, 2013). See Appendix 1 for a copy of the Evaluation Framework.

In this chapter, the Evaluation Framework is explained, the methodology described, the research strategies summarised and the research design considered.

### 2.2 Middletown Centre for Autism and National Council for Special Education Evaluation Framework

In order to ensure that the evaluation of education provision was conducted in a coherent and consistent manner, a broad evaluative framework was developed with reference to MCA and the NCSE Evaluation Framework (MCA and NCSE, 2013). The Framework was developed for the specific purpose of this evaluation research, to provide a shared understanding of best practice in education provision for students with ASD.

This Evaluation Framework sets out criteria and performance indicators with reference to four key statements against which provision can be systematically measured. A range of evaluations, policy and best practice guidelines produced in Ireland, Northern Ireland, the wider United Kingdom, the USA, Canada and Australia was consulted and informs the Evaluation Framework. The selection of documentation was guided by the ASD specialist team at MCA and advised on by the NCSE. While the selection of documentation is not therefore exhaustive, it nevertheless comprises a representation of international documentation addressing policy and practice for students with ASD. The main documentation consulted is referenced in the Evaluation Framework in Appendix 1. Specific themes were identified from the documentation consulted and these themes were further developed and applied to the Irish educational context in terms of education provision for students with ASD. The research team also wishes to acknowledge the limitations in using the Framework over other validated tools; while the Framework was piloted for this research, it has not been used previously and was developed specifically for the purposes of this evaluation research.

The Evaluation Framework has been designed for use in all education settings, including mainstream schools, special classes in mainstream schools and special schools. Relevant elements of the Framework are also applicable to pre-primary early intervention classes, home-tuition settings and the extended school year as provided for under both the home and school-based July Education Programme (JEP). The Evaluation Framework consists of four structured themes, referred to as 'Statements' relating to education provision for students with ASD: Teaching and Learning; Inclusive School Culture; School Management; and Staff Development. Each theme



has a number of linked criteria and associated performance indicators. As illustrated in the overview provided in Table 6, within the four statements there are 19 criteria and 84 performance indicators. The 'Teaching and Learning' statement is considered to be the core statement in the Framework.

**Table 6. Overview of Middletown Centre for Autism and National Council for Special Education Evaluation Framework's Statements and Criteria**

<p><b>Statement 1:</b> Teaching and Learning</p>	<p><b>Criteria:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.1 Assessment [6 Performance Indicators]</li> <li>1.2 Individualised Planning [7 Performance Indicators]</li> <li>1.3 Transition [6 Performance Indicators]</li> <li>1.4 Curriculum/Certification [3 Performance Indicators]</li> <li>1.5 Teaching Methodologies [8 Performance Indicators]</li> <li>1.6 Team Approach [4 Performance Indicators]</li> <li>1.7 Data-Collection/Monitoring of Progress/Outcomes [4 Performance Indicators]</li> </ul>
<p><b>Statement 2:</b> Inclusive School Culture</p>	<p><b>Criteria:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2.1 School Culture [5 Performance Indicators]</li> <li>2.2 Communication [2 Performance Indicators]</li> <li>2.3 Learning Environment [3 Performance Indicators]</li> <li>2.4 Extra-Curricular Activities [3 Performance Indicators]</li> <li>2.5 Student Wellbeing [8 Performance Indicators]</li> </ul>
<p><b>Statement 3:</b> School Management</p>	<p><b>Criteria:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.1 Leadership [9 Performance Indicators]</li> <li>3.2 Responsibility [2 Performance Indicators]</li> <li>3.3 Appointment of Staff [2 Performance Indicators]</li> <li>3.4 Review of Provision for Children with ASD [4 Performance Indicators]</li> </ul>
<p><b>Statement 4:</b> Staff Development</p>	<p><b>Criteria:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4.1 Understanding and Knowledge of ASD for all Staff [3 Performance Indicators]</li> <li>4.2 Continuing Professional Development [3 Performance Indicators]</li> <li>4.3 Information Sharing and Access to Specialist Information on ASD [3 Performance Indicators]</li> </ul>

## 2.3 Research Approach and Strategies

As noted previously, evaluation research is described as applied research that is designed to answer practical, real-world problems concerning the effects of some policy or programme (Kidder *et al.*, 1986). The Evaluation Framework therefore provided a robust instrument based on international evidence to conduct this evaluation, and specific research strategies were developed to review the range of education provision for students with ASD.

In selecting the research strategies, the research team was concerned that the method of collecting evidence should match the Evaluation Framework and that methods, questions and findings should all be part of a process that was conducted openly and systematically (Oakley, 2004).

Within this evaluation approach, a multiple case study research strategy, comprising an empirical investigation using multiple sources of evidence, was employed (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Pawson, 2013; Yin, 2003; Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Case study research has been identified as being capable of generating hypotheses, developing categories inductively, providing explanations and evaluations and observing effects in real contexts (Yin, 2003; Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Yin further advises that the analytic benefits and external generalisability from multiple case studies are considerably greater than those of single case studies. Case studies were therefore conducted in 24 sites. In order to preserve the anonymity of schools and participants in this research report, a banding system was developed with reference to the enrolment numbers in schools. This banding system is detailed below in Table 7.

The research was conducted in site types A-K as detailed below in Tables 4 and 5. As referred to previously, these research sites reflected the continuum of education provision currently available for students with ASD in Ireland. In a number of sites, where there was more than one class for students with ASD or where students in mainstream settings were included in different classes, all classes were observed.

**Table 7. Details of School-Based Research Sites**

Site Type	Observation Details	Enrolment Band and Ratio*	School Type*
<b>A Sites: Early Intervention</b>			
Mainstream Primary School (1)	2 ASD-specific classes	Band E R = 1:1.19 (200-250 students)	Urban DEIS
Special School (1) Mod. GLD*	1 ASD-specific class	Band B R = 2.5: 1 (50-100 students)	Urban SS
<b>B Sites: Students with ASD included in Mainstream Classes in Primary Schools</b>			
Primary School (1)	1 child with ASD	Band H R = 1.06: 1 (700-750 students)	Urban
Primary School (1)	1 child with ASD	Band C R = 1.5:1 (100-150 students)	Rural
Primary School (1)	2 children with ASD	Band F R = 1:1.9 (250-300 students)	Urban DEIS
<b>C Sites: Students with ASD included in Mainstream Classes in Post-Primary Schools</b>			
Post-Primary School (1)	1 student with ASD	Band H All Girls (700-750 students)	Urban Vol
Post-Primary School (1)	1 student with ASD	Band E All Boys (200-250 students)	Urban Vol DEIS

Site Type	Observation Details	Enrolment Band and Ratio*	School Type*
Post-Primary School (1)	2 students with ASD	Band H All Boys (700-750 students)	Urban Vol
<b>D Sites: Special Classes for Students with ASD in Primary Schools</b>			
Primary School (1)	1 ASD-specific class	Band A R = 2:1 (0-50 students)	Rural Gaeltacht
Primary School (1)	2 ASD-specific classes	Band H R = 1.06: 1 (700-750 students)	Urban
<b>E Sites: Special Classes for students with ASD – Post-primary</b>			
Post-Primary School (1)	2 ASD-specific classes	Band I R = 1.29: 1 (800-850 students)	Urban (ETB)
Post-Primary School (1)	2 ASD-specific classes	Band G R = 1.02: 1 (350-400 students)	Urban Vol DEIS
<b>F Sites: Students with ASD – Special School – Mild General Learning Disability (1)</b>			
Special School (1) Mild GLD*	2 ASD-specific classes	Band D R = 1.62:1 (150-200 students)	Urban
<b>G Sites: Students with ASD – Special School – Moderate General Learning Disability (1)</b>			
Special School (1) Mod. GLD*	2 ASD-specific classes +1 child with ASD included in class in school	Band C R = 1.61:1 (100-150 students)	Urban SS
<b>H Sites: Students with ASD – Special School – Severe to Profound General Learning Disability (1)</b>			
Special School (1) S/SP GLD*	2 ASD-specific classes	Band A R = 3.5:1 (0-50 students)	Urban SS
<b>Site I: Special Schools for Students with ASD (3)</b>			
Special School (1) ASD	2 ASD-specific classes	Band B R = 4.6:1 (50-100 students)	Urban SS
Special School (1) ASD	2 ASD-specific classes	Band A R = 9.3:1 (0-50 students)	Urban SS
Special School (1) ASD	2 ASD-specific classes	Band B R = 5.6:1 (50-100 students)	Urban SS

\* Enrolment Band and Ratio (R) indicates the ratio of boys to girls in each site

\* School Type: DEIS – Delivering Equal Opportunities in Schools; SS – Special School; Vol – Voluntary; ETB – Education and Training Board; Mod. GLD – Moderate General Learning Disability; Mild GLD – Mild General Learning Disability; S/SP GLD – Severe or Severe to Profound General Learning Disability

**Table 8. Details of Home-Tuition and July Education Programme Home-Based and School-Based Sites**

Site Type	Observation Details	Gender	Location
<b>J Sites: July Education Provision</b>			
Home-Based	1 child	Boy	Urban
Primary School (1)	1 ASD-specific class	5 Boys and 1 Girl	Rural
Special School (1) S/SP GLD*	2 ASD-specific classes	4 Boys and 1 Girl	Rural
<b>K Sites: Home Tuition</b>			
Site where Tuition was delivered on a Group Basis (1)	1 ASD-specific class	4 Boys and 2 Girls	Urban
Site where Tuition was delivered in the Home (2)	2 children	1 Girl and 1 Boy	Rural

\* S/SP GLD – Severe or Severe to Profound General Learning Disability

In these sites detailed in Tables 4 and 5 above, interviews were conducted with 21 school principals, 48 teachers and 33 special needs assistants (SNAs). Twenty-nine child conversations were conducted with 41 children. Telephone interviews were conducted with 60 parents, 24 document reviews and 35 observations of practice were completed. In total, as noted previously, consent and assent was received for 61 children with ASD to participate in the research, as summarised in Table 9 below.

**Table 9. Details of Children who Participated in the Study**

	HT_H	HT_S	JEP_H	JEP_MI	JEP_SS	Post-Primary	Primary	Special School	Total
Boys	1	2	1	2	4	12	11	19	<b>52 boys</b>
Girls	1	2	–	1	1	3	0	1	<b>9 girls</b>

### Sampling Framework

As noted in Chapter One, particular attention was directed towards developing a rigorous sampling framework to reflect the range of education provision for students with ASD in Ireland. School level data, with no student identifying information, were obtained from the NCSE. In relation to home provision, the DES advised parents of students participating in the Home Tuition and home-based JEP to contact the research associate directly if they were interested in participating in the research. The DES also provided the research team with contact details of schools participating in the school-based JEP.

Within the data and reflective of education provision for students with ASD in Ireland, a range of subgroups was identified (Gravetter and Forzano, 2012). These subgroups comprised early intervention classes for children with ASD (2); primary mainstream schools in which students with ASD were included (3); post-primary mainstream schools in which students with ASD were included (3); mainstream primary schools in which there was ASD-specific provision (2); mainstream post-primary schools in which there was ASD-specific provision (2); students with ASD in special schools for students with mild general learning disability (1), with moderate general learning disability (1) and with severe or profound general learning disability (1); students with ASD in ASD-specific special schools (3); sites in which students with ASD were availing of the home-tuition scheme (3); sites in which students with ASD were participating in the school-based JEP (2) and a site in which a student with ASD was participating in the home-based JEP. These subgroups were then stratified according to the sampling framework previously detailed in Chapter One and sites were randomly selected from within each of the categories. The final list of site categories was run by the DES to ensure that there was a full spectrum of sites included in the sample.

## 2.4 Research Design

The research design consists of three strands, which are detailed below.

### 2.4.1 Strand 1

From the period November 2013 to January 2014, a comprehensive evaluation methodology was developed, based on the Evaluation Framework (MCA and NCSE, 2013). Sampling of school sites was conducted, data-collection instruments were developed and piloted. A multi-faceted approach to data collection was developed and a Documentary and Classroom Analysis Schedule, Semi-Structured Interview Schedules and Child-Conversation Schedules were devised. Schools also completed Pupil Profiles. These instruments were translated into Irish for research conducted in the Gaeltacht site. See Appendices 2 and 3 for copies of the data-collection instruments.

#### **Documentary and Classroom Analysis Schedule**

Classroom observation has been identified as lying at the heart of both understanding professional practice and improving its quality (Wragg, 1999). Classroom observation was conducted with reference to the Documentary and Classroom Analysis Schedule included in Appendix 2. Individualised Education Planning, sections of the School Plan, classroom displays and samples of students' work relevant to education provision for students with ASD were examined in the context of the documentary analysis.

The Documentary and Classroom Analysis Schedule was developed with reference to the four statements, 19 criteria and 84 performance indicators included in the Evaluation Framework (MCA and NCE, 2013). The schedule was delineated in the following 11 key sections from the Framework: School Culture and Leadership; Learning Environment; Assessment; Individualised Planning; Transition Planning; Curriculum; Teaching Methodologies; Data Collection/Monitoring of Progress/Outcomes; Team Approach; Parental and Student Involvement and Staff Development.

Each section had associated subsections, as outlined in the exemplar at Table 10 below. This is taken from Section 1 of a schedule that was completed in respect of a type A site.

**Table 10. Extract from Documentary and Classroom Observation Schedules**

Learning Environment	Observation	Evidence Sources*
<p>2.1 The school is committed to improving the <b>physical environment</b> of the school, meeting the diverse <b>physical, emotional, social</b> and <b>aesthetic</b> needs of students with ASD.</p>	<p>A well-structured, spacious and bright environment is evident. The two classrooms were very well and appropriately resourced and determined by the needs of individual students. Individual photographs of children were used to plan activities and photographs were attached by the children to the item they had chosen to play with. Visual schedules were used appropriately and discreetly. All potential distractors were removed from students' immediate environment and books were placed beyond students' reach, which encouraged them to use the PECS. An appropriately well-equipped gym-room was adjacent to each classroom and children were enabled to use it as they wished. A seamless connection between the rooms was evident. All of the rooms had specific areas which were well labelled. Child-focused individualised work-stations were in operation and also horse-shoe shaped and group-tables for group activities.</p>	<p>PTI – TI – PI – O</p>
<p>2.2 The learning environment considers the <b>individual learning styles</b> and <b>interests</b> of students with ASD and <b>adapts the physical environment</b> to provide <b>visual structure</b> and <b>predictability</b>.</p>	<p>The individualised focus accommodated children's learning styles appropriately – visual kinesthetic – auditory (VAK). Children's interest areas were encouraged; for example, dinosaurs were available for a child with an interest in that area and cars for another child – these interest areas were used to extend children's language during activities. Visual schedules were displayed prominently with colour-coded materials – e.g. Tuesday as the Yellow Day. A high level of predictability was evident and structure. Timer was used effectively and was visually appealing. Teachers signalled all activities at the beginning and throughout the activities.</p>	<p>O</p>

Learning Environment		Observation	Evidence Sources*
2.3	<b>Adequate space</b> is provided for students with ASD <b>to find comfort</b> and to <b>self-regulate</b> when necessary and the facility to have <b>learning and movement breaks</b> during class time.	Spacious environment – clearly delineated areas – safe, secure and calm environment evident – Adjoining gym room provided opportunities for students to self-regulate and included equipment such as trampoline, ball-pool, swing, sand-corner, vehicles. The room also incorporated a multi-sensory approach. Students were empowered to initiate movement-breaks and were observed to do so independently.	○
2.4	A <b>range of supports</b> (e.g. tactile, visual, and auditory) is made available to assist students with ASD to understand and navigate the school environment.	Tactile, visual and auditory supports were readily available. A balanced level of print and visual prompts was paired in signage around the classroom and used appropriately by the students. A tactile object was used for a child with anxiety issues.	○

\* PT1 – Principal Teacher Interview; TI – Teacher Interview; PI – Parent Interview; ○ – Observation

Observations were recorded by both the principal investigator and the team during the classroom observation phase on separate schedules. Following review of relevant documentation and subsequent to engaging with other relevant evidence sources, all observations were merged in one schedule, as detailed in Table 10 above, by both researchers working together. A quantitative recording mechanism was applied to each subsection of the Documentary and Classroom Analysis Schedule, with numbers 1-5 used to evaluate the practice, and equated with a scale ranging from Unacceptable to Excellent, as illustrated in Table 11 below. This scale was equated with the percentage of data sources, which confirmed the relevant findings.

**Table 11. Specific Measurement and Weighting Criteria for Data Collected**

1	2	3	4	5
<b>never/almost never</b>	<b>rarely</b>	<b>sometimes</b>	<b>often</b>	<b>always/almost always</b>
Confirmed by Findings from 10% of Data Sources including Classroom Observation	Confirmed by Findings from 20% of Data Sources including Classroom Observation	Confirmed by Findings from 50% of Data Sources including Classroom Observation	Confirmed by Findings from 90% of Data Sources including Classroom Observation	Confirmed by Findings from All Data Sources
Unacceptable	Acceptable	Good	Very Good	Excellent

When the schedule was completed by both researchers, each researcher evaluated each subsection individually and, where there was a difference in the final determination, this was

discussed until a final evaluation was agreed. The percentage of inter-rater agreement prior to determining the final evaluation was calculated for each subsection of the schedule, through calculating the percentage of incidences in which both the principal investigator and team researcher agreed. High levels of inter-rater agreement were recorded with an average agreement rate of 90% across all settings.

The content and findings of the Documentary and Classroom Observation Schedule directly informed the findings reported on each site with reference to the Evaluation Framework (MCA and NCSE, 2013).

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

A semi-structured interview-format was selected as the method to explore the views of staff in the schools. Principals, class teachers, learning support and/or resource teachers and special needs assistants comprised the staff members who were interviewed in school-based sites. In home-based sites, parents and teachers/tutors were interviewed. This method provided flexibility to further explore relevant issues and seek further clarification as required (Merriam, 1998; Cohen *et al.*, 2011). In consideration of the multiple demands on parents' time, it was decided to conduct telephone interviews with parents at a time identified as suitable to parents (Irvine *et al.*, 2012).

### **Child Conversation Schedules**

Taking due cognisance of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the research team was concerned to capture the voice of the child in the study (United Nations, 1989). Child conversations were conducted with groups of children, augmented by a draw and tell approach where children were invited to draw pictures of their educational setting (Clark and Moss, 2011; Lambert *et al.*, 2014). These conversations were a derivative of the child conferences referred to by Clark and Moss (2011) and were designed to be flexible and responsive to children's needs. Including the drawing element in the study was designed to accommodate the challenges individuals with ASD may have in communicating verbally. Extracts from child conversations relevant to the Evaluation Framework are used to support the findings and are included in the report.

### **Piloting of Research Instruments and Procedures**

Research instruments and procedures were piloted in three sites: a mainstream primary school in which a student with ASD was included, a post-primary mainstream school in which students with ASD were included and a special school for students with mild general learning disabilities in which students with ASD were included. The instruments and procedures were piloted through a process of questioning and discussion with volunteers rather than in formal interviewing and/or observation sessions. This decision was based on the aim of the pilot testing in establishing whether the interests and needs of the research participants were being addressed within the research framework and to gain feedback from respondents with regard to their interpretation of the questions (Sieber, 1992; Brown and Dowling, 1998). Based on these discussions, a number of amendments were subsequently made to the data-collection instruments.



## 2.4.2 Strand 2

Potential research sites were identified to reflect the stratified sampling framework. Both principal investigators contacted nine potential research sites each, by phone, to invite them to participate in the research. An overview of the purpose and process of the research was provided for potential participants. Schools were informed that a research team would visit the school for two days and conduct interviews with teachers, principals and SNAs, engage in conversations with groups of children, engage in classroom observations for a minimum period of an hour and examine documentation related to provision for students with ASD in the school. The school was invited to select the time period most appropriate for the classroom observation from its perspective. Schools were also informed that two members of the team would be on-site for one day and one member of the team would be on-site for two days. Each principal investigator visited 12 sites and remained on the site for one day during each visit. Fieldwork was conducted for two days in each of the research sites A-I, and one day each in two of Site J and all of Site K. Research team members spent two days in one Site J, where the Home Tuition was being delivered in a group context. This was to provide consistency and increase reliability and validity in the data-collection and analysis process.

## 2.4.3 Strand 3

From February 2014 to July 2014, data collection and data input were completed. Data analysis was conducted simultaneously with this process and completed in September 2014. A total of 292 data sources was collected from each of the 24 settings, as detailed below in Tables 9 and 10.

**Table 12. Range and Quantity of Data Sources in Sites A-I**

A Sites: Early Intervention								
Primary School (1) Special School (1) Mod. GLD	Principal Interview	Teacher Interview	SNA Interview	Child Conversation	Child Drawing	Parent Interview	Document Review	Observation of Practice
	2	3	4	1	10	7	2	3
B Sites: Students with ASD included in Mainstream Classes in Primary Schools								
Primary School (3)	Principal Interview	Teacher Interview	SNA Interview	Child Conversation	Child Drawing	Parent Interview	Document Review	Observation of Practice
	3	9	3	4	4	2	3	5
C Sites: Students with ASD included in Mainstream Classes in Post-Primary Schools								
Post-Primary School (3)	Principal Interview	Teacher Interview	SNA Interview	Child Conversation	Child Drawing	Parent Interview	Document Review	Observation of Practice
	3	7	4	3	0	5	3	4

<b>D Sites: Special Classes for Students with ASD in Primary Schools</b>								
Primary School (2)	Principal Interview	Teacher Interview	SNA Interview	Child Conversation	Child Drawing	Parent Interview	Document Review	Observation of Practice
	2	5	1	2	3	7	2	2
<b>E Sites: Special Classes for students with ASD – Post-primary</b>								
Post-Primary School (2)	Principal Interview	Teacher Interview	SNA Interview	Child Conversation	Child Drawing	Parent Interview	Document Review	Observation of Practice
	2	2	4	5	4	10	2	2
<b>F Sites: Students with ASD – Special School – Mild General Learning Disability (1)</b>								
Special School (1) Mild GLD	Principal Interview	Teacher Interview	SNA Interview	Child Conversation	Child Drawing	Parent Interview	Document Review	Observation of Practice
	1	2	2	3	4	8	1	2
<b>G Sites: Students with ASD – Special School – Moderate General Learning Disability (1)</b>								
Special School (1) Mod. GLD	Principal Interview	Teacher Interview	SNA Interview	Child Conversation	Child Drawing	Parent Interview	Document Review	Observation of Practice
	1	3	1	0	0	0	1	3
<b>H Sites: Students with ASD – Special School – Severe to Profound General Learning Disability (1)</b>								
Special School (1) S/SP GLD	Principal Interview	Teacher Interview	SNA Interview	Child Conversation	Child Drawing	Parent Interview	Document Review	Observation of Practice
	1	2	3	0	0	1	1	2
<b>I Sites: Special Schools for Students with ASD (3)</b>								
Special School (3) ASD	Principal Interview	Teacher Interview	SNA Interview	Child Conversation	Child Drawing	Parent Interview	Document Review	Observation of Practice
	3	7	7	9	11	6	3	5




**Table 13. Range and Quantity of Data Sources in Sites J-K**

<b>J Sites: July Education Programme</b>								
Primary School (1)	Principal Interview	Teacher Interview	SNA Interview	Child Conversation	Child Drawing	Parent Interview	Document Review	Observation of Practice
Special School (1) Mod. GLD								
Home-Based Site								
	2	4	4	1	5	9	3	4
<b>K Sites: Home-Tuition Sites</b>								
Home-Based (2)	Principal Interview	Teacher Interview	SNA Interview	Child Conversation	Child Drawing	Parent Interview	Document Review	Observation of Practice
Pooled Provision (1)								
	1	4	0	1	1	5	3	3

## 2.5 Data Analysis

Following data-collection, all data were uploaded electronically using Nvivo software (QSR International, 2013). A rigorous and systematic analysis of the data with reference to the Evaluation Framework (MCA and NCSE, 2013), comprising seven phases, was conducted using audio-coding, as summarised in Table 14 below (Braun and Clark, 2006; Bazeley, 2009).

**Table 14. Data Analysis (adopted from Braun and Clark, 2006)**

Analytical Process	Practical Application in Nvivo	Iterative Process
1. Organising the Data	Importing data into NVivo – listening and re-listening to the data – memoing initial ideas	<b>Assigning data to refined concepts to portray meaning</b>
2. Generation of Codes	Phase 1 – Systematic open coding of data with reference to Evaluation Framework (MCA and NCSE, 2013)	
3. Identifying Themes	Phase 2 – Categorisation of codes into themes as reflected in statements, criteria and performance indicators of Evaluation Framework (MCA and NCSE, 2013)	
4. Reviewing Themes	Phase 3 – Coding on – Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire data set (level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis	
5. Defining and Finalising Themes	Phase 4 – Data Reduction – On-going analysis to refine the specifics of statement, criterion and performance indicator	<b>Assigning data to themes/concepts to portray meaning</b>
6. Compiling Report	Phase 5 – Generating Analytical Memos Phase 6 – Testing and Validating Phase 7 – Synthesising Analytical Memos; Relating back of the analysis to the Evaluation Framework and drafting of report	 <b>Assigning meaning</b>

Data analysis was conducted electronically with reference to the Evaluation Framework (MCA and NCSE, 2013). Data analysis was therefore aligned with the Evaluation Framework and codes were inductively developed from the data with reference to the Framework (Priest, 2006).

The use of NVivo software facilitated close engagement with the data and provided an audit trail through meticulously logging data movements and coding patterns in addition to mapping conceptual categories and thought progression (QSR International, 2013). All of the research team had access to the Nvivo platform and engaged simultaneously in the iterative data analysis process.

## 2.6 Research Validity and Reliability

Acknowledging that threats to validity and reliability in research can never be completely countered, attention was directed to mitigating these threats throughout the research process (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). In order to provide for the research procedures being repeated with the same results with the same research population, the study provides a transparent account of the procedures adopted in relation to the aim and purpose of the research, the development of the research instruments, data-collection and analysis (Schwandt and Halpern, 1998; Yin, 2003).

The validity and reliability of the data were also supported by methodological triangulation, in which multiple sources of evidence were used, which allowed for converging lines of inquiry through adopting a corroboratory approach (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). A quantitative element was employed in analysing and reporting the data, as detailed in Table 11 above. This scale was applied to each individual research setting with reference to the frequency with which the practices delineated in the MCA/NCSE Framework (MCA and NCSE, 2013) was evidenced and captured in the range of data-collection instruments. The use of language in reporting the findings from this research is also directly linked to the scales and percentage ratings in Table 11. In this context also, the percentage of inter-rater agreement was calculated for each subsection of the Documentary and Classroom Observation Schedule, through calculating the percentage of incidences in which both the principal investigator and team researcher agreed. As noted previously, high levels of inter-rater agreement were recorded with an average agreement rate of 90% across all settings.

## 2.7 Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical clearance through the Mary Immaculate College (MIC) Ethics Committee (MIREC) and has adhered to the ethical protocols under which MIC advises that research is conducted. The principles of beneficence, respect and impartiality were observed during all stages of the research (Sieber, 1992). Participants were advised of the voluntary nature of their participation and that they could withdraw at any stage without consequence. A comprehensive account of the purpose and process of the research was provided and consent and assent obtained. Data were stored securely, coded, and pseudonyms used throughout so that research participants could not be identified by anybody other than a member of the research team. Participants were assured that neither they nor their settings would be identifiable in the final report. In particular, attention was directed by the research team to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2012) publication, *Guidance for Developing Ethical Research Projects involving Children*. All members of the research team were Garda-vetted. Garda vetting applies to personnel working in a full-time, part-time, and voluntary or student placement capacity in a position in a registered organisation, through which they have unsupervised access to children and/or vulnerable adults.<sup>26</sup>

The involvement of children in the research and capturing children's voices in an area that they are directly affected by was a key aim of the research team and based on the principles articulated in the National Children's Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2000). In this context, a particular focus was maintained on creating a safe environment for the children participating in the research and on ensuring children's safety and welfare. The key principles enunciated in *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011) were a guiding precept from the beginning of the research and informed the tender application, ethics submission, development of data-collection instruments, fieldwork and data analysis. Where issues of concern arose during the research, these were reported to the designated liaison person (DLP) in the school.

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<sup>26</sup> An Garda Síochána (2015) Garda Vetting/Garda Protection, Accessed online on Monday 20th July 2015.

## 2.8 Report Outline

The research findings are now reported with reference to the statements, criteria and performance indicators of the MCA/NCSE Evaluation Framework. Positive features of practice and areas identified as having scope for further development are summarised at the end of each section. In order to preserve participants' anonymity while simultaneously maintaining transparency in the reporting process, a coding system is used to report participants' responses. This coding system is included in Appendix 4. Chapter Three presents the findings on provision for children with ASD in early intervention classes. The findings on provision for children in primary schools are presented in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five, education provision for students in post-primary schools is set out and in Chapter Six the findings in respect of education provision in special schools are described. In Chapters Seven and Eight, the findings on the provision of Home Tuition and the July Education Programme are presented. Finally, in Chapter Nine, the composite research findings are discussed.

### 3. Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Early Intervention Classes

The analysis below is derived from the data collected at two type A Sites in which there were three early intervention classes. While this small sample constrains the generalisability of the findings, nevertheless, it provides an in-depth overview of provision in these sites with reference to the Evaluation Framework (Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) and National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 2013). Two of these classes were located in a primary school [Site A1] and one class was located in a special school for children with moderate general learning disability [Site A2]. There were six children enrolled in each class. Data from 16 interviews, one child conversation, three observations of practice and two document reviews were analysed. A few pupils in Site A1 were reported as having a moderate or severe general learning disability, half of the pupils were described as having a mild/borderline mild general learning disability and some as being of average ability. In Site A2 a few pupils were described as having a mild to moderate general learning disability, the level of ability had not been determined for a few pupils, one pupil was reported as having a moderate general learning disability and one a severe general learning disability. Sensory processing challenges were identified as additional special educational needs in respect of a few pupils in Site A2. All pupils in Site A2 and almost all pupils in Site A1 were assessed with ASD and one pupil in Site A1 was assessed with Asperger's syndrome.

#### Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning

##### 1.1 Assessment

Both sites had good written assessment policies reflecting the general school-wide policy on assessment. The two sites engaged in very good on-going assessment of the curriculum areas being accessed by the children, and a specific focus on children's language and communication, behaviour, social and emotional development, play, leisure skills and independence was observed. The assessment process in early intervention classes was very good and constructively linked to the individualised planning process and included the identification of assessment tools relevant to the assessment of, and for learning. The implications of children's co-occurring special educational needs, such as a general learning disability, for assessment and the assessment practice observed in both sites were acceptable. However this practice would benefit from greater elaboration in written assessment policies. The rationale articulated for selecting specific assessment tools in school documentation was unacceptable in both sites and required greater elaboration in order to ensure that, where specific assessments are selected, the rationale for the selection is clear.

Assessment practice was very good in both sites and was described as an everyday occurrence. As observed by the special class teacher in Site A1: *'every day is assessment, every day is reflective teaching, going back to what worked yesterday, what didn't work; observation is key'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT2]. In both sites, a variety of checklists and observation profiles was used to record children's progress in curriculum areas, language and communication, behaviour, social and emotional development, play and leisure skills, independence and sensory differences.

Teachers' long and short-term planning was also described in both sites as contributing to the assessment process. The special class teacher in Site A1 noted that checklists and observation profiles *'are limited but can be a good starting point'* [E1\_P\_SCT2]. Teacher-devised assessment emerged as the predominant assessment mode in the three early intervention classes and commercially available ASD-specific assessments or standardised assessments were used in one Site. The principal in Site A2 noted that *'they like the PEP-R<sup>27</sup> and they like the ABLLS'<sup>28</sup>* [A2\_EI\_S\_P]. Conversely in Site A1, the special class teacher reported that she had used the PEP-R but described it as time-consuming and prescriptive and concluded that it *'drove [her] mad and the kids mad'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT1]. In Site A2, staff members used a blank sheet of paper on the back of the classroom door to record observations in relation to a child's achievement, for example, *'if one of my little students has come out with a particular sentence or wording, something new'* [A2\_EI\_S\_SCT2]. Both sites demonstrated excellent practice in adopting differentiated assessment practice for individual children as exemplified by the special class teacher in Site A1 who described her approach to assessment as based on three key questions: *'Who are you? What do you need? How can I meet your needs?'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT1]. Very good practice was observed in both sites in relation to the review and evaluation of assessment information, which was subsequently used to structure, plan, measure and support children's learning and progress. The principal in Site A1 noted that the children's end of year reports were *'very detailed'* [A1\_E1\_P\_P]. Children's involvement in the assessment process through observation and through the teacher engaging in discussions with the children was very good.

Almost all parents were satisfied with their children's progress as encapsulated by the parent in Site A1, *'They keep track of his progress or learning ... actually more updated than an ordinary child in terms of progress or where [he] is'* [E1\_P\_PAR20].

Practice in assessing children's behaviour was excellent in both sites and a functional approach linked to the communicative function of behaviour was always implemented. In both sites, antecedent, behaviour and consequence (ABC) charts were used in the management of children's behaviour with the teacher noting that *'we really write down what happens everyday'* [A2\_EI\_S\_SCT1]. In this case the teacher was referring to writing down everything that was relevant to the management of children's behaviour. The special class teacher in Site A1 advised that it is necessary to engage in *'a lot of thinking around where the behaviour is coming from'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT2].

## 1.2 Individualised Planning

Individualised planning in both early intervention sites was very good. Very good detailed and comprehensive individualised planning was available and clear sections on children's strengths, needs and priority learning needs were delineated. An excellent 'funneling approach' to

<sup>27</sup> Schopler E., Reichler R.J., Bashford A, Lansing M.D. and Marcus L. (1990) Psychoeducational Profile Revised (PEP-R), Volume 1, Austin: Pro-Ed; Schopler E., Lansing M.D., Reichler, R.J. and Marcus L. (2005) Psychoeducational Profile Revised – Third Edition, Austin: Pro-Ed.

<sup>28</sup> Partington, J.W. (1998) Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLLS), Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services; Partington, J.W. (2006) Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills – Revised (ABLLS-R), Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services.



identifying children's priority learning needs was adopted in both sites. Targets were specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timed (SMART) and connected to appropriate strategies and resources. Targets achieved were noted and review dates were included. Functional targets in the areas of language and communication, social interaction, behaviour and emotional development and independence were identified. Targets related to play and children's leisure time were rarely identified in individualised planning and would benefit from a greater focus in order to assist in mitigating the challenges experienced by children with ASD in relation to these areas specifically. Teachers, parents and available multidisciplinary team members devised and developed the individualised plans. Special needs assistants (SNAs) described being involved in the implementation process: *'we are not involved in IEP meetings but [are] given them [IEPs] and teachers [are] quite open to get us to engage that might bring these elements out and with reward charts also'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SNA2].

Parental involvement in the individualised planning process was very good and parents' views and input were highly valued by teachers and principals in both sites. Engaging in *'open-dialogue with parents'* was reported to be central to the communication process [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT2]. This was corroborated by almost all parents who were *'very involved'* [A2\_EI\_S\_PAR19] in the individualised planning process. However one parent suggested that she would like more than one individualised planning meeting a year [Site A2\_EI\_S\_PAR18]. Two parents referred to their children as never having reached the targets in the individual education plan [A2\_EI\_S\_PAR18] [A2\_EI\_S\_PAR23]. Individualised planning was described as not exclusively focusing on academics but on developing skills that could generalise into home life and *'make home life easier'* [A2\_EI\_S\_P].

The limited availability of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and psychological support in Site A2 and the limited availability of psychological support in Site A1 were unacceptable and cited as causes for concern both in supporting children's educational placement and in terms of supporting the individualised planning process. For example, the principal in Site A2, while acknowledging the many competing demands on support services, observed that the speech and language therapist provided sessional support twice weekly for 76 children and that psychological support in terms of updated assessments was provided on a referral basis only. This was reinforced by parents who, while they expressed satisfaction with the services received, noted that services had been reduced *'with the cutbacks'* [A2\_EI\_S\_PAR15].

Children's informal involvement in the individualised planning process was good with some evidence of involvement through discussion, interactions, teacher observations and planning based on children's identified interests. However, the formal involvement of children in the process was unacceptable and has implications in terms of the lack of children's defined role in the individualised planning process.

### 1.3 Transition

Planning for transition was excellent in both early intervention sites and the two sites had developed very good protocols for children transitioning to and from the early intervention classes. These protocols involved the class teacher, parent and special needs assistant (SNA)

visiting the setting where the child was enrolled to observe the child and liaise with the staff in that setting. As described by the special class teacher in Site A2: *'I would go and visit the child and offer the child to visit once a week from the first of June. We make a little photo-album of the teacher, the classroom, the school and put as much as we can in there so transition is more smooth then in September'* [A2\_EI\_SS\_SCT1]. The teacher reported that the same process occurred when children transitioned out of the early intervention class. While very good transition protocols were evidenced in both early intervention sites, they were not comprehensively documented as encapsulated by the special class teacher in Site A1 who noted that there was *'nothing written down, protocols, probably haven't it documented really'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT1]. Links between the transition process and children's individualised planning were rarely discernible.

The very good transition process was corroborated by parents who reported that *'they [pre-school setting] brought him over to the school and got him used to his surroundings'* noting that *'once he got used to the place, it did help'* [A2\_EI\_S\_PAR15]. This parent particularly referred to the importance for the child *'getting used to the new bus, the new escort'* and pointed to the positive impact of *'the school, the health board and the transport coming together'*. She described the involvement of herself, the child's parents and the receiving teacher in transition planning.

Both early intervention settings affirmed the role of the clinical early intervention services in encouraging parents to apply for enrolment in the early intervention classes. Schools and parents reported high levels of collaboration with the available external professional services. However two parents expressed concern that once the child left the early intervention class, *'there's nothing for a child from six to twelve...no support, that's what they tell me...you can't ring speech and language and ask for a social story...it's me that will be doing everything or else paying for it'* [A1\_EI\_P\_PAR16]. Referring to the early intervention clinical service, the other parent reported that once the child started school, *'you lose them and that is when you need them'* [A2\_EI\_S\_PAR18].

Both principals referred to parents' vulnerability at the point of transition as children may have just been assessed as having ASD and parents require support and reassurance at that point. The principal in Site A1 reported that on average he would get up to 100 calls each year from parents enquiring about a place in the early intervention classes, where there were only 12 places available. The principal in the special school early intervention site described the provision as generic in terms of catering for all children with ASD but noted that *'we still find that we get kind of the lower ability'* and observed that *'you know that it doesn't matter, because at that age it is individual planning but it is lovely to have the mixture'* [A2\_EI\_S\_P]. However, the principal pointed out that at the point of transition, the parents' *'big, big fear is the special school label...are they going to be left here?'* The principal also acknowledged that in the context of the special school *'it can be daunting when the parent of a three-year old sees an 18-year old in the corridor but at the same time you are talking about dignity and respect, this is their school'*. In both sites, the principals made specific decisions to ensure the classes were located near the hall and school transport.

Daily transitions to and from the early intervention classes and all transitions during the school day were excellent. Visual schedules were individualised, determined by the needs of individual children and used appropriately and discreetly. In one of the settings, individual photographs of

children were used to plan activities and photographs were attached by the children to the item they had chosen to play with. All potential distractors were removed from children's immediate environment and books were placed beyond children's reach, which was observed to encourage children to use the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS).<sup>29</sup> A clear and unambiguous use of language supported children during their daily transitions. Children were observed to navigate the environment in a confident and competent manner. Almost all parents described their children as having difficulty in coping with change and demonstrated an understanding of the need to signal change for the child and referred to using visual prompts to assist children to cope with transition to new environments.

While not directly related to educational provision, delays in receiving an assessment, reported by almost all parents, complicated transition as encapsulated in the words of one parent whose child was finally assessed with ASD at age three and a half: *it just took a while*' [A2\_EI\_S\_PAR15]. Another parent described only noticing that her child had different needs when *'he went to mainstream playschool, he just couldn't cope'* [A1\_EI\_S\_PAR16]. The parent described not having her child assessed with ASD through the Assessment of Needs at this point, as there was a delay in the service. One parent described going through the process involved in an Assessment of Needs, reporting that *'there is such a backlog that there is nothing happening within three months'* and pointing out that *'meantime Jack was not on a waiting list for early intervention and no one had come near us'* [A1\_EI\_S\_PAR20]. This parent reported further difficulties in the transition of her child from the existing early intervention class to a special school. She reported that she had been informed that, unless her child attended the playschool in the special school, he would not get a place there subsequently. The child was now attending the playschool class in the mainstream school for three days each week and the early intervention class in the special school for two days each week.

## 1.4 Curriculum

The focus on addressing children's holistic development through the provision of a wide range of learning areas and experiences in both early intervention sites was excellent. Children had access to areas of learning that included fine and gross-motor skills, music, art, communication, toileting-programmes, threading, sorting and matching activities, emergent reading and writing activities, and sensory programmes. Children's communication, social, play/leisure and imaginative skills were developed throughout the day in the context of the curriculum and also through the individualised planning process in both sites. An excellent child-centred and differentiated approach to the curriculum based on children's strengths and needs was evident in both sites. The level and pace of the lesson, children's interests and responses were considered in the implementation of children's curriculum experiences. The principal in Site A1 provided input on the music curriculum on a weekly basis and described the approach as *'the point is this if it wasn't working, I would expect her [special class teacher] and the other teachers to say to me, you don't mind me saying but it's not working'* [A1\_EI\_P\_P]. This was corroborated by the teacher in the special class who referred to adopting an approach that involved *'mostly taking the lead from the child'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT1].

<sup>29</sup> Bondy, A. and Frost, L. (2002) A Picture's Worth: PECS and Other Visual Communication Strategies in Autism, Bethesda: Woodbine House.

In both sites, participants reported that the Primary School Curriculum (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 1999) as presented was *'not applicable'* [A2\_EI\_S\_P] and was adapted by the teachers to meet the learning and teaching needs of the children. The principal in site A2 referred to using the *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* (NCCA, 2007) and *'anything else that we can get our hands on'* [A2\_EI\_S\_P]. The principal affirmed the guidelines and noted that the teachers *'found the guidelines on the button'*. She also noted that the curriculum had evolved *'from years of experience of knowing and doing'*. This was corroborated by the special class teachers who noted having difficulty in implementing the Primary School Curriculum in the early intervention class. One teacher referred to the *'the fluff around the curriculum'* [Primary School Curriculum]. This observation referred to the challenges in linking the language required for identifying specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timed (SMART) targets for children's learning with language such as *'appreciate'* or *'enjoy'* in the Primary School Curriculum. This teacher also observed that, while the Primary School Curriculum was sometimes woven into the child's experience, it *'was a long way back in our plans'* [A2\_EI\_S\_SCT1]. Teachers referred to consulting children's assessments and using those to identify objectives for the children's curriculum access [A2\_EI\_S\_SCT1] [A2\_EI\_S\_SCT2]. While both sites were familiar with Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), the use of the Framework to support children's curriculum experiences in early intervention sites was unacceptable as described by the principal in Site A2: *'In general "no", Jane [class teacher] just did a little bit'* [A2\_EI\_S\_P].

The special class teacher in Site A1 articulated a tension with regard to what she perceived as pressure to fit the child to the curriculum rather than starting with the child and taking the lead from the child. The teacher said of the available curriculum documents *'they just pull me away'* from the child [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT1]. The dilemma between meeting the needs of the curriculum rather than the child's needs emerged as an area of uncertainty for all teachers in early intervention classes. The absence of guidelines in the planning, implementation and assessment of the curriculum in early intervention classes was unacceptable and described by one teacher as contributing further to this dilemma [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT1]. While an excellent child-centred and differentiated approach to the curriculum based on children's strengths and needs was evident in both sites, the absence of guidelines specific to the planning, implementation and assessment of the curriculum in early intervention classes places an excessive onus on individual teachers and could potentially lead to arbitrary interpretation of the curriculum in early intervention classes.

The contribution of special needs assistants (SNAs) in terms of supporting children's care needs through toileting programmes, self-care programmes and behaviour intervention programmes was excellent [A1\_EI\_P\_SNA1, A2\_EI\_S\_SNA1, SNA2].

All parents expressed satisfaction with the curriculum being accessed by their children with four commending their children's engagement in music and art. A parent in Site A1 referred to her child's access to early literacy and numeracy, gross-motor skill development and music, noting that the teacher was *'excellent'* [A1\_EI\_P\_PAR16]. One parent stated that she *'was very satisfied with the curriculum'* and described it as being varied everyday for the child [A2\_EI\_S\_PAR26]. Almost all parents were satisfied with the resources available to support children's curriculum access, while also acknowledging that *'any school would like more and any parent would like more'* [A2\_EI\_S\_PAR15].

## 1.5 Teaching Methodologies

A child-centred approach to the selection of teaching methodologies was in evidence and a wide range of appropriate methodologies was observed in both sites. The selection and use of these methodologies was excellent, based on the individual needs of each child and differentiated in consideration of the child's strengths, interests and preferences with some being based on recognised good practice. Teaching methodologies included both those associated with the Primary School Curriculum and ASD-specific methodologies. Teachers' repertoire of ASD-specific teaching methodologies was excellent and included Floortime,<sup>30</sup> the Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication-handicapped Children (TEACCH),<sup>31</sup> the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS),<sup>32</sup> Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) and Social Stories.<sup>33</sup> All teachers used language in a clear and unambiguous manner as advised by the special class teacher in Site A2, 'we use very little teacher talk' [A2\_EI\_S\_SCT1]. The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) was unacceptable and was never observed as a feature of practice in either site. This finding has implications in terms of the need for a greater focus on the selection of ICT to augment the excellent child-centred approach to the selection of teaching methodologies. Children in both sites were allowed an extended response-time for questions and for completing tasks. Multiple opportunities were provided for children to respond, promote and maintain active engagement.

The approach to teaching children with ASD articulated by all teachers in early intervention sites was encapsulated in the observations of the special class teacher in Site A1. When questioned in relation to the teaching methodologies she used, she responded that '*with the autism a lot of intensive interaction, Floortime, elements of TEACCH, PECS depending – functional behaviour analysis [are used]*' [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT1]. She noted that methodologies from the mainstream curriculum were '*second nature – you don't even know you are doing it...break down into small points – build on what's gone before – it's your normal teaching – it's so inbred into us that we don't recognise it – that's what we learned in teacher training*'. In teaching children with ASD, the teacher concluded she built on the strategies she knew as a teacher observing that '*initially I thought I knew nothing and you could be all over the place with them, the core bit is the "good teaching"*'. The use of teacher-observation, talk and discussion with staff were also affirmed by the special class teacher in Site A2 who concluded that '*it's a whole variety and what's appropriate for that child at that particular time*' [Site A2\_EI\_S\_SCT2].

Teaching methodologies associated with the general curriculum (including the Primary School Curriculum and Aistear) and linked to principles of effective instruction that were observed included clarity of purpose, review of previous learning, continuity across learning and teaching, teaching in small explicit steps, providing feedback to the child, monitoring the child's response, teacher-modelling, displaying positive expectations for the child, cultivating respectful

<sup>30</sup> Greenspan, S. and Wieder, S. (2006) Engaging Autism, Cambridge: Da Capo Press.

<sup>31</sup> Schopler, E. (2001) TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children). In The National Autistic Society (ed.) Approaches to Autism, London: The National Autistic Society, p. 68.

<sup>32</sup> Bondy, A. and Frost, L. (2002) A Picture's Worth: PECS and Other Visual Communication Strategies in Autism. Bethesda: Woodbine House.

<sup>33</sup> Gray, C. (1994) The New Social Story Book, Arlington: Future Horizons.

interactions, promoting a safe and secure classroom environment, monitoring the child's on-task engagement and anticipating possible off-task behaviour. A particular focus was observed in early intervention sites on direct instruction, experiential learning, activity-based learning, structured questioning and scaffolding of children's responses through guided discovery processes. Children's interests were considered and used in implementing children's learning and teaching programmes in both sites. As summed up in the special class teacher's observations in Site A1, *'I tend to go with their obsessions very much as well, that you know, rather than stopping the obsession because it doesn't seem to work anyway, they get more and more anxious. To me if they have interests, you are rocking – you are home and dry because then you can use them but it is a child who isn't particularly interested in anything, they leave me stunned, I have to work particularly hard'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT1]. An excellent balance was observed in both sites between whole-class, group and individual teaching. Parents understood that the teachers in the early intervention units were employing very specific teaching approaches with a parent commenting in relation to her child that: *'he's excelled in ways, attention span, listening and engaging, it's a different way of learning but it works, it works for him'* [Site A1\_EI\_P\_PAR20].

In both sites, a wide range of attractive and stimulating commercially-available and teacher-devised resources were available and selected with reference to children's needs. The provision of environmental supports such as a well-structured classroom environment, visual schedules, appropriate adult-assistance, resources to support children's sensory differences and displays of children's completed work was excellent. The importance of visual schedules for children with ASD was emphasised in both early intervention sites as described by one special class teacher: *'visual schedules reduce their anxiety. [There are] visuals all around the class. [There are] expectations of behaviour and visuals to support that such as "waiting/stopping", visuals to show "gentle play" or "easy voice"'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT1].

Excellent attention was directed to the generalisation of children's learning and a range of opportunities was provided for children to consolidate their learning. Teachers demonstrated an excellent understanding of the impact of the sensory differences experienced by children with ASD on their learning as evidenced in the words of the special class teacher in Site A1: *'having sensory needs catered for, squeeze a ball and having resources on hand really facilitate the day'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT2]. There was good reference to ASD-specific teaching methodologies in the documentation reviewed, with acceptable reference to other teaching methodologies that were observed.

## 1.6 Team Approach

An excellent collaborative and collegial culture was evident in both early intervention sites and there was an emphasis on joint-planning and sharing of expertise and information between external professionals and services, school staff, SNAs and parents. Both special class teachers in Site A1 affirmed the impact of peer support and specifically referred to the collaborative practice between the two classes and the constant discussion and sharing of information. Formal and informal fora for sharing of information were evident in both sites.

The special class teacher in Site A1 described her role in working with the SNA to meet children's needs as modelling the appropriate support required, providing strong leadership and nurturing the relationship with the SNA. This teacher described the importance of SNAs facilitating children's independence in terms of the need for SNAs to *'tie your hands behind your back'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT1]. The importance of *'keeping that dialogue open'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT2] and constantly reviewing practice was emphasised by the second special class teacher in Site A1. The impact of participating in group discussions in the classroom was noted by one SNA who described making suggestions during meetings and being *'always listened to'* [A2\_EI\_S\_SNA1].

The potential for the early intervention classes to be viewed in the mainstream context as a discrete unit was evident. In Site A1, the staff in the mainstream school had not considered accessing the expertise of the teachers in the early intervention classes but went to the Special Education Support Service for support when needed. This was not reported in the special school where the availability of other staff in the school was acknowledged in terms of information sharing and advice [A2\_EI\_S\_SCT2]. The documentation of the communication structures observed and reported in both sites was unacceptable, which has implications in terms of communication structures being clear to all relevant stakeholders.

Communication with parents was excellent in both sites and parents were seen as partners in their children's learning and teaching programmes. Schools referred to having *'an open-door policy'* [A2\_EI\_S\_P] in relation to parent communication with the school and noted that *'parents are always welcome'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT2]. The advice and support of external professionals and services were highly valued in both sites. Where parents were dissatisfied with the supports available, the dissatisfaction related to the unacceptable lack of availability of external support services: *'more access to his occupational therapist, his speech therapist, his psychologist'* [Site A2\_EI\_S\_PAR18] and another parent noting that she would have been happier if her child had got *'more OT'* [A2\_EI\_S\_PAR19]. Parents reported being clearly informed with regard to their child's progress and activities in early intervention classes through telephone contact, home-school journals, the individualised planning process and teacher-parent meetings. It was reported that parents were given advice, support and guidance in relation to issues at home such as sleeping patterns [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT2]. Reference was made to the limits of the home-school journal, which often required a follow-up phone call with the teacher concluding that *'we prefer when the kids don't come in the taxi because we can chat everyday'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT1]. This teacher described sending a photographic memory book and video-clips of the children home as *'It really just puts them [parents] in the picture'*.

## 1.7 Data Collection/Monitoring of Progress/Outcomes

The excellent quality of teaching and learning in both early intervention sites was informed and influenced by very good informal and formal systems devised to monitor and record children's progress. Data were collected chronicling children's language and communication, academic work, social skills, behaviour and emotional understanding, independence, play and use of leisure time. Checklists and summaries of teacher observations were used in monitoring children's progress. Teachers in early intervention sites engaged in a high level of informal note-taking and consistently used tick-charts linked to children's learning and teaching programmes as described by one of the special class teachers, referring to behaviours that challenge, *'I write down*

*everything'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT1]. Attention was often directed towards collecting data in relation to children's behaviour through the use of checklists and antecedent, consequence and behaviour (ABC) charts.

Special needs assistants' involvement in the data-collection process on children's behaviour and care needs through discussion was very good in both sites. In Site A2 the criteria – 'presented-practised-perfected' – were used and the SNA had a role in monitoring the child's progress at the level of the 'practice' criterion. There was very good reference to the processes in place with regard to data collection and monitoring of progress and outcome in the School Plan.

Parents affirmed the data collection processes, monitoring of children's progress and outcomes and sharing of information, as noted in the words of one parent, '*They keep track of his progress or learning*' [A2\_EI\_S\_PAR20]. However parents were unsure of the concept of assessment. In response to whether she was aware if the school assessed her child's progress one parent said, '*I'm sure they do*' [A2\_EI\_S\_PAR15] and another parent responded that, while she didn't know, she had one hundred per cent confidence in the teacher, whom she praised highly [A1\_EI\_P\_PAR16].

## Summary: Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning

An excellent collaborative and collegial culture was evident in both sites with an emphasis on joint planning, sharing of expertise and information between external professionals and services, school staff, special needs assistants and parents.

Assessment practice was very good in both sites with good written school-wide assessment policies available. The rationale articulated for selecting specific assessment tools in school documentation was unacceptable in both sites and required greater elaboration in order to ensure that the rationale for the selection of specific assessments is clear. The implications of children's co-occurring special educational needs, such as a general learning disability, for assessment was acceptable in both sites. Children's involvement in the assessment process through observation and through engaging in discussions with the children was very good. The Individualised planning process in both early intervention sites was very good with parents almost always expressing satisfaction with the process. However, the formal involvement of children in the process was unacceptable. Planning for transition was excellent in both early intervention sites and very good transition protocols were in place.

The focus on adopting a child-centred approach to the curriculum and addressing children's holistic development through the provision of a wide range of learning areas and experiences in both early intervention sites was excellent. However the role of Information and Communication Technology in augmenting the curriculum was unacceptable. The contribution of SNAs in terms of supporting children's care needs through toileting programmes, self-care programmes and behaviour intervention programmes was excellent. While both sites were familiar with Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), the use of the Framework to support children's curriculum experiences in early intervention sites was unacceptable. The absence of guidelines in the planning, implementation and assessment of the curriculum in early intervention classes was also unacceptable.



## Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture

### 2.1 School Culture

The findings from each of the two sites in relation to the criteria and performance indicators of the Evaluation Framework (MCA and NCSE, 2013) demonstrate that high ambitions and aspirations for the children were an excellent feature of practice in both sites. A positive school culture was evident in both early intervention sites. School policies in both sites explicitly referred to provision for children with ASD and indicated an understanding and appreciation of the strengths and needs of children. Respectful interactions were consistently promoted. Providing early intervention classes for children with ASD in the school had a very good impact on the whole school and had unanticipated consequences as referred to by the principal in Site A1, *'if you can fill an empty room you will do it, the value of having new people in the learning environment, people will come out of the woodwork with things you never knew they had'* [A1\_EI\_P\_P]. The role of the principal in contributing to an inclusive school culture was specifically referred to by both special class teachers in Site A1, with one teacher noting that the principal *'leads by example'* and was *'very present'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT2].

In both sites excellent attention was directed towards developing children's key skills and independence. Children were also included with their peers during break-time periods and for reverse-inclusion activities. All children were provided with excellent opportunities to participate in a range of activities that fostered their personal, social, emotional, physical, moral, spiritual, aesthetic and cognitive dimensions of development. An excellent emphasis was placed in both sites on fostering children's communication skills and opportunities were consistently created to encourage children to communicate.

Almost all children participated in school activities such as school tours, sports days, fundraising activities, the annual school drama, horse-riding, swimming and gross-motor activities. The special class teacher in Site A2 described the approach adopted in the school as *'fully inclusive'* and referred to adopting *'a whole-school approach'* [A2\_EI\_S\_SCT1]. In both sites, there was evidence of an excellent sensitive and differentiated approach to children's involvement in activities, described by an SNA in Site A2, who noted that the amount of involvement was determined by *'the children's needs, they may not be able to have a whole-school session or involvement'* [A2\_EI\_S\_SNA1]. As articulated by the special class teacher in Site A1 *'everything is dictated by the needs of the child'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT2].

### 2.2 Communication

Both sites demonstrated an excellent commitment to developing effective communication systems with parents and external services, where available. Schools had developed an excellent range of both formal and informal strategies to facilitate communication with parents. Formal strategies included homeschool journals, school reports, telephone contact; individualised planning; samples of children's work, individual children's portfolios; face-to-face discussions with parents at the start and finish of the school day and parent-teacher meetings. As noted by the principal in Site A2 *'parents are very much involved'* and *'we very much see parents as educators'*. All parents in Site A1 unanimously expressed satisfaction with the communication

system in place with the classes. Almost all parents in Site A2 expressed satisfaction with the communication systems in place observing that home and school work *'hand in hand'* [A2\_E\_S\_PAR15].

A willingness and readiness to foster communication with external support services, where available, was articulated by teachers and principals in both sites.

## 2.3 Learning Environment

Excellent well-structured, spacious, aesthetically pleasing and bright learning environments were evident in the early intervention classes. The availability of resources in classrooms was excellent and determined by the needs of individual students. The use of visual schedules was excellent and there was adequate space for children to self-regulate when necessary. Tactile, visual and auditory supports were readily available and children navigated the classroom environment confidently and with a sense of purpose. Children were empowered to initiate movement-breaks and were observed to do so independently. In Site A1 children readily participated in activities in a ball pool, which focused on developing children's visual, auditory and tactile sensory tolerance, gross motor skills, social-interaction skills, language and communication skills and play skills.

Child-focused individualised work-stations were in operation and also horse-shoe shaped and group-tables for group activities. Children, teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) were observed to take ownership of the space. In the words of a special class teacher, *'the space is ours, it really works for us'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT2]. Both principals articulated a commitment to constantly developing and improving the learning environment based on the needs of children with ASD and both were aware of the importance of providing a spacious well-structured environment. Parental satisfaction with the learning environment in both sites was excellent as noted by one parent in relation to the learning environment, *'they have done everything right'* [A2\_EI\_S\_PAR26].

## 2.4 Extra-Curricular Activities

Extra-curricular activities in terms of activities taking place outside the school day are not a feature of the Irish Education system. Rather schools provide a range of co-curricular activities with explicit links to the curriculum. Very good practice was evident in supporting children's participation in, and inclusion with their peers for co-curricular activities such as the school tours, sports days, fundraising activities, the annual school drama and horse-riding. In one of the sites, the school had links with the Special Olympics and children were encouraged to be involved.

The principal in Site A1 pointed out that the *'teaching day is intensive'* and observed that in terms of additional activities the *'integrity of the school day'* had to be preserved to ensure that children were accessing the wide range of curriculum areas [A1\_EI\_P\_P]. All parents expressed satisfaction with the co-curricular experiences being provided for their children. One parent particularly referred to the positive impact of pony riding and swimming on her child's sensory regulation [A2\_EI\_P\_PAR15].

## 2.5 Student Wellbeing

Wellbeing is conceptualised as focusing on a child's psychological and physical wellbeing and is concerned with children's need to feel valued, respected, empowered, catered for and included (NCCA, 2009). The attention to fostering and affirming children's wellbeing was excellent in both early intervention classes. A pastoral care system was evident whereby children's wellbeing was consistently monitored through teacher observation and, where concerns emerged, these were discussed with parents and with available external professionals. One special class teacher suggested that *'if they feel disconnected from the world around them, isn't that what it is really... mental illness? We need to let them see that the world is for them. You make things predictable in the beginning, you can tell the day when they reach that equilibrium and then you can push them a little'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT1]. The teacher concluded that *'once you have invested in the relationship they can open like flowers'*.

There was an awareness in both sites of the potential for children to experience anxiety related to their social, communication, inflexibility of thought and behaviour and sensory differences. These were addressed through the on-going functional analysis of children's behaviour and the provision of augmentative communication methods such as the PECS<sup>34</sup> and interventions to address children's sensory differences. One of the teachers concluded that *'it's crucial for us to recognise their sensory needs and to accommodate these'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT2]. The approach to the organisation of the environment advocated by the TEACCH<sup>35</sup> system was constructively adopted in both sites and, as referred to previously, the accommodation of the needs of children with ASD through the learning environment was excellent.

Schools fostered communication with available external professional services and with parents/guardians in relation to children's wellbeing. However the unacceptable dearth of availability of psychological, occupational therapy and speech and language therapy services in both sites led to their role in this regard being mainly consultative and services were contacted by schools as required. Children's wellbeing was addressed in the context of Social, Personal and Health Education (NCCA, 1999) and in child-protection and anti-bullying policies rather than in a specific section of school planning documentation.

### Summary: Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture

An excellent culture of high ambitions and aspirations for children with ASD was a feature of practice in both early intervention classes. Excellent attention was directed towards fostering children's wellbeing and a safe, secure and positive environment was evident in both sites. The issue of parent and family wellbeing emerged as an area requiring attention.

<sup>34</sup> Bondy, A. and Frost, L. (2002) *A Picture's Worth: PECS and Other Visual Communication Strategies in Autism*, Bethesda: Woodbine House.

<sup>35</sup> Schopler, E. (2001) TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children), in The National Autistic Society (ed.) *Approaches to Autism*, London: The National Autistic Society, p.68.

Formal and informal effective communication systems with parents were excellent in both early intervention sites. Well-structured, bright and spacious learning environments were observed and excellent practice was evident in relation to supporting children in self-regulating and taking movement breaks as required.

The facilitation of children's participation in co-curricular activities such as the school tours, sports days, fundraising activities, the annual school drama and horse-riding was excellent.

## Statement 3 – School Management

### 3.1 Leadership

An excellent management structure was in place in both early intervention sites. Principals in the two sites demonstrated high levels of commitment to providing excellent standards in ASD provision in the school. The concept of provision 'evolving' over time was referred to by one of the principals who noted that *'it is 15 years in the going'* and that *'your aim in life is for your child to be happy'* and concluding that *'the ideal model is the model we have'* [A1\_EI\_P\_P]. The principal reported that, when he was appointed to the school nine years before, there was one class only, which had been there for four years. He described the special class teacher at that point as *'having to pitch to the rest of the school'* and affirmed the support provided for the special class teacher in having a second class in the school. The principal concluded that this positive culture of acceptance and understanding had evolved from the learning of the teachers in the classes, his own learning, staff meetings in the school and the support of the Special Education Support Service (SESS).

The excellent success of the principals in building a team approach to meeting the needs of children with ASD was evident in all stakeholders' understanding of their role in this team approach as noted by one of the special needs assistants (SNA), *'the teacher would make up her programme and my role is to support them [the children] in the programme and to support the teacher in her programme as well'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SNA1]. Both principals also articulated high levels of professional regard for the special class teachers and of the importance of delegating responsibility to the early intervention class personnel as noted by one of the principals, *'they are a school within a school'* [A1\_EI\_M\_P]. Both principals were directly involved in provision, with one of the principals providing input on the music curriculum and the other involved closely with the individualised planning process. Almost all parents affirmed the excellent leadership in the schools.

A range of administrative duties accompanying ASD early intervention was reported by both principals as including management of employment contracts for taxi escorts; management of special needs assistant support; sourcing appropriate substitute teachers; managing the enrolment process; communicating with parents and therapeutic services and, in Site A2, managing the July Education Programme (JEP). In particular one of the principals referred to the dilemma he faced when the special class teacher, whom he positively described as *'straddling theory with practice'*, was seconded for a number of days each year by the SESS, which he described as both *'a pro and a con'* and the difficulty he encountered in sourcing a person *'who would suit the role'*.

While the availability of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities for principals specific to their management and instructional role in classes for children with ASD was acceptable, it was evident that there was scope for developing this further.

### 3.2 Responsibility

All staff demonstrated an excellent understanding of their roles and responsibilities in relation to children with ASD in early intervention sites and all participants referred to the importance of a team approach. As encapsulated by a special needs assistant (SNA) in Site A2: *'it has to be a team approach...if not, the class won't work, the class won't function properly'* [A2\_EI\_S\_SNA3]. An excellent approach characterised by formal and informal collaboration and peer support was evident in both sites. In particular staff members in special classes were aware of the sources of additional support, expertise and resources for children with ASD and the manner in which they could be accessed. While the principal in the special school site affirmed the provision in the early intervention class, she specifically referred to the lack of adult services and expressed her apprehension for the children in the future, pointing out that *'there's a gap in the market'* [A2\_EI\_S\_P].

A very good delineation of the management and administration responsibilities of staff in relation to the ASD class was evident in the School Plan in both school sites.

### 3.3 Appointment of Staff

Both principals demonstrated an excellent awareness of the importance of recruiting staff with knowledge of, experience, expertise and qualifications in the learning and teaching of children with ASD and reported that they made every effort to recruit such staff. This was evident in the experience, expertise and qualifications of staff in both early intervention sites, which were very good.

In both early intervention sites, SNAs displayed an excellent understanding of ASD as to its implications for managing children's care and behaviour needs, on-task engagement and participation. Peer mentoring of SNAs by the class teacher was a feature of practice in both sites. However, one special class teacher suggested that greater attention should be directed towards the provision of Continuing Professional Development for SNAs and observed that: *'I don't see it as it having to be the teachers' onus to deliver the instruction to the SNA...it's hard to expect the teachers to come back and relay that information when they've got so much else going on'* [A2\_EI\_S\_SCT1].

Both principals reported that it was not always possible to recruit staff with appropriate qualifications and/or prior experience in working with children with ASD. They pointed out that, due to panel arrangements, they were obliged on occasions to employ staff with no prior knowledge, experience or expertise in the area. Both principals responded to the restrictions stemming from panel arrangements and demonstrated a very good commitment to providing CPD specific to ASD for staff. Both principals affirmed the provision of CPD provided by

the Special Education Support Service and one of the principals had specific post-graduate qualifications in the area of ASD. Both principals also articulated a commitment to providing opportunities for staff to access CPD programmes on ASD, while also noting the difficulties for schools in releasing staff from classes to access CPD.

Both principals cited the critical importance of teachers allocated to classes for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder being interested in this field and having the requisite knowledge and expertise or being willing to access professional development in ASD.

### **3.4 Review of Provision for Children with ASD**

Both early intervention sites were engaged in a very good process of on-going reflection and review of children's learning and teaching programmes, individualised planning, environmental adaptations and access to CPD. Daily review of children's learning and teaching was a feature of practice in the two sites. All teachers highlighted the importance of being open to trying new approaches and '*being able to say to yourself ok, I tried this and it didn't work*' [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT2]. Special needs assistants referred to supporting children's care needs and, through providing for care needs, impacting on children's education also on a daily basis. Review of provision for children with ASD was also reported to occur in the context of school self-evaluation. Comprehensive detailing of the robust review processes evidenced was rarely documented.

The provision of two early intervention classes in a school was reported by both the special class teacher and the principal in Site A1 to mitigate the potential professional isolation of the teacher in the special class. In the special school site, teachers were rotated between classes in the primary/post-primary section of the school, however this was not a feature of practice in the early intervention class nor in the early intervention class in the mainstream school.

### **Summary: Statement 3 – School Management**

An excellent management structure was in place in both sites with both principals demonstrating a commitment to providing excellent standards of ASD provision in the school. All staff displayed an excellent understanding of their roles and responsibilities in relation to children with ASD in early intervention classes.

Principals' attention to recruiting staff with knowledge, experience, expertise and qualifications in the learning and teaching of children with ASD was very good. Review of provision for children with ASD was reported to occur in the context of school self-evaluation and schools were engaged in a very good process of on-going reflection and review during daily activities.

## Statement 4 – Staff Development

### 4.1 Understanding and Knowledge of ASD for All Staff

Staff in the two early intervention sites demonstrated an excellent understanding and knowledge of the implications of ASD for children's learning and teaching. An excellent understanding of ASD in relation to the implications of ASD for meeting children's care needs and managing behaviours that challenge was also evident. School principals in both sites displayed an excellent understanding of the importance of all staff in the school being familiar with ASD as noted by one of the principals '*all staff are ASD staff*' [A1\_EI\_P\_P] and further remarked that '*I think that the classes with ASD are hugely supported in Ireland*'. The same principal noted that '*it was a more stressful*' work environment and '*a much more serious brief*' for an SNA working in the early intervention class than working in the mainstream as the service was dependent on the staff in the early intervention class. All parents expressed satisfaction with the understanding and knowledge of staff in relation to ASD as encapsulated by one parent who noted that the teachers use '*excellent teaching methods*' and that the staff was '*absolutely brilliant*' [A1\_EI\_P\_PAR20].

Staff had accessed a range of CPD and both sites referred to the benefits of CPD provided by the SESS. In the words of one of the principal's '*you click on the site and it's there, it's very satisfactory*' [A2\_EI\_S\_P]. Excellent formal and informal sharing of knowledge and expertise between staff within schools was evident in both sites. School management demonstrated an excellent commitment to facilitating teaching staff in accessing CPD in the area of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

### 4.2 Continuing Professional Development

The principals in both sites also affirmed the indepth knowledge and experience of the teachers in the early intervention units and that they '*were constantly accessing the SESS*' and also special education post-graduate programmes in third-level institutions [A2\_EI\_S\_P]. The principal in Site A1 however advised that this did not extend to the rest of the school: '*probably quite limited knowledge of staff in the rest of school*' and pointed out that if you were teaching sixth class, the teaching methodologies in the pre-school ASD class were not a priority [A1\_EI\_P\_P].

There was evidence that school management provided excellent levels of encouragement and support for staff to access Continuing Professional Development and good records of CPD that staff had accessed were retained. Priority areas for staff in relation to CPD were identified in both early intervention sites and staff members were supported by school management in accessing CPD as required. As noted previously, the availability of CPD opportunities specific to their role vis-à-vis the ASD provision was limited.

Both early intervention sites referred to engaging in school-based CPD through peer-mentoring support and at staff meetings. The CPD provided by the SESS was affirmed in both sites with the special class teacher in Site A2 observing that '*there is more for ASD teachers than anyone else*' [A2\_EI\_S\_ScT1]. However this teacher noted that some of the courses were focused more on children who had less complex needs and were not always appropriate for the children in her class, noting that '*sometimes you don't always come away feeling that this has helped your class*'.

The positive benefits of attending CPD were referred to by all teachers and was commented on by a special class teacher [that it enabled her] *'to come back from a course and to share with my staff. I have a little library below in my class and it's open to all staff'* [A2\_EI\_S\_SCT2].

The role of external agencies in CPD was also affirmed in both sites and the positive benefits of advice and 'modelling' in the classroom were referred to. As noted by one of the special class teachers: *'it challenges me to think, maybe in a way I hadn't thought before'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SCT2].

The unacceptable lack of availability and provision of Continuing Professional Development for Special Needs Assistants was criticised by all principals, teachers and SNAs, and contrasted strongly with the availability of CPD for teachers. Difficulties in relation to SNAs accessing CPD were articulated by almost all SNAs. As noted by one, *'it would be up to us to avail of them [courses], and it would be done outside of school hours...The school wouldn't approach us to carry out courses or anything like that...it'd be up to us to find them and to do them ourselves'* [A1\_EI\_P\_SNA2]. This was corroborated by all class teachers as noted by the special class teacher in Site A2: *'the girls are great and they'd try anything, but sometimes I don't know if they know the actual methodology around it'* [A2\_EI\_S\_SCT1]. This teacher suggested that there was a need for introductory CPD for SNAs in specific areas such as the Picture Exchange Communication System and Applied Behaviour Analysis, concluding that *'the SNAs are very varied in their own qualifications and in their own experience'*. The second class teacher in Site A2 described conducting team meetings with the SNAs and providing *'sample sessions'* monthly in order that the SNAs understand how to use the specific worksheets and programmes with the children [A2\_EI\_S\_SCT2].

During the fieldwork, the principal and one of the class teachers in site A1 commented on the contribution the research made towards focusing them on self-evaluation processes and the opportunity it provided to discuss relevant and important issues, which they do not normally get a chance to do. The lack of provision for formal learning for parents/guardians was unacceptable.

### 4.3 Information Sharing and Access to Specialist Information on ASD

Information-sharing and access to specialist information on ASD were reported to occur always on an informal basis and often on a formal basis during staff meetings supporting the dissemination of relevant material throughout the school. There was a very good culture of cascading information gained through CPD amongst all staff in early intervention classes and capacity based on good practice was evident in the two sites. Excellent peer support between teachers in ASD-specific provision was evident in both sites. The need for a more formal approach to sharing and accessing specialist information on ASD was articulated by one of the special class teachers in the special school site who suggested that *'it would be nice if we could do our course as a group of teachers here as opposed to going off meeting resource teachers and learning support teachers'* [A2\_EI\_S\_SCT1].



Participants in early intervention sites did not refer to professional networks or sharing of practice with teachers in other schools on a formal basis. However, reference was made to professional networks for principals, which provided peer support at local and national level.

### **Summary: Statement 4 – Staff Development**

An excellent awareness and understanding of the importance of CPD for all staff was manifest in both sites and there was evidence of both formal and informal sharing of knowledge and expertise between staff. School-based CPD was a feature of practice in both early intervention sites, and both sites referred to engaging in school-based CPD through peer-mentoring support and at staff meetings. In both sites, the CPD provided by the SESS was acknowledged and affirmed. The lack of availability and provision of CPD for SNAs was unacceptable. Principals demonstrated excellent awareness of the importance of encouraging and supporting staff members in accessing CPD. However, limited availability of CPD for principals specific to their role vis-à-vis the ASD classes was reported.

### **Concluding Summary: Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Early Intervention Classes**

Provision for children with autism in both early intervention sites was characterised by an excellent collaborative and collegial culture with an excellent culture of high ambitions and aspirations for children evident. Communication systems with parents were excellent and positively affirmed by almost all parents. Assessment practice and the individualised planning process were very good in both sites with good written school-wide assessment policies available. However, scope for development was identified in articulating the rationale for selecting ASD-specific assessment tools in school documentation and specifying the implications of children's co-occurring special educational needs for assessment. Planning for transition was excellent in both early intervention sites and very good transition protocols were in place. The formal involvement of children in both assessment and the individualised planning process was unacceptable. While children's access to curricular and co-curricular access was excellent, the role of Information and Communication Technology in the curriculum was unacceptable and requires development. The contribution of SNAs in supporting children's care needs was excellent. While both sites were familiar with Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), the use of the Framework to support children's curriculum experiences in early intervention sites was unacceptable. The absence of guidelines in the planning, implementation and assessment of the curriculum in early intervention classes was also unacceptable.

Excellent attention was directed towards fostering children's wellbeing and a safe, secure and positive environment was evident in both sites. However, parent and family wellbeing emerged as an area requiring attention.

An excellent management structure was in place in both sites and all staff displayed an excellent understanding of their roles and responsibilities in relation to children with ASD in early intervention classes. An excellent awareness and understanding of the importance of CPD for all staff was evident in both sites. However the availability and provision of CPD for SNAs was unacceptable. Every effort was made to recruit staff with knowledge, experience, expertise and qualifications related to the learning and teaching of children with ASD.

The availability of external support services such as occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and psychological support was unacceptable across all sites.

## 4. Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Primary Schools

The analysis below is derived from the data collected at three type B Sites and two type D sites. There were four children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) included in mainstream classes in type B Sites and there were nine children with ASD enrolled in the two special classes in type D sites. One of the type D sites was a school in a Gaeltacht area, where three children with ASD were enrolled in a special class in the school. While the analysis presents in-depth findings with reference to the evaluation framework, the sample size presents as a limitation with regard to the potential generalisability of these findings. Data from 32 interviews, six child conversations, five document reviews and five observations of practice were analysed. All children were assessed as having ASD. Almost all children in the three type B sites were reported as having from average to above average general learning ability with one child in junior infants not having a definitive assessment as to general learning ability. Similarly in the two type D sites, almost all children were described as being in the average to high average range of general learning ability, with one child's level of ability being reported as 'unknown'. This child was reported as having severely delayed receptive and expressive language and social communication skills with significant delays in play skills, social interaction and independence. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), attention deficit disorder (ADD) and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) were among the co-occurring special educational needs impacting on a few children in the two type D sites.

### Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning

#### 1.1 Assessment

Three of the five primary sites had an assessment policy in place, which referred specifically to ASD provision in the school. These assessment policies were excellent in terms of the range of assessment tools referred to, which included standardised tests, screening, diagnostic tests, checklists, observation schedules and portfolios. Assessment policies in these three sites referenced ASD-specific assessment tools such as the Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills – Revised (ABLLS-R)<sup>36</sup> and the Psycho educational Profile – third edition (PEP-3).<sup>37</sup> All sites identified whole-school assessment tools both for assessment of and for learning. With the exception of one site [Site B1], which detailed why certain assessments tools should be used, in general these whole-school policies could have included more guidance for teachers to facilitate a more systematic, whole-school approach on when and why certain assessment tools could and should be used and the importance of differentiating assessment for individual children. This would also have assisted in providing both a rationale and guidance in effecting a differentiated approach to assessment. For example, the principal in Site B1 referred to the difficulty presented by standardised testing for children with ASD as '*we do have to modify them because they are not able to sit for the length of time*' [B1\_PM\_P]. The alignment of assessment approaches

<sup>36</sup> Partington, J.W. (1998) Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLLS), Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services; Partington, J.W. (2006) Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills – Revised (ABLLS-R), Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services.

<sup>37</sup> Schopler, E., Reichler, R.J., Bashford, A., Lansing, M.D. and Marcus, L. (1990) Psychoeducational Profile Revised (PEP-R), Volume 1, Austin: Pro-Ed; Schopler, E., Lansing, M.D. Reichler, R.J. and Marcus, L. (2005) Psychoeducational Profile Revised – Third Edition, Austin: Pro-Ed.

with the curriculum for children with ASD, while acceptable, was not sufficiently delineated in all assessment policies. Consideration of the implications of children's co-occurring special educational needs and the associated implications for assessment was acceptable in all sites. However this would benefit from greater elaboration in written assessment policies.

In all sites assessment information was collected, reviewed and evaluated and used to structure, plan, measure and support children's learning and progress. This practice was very good in three sites, good in one site and acceptable in another site. All teachers consistently referred to the role of teacher observation as '*the most important assessment of all...*' [B2\_PM\_P] and understood the role of assessment in identifying whether the child had '*grasped the concept that I am trying to teach*' [B2\_PM\_CT].

A variety of practice in relation to assessment of and for learning was evidenced in each of the three models of provision observed in primary schools: children with ASD who were included in mainstream classes in sites where there was no ASD-specific provision; children with ASD who were included in mainstream classes where there was ASD-specific provision and children who were enrolled in ASD-specific provision. In all sites assessment was observed to be on-going and part of the daily routine in relation to both curricular and behavioural areas. In one site [B3], where there was no ASD-specific provision, comprehensive assessment policy and practice were evident and included screening and diagnostic tests, checklists, social-skill checklists, observation schedules, individualised checklists and curriculum-based checklists. Assessment was also delineated for each curricular area. However assessment as regards ASD in this site was unacceptable as ASD-specific assessments were not used nor was there reference to differentiating existing assessments to meet the learning and teaching needs of children with ASD. The lack of ASD-specific assessment has implications for specifically reviewing children's progress with reference to the deficits associated with ASD. In another site, where there was ASD-specific provision and where a child with ASD was also included in the mainstream, comprehensive assessment policy and practice were also evident and included a wide range of standardised and non-standardised assessment tools. The Verbal Behaviour Milestones, Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP),<sup>38</sup> the PEP-3,<sup>39</sup> the ABLLS-R<sup>40</sup> and the TEACCH Transition Assessment Profile (TTAP)<sup>41</sup> were also referred to in the assessment policy [B1]. In another site where there was ASD-specific provision, checklists, teacher-devised assessment and observation were the key assessment methods in use [D1]. In another site, specific assessments identified included the Belfield Infant Assessment Programme (BIAP),<sup>42</sup> the Middle

<sup>38</sup> Sundberg, M.L. (2008) *The Verbal Behaviour Milestones, Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP)*, Concord: AVB Press.

<sup>39</sup> Schopler, E., Lansing, M.D. Reichler, R.J. and Marcus, L. (2005) *Psychoeducational Profile Revised – Third Edition*, Austin: Pro-Ed.

<sup>40</sup> Partington, J.W. (1998) *Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLLS)*, Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services; Partington, J.W. (2006) *Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills – Revised (ABLLS-R)*, Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services.

<sup>41</sup> Mesibov, G., Thomas, J.B., Chapman, M., Schopler, E. (2012) *TEACCH Transition Assessment Profile (TTAP)*, 2nd ed., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.

<sup>42</sup> McHugh, B. and Spelman, B. (1994) *Belfield Infant Assessment Profile (BIAP)*, Dublin: Folens.

Infant Screening Test (MIST),<sup>43</sup> the Non-Reading Intelligence Test (NRIT),<sup>44</sup> the Mary Immaculate Reading Attainment Test (MICRA-T),<sup>45</sup> and ABLLS-R<sup>46</sup> in addition to checklists for children's social emotional development [B2]. While children's language and communication, behaviour, social and emotional development, play and leisure skills and independence were assessed in the context of curriculum-based assessment in all sites, these areas were not highlighted as specific to the area of ASD either in policy or practice. The potential of information and communication technology (ICT) to contribute to assessment was referred to by one teacher who observed that it was '*fantastic*' for children with ASD and '*motivates pupils and at the end I have a record...it is very visual and the visual works*' [B1\_PM\_SCT]. Teachers appeared to be overwhelmed by the assessment process in terms of the task of selecting from the wide range of assessment available and documenting practice. While teachers almost always demonstrated a very good awareness of the importance of differentiating assessment, challenges were often identified in developing an assessment process appropriate for children with ASD.

Assessment for learning was a feature of practice in all sites, however there was variability in terms of the efficiency and effectiveness with which this process was used to support learning. This practice was good in one site, very good in two sites, and excellent in one site. Where practice was excellent in Site B1, pupil self-assessment was meaningful and linked to learning through explicitly sharing success criteria with children, which provided them with a reliable frame of reference from which to evaluate their own work. The strategies 'we are learning to' (WALT) and 'what I'm looking for' (WILT) were used to excellent effect with the child in this site. Pupil self-assessment was also a feature of practice in the four other sites with practice in Site B2 being very good. Strategies such as self-assessment learning portfolios (SALF); thumbs up/down to indicate levels of understanding; two stars and a wish [identifying two positive features and one area for improvement in task completed] were used to excellent effect in Site B2. In the remaining three sites, pupil-self assessment was acceptable and largely focused on retaining portfolios of children's completed work and engaging in some discussion with children.

A positive approach to supporting children's behaviour was evident in almost all sites and almost all staff members were aware of potential triggers for behaviour with prompts and token-economies to scaffold positive behaviour. In four of the five sites functional behaviour assessment (FBA) was central to practice and potential triggers were identified, analysed and recorded in a systematic way with practice in three sites being very good, practice in one site being acceptable and practice in one site characterised by a lack of consistency and unacceptable. Teachers recognised the benefit of FBA in encouraging reflection on children's behaviour. One teacher noted that the FBA process '*really makes you think [about the behaviour] and really makes you do something about it*' [D2\_PSC\_SCT]. While all classroom personnel and parents/guardians were consulted in this process, it was clear that special needs assistants (SNAs) were central to ensuring the effectiveness of FBA, in almost all cases playing a key role in recording observations.

<sup>43</sup> Hannavy, S. (1993) Middle Infant Screen Test (MIST), London: NFER-Nelson.

<sup>44</sup> Young, D. and McCarty, C. (2012) New Non-Reading Intelligence Tests 1-3 (NNRIT 1-3), Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.

<sup>45</sup> Wall, E. and Burke, K. (2003) Mary Immaculate Reading Attainment Test (MICRA-T), Dublin: C.J. Fallon.

<sup>46</sup> Partington, J.W. (1998) Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLLS), Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services; Partington, J.W. (2006) Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills – Revised (ABLLS-R), Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services.

The special class teacher in Site D2 described a process where through recording the antecedent, behaviours and consequences over a week and introducing an intervention, FBA was successful in reducing incidences of a child's use of inappropriate language. The teacher also referred to the positive involvement of the SNA in this process.

Pupil self-monitoring of behaviour through pupil-teacher conferencing and specific teaching of behavioural self-regulation strategies were observed in two sites. The positive impact of specific self-regulation strategies such as controlling breathing; visualisation strategies; time out for reflection; self-assessment and discussion was very good in Site B2. Pupil-evaluation of behaviour through discussion and reflection was excellent in Site D1.

## 1.2 Individualised Planning

The individualised planning process was very good in three of the five sites, good in one site and unacceptable in one site, where the process was insufficiently developed and documented. A commitment to meeting children's additional identified needs through this process was clearly documented in four of the five sites. In these sites, the individualised planning process was structured and systematic, based on children's assessed needs and strengths and including essential information for planning, implementing, and evaluating children's learning and teaching. Targets were set, review dates agreed and progress monitoring indicators specified. Targets were identified based on children's individual strengths and needs and included academic, social and communication, life-skills and behavioural domains. An understanding of the importance of having targets that were specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timed (SMART) was evident in these sites as epitomised by the words of a principal in Site B3, *'the advice is to keep your targets nice and short and don't overcrowd the whole thing'* [B3\_PM\_P].

When operating within the individualised planning structure, very good practice in three sites, good practice in one site and unacceptable practice in the remaining site were evident in terms of progress monitoring through employing record sheets, checklists, and clear criteria to identify whether progress had been made. The individualised planning process also facilitated the sharing of information with regard to children's progress and the identification of future planning. Individualised planning constructively augmented, rather than replaced children's curriculum experiences in four of the five sites and the individualised plan was conceptualised as a 'working document'. Where targets were achieved prior to the next meeting, additional related targets were identified and addressed in consultation with parents. In four of the five sites, class teachers, special class or resource teachers and parents had copies of the plan. In four of the five sites, formal individualised planning meetings were conducted on a bi-annual basis and always attended by the class teacher, special class teacher or support teacher and parents. In Site B1, the principal also attended these meetings.

Special needs assistants were involved in the implementation of the individualised planning process in four sites as it related to children's behaviour and care-related targets. In three of the five sites the parental/carer involvement was good and clear links between children's learning at home and in school were evident. In these sites, fostering communication with parents in the context of individualised planning was perceived as central to ensuring that children's

progress was satisfactory. A class teacher noted that partnership with parents was the '*stalwart*' and reported how a parent had brought along to the individualised planning meeting a video of difficulties experienced by the parent with the child at the local leisure centre [B1\_PM\_CT]. These difficulties were discussed and targets identified to alleviate them. In these sites, parents expressed satisfaction with the individualised planning process.

Six out of the nine parents interviewed in primary-school sites considered that they had a meaningful role in the individualised planning process. One parent described this as '*we go through that at the meetings and [the teacher] tells us what we need to work on*' [D2\_PSC\_PAR49]. Two out of six parents interviewed in Site D2 however expressed some uncertainty with regard to the process. In the site where the individualised planning process was unacceptable, the parent, while expressing satisfaction with her child's provision, was unsure as to whether there was individualised planning in place for her child and referred to dealing with issues as they arose.

There was evidence in four sites that the individualised planning process was informed by teachers' and parents' discussions and interactions with children. The formal involvement of children in the process was excellent in one site and unacceptable in the remaining sites. The role of the child in the individualised planning process was therefore less well defined in sites where practice was identified as unacceptable. Formal involvement of the child in the process was reported to be a positive development in placing the '*onus and responsibility*' [B1\_PM\_CT] on the child for the achievement of his/her targets. An openness to considering the involvement of older children in the process was articulated by teachers and principals as noted by the principal in Site B2, '*it's not something we've done but it is something we might have a look at*' [B2\_PM\_P]. However, children's age was identified as a barrier to the involvement of younger children in the process, as noted by the special class teacher in Site D2, '*I would be open to it but at this age it is just confusing and we won't get anything from them*' [D2\_PSC\_SCT].

Involvement of external professionals and services in the individualised planning process was unacceptable in all sites and reported by three sites to have decreased substantially in the past number of years. In Site B3, where a child in junior infants had been assessed as having ASD during the school year and where the school had very little prior experience of ASD, the principal encountered great difficulty accessing external support and services such as speech and language therapy, psychological support and occupational therapy to assist the school in devising an individualised plan for the child [B3\_PM\_P]. The class teacher had never experienced a child with ASD previously and pointed out that, as the child had been assessed with ASD midway through the school year, he was not entitled to additional teaching or SNA-support [B3\_PM\_CT1]. All sites articulated a need for a greater level of occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and psychological support. The special class teacher in Site D2 advised that '*I don't think they are needed at the meetings at the moment but I would like to have the option in the future*', the teacher was satisfied in the interim provided that this support was always available through e-mail or phone [D2\_PSC\_SCT]. In the site where the individualised planning process was unacceptable, a need for additional support and advice in relation to developing the process was articulated. The absence of external professional advice and services available to this school in meeting complex and challenging needs contributed to the reluctance of the school to develop the individualised planning process. While the teacher had post-graduate qualifications in ASD, the school

considered that it did not have adequate knowledge and expertise to engage in individualised planning in the absence of external professional advice and services. It may also be of significance that this school was located in a remote rural area.

### 1.3 Transition

Four of the five sites demonstrated an excellent awareness of the importance of clearly signalling transitions within the school day for children. Visual and written schedules were used effectively and verbal prompting was sensitively employed. In these sites as described by one teacher '*children feel confident, they know where they are going, what they are about*' [B1\_PM\_LS/RT]. The challenges experienced by children with ASD in transitioning were less well understood in one site, where practice in facilitating transition was unacceptable and may have been linked to the limited experience of the school in teaching children with ASD. In three sites, where there were ASD-specific classes, transitions for children to mainstream classes in the school were carefully planned, monitored and reviewed. The mainstream class teacher in Site D2 referred to the importance of '*visual aids*' and of '*sticking to structure and routine so that he knows when he comes down what is expected of him and what we are doing*' [D2\_PSC\_CT]. A positive practice was observed whereby the children in the ASD-specific class lined up with their mainstream class, rather than in a special class grouping at the beginning and end of the school day and moved effectively between both settings during the school day.

In four sites, there was evidence that excellent attention was directed towards transitioning children from pre-primary settings and also to post-primary settings in accordance with best practice in this area. In the remaining site transitioning practice was unacceptable and less well developed. For example, in one of these sites, the principal and the teacher conducted preparatory visits to the pre-primary setting prior to the child enrolling in the school. In this school, parents/guardians were advised to begin to think about transition from two years before their child was due to leave the school and encouraged to work with the school in planning for the child's transition. The individualised planning process was used as a vehicle to support the transitioning process both to post-primary and from the ASD-specific class within the school. Strategies identified by schools in transitioning children from pre-primary included inviting children and their parents to Open Days in the school and liaising with, and visiting the child's pre-primary setting. Strategies identified by schools in transitioning children from primary to post-primary included visiting the post-primary school with the children and taking photographs of the setting, inviting teachers from the post-primary school to visit the primary school and compiling transition books with the child in preparation for transition. A parent described how the school had purposefully changed the resource teacher to prepare the child for post-primary school and the range of teachers he would experience there, observing that '*he had quite a few resource teachers during the school year and that he is dealing with it a lot better*' [D2\_PM\_PAR17]. The excellent practice adopted for a smooth transitioning was only sometimes evident in the documentation examined.

Delays in children getting ASD assessments in pre-primary settings were observed to negatively impact the efficacy of the transition process in two sites and present challenges for children, parents and schools. A parent in Site D1 described a particularly unsatisfactory experience with



transitioning her child to school. The child hadn't been assessed with ASD and enrolled in the local mainstream rural primary school, where 12 children were starting on the day. The parent described the child's first day as a *'total disaster'* and *'nightmare'*. The child then enrolled in another nearby mainstream rural school and was subsequently assessed with ASD two years later. However, as the child would have to move classrooms in this school and the teacher in the next class had no experience of ASD, the parent subsequently moved the child to the school where there was an ASD-specific class. The parent concluded that *'if this school wasn't here I don't know what we would have done...he would just be in the mainstream being pulled through'* [D1\_PSC\_PAR30]. The junior infant class teacher in Site B3 reported that there were generally protocols to plan for transitions into school but the child with ASD in her class did not have an ASD assessment at the point he enrolled in the school which the teacher described as *'I had no preparation or "thumbs up" that there was a child with special needs coming into my class'* [B3\_ML\_CT1].

## 1.4 Curriculum/Certification

In accordance with the philosophy of the Primary School Curriculum (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 1999), there was an excellent focus on enabling and supporting the holistic development of the child in all sites. High expectations for children's curriculum access were articulated and very good access to all the areas and subjects of the Primary School Curriculum for children was provided in all sites. There was no difficulty perceived for children with ASD who were deemed to be *'high-functioning'* [B2\_PM\_P] or *'well able'* [B3\_PM\_CT2] accessing the *'normal'* curriculum [B2\_PM\_P]. However, challenges were articulated in all sites in differentiating curriculum access for children with more complex needs. Some concern was voiced by the principals in three sites and the class teacher in one site with regard to the difficulties involved in enabling children with more complex needs to access the curriculum [B1\_PM\_P; B2\_PM\_P; D2\_PSC\_P; B3\_PM\_CT1]. While the class teacher stated that all areas of the curriculum were available to the child, the child's *'ability'* to get involved was described as a barrier to curriculum access [B3\_PM\_CT1]. Additionally the principal in Site B1 noted the challenge in balancing children's curriculum access, preparing children for society and accommodating children's behaviour, concluding that it was *'difficult to get that right'* [B1\_PM\_P].

In sites where there was specific ASD provision and where children were included in mainstream classes for periods of the school day, children's curriculum access was determined with reference to each individual child's ability to access the curriculum in the mainstream classes. All children who participated in the child conversations reported their engagement with a range of school activities. Mark noted that *'we work and play, we do Maths and English and things like Reading Zone and Mindful Maths and stuff. Irish, Geography, History, oh and Maths and Music and PE'* [D2], Ted reported that we *'play and talk and do things I like to do and I play in the yard'* [B3] and Ronan observed that *'I do work, Maths or PE, well PE is dancing, we do dancing every two years, what else, we do History, Geography a lot of stuff, we also do printing'* [B1].

A mainstream class teacher in Site D2 described a child included in her class who also attended the ASD-specific class in the school as being included for *'non-core subjects'* [D2\_PM\_CT] and accessing Irish, English and Mathematics in the special class. A special class teacher in Site

D2 described a particularly positive practice in relation to introducing children to curriculum inclusion in the mainstream class where the first subject chosen for inclusion is one that the children are observed to enjoy such as Visual Arts. The teacher also referred to teaching the Jolly Phonics®<sup>47</sup> rhymes in the early intervention class and then including children in the mainstream junior infant class for phonics lessons. This teacher used Irish and Religion periods as the times when children returned to the ASD-specific class as parents hadn't made their minds up as to their children's participation in these subjects. This teacher described Religion as being 'very abstract' [D2\_PSC\_SCT] for children. A parent in Site D1 observed that '*Irish was always a little bit behind as other areas were so difficult*' [D1\_PSC\_PAR30]. The challenges associated with the teaching of Irish in an Irish-medium school for children with ASD were articulated by the class teacher in Site D1, '*so if they come in without Irish, it adds to their frustration and if you are putting pressure on them then to speak the language and if the other children see you being more lenient, it brings down the standard of Irish. And if English is the first language at home, it can create a further obstacle so Irish can be an obstacle really if you don't have it as a first language*' [D1\_PSC\_CT]. Differentiation of children's curriculum experiences observed was very good in four sites and acceptable in one site in the level of SNA support provided, the level and pace of the lesson, utilising children's interests, children's access and response, teaching style and lesson sequence.

In all sites, the development of children's communication, social, play, leisure and imagination in the context of the curriculum was excellent and also through children's individualised planning in four sites. In Site B1, the inclusion of a child with ASD in a mainstream class was the focus of this evaluation. However there was also ASD-specific provision in this school and the principal reported that preparatory work was undertaken beforehand with the child and reverse inclusion curricular activities were organised in order to familiarise the child with the children in the mainstream class. In Site B2, the class teacher specifically referred to developing children's communication, social, play, leisure and imagination skills in the context of SPHE, Drama and Music. In Site D2, the special class teacher noted the positive impact on children's social, communication, play, leisure and imagination skills of the role of structured play in Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) and free-play activities during break-time periods. She further elaborated on the positive impact of visits to the local library, shops and amenities during planned social outings and observed that now the children readily converse with the librarian noting that '*three years ago three out of these four boys were non-verbal and now they are chatting away*' [D2\_PSC\_SCT].

Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework was used in three sites. The special class teacher in Site D2 reported that Aistear had contributed significantly to the ability of a child included in a mainstream class in the school to engage in pretend play and reported it as '*working out really, really well*' [D2\_PSC\_SCT]. She described the child as initially refusing to participate in Aistear activities and how he now '*was full on with a group of children pretending to be a chef*'. Similarly the special class teacher in Site B1 described Aistear as impacting positively on children's social skills and on their ability to manage everyday activities through enacting '*real-life situations*' [B1\_PM\_SCT]. Conversely practice in the implementation of Aistear with the child in Site B3 was unacceptable and has implications in terms of the provision of future support for

<sup>47</sup> Lloyd, S. (1992) The Jolly Phonics Handbook, Essex: Jolly Learning Ltd.

teachers in the implementation of Aistear with children with ASD. The child was observed not to participate in Aistear activities and the class teacher noted, '*George doesn't participate in any shared play, he doesn't generally like play too much*' [B3\_PM\_CT1]. In this setting, the availability of ASD-specific support was unacceptable and the teacher had no prior experience and very limited knowledge of the implications of ASD for children's learning and teaching. She described the year as a '*complete learning curve*' for her. While the resource teacher in the school had expertise in the area, her time with the child included in the mainstream junior infant class was limited due to the other demands of her role.

In schools, where there were ASD-specific classes and where children were included in mainstream classes, collaboration and consultation between the class teachers and the teacher in the ASD-specific class was excellent in optimising children's curriculum access. Where there was no ASD-specific unit in the school, class teachers were observed not to benefit from the same on-site support in facilitating children's curriculum access.

All parents displayed a good knowledge of the curriculum that their children accessed and almost always displayed high levels of satisfaction with it. The parent in Site D2 observed that '*I think they are doing pretty well, there is a bit of everything...I thought this child is never going to read now he's so good with reading, it's amazing*' [D2\_PSC\_PAR30]. This parent however referred to the focus on Physical Education in the school and noted that her child didn't like it as he couldn't ride a bike and was '*clumsy*'. This parent also noted that the child's self-confidence had improved significantly. However, parents were less sure about specific areas of the curriculum as encapsulated in the words of a parent who expressed high levels of satisfaction with the provision for numeracy and literacy for his child: '*ten out of ten, exemplary...now I don't know about History and Geography but when it comes to numeracy and literacy... I am satisfied he has the same access and couldn't believe he has the same access as the kids in his own class...*' [B1\_PM\_PAR61]. One parent expressed dissatisfaction in relation to her child's curriculum access and observed that '*at times Patrick could do with a more individualised programme for Science and Maths – like the Maths he does with his eyes closed – they're quite easy for him so it would be nice if there was something more individualised, he could do with something more advanced, more challenging, I feel that sometimes he is just bored sitting there*' [D2\_PM\_PAR17].

The curriculum accessed by children with ASD was documented in all sites. However, the documentation of the rationale underpinning the decisions on children's curriculum access was unacceptable.

## 1.5 Teaching Methodologies

In four sites the implementation of a range of teaching methodologies, associated with the Primary School Curriculum and ASD-specific methodologies based on recognised good practice, was very good and selected approaches were based on individual children's strengths and needs. In one site the implementation of ASD-specific methodologies based on recognised good practice was acceptable. Methodologies specific to ASD that were observed included the Treatment and

Education of Autistic and related Communication Handicapped Children<sup>48</sup> (TEACCH), the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)<sup>49</sup> and Social Stories.<sup>50</sup> In sites where practice was very good, teaching was based on children's assessments and considered children's strengths, interests and preferences as summarised by the special class teacher in Site D2, '[we are] *starting where they are at because otherwise it just doesn't work really*' [D2\_PSC\_SCT]. The teacher in Site B3 observed that the child had a particular interest in nature, cars, the letter 's' and ice-cream and ensured that the child had access to these resources both in the context of curriculum-related activities and as rewards for working well. In this school, the second class teacher referred to using the child's interest in computers as a reward and allowing him to talk about his family during language lessons. The special class teacher in Site D2 described developing sight vocabulary with reference to the children's interests in cars, horses, trains and films, noting that '*otherwise it wouldn't really work*' [D2\_PSC\_SCT].

Active learning methodologies were used in all sites as captured in the words of the class teacher in Site B3, '[we use] *hands-on activities...he likes touching and seeing things*' [B3\_PM\_CT1]. The teacher described the child as engaging in movement breaks with the SNA and a peer, developing the child's gross-motor skills through ball activities and utilising the child's interest in nature to develop his language skills during walks in the school environs. She also noted that '*music is really good with him*' in the context of using musical instruments in composing music and developing the child's rhythmic sense. Where practice was very good, teaching methodologies associated with the general curriculum and linked to principles of effective instruction that were almost always observed included clarity of purpose, review of previous learning, continuity across learning and teaching, teaching in small explicit steps, providing feedback to the child, monitoring the children's responses, displaying positive expectations for the child, promoting a safe and secure classroom environment, monitoring the children's on-task engagement, anticipating possible off-task behaviour, using role-play, structured questioning and scaffolding of children's responses through guided discovery processes. Direct instruction, teacher modelling, talk and discussion, the cultivation of respectful interactions, were also observed in all sites. A balance was almost always observed between whole-class, group and individual teaching. The class teacher in Site B1 cautioned that group work can present challenges for children with ASD and needs to be well-structured and organised.

The knowledge of staff in primary schools of ASD-specific teaching methodologies varied. Where there was a special class for children with ASD in the school, very good to excellent levels of relevant knowledge, understanding and skills were evident [B1; B2; D1; D2]. The principal in Site B3, where there was no specific ASD provision, commented, '*I would say that it is a concern for all of us that we might need more inservice*' [B3\_PM\_P]. The principal in Site B1 described a policy whereby all staff members in the school were assigned to the ASD class for a three-year period. However, she noted that, in one case, a teacher in the school had expressed an option not to teach in the class and the principal remarked that there was no point in allocating a teacher

<sup>48</sup> Schopler, E. (2001) TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children, in The National Autistic Society (ed.) Approaches to Autism, London: The National Autistic Society, p.68.

<sup>49</sup> Bondy, A. and Frost, L. (2002) A Picture's Worth: PECS and Other Visual Communication Strategies in Autism. Bethesda: Woodbine House.

<sup>50</sup> Gray, C. (1994) The New Social Story Book, Arlington: Future Horizons.

to the class who had no interest in the area. The principal in Site B2 noted that all the staff in the special classes had accessed ASD-specific continuing professional development (CPD) and that the mainstream teachers' knowledge was related to the level of contact they had with children with ASD. Elements of the TEACCH<sup>51</sup> approach were used in an excellent manner by almost all schools. This approach was selected based on children's responses to it. As children were observed to become less dependent on the environmental and task organisers associated with this approach, these were gradually faded out and only the supports required utilised, such as individual timetables. The special class teacher in Site B1 described this approach as '*letting-go*' [B1\_PM\_SCT]. The special class teacher in Site D2 attributed the progress of the children in her class to the TEACCH approach. The strategy associated with 'first-then' was observed to be effective in maintaining children's attention to their required tasks in four sites, with the class teacher in Site B3 noting that prior to implementing the strategy '*there was a lot of frustration*' [B3\_PM\_CT1] both for the child and the teacher. Social stories<sup>52</sup> were described as being particularly effective by the special class teacher in Site D1, who described devising social stories for parents at home and using boardmaker®,<sup>53</sup> the teacher's own drawings and the child's drawings in creating the stories. The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)<sup>54</sup> was used to very good effect in four sites to foster and encourage children's communication. The use of a reduced language of instruction was excellent in four sites.

The use of visual cues in supporting children's access to the curriculum was excellent in four of the five sites and acceptable in one site. All teachers affirmed the benefits of using visual cues with children with ASD. The class teacher in Site B2, commenting on the practice, said: '*it's not just Rory that it's benefiting – it's for everyone that I am planning*' [B2\_PM\_CT]. The use of task-analysis and token economies was very good in four sites, with positive reinforcement of children's on-task behaviour evidenced in all sites. The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) was very good in three sites and good in two sites. Tablets, desktop and laptop computers and the Interactive Whiteboard were variously available and children were observed to respond positively to the use of ICT in their learning and teaching programmes. Ronan described the positive impact of having a laptop: '*not everyone in the class has a laptop...it's hard for me to write a lot of stuff down because my hand gets tired...makes it a bit easier not having to like rub everything out*' [B1]. Very good attention was directed to promoting the generalisation of children's learning in all sites with opportunities provided for children to practise and use their knowledge and skills in a variety of different contexts.

The structuring of classroom and school environments was excellent in four sites and unacceptable in one site. Where environments were excellent, children navigated the environment comfortably and confidently and consideration was given to the potential environmental challenges stemming from children's sensory differences: visual, auditory, tactile

<sup>51</sup> Schopler, E. (2001) TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children, in The National Autistic Society (ed.) Approaches to Autism, London: The National Autistic Society, p. 68.

<sup>52</sup> Gray, C. (1994) The New Social Story Book, Arlington: Future Horizons.

<sup>53</sup> Mayer-Johnson (2015) Available at <http://www.mayer-johnson.com/support/productdocumentation/details/id/742> [Accessed Thursday 21st July 2015].

<sup>54</sup> Bondy, A. and Frost, L. (2002) A Picture's Worth: PECS and Other Visual Communication Strategies in Autism, Bethesda: Woodbine House.

and olfactory. In these sites, children's completed work was displayed in a prominent, creative and sensitive manner and the learning environment was understood as being paramount in supporting children's sensory differences. Where practice was unacceptable, sufficient attention had not been directed to organising the school and classroom environment with reference to the needs of children with ASD. An excellent understanding of the need for children with ASD to self-regulate was evident in four sites and good in one site with the gym room, schoolyard and sensory room used in this context. The role of the occupational therapist in addressing children's sensory differences was referred to in four sites and the challenges experienced by teachers in an area where they are not skilled referred to by participants in two sites. As noted by the class teacher in Site D1: *'it's not an area I would be fully trained in so I would not know how it would affect him'* [D1\_PSC\_CT1] and corroborated by the principal: *'I do feel we need further up-skilling in the area'* [D1\_PSC\_P]. This was further confirmed by the principal in Site B3 who noted that the staff's awareness is *'not as up to speed'* [B3\_PM\_P] as it should be.

The positive practice observed in the selection and use of a wide range of teaching methodologies with reference to the needs and responses of children with ASD was rarely delineated in school documentation.

## 1.6 Team Approach

Informal sharing of information among colleagues and a range of collaborative practices were very good in all sites. Formal sharing of information was very good in three sites and good in two sites. The formal sharing of information following attendance at CPD was reported to occur during staff meetings, Croke Park<sup>55</sup> training hours, individualised planning meetings through dissemination of CPD literature in schools and in one instance through the school's intranet system. The individualised education planning process in four sites facilitated clear communication and sharing of information, expertise and practices with parents/caregivers and with relevant professionals such as psychologists, where these were available. All teachers and principals affirmed the benefit of the recommendations in professionals' reports when they were available. However the difficulty in accessing regular reports from psychologists, speech and language therapists and/or occupational therapists was referred to by three sites. As one teacher in Site B1 noted, *'they [the reports] can be two or three years old before they come in and the next one is when they [the children] are going out'* [B1\_PM\_LS/RT]. It was acknowledged by this site that e-mail support was offered by the psychological service but pointed out that *'there were some things that you couldn't just iron out on e-mail'* [B1\_PM\_CT].

Informal methods of communication were a feature of practice in all sites with two sites almost always depending on this approach. These informal methods included peer mentoring and consultation, with particular collaboration within the special educational needs team and between individual teachers and the learning support/resource teacher. The learning support/resource teacher was almost always considered to be the 'expert' member of staff and teachers

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<sup>55</sup> Reference to the Public Service Agreement under Circular 08/11 between the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, the Department of Education and Skills and School Management, which provides for an additional 36 hours' employment obligation per year for primary school teachers (Department of Education and Skills, 2011).

tended to rely on their advice. This was mirrored in sites where there was a special class, with the special class teacher considered an 'expert' in the area. As noted by the class teacher in Site B2 in describing the communication with the special class teacher: *'we'd frequently meet even if it is just a chat in the corridor'* [B2\_PM\_CT]. All principals acknowledged the importance of staff collegiality and effective teamwork. As noted previously, the formal involvement of the child in the context of a team approach to individualised planning was referred to in one site only.

The use of documentation in planning for sharing information was almost never referred to, other than in the context of the individualised planning process. Oral communication was almost always the method used to promote collaboration. Peer observation was never utilised in the context of implementing a team approach. A commitment to the importance of fostering effective and meaningful communication with parents/caregivers in relation to each child was very good in all sites. Telephone contact with parents and the use of a home-school journal were evident in all sites.

The limited availability of external professionals was a barrier to implementing a team approach in all sites as summarised by the class teacher in Site B2: *'No, I have never met an OT or a psychologist or anything'* [B2\_PM\_SCT]. The teacher acknowledged that the learning support/resource teachers did meet with some external professionals and provided feedback to the class teachers but that it would be beneficial to get the feedback *'firsthand'*. The principal in Site B1 advised that *'it would be very helpful if we had more support from these professionals, especially speech and language therapists, I find it very annoying that teachers are asked to be speech and language therapists...we have non-verbal children here who are not getting support, we were told that they are priority one and what has that meant?'* [B1\_PM\_P]. The two principals in Site D where there were special classes pointed out the anomaly whereby the school had the services of a psychologist from the National Educational Psychological Service [NEPS] but that the psychologist did not have a remit in relation to the special class.

All principals acknowledged the importance of staff collegiality and effective teamwork as noted by the principal in Site D2: *'staff collaboration is hugely important'* [D2\_PSC\_P]. A collegial, collaborative and broad approach to team work was evident in all sites. The principal in Site B1 remarked on the impact of including children with ASD in terms of *'huge team development'*, noting that when there are challenges, the whole-school staff are required to *'sit down as a team and analyse the problem and how we think we can sort it'* [B1\_PM\_P].

## 1.7 Data Collection – Monitoring of Progress/Outcomes

Data collection and monitoring of children's programmes and outcomes were very good in three sites and good in two sites. Data were used in all sites to inform planning and review children's progress. All sites were committed to sharing information with parents both on a formal and informal basis through the parent-teacher meetings, home-school journals and individualised planning meetings. As noted by the special class teacher in Site D1: *'well we do it on a formal and an informal basis'* [D1\_PSC\_SCT].

A variety of practices was evident and schools used a range of data-collection processes. The class teacher in Site B2 used curriculum-based checklists and self-assessment and learning folders (SALF), pupil-profiles and teacher observation. The teacher also used weekly curriculum-related spelling and table tests with her class but noted that these did not apply to the child with ASD. In Site B1, similar processes were evident with the class teacher noting the importance of the home-school journal in communicating with parents and monitoring children's behaviour: *'if anything is going to affect his day, she [the parent] tends to tell us'* [B1\_PM\_CT]. The special class teacher in Site D1 raised concerns about a practice that had developed in simply recording for the sake of recording in the home-school journal and the potential pressure this might place on parents. She had now adopted a practice of using the home-school journal only when necessary: *'if there was something special or a difficulty, that's how I use it'* [D1\_PSC\_SCT]. The special class teacher in Site D2 also referred to the importance of informally communicating children's progress to parents when they visited the school to drop off and/or collect their children.

In four of the five sites data collection including observing and recording children's behaviour was central, with practice in three sites being very good, practice in one site being good and practice in one site being unacceptable. Where practice was very good or good, data was collected systematically, analysed and used to inform practice. In the site where practice was unacceptable, data was not collected systematically and a response-cost was implemented whereby a token was removed in the event of the child's inappropriate behaviour.

The individualised planning process as a vehicle for data collection and monitoring children's progress/outcomes was very good in three of the five sites, good in one site and unacceptable in one site. Where practice was good or very good, clear targets were identified and criteria delineated to assess whether progress had been made. Additionally, robust structures were in place within this process to share information with parents on their children's progress.

Data collection and monitoring of children's progress and outcomes was not an integral part of the school self-evaluation process in any of the sites evaluated.

## Summary: Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning

Informal sharing of information among colleagues and a range of collaborative practices were very good in all sites. Formal sharing of information was very good in three sites and good in two sites. In all sites assessment information was collected, reviewed and evaluated, with practice variously identified as very good, good and acceptable. Children's language and communication, behaviour, social and emotional development, play and leisure skills and independence were assessed in the context of curriculum-based assessment in all sites. The rationale articulated for selecting ASD-specific assessment tools in school documentation was unacceptable in four sites and required delineation. The articulation of the implications of co-occurring special educational needs for children's learning and teaching was unacceptable and required further elaboration in school documentation in all sites. The use of pupil self-assessment strategies ranged from excellent to very good to acceptable. In four of the five sites, Functional Behaviour Assessment was central to practice and the positive role of the SNA in this process affirmed.



There was evidence in four sites that the individualised planning process was informed by teachers' and parents' discussions and interactions with children. The formal involvement of children in the process was excellent in one site and unacceptable in the remaining sites.

Four of the five sites demonstrated an excellent awareness of the importance of clearly signalling transitions within the school day for children. The challenges experienced by children with ASD in transitioning were less well understood in one site, where the practices to facilitate transition were unacceptable and might have been linked to the limited experience of the school in relation to ASD. In three sites, where there were ASD-specific classes, the transition for children to mainstream classes in the school were carefully planned, monitored and reviewed. In four sites, there was evidence that excellent attention was directed towards transitioning children from pre-primary settings and also to post-primary settings, which reflected best practice in this area.

There was a focus on enabling the holistic development of the child in all schools.

While access to all the areas and subjects of the Primary School Curriculum for children with ASD was provided in all sites, challenges to enabling curriculum access for children with complex needs and differentiating the curriculum were also articulated. Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2001) was a feature of practice in three sites. A need for guidance based on best practice around children's access to Irish in the curriculum in Irish-medium schools was articulated.

In four sites the implementation of a range of teaching methodologies as prescribed in the Primary School Curriculum and ASD-specific methodologies was very good. Almost all classroom and school environments were well structured and children effectively navigated the environment. The availability of external professionals such as psychologists, occupational therapists and speech and language therapists to support teaching and learning was unacceptable in all sites.

## Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture

### 2.1 School Culture

A positive school culture was evident in all sites and informed by an excellent understanding and appreciation of ASD in four sites and an acceptable understanding in one site. The principal in Site B1 noted the impact of an inclusive school culture on teachers' professionalism with the comment: *'I really believe that job satisfaction is huge when you have that inclusion, it's just the right thing to do'*, while also noting that the benefits to children's social and communication differences of being included in a mainstream school could not be *'quantified'*, adding, *'how do you teach this stuff unless you let the children at it?'* [B1\_PM\_P]. Respectful interactions were evident in all sites between staff and children and children and their peers. All principals saw the provision for children with ASD in the school as linked to the school's ethos and mission statement as stated by the principal in Site B2: *'our mission is to educate all children'* [B2\_PM\_P]. In sites where there was specific ASD provision, this contributed positively to the understanding and appreciation of ASD, as noted by the special class teacher in Site B1: *'because of having the*

*unit and the expertise in the unit and all the staff trained in the unit'* [B1\_PM\_SCT]. All parents affirmed the inclusive school culture that their children experienced as summed up by one parent: *'I think without the provision that's here...I don't think he would be like you met him today... he has come on so much...he loves coming to school'* [B2\_PAR61].

A number of potential threats to promoting inclusive practice were referred to concerning children's placement in two sites. In one site, where there was a special class, the principal referred to the tension involved in maintaining a code of conduct for all children in a context where a child with ASD might require an exemption from the code, noting that *'if they are attending a mainstream school, [the child] has to abide by the normal code of conduct'*. The principal also noted the confidentiality issues specific to smaller communities in discussing the child's behaviour at school management level as it is *'hard to be talking about a child in a very small place in the special class'* [D1\_PSC\_P]. The principal in Site B1 referred to feeling a *'strong sense of responsibility'* [B1\_PM\_P] in terms of the appropriateness of a child's placement in the school and queried how suitable in terms of adequately meeting the child's needs it was for a child with a moderate general learning disability and ASD to be included in a mainstream school. The principal suggested that the nature of the child's needs could be a barrier to inclusion in terms of the challenges in ensuring the child's meaningful participation in activities and referred to informing parents on enrolment that *'every year their [the children's] placement is reviewed'* through discussion at the bi-annual individualised planning meetings. This principal referred specifically to the lack of support from the Health Service Executive from the time children are enrolled and that professionals who had recommended children to the school had never followed up.

An excellent focus was evident in celebrating children's achievements in non-academic and academic areas in all sites through displaying children's work and specifically acknowledging and affirming children's achievements during all activities. Children with ASD were involved in a range of school-wide activities in all schools that included speech and drama, religious celebrations, choir, swimming, horse-riding, sports day, school plays, GAA coaching, artist-in-school scheme, additional music classes and school tours. The principal in Site B1 noted that *'I can't think of one thing that they're not involved in'* [B1\_PM\_P].

All children interviewed identified an element of their school experience that they enjoyed: Ted referred to enjoying being able to *'play with people in yard'* [B3], Fred noted that *'swimming...I love it. Maths, cause there's lots of puzzles and I love solving them...'* [D1] and Ronan expressed a preference for *'Art...it's just creative'* [B1]. Ronan also noted that *'the thing is I don't really have that many friends...the only friends I have are my actual sister who goes to a different school...I actually don't have that many friends...I talk to myself sometimes'* [B1]. However he added that during playground *'I sometimes play with John'*. Children explained their drawings of school in a positive manner. Ted observed that *'I coloured it every colour I had and it just is going to be beautiful. I imagined my brain'* [B3]. Ronan elected to draw the playground and described each piece of equipment and his favourite places in the playground as he drew the picture, noting that *'I would like to draw more'* [B1].

School documentation defining the school's policies, practices and capacity to ensure the learning environment was welcoming and supportive of children with ASD was very good in four sites and acceptable in one site. It was clear in all sites that the focus on practice was prioritised above documentation as stated by the principal in Site B1: *'one of the questions that I saw here, something about policy that you were looking at our policies...and I thought Oh my God have we referred to the children with special needs and I thought you know if we haven't...that's a good sign because they're like everybody else'* [B1\_PM\_P].

Excellent inclusion and reverse inclusion practices based on curricular and co-curricular activities were evident where there was ASD-specific provision. It was evident that these activities were meticulously planned and time-tabled based on children's individual needs and the potential for their learning. These activities were child-led and incremental as noted by the principal in Site D2, right from the beginning, children are included in the mainstream class *'for as much as they can take, now that may only be for five minutes...as they get older then they start going for more and more subjects'* [D2\_PSC\_P]. The principal also referred to allowing children to return to the ASD specific class, to *'a safe zone'* [Site D2\_PSC\_P] should they wish at any time, and to developing children's self-regulation and autonomy through directly teaching them to indicate this to the mainstream class teacher. Excellent attention was also directed towards supporting children's inclusion during recess periods in four sites and acceptable attention to this in one site.

There was an excellent appreciation and understanding of the role of the SNA in supporting an inclusive school culture in all sites. The principal in Site D2 noted that while *'we have some great SNAs in the school...there is a danger that the child would become attached to a SNA and you take from their independence'* [D2\_PSC\_P]. The mainstream class teacher in Site D1 observed that, as children got older, they often preferred to work independently without SNA support. The principal noted that he had deliberately reduced SNA support in the school recently and observed that *'I think we are ready to cut again'*. He admitted that there were *'too many SNAs'* and while he acknowledged the difficulty in removing posts he concluded that *'this is about the kids...this is about education'*, observing that SNAs were there to provide support *'as it's required only'* and noted that *'they don't always have the ability to pull back'*. Special needs assistant support was rotated frequently in three sites as described by the special class teacher in Site D2, *'I don't want any child dependent on one SNA all the time'* [D2\_PSC\_SCT]. Mark referred to teachers and his friend who sits next to him helping him with work [D1], while Ted noted: *'Nobody [helps me], because I do it all by myself'* [B3]. Fred in Site D1 and Ronan in Site B1 referred explicitly to the SNA helping them with their work.

However the principal in Site B1, where there was also ASD-specific provision, recognised that there were challenges in maintaining a balance in facilitating the inclusion of children with ASD in the mainstream classes where class teachers had large class numbers and *'especially in multiple class situations'* [B1\_PM\_P]. In this Site, there were three SNAs assigned to the ASD-specific class and the principal pointed out that if one of these SNA posts was terminated, the school would have to *'pull back on inclusion'* as the third SNA was used throughout the school to support children's inclusion in mainstream classes.

## 2.2 Communication

An excellent understanding and appreciation of the importance of developing effective and positive means of communicating with parents was evident in all sites. Communication with parents was fostered in all sites through an excellent range of both formal and informal strategies that included parent-teacher meetings; the individualised planning process; telephone contact; meetings by appointment and informal contact when dropping children to, or collecting them from school. One of the class teachers in Site B3 referred to the importance of communicating the positives and the achievements that the child makes rather than always focusing on concerns [B3\_PM\_CT1]. Almost all parents expressed satisfaction with the communication systems in place. However one parent expressed dissatisfaction and referred to '*one-sided communication*' with the school noting that '*I don't even know what kind of assessments they carry out*' [D2\_PM\_PAR43]. She reported that when her child was in the ASD-specific early intervention class in the school that '*it was very good*' but had become '*confusing now that he was integrated into mainstream...*'

All schools acknowledged the potential for children's learning and teaching in developing effective communication systems with parents as noted by one class teacher, '*they [parents] know the child more than we do*' [B1\_PM\_CT]. In two sites teachers reported that children with ASD were sometimes excluded from after-school activities such as birthday parties, which was reported to stem from a lack of understanding of ASD by parents of children who do not have ASD. A class teacher in one of these sites referred to a parent's observation that '*those children are in their own world*' and advising the teacher that she didn't want her child sitting next to the child with ASD [B3\_PM\_CT1].

All schools had developed very good systems to communicate with external professionals and services and affirmed the advice and support of these professionals and services. However, unacceptable availability of external professionals and services with regard to therapeutic services and psychology was reported in three schools. Two of these schools were located in rural areas, with one school in a remote Gaeltacht area and the other in an urban area. The principal in Site B1 summed up the views of principals and teachers in these three schools while referring to the lack of support from external professionals and services as '*very challenging*'.

## 2.3 Learning Environment

The location of specifically designed ASD classrooms in an intentional central location in the school was excellent. In these sites, there was an excellent recognition of the importance of creating an ASD-friendly environment throughout the school. The benefits of a purposefully structured ASD learning environment were evident in terms of the ease with which children navigated the environment. Staff also affirmed the benefits of a purposefully structured ASD environment in terms of the positive impact it had on the visibility and inclusion of children with ASD in the school, with the principal in Site D1 describing this as '*a very positive thing*' for the whole school and how the other children in the school '*loved going in there*' [D1\_PSC\_P]. A kitchen was deliberately included in the room where all children learned '*life-skills*' and the room was used for whole-school events such as religious celebrations or school concerts. In three of the

sites, specific equipment was available in the schoolyard to engage children during unstructured periods of the school day. In Site D1, the principal referred to the prohibitive cost of providing this equipment and the associated cost of securing the yard in order to prevent public access to the equipment outside of school hours.

These classrooms were exemplary in design and contributed to an aesthetically pleasing and ASD-friendly school environment. These variously included sensory rooms; multidisciplinary rooms; soft playground areas; kitchen space; toileting facilities and, in one instance, a sensory garden. Classrooms were spacious, bright and well-ventilated, which facilitated children taking movement breaks as required. Classrooms were well organised and work stations were available to accommodate children where necessary. Group-tables were available in all ASD-specific classes. Individualised and personalised schedules were provided for each child. In Site B2, a particularly excellent practice was observed whereby each corridor was allocated a theme associated with the locality, e.g. 'Underwater', and each classroom in the corridor was represented by a corresponding visual, e.g. 'octopus' class. This facilitated children with ASD to negotiate the building with great ease and confidence.

Where children with ASD were included in mainstream classes, these classrooms were typically 'busy' and colourful displays featuring samples of children's work and curriculum-related materials were observed. The accommodation of the sensory needs of children with ASD was excellent in two sites and acceptable in one site. Sensory needs were accommodated through seating children in an area of the classroom with least distraction and providing adequate space for the child with ASD to self-regulate by incorporating movement breaks into the child's schedule.

## 2.4 Extra-Curricular Activities

As noted previously in this report, extra-curricular activities in terms of activities taking place outside of the school day are not a feature of the Irish Education system. While one school did refer to encouraging children to participate in local GAA activities, children's involvement in co-curricular activities linked to the curriculum was an excellent feature of practice in all schools. These activities included: participation in sports; swimming in the local pool; organised activities during recess periods of the school day; drama; music; religious celebrations and school tours.

An individualised approach was adopted in all sites to children's participation in co-curricular activities. For example in Site B1, the child with ASD included in the mainstream class was facilitated in availing of more frequent swimming activities than his mainstream peers on the advice of the occupational therapist. The special class teacher in Site B1 noted that children are always included unless '*they show a difficulty and everything is modified*' [B1\_PM\_SCT]. The class teacher in Site B2 noted that '*they're involved in everything*' [B2\_PM\_CT]. A positive practice was evident in Site B2 whereby all children enrolled in the ASD-specific class were also assigned a mainstream class in the school and in that context participated in the co-curricular activities that the class was involved in. In Site D2, children's independence and social skills were promoted through visits to local cafés and library with the principal commenting that '*it brings them out of themselves, it makes them social*' [D2\_PSC\_P].

## 2.5 Student Wellbeing

There was an excellent focus on promoting positive relationships and positive mental health in all sites. The principal in Site B1 commented that *'all children are valued'* and their *'sense of self-importance and belonging'* is constantly nurtured [B1\_PM\_P].

There was an excellent awareness of identifiers for children's anxiety in four sites and an acceptable awareness in one site. One teacher remarked that the child with ASD would get very fidgety, asking to go to the toilet frequently and that she *'would know then that [the child] would need to take a break'* [B2\_PM\_CT]. The teacher also referred to using movement breaks with the whole class such as three-minute body movement games and meditation techniques. In sites where there was a special class, there was an excellent use of the special class environment as a 'refuge' for children from the potential sensory overload of the mainstream classroom. The mainstream class teacher in Site B1 noted that *'his [the child with ASD] face would tense up'* at times of less structure and the importance of being alert to this and intervening with counting/ breathing strategies or providing distracters for the child [B1\_PM\_CT]. The learning support resource teacher in this site referred to the strong focus in the school on self-regulation, ensuring the child was aware of his own emotional state and tracking his own feelings and the use of mindfulness as required. Child-protection and anti-bullying policies were available in all sites. It was not a feature of practice in any site to nominate a staff member as a resource for children who might be concerned about mental health issues.

The strategies evident to ensure children's wellbeing were sometimes referred to specifically in school documentation and information related to mental health was sometimes displayed in the context of the Social, Personal and Health Education curriculum.

It was evident that all schools were proactive in seeking support to foster children's wellbeing. However, the level of support from external services such as psychiatric, psychological, occupational therapy and speech and language therapy services in this regard was unacceptable. As noted by the principal in Site B1: *'I know it's cutbacks and the rest of it and I am not pointing a finger at managers down there, the system is not right, we have non-verbal children here who are not getting support, we were told that they are priority one and what has that meant?'* [B1\_PM\_P]. One teacher described a proactive approach developed in consultation with a NEPS psychologist due to concerns about mental health issues in the future, in recognition of the fact that the child *'internalises a lot of stuff'* [B1\_PM\_SCT]. They developed a think-about strategy in order to reflect upon *'meltdowns'* which *'gave him an avenue to himself; it helped to talk it out'* [B1\_PM\_SCT]. In this school the learning support/resource teacher reported attending continuing professional development programmes on ASD and co-occurring needs including depression and anxiety. In Site D1, where there were significant mental health concerns, psychological and psychiatric support had been requested but, due to long waiting lists in the area, it was not possible to provide the comprehensive service that was required. The principal in Site D1 reported phoning a support service and waiting for prolonged periods for a response, noting that *'maybe you would be a week'* waiting [D1\_PSC\_P].

Serious issues were raised about possible distress and mental health concerns reported in two sites. The SNA referred to one child regularly verbalising suicidal intentions; *'I have no friends, I am going to kill myself, I am going to put my finger in water and put it into a plug socket...where is the highest part of the building – I am going to throw myself off it'* [B1\_PM\_SNA1]. The SNA suggested that *'he [the child] really feels these things'* and that they represent a manifestation of an exaggeration or misinterpretation of his emotions. She described how in these instances she attempts to help him to accurately assess these emotions, e.g. *'you are feeling bad because you did something wrong'*. She expressed worry, stress, role confusion and exasperation with the situation: *'that's the hard part of the job – I am worried that if he was near somewhere that he could... [hurt himself] would he?...could he hurt himself? I'd love to know how to talk around him... do I ignore it? Is it my place to do anything?...are they real or is he just...?'* Teachers also reported concerns in relation to this child. Similar concerns emerged in Site D1, where it was evident that the special class teacher was overwhelmed by the negative, violent, aggressive verbalisations of two of the children. In both sites it was clear that such issues take a huge toll on the wellbeing of staff with one staff member reporting that on some occasions she would have to turn her back on the child in question *'because [she] just... had to calm down [her]self'* [D1\_PSC\_SCT].

As reported previously there were very good levels of communication between schools and parents and this was also evident in communication about children's wellbeing. All teachers reported that they would discuss any concerns about children's wellbeing with parents and close parental liaison was acknowledged as very important in this regard. A sense of empathy was evident in all schools with regard to the impact of ASD on families as noted by the principal in Site B1: *'The whole insight you get into how families struggle is just shocking really what these families have to cope with'* [B1\_PM\_P]. Almost all parents reported struggling with children's behaviour on occasions at home and referred to it as *'difficult'* to manage at times [D1\_PSC\_PAR30]. Almost all parents also noted that the schools were *'very good'* and knew how to *'deal with the child'* [D2\_PDC\_PAR45].

## Summary: Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture

A positive school culture was evident in all sites and informed by an excellent understanding and appreciation of ASD in four sites and an acceptable understanding in one site. Respectful interactions were evident in all sites between staff and children and children and their peers. An excellent appreciation and understanding of the role of the SNA in supporting an inclusive school culture was observed in all sites. There was an excellent focus on promoting positive relationships and positive mental health was consistently nurtured in all sites. An excellent awareness of identifiers for children's anxiety was evident in four sites with an acceptable awareness evident in one site. An excellent understanding and appreciation of the importance of developing effective and positive means of communicating with parents were evident in all sites.

Four of the sites had specifically designed and centrally located ASD classrooms. In these sites, there was an excellent recognition of the importance of creating an ASD-friendly environment throughout the school. In sites where there was specific ASD provision, this contributed positively to the understanding and appreciation of ASD. All parents affirmed the inclusive school culture that their children experienced and children interviewed readily identified an element of their school experience that they enjoyed.

Child-protection and anti-bullying policies were available in all sites. School documentation describing the school's policies, practices and capacity to ensure the learning environment was welcoming and supportive of children with ASD was very good in four sites and acceptable in one site.

All schools had developed very good systems to communicate with external professionals and services and affirmed the advice and support of these professionals and services. However, the adequate level of support from external services to assist schools in promoting an inclusive school culture was unacceptable in all sites.

## Statement 3 – School Management

### 3.1 Leadership

All principals displayed a commitment to providing for children with ASD in the school with excellent leadership and management structures in three sites, very good and good respectively in two sites. In these sites, there was an awareness of complying with legal requirements and providing support for staff in enhancing children's learning, teaching and behaviour. A commitment to providing, communicating and reviewing whole-school policies on the inclusion of students with ASD was evident in all sites as noted by the principal in Site B3: *'we're an inclusive school, it's part of inclusivity and everyone is learning, special children are always special in every class'* [B3\_PM\_P]. Structures were in place in all sites to address teaching staff's concerns regarding children's learning and behaviour and routines and structures to accommodate the needs of children with ASD were in place in all sites.

It was evident that all principals were ambitious for the children in all settings, with high, yet realistic expectations and recognised the *'huge joy in achievement'* for children with ASD [B1\_PM\_P] while also acknowledging that there were *'always challenges'* in managing provision for children with ASD [B2\_PM\_P]. Challenges reported included: administration requirements such as managing enrolments, organising school transport, applying for additional supports, staff appointments and allocation; managing staff-burn out; managing children's behaviours that challenge; communicating and building meaningful relationships with parents and ensuring that the child's placement in the school continued to be an appropriate placement.

All principals reported challenges in communicating unpalatable information to parents and on occasions experiencing difficulty in getting *'parents to agree'* [D2\_PSC\_P] in relation to a child's placement and/or learning and teaching programme. Difficulties experienced by parents in accessing professionals' reports and the financial cost were referred to by the principal in Site B1: *'parents want an assessment and can't afford basically 600 euro'* [B1\_PM\_P]. Particular challenges for principals in relation to multiple class contexts were noted in two sites as described by the principal in Site D1: *'I have three classes this year, usually I have four and 14 administrative days as does every other principal with two teachers on the team. I am not getting any extra because of the special class being there so that is a big challenge'* [D1\_PSC\_P]. The principal in Site B1, where there was also an ASD-specific class, referred to the challenges in facilitating inclusion for children enrolled in the ASD-specific class and articulated a need for *'more slack to facilitate inclusion,*



*especially in the multiple class situation'* [B1\_PM\_P]. The principal in Site D1 remarked on the challenges of a multiple class situation where a child would have the same teacher for four years in mainstream and the same teacher for eight years in the special class. In particular the principal in Site B3 noted that when there are challenges in including a child in mainstream due to the lack of adequate support in terms of external services and/or SNA support, *'so much time is wasted for all the children involved'* [B3\_PM\_P], including both the child with ASD and his/her peers. She also noted that in such circumstances, *'SNAs are being pulled here and there'* in terms of being moved around the school in an attempt to compensate for the lack of adequate support to include the child.

A variety of practices in the allocation of SNAs and teaching staff was evident. In three of the five sites, an excellent consistent and equitable approach to rotating teachers and SNAs was evident. The principal acknowledged the reluctance of some staff to be allocated to the ASD-specific provision in the school but noted that *'when they transfer into mainstream, they bring all this with them'* concluding that *'I think as a result of it they are way better teachers...it gives us a better perspective on the whole child development...it gives a depth to the soul of us all'* [B1\_PM\_P]. She further noted that *'if you had a teacher in the unit who was going to be left there for the rest of her time, I think the rest of us would sit back and really we wouldn't be that involved at all but we know that this pot is going to be passed around'*. In Site D2, a different approach was adopted, SNA support was rotated and while there was a policy in the school of rotating teaching staff between infants, junior classes, middle classes, senior classes and support areas every three to five years, the principal noted in relation to ASD-specific provision that *'it is only volunteers because I don't think it would be fair to a teacher, to say as I can do, "you into the ASD", I would regard the ASD area as separate [in the context of requiring a distinct skill-set], you have to have a grá [Irish word for 'love'] for it and you must have a liking for it...you don't want to stress people'* [D2\_PSC\_P]. In Site D1, teaching and SNA support were not rotated. In Sites B2 and B3, SNA support and teaching support were consistently rotated. All principals had an excellent understanding of the NEPS Continuum of Support in contributing to the provision of appropriate support for children with ASD and were pro-active in seeking health and other supports for children with ASD as required.

Specific challenges were evident in managing ASD-specific provision in Gaeltacht areas and the tension that can emerge between meeting children's needs and the need to comply with the Education Act, 1998 (Ireland, 1998), as noted by the principal: *'Some of the children that come to us don't have Irish and we have to comply with the Education Act, as we are in the Gaeltacht, to provide an education through Irish'* [D1\_PSC\_P]. This was corroborated by both the class teacher and the special class teacher as encapsulated by the latter: *'the Gaeilge is a big thing, I mean this is a special class in the Gaeltacht and children with autism have difficulties with communication and they may not always have an interest in Irish'*, concluding that *'I'm always worried that I don't do enough for the Irish'* [D1\_PSC\_SCT].

## 3.2 Responsibility

In all sites, all staff demonstrated an excellent understanding of their roles and responsibilities in relation to children with ASD. A collegial approach as described by the principal in Site B3 was evident in all sites: *'it might not always be the SEN team who have the answer, it might be the class teacher and sometimes it might be the SNAs'* [B3\_PM\_P].

In four sites, principals, teachers and SNAs had a clear understanding of where they might access additional support, expertise and resources for children with ASD. However, in one site, there had been no external professional support available when two children with ASD enrolled in the school. The principal described the situation as *'unreal'* adding that the teacher and SNAs found it particularly challenging and the parents also had difficulty understanding that their child had additional needs [Site B3\_PM\_P]. In four sites, all principals and teaching staff were aware of the Special Education Support Service (SESS) and actively sought support from the SESS as required. Only two sites were aware of the role of MCA.

## 3.3 Appointment of Staff

An excellent commitment was evident in all principals' concern to recruit staff with knowledge of, and experience, expertise and qualifications in the learning and teaching of children with ASD. All principals acknowledged the criticality of employing such staff. The principal in Site B2 attributed the success of provision in the school to *'having the proper staff in place who are interested in it and who are willing to do it...the teachers are critical'* [B2\_PM\_P].

However all principals pointed out that it was not always possible to recruit staff with appropriate qualifications and experience due to the panel restrictions and the non-availability of applicants with the requisite expertise. A solution-focused approach to this dilemma was adopted in Site B1, where a consistent policy of rotating staff in the school was adopted. There was also ASD-specific provision in the school and the principal considered that this practice enhanced the provision in the school for all children, including children with ASD. A fortuitous experience related to the category of 'restricted recognition'<sup>56</sup> was reported by the principal in Site D2, who noted that the school first enrolled a child with ASD 12 years previously and was allocated one teacher for this child, reporting that the Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO) had asked the school to enrol the child. The principal reported not being able to find a teacher with knowledge and experience of ASD and consequently employing a teacher in the 'restricted recognition' category from a European country who had prior experience of teaching children with ASD.

Securing substitution was referred to as a particular difficulty for sites where there was ASD-specific provision with the principal in Site D2 noting that not every teacher is suited to teaching children with ASD and reporting [in relation to substitute teachers who had variously replaced the class teacher in the ASD class] that *'I can remember some couple of young girls crying in the evening after it'* [D2\_PSC\_P].

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<sup>56</sup> The term 'restricted recognition' refers to a category of teachers who are recognised as being qualified to teach only in specified school contexts.

### 3.4 Review of Provision for Children with ASD

It was evident that a very good culture of reflection and review as to provision for children with ASD was a feature of practice in all sites. This process was informal rather than scheduled and sometimes linked to the school's self-evaluation process. Data suggest that very good in-depth review of the provision of appropriate and adequate accommodation, curriculum experiences and teaching methodologies was a feature of practice in all schools. It was evident that children's programmes were consistently reviewed with reference to assessment of children's academic, socio-emotional and overall developmental progress. Almost all parents confirmed this review process as described by one parent: *'the teacher goes through everything and lets us know how he is getting on and what we may have to do at home to help her and gives us some strategies, things to do with his behaviour and educationally wise'* [B2\_PM\_PAR31]. The individualised planning process was used in four sites to facilitate this review process.

It was evident that all sites continued to make environmental adaptations in accordance with emerging children's needs. The principal in Site B1 described the ASD-specific provision in the school as evolving from a spare classroom in 2002 where a curtain was used to delineate the multi-sensory area to the excellent purpose-built provision that was now in place that included a soft-play area and a secure playground space.

#### Summary: Statement 3 – School Management

A variety of practices in relation to the allocation of SNAs and teaching staff was evident with an excellent consistent and equitable approach to rotating teachers and SNAs evident in three sites. Principals reported a range of additional administrative duties in managing provision for children with ASD with specific challenges evident in Gaeltacht areas regarding children with ASD accessing the curriculum through the medium of Irish.

In all sites, a collegial approach was evident and all staff demonstrated an excellent understanding of their roles and responsibilities towards children with ASD. In four sites, principals, teachers and SNAs had a clear understanding of where they might access additional support, expertise and resources for children with ASD. In these sites, all principals and teaching staff were aware of the Special Education Support Service (SESS) and actively sought support from the SESS as required. However, in one site, there had been no external professional support available. Only two sites were aware of the role of MCA.

A very good culture of reflection on and review of provision for children with ASD was a feature of practice in all sites. All principals had an excellent understanding of the criticality of having staff with the appropriate knowledge and understanding of learning and teaching for children with ASD. However all principals pointed out that it was not always possible to recruit staff with appropriate qualifications and experience due to the panel restrictions and the non-availability of applicants with the requisite expertise.

## Statement 4 – Staff Development

### 4.1 Understanding and Knowledge of ASD for All Staff

All teachers in special classes demonstrated an excellent understanding of ASD and the associated implications for learning and teaching for children with ASD. Teachers had attended a wide range of CPD programmes provided by the SESS and had sometimes completed post-graduate qualifications in the area of special education and/or ASD. An excellent model of in-school support for teachers transitioning to the ASD-specific class from mainstream was reported in Site B1, where substitution through the SESS was provided for the mainstream teacher to shadow the teacher in the special class rather than the mainstream teacher having to leave the school to attend an introduction to an ASD CPD programme [Site B1]. The strengths of the CPD courses were identified as contributing to the knowledge, skills and confidence of the teacher and as noted by the principal in Site B1, *'staff development is a huge benefit to the school'* [B1\_PM\_P]. ASD-specific CPD was reported to have a positive impact on the child with ASD, and also, on other children in the class/school as noted by the class teacher in Site B2, CPD had provided her with *'tips for other children...it could apply to a child with little to no language as well, you could be using similar strategies'* [B2\_PM\_CT]. The principal in Site B3 reported the impact attending a CPD programme had on the junior infant teacher: *'the junior infant teacher has learned so much, it has kind of sparked her interest'* [B3\_PM\_P].

Within mainstream schools, the expertise of the learning support/resource teacher was relied on, with one site being particularly dependent on the LS/RT as class teachers had not accessed CPD in the area of ASD. Access of teachers in mainstream classes to ASD-specific CPD was unacceptable and has implications both for initial teacher education and CPD access. An exception to this finding was in Site B1 where there was also a special class for children with ASD. In this school, the practice of rotating teaching staff in the school ensured that all teachers demonstrated an excellent understanding of ASD. However, the principal reported that initially teachers were reluctant to transfer to the special class, explaining that *'teachers feel ill-prepared going in. As teachers, we like to believe that we know what we're at...they have no confidence really in the beginning. And a certain amount of fear. Fear that they won't know how to handle challenging behaviours, for example'* [B1\_PM\_P]. The principal further pointed out that *'the courses for mainstream teachers, I feel, need further development, to be more specific to the needs of a mainstream teacher, because trying to maintain that balance between curriculum and ASD issues and so on is very challenging'* [B1\_PM\_P]. In Site B3, mainstream teachers had no awareness of the SESS or MCA.

All teachers affirmed the support of the principal in facilitating teachers' access to CPD as noted by the class teacher in Site B2: *'our principal would be really supportive there, he'd arrange cover and everything...once we show an interest he would be delighted to send us off'* [B2\_PM\_CT]. In Site B1, the board of management had arranged for substitute cover for teachers to participate in the research project as the school considered that it was important *'to get this message across'* [B1\_PM\_P]. All teachers acknowledged the need to constantly review CPD accessed and engage in systematic upskilling. The LS/RT in Site B3 commented that *'it's just such a vast area and so individualised when you're trying to cater to the students' needs that I think you need continuous professional development and you know, support from external professionals that kind of give*

you recommendations...it still comes back to you've met one child with ASD, you've met one child with ASD'.

A whole-school collaborative approach in relation to the dissemination of knowledge, resources and information accessed during CPD staff development was evident. All schools reported disseminating information informally and formally during staff-meetings and Croke Park<sup>57</sup> hours. The informal sharing of information was captured by the LS/RT in Site B1 noting that she had '*a cup of coffee with the principal*' [B1\_PM\_LS/RT] that morning and shared information and the list of books from the CPD she had just accessed. In two sites, an online system for sharing teaching tips was available in the school. All schools affirmed the knowledge of external professionals who had supported them in meeting the needs of children with ASD as noted by the principal in Site B3: '*some of the professionals we have dealt with are fantastic, they just give us the insight*' [B3\_PM\_P].

Special needs assistants (SNAs) in three sites demonstrated a very good understanding of the implications of ASD for classroom engagement and participation, self-care and independence, social interactions and behaviour. Special needs assistants in one site demonstrated an acceptable understanding and in another site a good understanding. The knowledge base, experience and contribution of the SNA were recognised and acknowledged in all sites.

## 4.2 Continuing Professional Development

It was evident that principals had both a managerial and instructional role in providing for children with ASD in the school. In four sites, principals had accessed CPD related to their leadership role but not specifically on ASD. In Site B3 the principal reported that she had no preparation for her role other than from a NEPS psychologist who visited the school in relation to the two children with ASD included in the school. The principal in Site B2 noted that '*I am getting whatever training I need*' [B2\_P\_P]. In Site B1, the principal reported attending a number of conferences but said: '*I am the person who is the least prepared*' [B1\_P\_P]. The additional impact of providing for children with ASD on staff wellbeing in terms of its direct impact on staff and the impact on the principal in managing its impact on staff was evident in all sites. The principal in Site B1 referred to the '*burn out of staff*' due to the '*extremely demanding work*' and noted that '*it can be all-consuming and it worries me that people can lose a sense of balance*' [B1\_PM\_P]. The principal in Site B3 observed that '*the children can be very demanding*' [B3\_PM\_P]. In reference to a teacher experiencing anxiety and the difficulty in getting support for this teacher, the principal in Site B1 said, '*it can be a hard one to manage as you don't actually see it when you are going through it yourself*'.

In three sites, all teaching staff expressed satisfaction as to the availability of CPD. In Site D1, the geographical location of the school was a barrier to staff accessing CPD as it often involved driving up to 40 miles to the nearest town. In Site B3, where there were two children with ASD

<sup>57</sup> Reference to the Public Service Agreement under Circular 08/11 between the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, the Department of Education and Skills and School Management, which provides for an additional 36 hours' employment obligation per year for primary school teachers (Department of Education and Skills, 2011).

included in mainstream classes, there was no awareness of the role of the Special Education Support Service (SESS). On-site CPD was a feature of practice in four sites, where there was ASD-specific provision. This was organised informally and also during staff-meetings. The voluntary nature of CPD was referred to by the principal in Site B1, who commented that *'you can't force things on people either'* [B1\_P\_P].

Dissatisfaction was expressed by all schools as regards the CPD available for SNAs. As noted by the LS/RT in Site B3, *'that's something that I feel could be developed more for SNAs...if they had more specialised information as part of their course...'* There was an anomaly between specialist teachers' access to CPD being excellent, class teachers' access being acceptable and special needs assistants' access being good. The lack of availability of CPD for SNAs was summarised by the principal in Site B1: *'we encourage training. A teacher can go on an SESS course. There's no courses for SNAs during the day'* [B1\_PM\_P]. The principal further noted how CPD for SNAs occurs at the SNAs' own expense, both time-wise and financially. All SNAs referred to the lack of CPD opportunities available to them as reported by the SNA in Site B3, *'I never did anything on inservice' and noted how ASD was 'briefly covered' in a special education training course she accessed herself. She concluded that 'I would love inservice...I would love to learn more how to help the child'* [B3\_PM\_SNA1].

The monitoring and recording of CPD accessed was very good in all sites, however individual CPD plans were not a feature of practice in schools. Extending formal learning opportunities and awareness training to parents/guardians was not a reported feature of practice.

### 4.3 Information Sharing and Access to Specialist Information on ASD

Whole-school sharing of information was reported to take place in all schools during staff meetings, Croke Park hours, through informal discussion and dissemination of materials. All principals referred to their lack of expertise in the area of special education and ASD. However, they highlighted their role as manager in the school, and the role of the special educational needs co-ordinator in working specifically in this area.

One principal noted the desirability of a 'mentor' in this area, to facilitate problem-solving at a managerial level. Limited availability and input of external agencies was noted in all sites and the need for greater input from multidisciplinary teams within schools was articulated.

### Summary: Statement 4 – Staff Development

It was evident that principals had both a managerial and instructional role in providing for children with ASD in the school. In four sites, principals had accessed CPD to inform their leadership role but not explicitly related to ASD as this was reported not to be available specifically for principals. All teachers in special classes demonstrated an excellent understanding of ASD and the associated implications for learning and teaching for children with ASD. Teachers in special classes for children with ASD had attended a wide range of CPD programmes provided

by the SESS and had sometimes completed post-graduate qualifications in the area of special education and/or ASD. CPD courses were identified as contributing to the knowledge, skills and confidence of the teacher. However teachers in mainstream classes had not accessed significant levels of ASD-specific CPD. In one site, where there was no special class, the expertise of the LS/RT was particularly relied on. The support of the principals in facilitating access to CPD in all schools was affirmed. All schools reported disseminating information informally and formally during staff-meetings and Croke Park<sup>58</sup> hours. In three sites, all teaching staff expressed satisfaction as to the availability of CPD, with one school's rural isolation and another school's lack of knowledge of the SESS impacting on CPD access. While the knowledge base, experience and contribution of the SNA was recognised and acknowledged in all sites, dissatisfaction was expressed by all schools in relation to the CPD available for SNAs. Extending formal learning opportunities and awareness training to parents/guardians was not a reported feature of practice.

### **Concluding Summary: Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Primary Schools**

Collaborative practice, formal and informal sharing of information in relation to children's learning and assessment ranged from good to very good. Curriculum-based assessment referred to children's language and communication, behaviour, social and emotional development, play and leisure skills and independence. Excellent assessment policies containing a comprehensive range of assessment tools were in place in three of the five sites and the use of pupil self-assessment strategies ranged from excellent to very good to acceptable. A positive approach to supporting children's behaviour was evident in four of the sites. Teachers' and parents' discussions and interactions with children informed the individualised planning process in four sites. There was an excellent understanding of the challenges experienced by children with ASD when transitioning in four sites with the limited experience of the school regarding ASD impacting on the unacceptable practice in one site. Children were provided with access to all the areas and subjects of the Primary School Curriculum in all sites, however challenges were evident in providing curriculum access for children with complex needs and differentiating the curriculum. Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2001) was a feature of practice in three sites. A need for guidance based on best practice as regards children's access to Irish in the curriculum in Irish-medium schools was evident. Almost all classroom and school environments were well-structured and children effectively navigated the environment. While schools were observed to select and use a wide range of teaching methodologies with reference to the needs and responses of children with ASD in practice, this required greater delineation in school documentation.

A positive school culture was evident in all sites and respectful interactions were evident between staff and children and children and their peers. In four of the sites, the positioning of specifically designed ASD classrooms at a central location in the school was excellent. An excellent appreciation and understanding of the role of the SNA in supporting an inclusive school

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<sup>58</sup> Reference to the Public Service Agreement under Circular 08/11 between the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, the Department of Education and Skills and School Management, which provides for an additional 36 hours' employment obligation per year for primary school teachers (Department of Education and Skills, 2011).

culture was observed in all sites. The importance of developing effective and positive means of communicating with parents was well understood in all sites and all parents affirmed the excellent inclusive school culture that their children experienced. Children interviewed readily identified an element of their school experience that they enjoyed. Child-protection and anti-bullying policies were available in all sites.

A very good culture of reflection on and review of the provision for children with ASD was a feature of practice in all sites. Principals had both a managerial and instructional role in providing for children with ASD in the school. In four sites, principals had accessed CPD relevant to their leadership role but not specifically related to ASD as this was reported not to be available specifically for principals. All principals had an excellent understanding of the criticality of having staff who had the appropriate knowledge and understanding of learning and teaching for children with ASD. The impact of panel restrictions in recruiting staff with appropriate qualifications was specifically referred to. A variety of practices in the allocation of SNAs and teaching staff was evident with an excellent consistent and equitable approach to rotating teachers and SNAs evident in three sites. While the knowledge base, experience and contribution of the SNA was recognised and acknowledged in all sites, the availability of CPD for SNAs was unacceptable. Access to CPD for teachers in mainstream classes was acceptable. All teachers in special classes demonstrated an excellent understanding of ASD and the associated implications for learning and teaching for children with ASD. In four sites, principals, teachers and SNAs had an excellent understanding of where they might access additional support, expertise and resources for children with ASD. The role of the the Special Education Support Service (SESS) in supporting ASD provision was affirmed in these sites. CPD courses were identified as contributing to the knowledge, skills and confidence of the teacher. In three sites, all teaching staff expressed satisfaction with regard to the availability of CPD with one school's rural isolation and another school's lack of knowledge of the SESS impacting on CPD access. Extending formal learning opportunities and awareness training to parents/guardians was not a reported feature of practice.

All schools had developed very good systems to communicate with external professionals and services and affirmed the advice and support of these professionals and services. However the level of support from external services such as psychologists, occupational therapists and speech and language therapists in supporting provision for children with ASD was unacceptable in all sites.



## 5. Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Post-Primary Schools

The analysis below is derived from the data collected at five post-primary sites, three focused on students with ASD served primarily in mainstream classes (C sites) and two evaluated educational provision for students in special classes (E sites). Four of the five schools in the sample had special classes for students with ASD in the school. A total of 37 interviews, eight student conversations, including two focus groups, and six observations of practice were conducted. Six of the students interviewed were reported to have High Functioning Autism, one had a general learning disability and autism, and one had a moderate general learning disability and autism. The six students in the focus groups were reported to range from having a moderate general learning disability to having High Functioning Autism.<sup>59</sup>

### Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning

#### 1.1 Assessment

Post-primary schools generally demonstrated better levels of practice than documentation. In the area of assessment in particular, unacceptable levels of documentation were observed in all schools. No post-primary settings had a specific assessment policy on provision for students with ASD. Generic approaches to assessment and intervention for students who may have additional support needs were outlined in school policy documents in two sites (e.g. Policy for Children with Special Educational Needs and the Resource Policy). Formative assessment approaches including observation, discussion and checking understanding were often a feature of practice in all sites. Three sites demonstrated an awareness of discrete types of assessment approaches required to evaluate students' language, communication, and social and emotional skill development. A class teacher at one of these sites pointed out that *'it's easy to spot the communication skills. Are they talking and how are they working together? So you monitor that and you can record that quite easily'* [C2\_PPM2\_CT1]. Two sites actively encouraged student involvement in the assessment process by providing clear learning outcomes or targets for each lesson or by engaging the students in self-reflection and self-evaluation [C2\_PPM, E2\_PPSC]. Summative assessment approaches, e.g. termly tests and State examinations (Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied) were a feature of practice in all post-primary sites. Standardised assessments (e.g. Group Reading Test (GRT), Mathematics Assessment for Learning and Teaching (MALT), and Non-Reading Intelligence Test (NRIT) were used often by sites as initial screening assessment tools. Some sites also used the Cognitive Abilities Test 4 (CAT4), and Wide Range Achievement Test 4 (WRAT 4) for the purposes of requesting reasonable accommodations in certificate examinations (RACE) and to provide additional assessment information to support intervention planning [C1\_PPM, Site C2\_PPM]. Access to reasonable accommodations based on educational psychological reports (e.g. use of a scribe, laptop, separate centre, a reader) were provided where necessary in all sites.

<sup>59</sup> High Functioning Autism is used interchangeably with Asperger syndrome.

ASD-specific assessments were a feature of practice in three schools [C1\_PPM, C2\_PPM, E1\_PPSC] and were used to inform planning, instruction and monitoring of progress (e.g. ABLLS-R; and T-TAP). These were associated with special classes and not mainstream students with ASD. Evidence from interviews and documentation suggested that elements of the Functional Behavioural Assessment (FBA) process were utilised where there were instances of behaviours that challenge in special classes in three schools. Antecedent Behaviour Consequence (ABC) charts were predominantly used to identify settings, triggers, actions and consequences. Assessment of co-occurring needs was rarely in evidence in post-primary sites. At one site, an Occupational Therapist assessed students' motor and processing skills using the Assessment of Motor and Process Skills (AMPS). The co-ordinator of ASD provision at this school commented, *'this test is just fantastic because a lot of the time the mainstream teachers say, he is not answering the question – what's going on? I say give him time, the processing time and this (test) gives us that information'* (C2\_PPM\_CO3). This site had also moved towards a continuous assessment approach to reduce students' anxiety. The co-ordinator considered this system to be *'much more productive and it is in tune with their grades'* [C2\_PPM\_CO3]. Assessment of behaviours that challenge was acceptable in special classes but unacceptable for students in mainstream classes in post-primary schools.

Differentiated methods of assessments were in evidence in three post-primary sites to maximise student participation in the assessment process. Methods included using lower and higher order questions, and allowing extra time for student responses. One site was in the process of including on students' report cards whether assessments had been differentiated *'so the parent is aware of it'* [C2\_PPM\_CO3].

## 1.2 Individualised Planning

Documentary evidence of individualised planning based on students' strengths and needs was available in all sites but unacceptable overall. The inclusion of essential information for planning, implementing and evaluating the students' programmes was rarely a feature of practice. Individualised education planning addressed a broad range of developmental and educational needs in the areas of language and communication, social interaction, behaviour and emotional development in two post-primary settings in special classes. One of the settings also included a section in the pupil profile to record care and medical needs [C2\_PPM]. In all the individualised planning reviewed, targets were rarely specific, measurable, agreed, realistic, and time-bound (SMART). However, the co-ordinating teacher at one school pointed out that *'learning targets are phrased as learning goals and are devised by the students themselves in senior cycle classes'* [C2\_PPM\_CO3]. Consequently, the learning goals in this setting were not written as SMART targets.

Strategies, methodologies and materials required to teach learning targets were rarely clearly defined and tended to be vague or global approaches rather than differentiated for individual students. The individualised education plans were available to mainstream teachers in all settings. A class teacher pointed out that he would photocopy the individualised education plan and found that *'there is a great benefit of being aware of their sensory needs'* [C1\_PPM\_CT1]. However, implementation of individualised education plans outside special classes was rarely in evidence. When asked how the individualised education plan was implemented in the school, a class

teacher replied '*I don't know, that's more special needs teachers*' [C1\_PPM\_CT1]. The co-ordinator of special education at one site also acknowledged that individualised planning was an area in need of development: '*that is where we fall down and I'm hands up here I suppose. It is all very new to us in a sense...*' [C3\_PPM\_CO]. The co-ordinator at another site also alluded to the difficulties associated with individualised planning in post-primary settings: '*They [IEPs] are available for all teachers to view. We would get input from all teachers into the IEP. We have tried it the other way. We have given them to every subject teacher [and] asked them what it would mean for their subject, we are still working on it. It is really hard to collate multiple students and 11 subjects...*' [C2\_PPM\_CO]. Review dates were included in individualised education plans in special classes in two sites and in student profiles in one of these settings.

Parental and student involvement in educational planning, both formally and informally, was often a strong feature of practice and acceptable in most sites. Parents were involved and consulted on an on-going basis in most sites. One parent articulated that she felt '*very involved and always have been. We would identify the targets with the unit teacher or with the classroom teacher and we would discuss them*' [E2\_PPSC\_PAR8]. Evidence from interviews indicated that students were consulted and involved in education planning informally in all settings. A special class teacher pointed out that '*students would chat with myself or another staff member. There would be self-reflection about classes, what went well, what could be better what the challenges are*' [E2\_PPSC\_SCT3]. In two settings formal procedures were in place to record student involvement in their own educational planning (e.g. student questionnaires and attendance at planning meetings was evident from documentation).

External services such as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), Occupational Therapist, Speech and Language Therapist and/or Psychiatrist were sometimes consulted and involved in the planning process where appropriate and, more often, where available. One co-ordinator stated '*we indirectly get feedback from them [external services] should we need it to implement into the IEP*' [C2\_PPM\_CO]. Two sites didn't engage with external services due to their lack of availability. A parent of a child in one of these sites commented, '*there is a lack of occupational, speech and behavioural therapy...we asked for all of them... there is no set plan in place*' [E1\_PPSC\_PAR60]. Some parents also referred to their relationship with external services with regard to intervention planning and access. One parent mentioned that she '*was in touch with SLT and OT recently ... they are like gold dust. They will take my call*' [E\_PPSC\_PAR9]. Another parent pointed out that: '*a private Speech and Language Therapist has been a huge help...Working out little plans and setting out targets and reviewing progress that Jake has made. And it links into the school. Psychology we haven't been seeing. We are on the waiting list. Psychiatry has been a huge intervention because Jake's mental health has been huge*' [E\_PPSC\_PAE8].

Overall, external services were not equally available to post-primary sites and some were able to use the resources of their patron bodies to support them. Appropriate use of external services to inform planning was unacceptable though not within the control of the schools.

### 1.3 Transition

Three forms of transition planning were observed in these sites: transitions within sites from class to class and within lessons, transitions into post-primary schools from primary sites, and, finally, transition planning for post-school sites. Excellent practices were noted for transitions into and within sites. Transition practices for post-school sites was good at two sites, unacceptable at one and not required for students with ASD to date in two sites, therefore not developed.

Immediate day-to-day transition planning was in evidence in all sites. Internal transitions (class to class, activity-to-activity within classes) were well structured and detailed in interviews and observations. There was awareness among staff at all sites of the increased anxiety and stress that unplanned changes to schedules produced. In the words of a class teacher, day-to-day transition planning '*goes on all the time. There is preparation for it all the time because anywhere that there is integration there is movement*' [C1\_PPM\_CT2]. Pictorial and written schedules were in evidence in all sites where appropriate. Special needs assistants (SNAs) supported the management of internal transitions and students were alerted ahead of time to changes in schedules at all sites.

There was evidence (in interviews and in documentation) of excellent practice in the process of transitioning into post-primary schools which was carefully and sensitively managed and individualised in nature in two of the sites. Transition planning in three of the sites was less formalised but acceptable in practice. One school detailed the transitional support programmes offered by the school in their Admissions Policy. Strategies were in place in all schools to familiarise the student with ASD with their post-primary setting. These strategies included transition books, videos, pictures, site visits, social stories and meetings with their peer group and teachers. Most sites included some of these activities but did not have them enshrined in policy documents. Parents were invited and welcomed to be a part of the transition process into post-primary schools at all sites. External professionals (e.g. disability services and NEPS) were also involved in transition planning where relevant. In two of the sites places were offered to students with ASD in December and this facilitated early planning for transition. Formal transition meetings between primary and post-primary personnel were also a feature of practice in all schools.

Transition planning to post-school placement was very good in two of the settings [C1\_PPM; C2\_PPM]. Students in these settings were introduced to post-school options and personnel up to one and a half years in advance, where relevant. School personnel have built up relationships with a variety of organisations and institutions involved in the delivery of continuing education and training (e.g. National Learning Network, Post Leaving Certificate courses, Further Education and Training Award Courses). Strategies in place to support these transitions included site visits with a teacher and SNA, short placements in the setting supported by an SNA, and meetings between the personnel involved. Planning for students transitioning out of post-primary school was absent in one (which was unacceptable) and a developing acceptable practice in two of the sites as students with ASD had not progressed through these two schools to need such planning. Guidance counsellors played a key role in transitioning and worked in collaboration with resource teachers, year heads and parents. Principals, teachers and parents expressed concern at the lack of support and structure at the exit stage in two sites. A principal commented that '*only in last couple of years we had students with ASD leaving. We are aware of it now and we are putting things*

*in place. We have met with parents and most cases the parents had a good idea of what was next for them and we didn't have much of a role to play. There is a need to have something more substantial' [E2\_PPSC\_P].*

In one site, the principal felt transition planning for students leaving the school was not within their remit '*...it's not our business. We prepare them and make sure they have whatever they have to have to get to go wherever they want to go but it's not our decision' [E1\_PPSC\_P]. This philosophy permeated down to parents, one of whom expressed concern about the transition from post-primary school '*...it's just now when he finishes, where will he go, that is the killing thing and he is so happy there' [E\_PPSC\_PAR9].**

## 1.4 Curriculum/Certification

The availability of and support for access to all curriculum and subject areas was acceptable in four schools and not acceptable in one. All schools indicated that students had access to all areas and subjects within the national curriculum but noted that this access was mediated by student interest and capacity. Two schools indicated in their policy documents that they aim for students to participate in mainstream classes at least 70% of the time. Students were encouraged to participate in the full range of subjects whenever possible including music, art and physical education, woodwork, home economics and geography. There was evidence that some students with ASD were on reduced timetables in all settings. In four of the five sites decisions to reduce timetabled access to subjects were appropriately made in response to students' capacity and interest levels. One principal stated that students '*would have access to all subjects but what we found is that some of them can't cope with it. Reduced curricula are the individualised response that we have to that' [C3\_PPM\_P]. Another principal indicated that approximately 50% of students would access regular classes for mainstream subjects and that others would have reduced timetables and '*may access two, three or four subjects' [C2\_PPM\_P]. Where reduced timetables were in place, exemptions were almost always for Gaelge and Modern Foreign Languages. Decisions to reduce the curriculum were based on the student's ability, their strengths and how stressful they found the subject, and were made in consultation with parents and teachers in all schools. However, none of the students with ASD accessed Science in one setting which was unacceptable.**

In another setting access for students in special classes to mainstream classes was minimal for some and non-existent for others. At this site [E1\_PPSC], the absence of a curricular framework for the special classes was a significant concern to the staff of the special classes and the practice was considered unacceptable. Here, mainstream teachers, satisfying timetable requirements with learning support hours, supplemented teaching in the special classes. This was unstructured and led to a fragmented provision including no curriculum content being covered for up to 25% of the day for many students. It also meant that more than 16 teachers worked in the special classes with the students with ASD, contrary to best practice. The co-ordinator of the special classes was aware of the negative impact this timetable-driven practice had on teaching content and methods but was powerless to change it.

Junior and Leaving Certificate programmes were available for students in all settings, and accessed depending on interests and capacity to engage in them. Students could access various levels of certification (i.e. foundation, pass and honours levels). The Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) was available in two settings and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) was available in four of the five settings. In three sites mainstreamed students did participate in state certificate examinations. Participation in the leaving certification examinations was not without challenges, as one principal noted that: *'performance at Junior Level is generally very, very high. What we have discovered is that children with ASD tend to find the inferential learning, critical thinking and the breadth of vision required to respond to the higher order thinking questions at Leaving Cert to be a challenge that goes a little bit too far for them'* [C2\_PPM]. In two of these sites, alternatives such as FETAC were offered for students in either special classes or mainstreamed. In the third site, the principal expressed the concern that the school could not meet the students' needs in these circumstances. There was a clear expectation by the principal in this site that all students with ASD entering the school would have capacity to partake to some extent in the general curriculum. Overall, certification options available were good at four sites and not acceptable at one.

There was evidence of differentiation based on language and sensory needs, pace, responses and outcomes in all settings and differentiation was observed in practice in two sites. A special class teacher noted that the tasks, expectations and support were typically varied to suit the students but, *'more often than not it's usually that the workload has to be differentiated, homework or secondary activities in class they would be a little bit different'* [E\_PPSC\_SCT3]. Separate lessons were offered in some sites in these areas and these were arranged flexibly during resource classes to support the content of the mainstream classes rather than replace them. For example, at one site students could take additional Physical Education (PE) classes prior to the mainstream PE classes in areas where they might need extra skill practice or more task-analysed instruction [C2\_PPM]. A variety of activities and methodologies was used to reflect the different ways students learned including class discussion, group work, demonstration/modelling, scaffolding, power-point presentations and role play. Information and communication technology (ICT) and visual approaches to learning were identified as methodological approaches used to support students with ASD in two sites. Lesson sequences observed were logical and developmentally appropriate in all settings. Evidence from lessons observed suggested that the content was made very concrete and related to student experience and prior knowledge. A rationale related to 'real life' was provided for students in lessons observed in four settings. Overall, differentiation methods were acceptable in four sites and not observed in the fifth, therefore unacceptable.

## 1.5 Teaching Methodologies

An acceptable variety of activities and methodologies was used to teach core skills and concepts to the students with ASD in all post-primary sites, e.g. class discussion, group work, demonstration/modelling, scaffolding, power point presentation and role play. Observations of lessons in four sites indicated good levels of student engagement with multiple opportunities for students to actively respond and participate. There was evidence in one setting of excessive adult talk and discussion in the context of special class provision, too much rapid verbal prompting, and an over-reliance on unstructured independent work. At this site, observed teaching methodologies were unacceptable.

Specific ASD teaching approaches such as TEACCH, ABA and PECS<sup>60</sup> were mentioned by three settings and teachers had received CPD around these. ASD-specific teaching approaches were more associated with special classes in these settings than mainstream provision and were used acceptably in response to student needs. Although one parent stated that she used Social Stories as a strategy to prepare her child for change, teachers from two settings indicated that they felt the use of Social Stories was not an effective approach for post-primary students. One special class teacher suggested that students in post primary were '*beyond Social Stories*' [E3\_PPSC\_SCT]. Scripts were used primarily in that setting for rules and guidelines.

All sites recognised the importance of the development of social and communication skills through small group work and pair work. One teacher indicated that, although these tasks are '*difficult for our pupils*', they were also the '*best ones to promote social and communication skills*' [E3\_PPSC\_SCT]. However, in one setting greater opportunities for group work or pair work would have enhanced the lesson observed. In another setting it was observed that communication between students was not a focus of the group work activity.

Visual approaches to support learning were promoted in all settings and in evidence at acceptable levels. A class teacher stated that most of the students '*are visual learners and that would dictate how I work*' [C2\_PPM\_CT1]. Visual teaching supports and organisational supports (e.g. diagrams, visual schedules and timetables, visual prompts) were a feature of practice in all settings and were acceptably used to increase students' independence, participation and active engagement in teaching and learning activities. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) was observed in use as a teaching tool in three out of the five settings, e.g. power-point presentation, interactive white board, online resources and tablets. All schools identified ICT as a methodological approach used to support students with ASD. Parents also recognised the importance of technology and one parent commented that '*technology has been huge...we have a little app on her phone...the "tablet" and everything like that has helped hugely*' [E2\_PPSC\_PAR8]. Evidence from interviews suggests that co-teaching was used to support students with ASD in the general curriculum in two sites. At one site it was used for practical subjects such as Science and Woodwork [E2\_PPM].

Special needs assistants (SNAs) provided acceptable support to students during observed lessons in four settings. The SNAs provided additional assistance by taking notes for students, providing opportunities for rehearsal of answers and using verbal and visual prompts. SNAs were used very well to increase students' independence and participation in school activities in three of the settings. In one setting, SNAs were observed to engage in teaching activities and to supervise students without teacher guidance. This occurred when mainstream teachers present were filling Learning Support hours in special classes. Excessive adult-to-adult communication and disproportionate SNA input were observed to reduce student active engagement and participation in learning activities at this site and were unacceptable.

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<sup>60</sup> Bondy, A. and Frost, L. (2002) A Picture's Worth: PECS and Other Visual Communication Strategies in Autism, Bethesda: Woodbine House.

There was some evidence from observations that teaching was based on assessment and took into account the students' strengths, interests and preferences. This was more evident in special classes than in mainstream classes. Evidence from interviews indicated that students' special interests, strengths and preferences were taken into consideration at acceptable levels in three settings. A special class teacher mentioned the importance of finding out about each student's interest, *'what is their key'*, and to relate it to learning [C1\_PPM1\_SCT1]. The teacher added that the subject material *'no matter what it is'*, can be related to the students' interests. Another special class teacher referred to using students' special interests in instruction to promote engagement in learning activities, *'they are more inclined to get involved in a task if it is along the lines of their special interest...'* [E2\_PPSC\_SCT3]. In mainstream subject teaching, attention to interests and preferences was less in evidence and not acceptable.

The promotion of routine and predictability was a good feature of practice in all post-primary sites. Students demonstrated an awareness of the structure of the school day and activities and transitions were clearly signalled and explained. Unstructured activities (e.g. DVDs, independent computer work, and choice time) were a feature of practice in one setting where provision was fragmented due to timetable issues. Students' work was on display in the ASD specific classrooms in all settings. Students' artwork was also on display in the corridors and staffroom of two of the settings.

There was no documentary evidence of a clear plan showing methodologies for systematically promoting the maintenance and generalisation of skills learned in any of the settings which was unacceptable. Pre-teaching was mentioned by personnel in two settings as an approach used to prepare students for their mainstream classes. One special class teacher [C1\_PPM\_SCT1] used observation to assess students' social and communication skills during a class he co-taught. The teacher used this information to reinforce skills in a small group during resource class. Students then had an opportunity to practise their skills in a small group setting and apply their learning in the mainstream class. In another setting, a special class teacher pointed out that teachers try where possible to give: *'everyday life examples... always making the connection to everyday life skills regardless of the subject. Teachers look to try and build that in a little bit... to integrate any opportunity for social life skills into that lesson'* [E\_2\_PPSC\_SCT3].

School personnel in all sites were aware of the sensory aspects of ASD and their impact on teaching and learning. A class teacher was mindful of overstimulating students' visual senses and spoke of minimising distractions in classrooms, base rooms and corridors. In this setting, PE was taught in small groups to students with ASD to supplement mainstream instruction as: *'the PE teacher blowing the whistle and the lights might be that bit too bright so it can be difficult for students with sensory difficulties... I think by having smaller group classes it takes away a lot of that stress straight away'* [C2\_PPM\_CT3].

During observations in special classes, classroom lighting was managed to suit students' sensory needs, and one student with light sensitivity wore a hat and sunglasses. Another site with special classes cultivated a relaxed atmosphere in their sensory room through the use of flowers, scented candles, and light management. A relaxation room was used in a mainstream setting to provide a calming space in the school for students with ASD. Careful attention had been paid to the colour



scheme of the room and the selection and placement of furniture [C3\_PPM]. Overall, there was very good attention to sensory needs of students in all post-primary sites.

## 1.6 Team Approach

There was almost always evidence that a team approach to the education of students with ASD was a feature of practice. External agencies were used whenever available rather than when needed. All sites expressed concern at cutbacks to services including Speech and Language, Occupational Therapy, and Psychological services. In all sites, as provision for students with ASD increased, support services remained the same or decreased. One co-ordinator noted, '*the same level of support we had for three students in 2007 is what we have now for eight times that number*' [C2\_PPSC\_CO3]. Some sites had access to services from local providers, others did not, which was not acceptable.

There was some collaboration between mainstream teachers and special class and resource/ learning support teachers but most of this was informal in nature. Staff room discussions and chats, easy availability of information and plans for students with ASD for mainstream teachers and occasional use of formal staff meetings to share information were referred to. Excellent practice was observed in one site where daily interactions between special education staff and mainstream teachers were a consistent feature of practice, as were weekly team meetings between the ASD team and the school principal. There was an overall lack of clear structures for sharing information between special education teachers and mainstream teachers. In some sites, mainstream teachers consulted directly with special education teachers when there was a problem with a student. Special needs assistants also relayed information between mainstream and special education settings within sites. Overall, the team approach was in excellent evidence at one site and was unacceptable in the other sites due to the lack of formal structures to facilitate it.

## 1.7 Data Collection/Monitoring of Progress/Outcomes

Acceptable levels of data were used to inform instruction of an academic nature but data collection procedures for non-academic areas such as communication or social domains were unacceptable at all post-primary sites particularly for mainstreamed students with ASD. Data were used on an on-going basis to inform teaching and learning. Teachers in all five post-primary settings were observed to engage in on-going monitoring of student progress within the classroom, e.g. checking understanding, questioning, correcting homework. All teachers monitored academic progress through in-class assessments and State examinations. Student involvement in monitoring their own progress was a feature of practice in one school. A co-ordinator of ASD provision in one site explained that students engaged in self-evaluation during resource time: '*they would evaluate how I have done this week. We have a goal of the week usually, how do I evaluate, has this been a good week or a bad week*' [C2\_PPM2\_CO]. Systematic engagement in on-going monitoring of progress in relation to language and communication, social skills, behaviour and emotional understanding and independence was rarely in evidence in special classes and never in mainstream classes. One school used a behaviour rating scale to monitor and record student behaviour. Another school also used a social skills checklist to inform intervention

planning. However, there was a lack of documentary evidence to indicate how the monitoring of student progress was recorded and used to inform practice on a school-wide basis in all five sites. The informal nature of progress monitoring and review was highlighted by one special class teacher who said, *'we do it informally most of the time, 80% of the time we'd say informally. And then we have our meetings and we would always check back on targets'* [E2\_PPSC\_SCT3]. Students' individualised planning and student files were available to staff in all five sites in line with confidentiality protocols. A principal expressed the belief that *'the SNAs and the general teaching staff should have access to a summary file of the child, what the child's needs are, what strategies work in the classroom and what strategies are major triggers'* [C2\_PPM\_P3]. This principal also highlighted the importance of establishing *'proper functioning communications systems'* and ensuring that *'files will be reviewed regularly'*. Informal communication of student progress between teaching staff was a feature of practice in all five sites and was acceptable. A principal, commenting on this process, mentioned that communication between teachers in the ASD special classes and mainstream teachers was primarily informal through meetings *'in the staff room, informal chats. If there are specific difficulties they would go to whoever is responsible for them in the unit or the year head'* [C2\_PPM1\_P2]. Similarly, a special class teacher noted, *'you are getting constant feedback from the teachers and SNAs. If there is a problem we would know about it very quickly'* [C2\_PPM\_SCT1]. Special needs assistant involvement in monitoring and recording of student progress was a feature of practice in all schools. Special needs assistants maintained formal records using diaries, reports, and notes. A special class teacher pointed out that very often the SNA would be the person who would recognise, *'well actually Mike has gone from saying "hi how are you" to three more questions at lunch time'* [E2\_PPSC\_SCT3]. Acceptable systems to communicate information to parents were in place in all sites. Formal methods included report cards, individualised planning meetings and letters. Informal approaches included phone calls, communication booklets and meetings.

## Summary: Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning

Whilst there was considerable diversity in regards to the degree to which the post-primary sites documented their educational practices for students with ASD, practice was good and superior to documentation in four of the five sites. Assessment for learning including differentiated methods was acceptable at three sites and unacceptable at the other two. Elements of Functional Behavioural Assessment were used at all sites to support students with challenging behaviour but these elements were more obviously used in special classes than with mainstreamed students. The practices of schools to engage parents and students themselves in the development of individualised plans were excellent. Transitions within lessons and across the school day were excellent, and good procedures were in place to facilitate students moving from primary to post-primary environments. Four of the five sites provided open access to all curriculum areas to students and reduced curriculum timetables were developed with good input from parents and students. Differentiation for instruction was acceptable at four of the five sites. Good teaching strategies were observed in the same four sites including a wide range of appropriate practices to support student engagement and learning. Both differentiation and instructional strategies were unacceptable at the fifth site.

There was no evidence of assessment policies to drive instruction at any site. Individualised plans – while in evidence at all sites – lacked SMART targets, and were rarely systematically reviewed. Individualised planning was generally unacceptable for students in mainstream classes and acceptable for students in special classes. Post-primary schools overall did not have adequate access to external services at any site to provide input to planning, assessment or review. Transition practices for students moving to post-secondary options were acceptable at three sites, very good at one and unacceptable at one. Timetabling of Learning Support hours in special classes at one site led to unacceptable instruction and SNA responsibility for student learning. Progress on learning targets was monitored informally only at all sites and systematic review of progress was rarely in evidence.

## Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture

### 2.1 School Culture

There was very good practice of thoughtful and co-ordinated school-wide efforts to create a positive school culture for the students with ASD in most of the post-primary schools. Inclusivity ranged from placing provision for students with ASD at 'the centre' of what schools did to considering it a normal part of their role of educating all the students from their surrounding communities. Students with ASD were given opportunities to participate in a broad range of certification options including Junior Certificate, JCSP, LCA, and Leaving Certificate and FETAC. Parents and students were very satisfied in most schools with these opportunities. As one parent observed, *'I never thought I'd see the day when he would be doing an exam and he is very proud of it'* (C1\_PPM1\_P). Project work was flexible and content was chosen to suit the interests of students. In four of the five schools, there were expectations that students with ASD would fully participate in Transition Year (TY) activities including career exploration experiences. At three sites, students were given a considerable degree of choice around their overt connections to special classrooms or resource rooms in the schools. For example, in two sites, students were supported to use lockers in the mainstream portion of the school at their request rather than use the lockers designated for students associated with special classes in the school. One student observed that *'most students have to go to the resource room and they have a shelf there and they have their name and their books there. But I wanted my own locker. I didn't really like being seen going into the room. I was kind of uncomfortable with that and it was embarrassing. They were good enough to let me have my own locker as long as I was organised and that was no problem for me'* [C2\_PPM2\_Peter].

Most post-primary schools valued making provision for students with ASD not only because of its impact on the students, but for what it contributed to the skill enhancement of all teachers in the school and teaching practices in all classrooms. In one school the classroom boards were all structured similarly with spaces on the sides devoted to key words and concepts for lessons and homework recognising that incorporating visual supports as key elements of instruction was of benefit not only to the students with ASD but to all in the school.

## 2.2 Communication

An excellent level of communication with parents was evident in four of the five sites with an acceptable level evident at the fifth. All sites operated an open-door policy. Communication was facilitated through formal parent-teacher meetings and individualised planning meetings, both of which were held at least annually, informal face-to-face meetings, regular telephone contact, use of home-school journals and school reports. All five sites used daily Communication Books and these were very good in all cases in transmitting information about students. In two sites the co-ordinating teacher or special class teacher had given a personal mobile number to parents to facilitate contact and in another school a dedicated mobile phone was used to enable contact with parents as and when needed. In four of the five sites there was a strong sense of the value of parental involvement in planning for students. At the fifth site some prior negative parent-school experiences had impacted on the school administration which was more cautious about valuing parental involvement. One special class teacher mentioned, *'we are a team. It takes a village to raise a child'* [C3\_PPM\_CT4], and another commented that *'parents are the first educators'* [C1\_PPM\_SCT1]. One site in particular demonstrated an excellent capacity to engage parents in meaningful collaboration and one teacher described how *'parents can influence the teachers positively but it's about keeping the communication open'* [C2\_PPM\_CT3]. Involvement, when it was encouraged, was meaningful and parents in almost all interviews expressed their satisfaction with the level of communication with school. One parent described how she felt her concerns and the concerns of her son were taken on board and noted that *'the school understands my son – they listen to him'* [C2\_PPM\_PAR3].

School personnel in all schools described the challenges of involving parents and cited time constraints, varying expectations and attitudes, poor parental engagement, or excessive parental engagement as potential barriers to collaboration with parents. One principal described how parental involvement *'...can be a difficulty. Sometimes parents have had to fight every step of the way, fighting with school when there is no need to'* [E2\_PPSC\_P], while a co-ordinating teacher explained how she *'sometimes [has] to ring parents at home, at night, when my own children have gone to bed'* [E2\_PPSC\_SCT3]. Distance from the school was a barrier to regular communication in some rural areas. There was evidence also that more negative parent-school relationships developed when there was a disconnect between what parents wanted as supports for their child and what the school thought it should provide, when the school did not consider the child could participate in mainstream subjects beneficially, or when one-on-one teaching was expected and could not be provided because of resourcing. In all five sites, little documentary evidence existed as to the extent of parental involvement and schools would benefit from documenting a more detailed description of all practices used to cultivate parental involvement in the School Plan.

Relevant professionals were also communicated with when services were available. There were inequities in terms of service provision that seemed to be based on geographical location. Four of the five sites expressed concerns at the lack of external support services and the fifth reported extremely poor levels of external support. One co-ordinating teacher expressed her frustration at the paucity of therapeutic services and considered that support was only given in response to crises and believed that external agencies *'do not want to engage with children who have turned 12'* [E1\_PPSC1\_CO2]. Parents from three sites asserted that the level of support from external agencies had either ceased or significantly diminished upon entry to post-primary education.

Two parents, both from the same geographical region, were happy with the level of support from external agencies. Almost all participants in the post-primary sites expressed frustration at the lack of synchronisation of services and felt that external services should be linked to educational provision. School personnel in three sites raised concerns about their dependence on parents to mediate between services and share reports and details of any interventions being used to support their child outside of school.

## 2.3 Learning Environment

The learning environment provided was very good in all sites. Four of the five sites had specifically designed ASD classrooms while the fifth site had two resource rooms that were purposefully decorated to support students' sensory needs. Four sites deliberately located ASD support classrooms in central but quiet positions in the schools to promote locational inclusion while one site was remote from the main school building. In all five sites, specific ASD or resource classrooms were organised, bright and attractive. Visual schedules and timetables were age-appropriate, displayed appropriately and kept to a minimum. Students were aware of the predictable sequence of activities in the school day. Work stations were individualised and age appropriate. In all five sites, space was used flexibly and creatively to facilitate individual and group work. Three sites had separate sensory rooms, which were used effectively by some students to self-regulate, promote positive behaviour and reduce anxiety and stress. In four sites students were encouraged to attend regular lessons alongside their peers, while very little integration for students with ASD was observed in one site which was unacceptable.

However, while integration was promoted, only two sites made adaptations to the physical environment in the mainstream school. One of these made excellent efforts to create an ASD-friendly environment throughout the school with colour-coded corridors, minimal classroom displays and separate lockers for students in calmer areas of the school. Another site supported integration by organising the physical environment in a way that facilitated independent navigation by way of subject-themed corridors reflecting areas such as Humanities, Languages, and Science. School personnel in three sites did not think adaptations were necessary in the mainstream classrooms insofar as these schools had specifically designed ASD special classes that catered for students' learning and sensory needs.

In three sites, almost all students with ASD initially experienced difficulties navigating the school. Some continue to be challenged by this. One student, remembering his own difficulties in first year at the school, offered advice to incoming first year students with ASD *'to try and stay focused and try and stay settled because that is hard and sort of do your own thing'* [C2\_PPM\_Peter]. No additional navigational strategies were evident, other than SNA support, to promote independent mobility for these students.

In all sites, school personnel had an excellent level of awareness of the need to create quiet social spaces for students with ASD and, in three sites, designated social areas with soft couches, refreshment facilities like kettles, microwaves, and communal tables were observed. The importance of these 'safe havens' for students with ASD in busy post-primary schools was discussed by school personnel, students and parents in all sites. These spaces were accessible

to students upon arrival at school in the mornings, during breaks and lunch times, under SNA supervision, and were almost always used by the majority of students. In all sites reverse inclusion was promoted to varying degrees through clubs and games activities during breaks and lunchtimes. Several students commented on inviting mainstream peers and friends to visit these spaces: *'I have a friend in the unit and two in mainstream – one comes down here sometimes. We just chat. I bring one down here to play on the computer or play basketball'* [E2\_PPSC\_Josh]. Another student commented on inviting a mainstream peer to visit the sensory room, *'sometimes I take them down here and show them the sensory room'* noting that his mainstream peer described his experience of a sensory resource as *'complete heaven'* [E2\_PPSC2\_Luke].

In all five sites, good variety in the timetable facilitated movement breaks particularly in special classrooms. In one site where classrooms were teacher based and necessitated student mobility, a teacher commented that this system worked well when students were provided with additional supports to navigate the building. In mainstream classrooms it was often observed that inadequate space was available for students to take movement breaks or to self-regulate. While staff was alert to potential stressors in almost all sites, strategies to alleviate student stress and anxiety were mostly evident in designated ASD classrooms. In lesson observations in mainstream classrooms learning and movement breaks were rarely observed.

Evidence of a good variety of visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and tactile resources was found in all sites. Use of ICT acted as a motivator for students but, in one site, appeared to have been used excessively when students were given 'choice' activities. Classrooms were almost always well-resourced with a variety of displays, 3-D models and objects.

## 2.4 Extra-Curricular Activities

Extra-curricular activities in terms of activities taking place outside of the school day are not a feature of the Irish Education system. Rather schools provide a range of co-curricular activities with explicit links to the curriculum.

It was evident in four of the five sites that excellent structures were in place to promote student engagement with school-wide and community-based activities. Students with ASD had access to almost all co-curricular activities in all sites. Activities such as sports, school tours, offsite visits to universities and colleges and field trips were accessible to almost all students. In all sites, students with ASD had been on trips abroad, for example, to France and Italy. Schools put additional resources in place to support access to these extra-curricular activities for students. In all sites, the SNAs played a pivotal role in promoting this access and one SNA commented, *'wherever the boys go, we go'* [C2\_PPM\_SNA2]. Special Needs Assistants displayed an excellent commitment to their role in almost all instances. In one site, an SNA fundraised annually in her own time to take two students to France each Easter, and in another school, an SNA will be accompanying a particular student to Italy in the summer term. Many parents and students referred to the importance of giving choice in terms of participating in these activities. A parent commenting on her son's lack of participation in non-academic activities said, *'He is not doing anything and that is his own choice. He doesn't want to join one of those clubs – he could do it because they are very open to that ... but it is his choice'* [E1\_PPSC\_PAR2]. Students' level of interest in the activity,

the social demands of the activity and whether the students had significant behaviours that challenged and might comprise a health and safety concern were the key factors identified by both parents and teachers which limited the extent to which students with ASD participated in extra-curricular activities at four of the five sites. At the fifth site acceptable supports were provided to include students in some co-curricular activities but expectations for participation in all co-curricular activities were low and unacceptable.

Most schools also made efforts to prepare students to participate in co-curricular activities that they might have anxieties about in order to broaden the range students would attempt. Additional activities such as weekly swimming, horse-riding, trips to local cafés were included on timetables to foster the development of life skills and social skills. In all sites, students were supported to participate in work experience and, for the most part, this was well planned and successful. An SNA in one site offered an example of how a talent for playing musical instruments had accidentally been discovered in one of the students. The school, together with the family, encouraged and facilitated the student in developing this skill, offering on-site music tuition, providing musical CDs, and the family organised after-school tuition. This student has now replaced his special interest in graveyards with playing musical instruments and has started playing traditional music in some local pubs with his uncle.

In all sites school personnel discussed the challenges of including students with ASD in activities such as PE and Music. Two schools displayed excellent practice in how they differentiated the PE curriculum to facilitate access for the students. In one site students participated in PE in smaller groups in a smaller area, in order to minimise the noise, and in another site, a specifically designed 'Fitness Suite' was used effectively each morning with the students from the special class.

Student interviews in all sites revealed that most students did not engage in social activities with school friends outside of school hours. In only one site did students meet outside of school hours and usually this was every Saturday. The distance students lived from the school and each other might have been an inhibiting factor. Opportunities for students with ASD to socialise with typically developing peers were promoted in all schools during lunch and break times. Special needs assistants in all sites facilitated social interaction between peers during these unstructured times and students were encouraged to eat lunch in the canteen at least once a week in all schools.

Reverse inclusion was observed in three schools where students with ASD were encouraged to invite peers along to the special class or designated base during break and lunch times. However, in one school this was described as particularly challenging and one SNA stated that students with ASD didn't interact with peers and expressed the belief that ASD special classes *'should [not] be part of a mainstream school... too much focus on academic skills to the detriment of life skills* [E1\_PPSC\_SNA5]. A tension seemed to exist at the post-primary level in trying to strike a balance between academic and non-academic skills. This emerged as an issue in three sites and particularly related to students who presented with moderate general learning disabilities. Maintaining an equilibrium between the teaching of academic and non-academic skills was difficult to achieve, and staff cited reasons such as unrealistic parental expectations as to the ability of their child, a content-driven curriculum and lack of time to develop social and life skills.

Parental involvement in supporting their child to engage in co-curricular activities was observed in four sites and was a particular strength of current provision. Parents almost always played an active role in supporting work experience placement. In one school, for example, a parent was pro-active in sourcing and securing a work placement for her son, after the placement provider was initially reluctant to offer the place, *'once they heard he had autism they wanted nothing to do with him and it was me that kind of took the heat and said please don't dismiss him until you meet him'* [C1\_PPM\_Par2]. Parental involvement in school trips and tours was also encouraged in four sites. Parental involvement in the development of co-curricular activities was rarely observed in one site. Almost all parents described the co-curricular activities they encouraged outside of school time and often supported their children in pursuing their interests, such as swimming, music and quad biking.

## 2.5 Student Wellbeing

In four of the five sites, positive mental health amongst the students was promoted informally and indirectly at a very good level and at the fifth site this was acceptable. Staff displayed an awareness of potential stressors for students with ASD, specifically transitions, State examinations, homework and unstructured breaks in the day such as lunch time. One site in particular was excellent in its approach to support and promote positive mental health for all students and adopted school-wide campaigns or 'themes' such as anti-bullying awareness and social skills training for all students. This school also fostered links with external psychiatric and counselling services and in one instance provided on-site counselling for a student who had experienced bereavement. In two sites formal peer mentoring systems – labelled in one school 'Big Sister: Little Sister' – were established, whereby either senior or transition year students mentored first years. Guidance counsellors in three schools provided much needed support to students experiencing anxiety.

In all sites, procedures were put in place to minimise or alleviate anxieties. All sites consistently fostered positive relationships with students and acknowledged its importance in promoting positive student wellbeing. Formal curricular programmes such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) were available and accessible to students with ASD in four sites. In one site some students in the special classes did not access any mainstream education and no evidence of access to the SPHE curriculum was observed or provided which was considered unacceptable practice. Visual schedules, preparing students for transitions, use of sensory rooms or quiet spaces, calming colour schemes in designated spaces, sympathetic use of wall displays, awareness of sensory needs of students and potential triggers for students were almost always observed in the five sites.

Transitioning into and out of post-primary education was described as triggers for student anxiety in all sites by parents, students and school personnel. It is evident that all schools developed practices to support transition into post-primary, which were described earlier in Section 1.3. In sites where July Education Programme (JEP) provision was offered to students prior to transitioning to first year (two sites), the students interviewed who had availed of this found it helped to reduce anxiety. One student described how July provision *'helped me to settle in. When I was going into secondary school I was nervous about how I would cope as a lot of things in my life*



*are difficult'* [E2\_PPSC\_Luke]. It was evident in four sites that support for transition to further and higher education, or to supported employment was in place for students with ASD and two sites were involved in the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme.

Staff in four sites demonstrated an excellent flexible approach to supporting student mental health and were responsive to students' requests and concerns. In these sites, teachers appeared competent in supporting student anxiety: offering students sensory, movement and mental breaks, teaching students self-regulation strategies, involving students in decision-making processes and providing predictability and structure. Two sites acquiesced to the requests of students about locker placement which reduced student anxiety and respected choice (see Section 2.1). In all sites, all students interviewed indicated they were reasonably happy in school. Potential triggers for anxiety included homework, transition, noise, social interactions with peers and exams. One student described how she enjoyed writing and engaged in developing online friendships because *'I like talking online because it is text based and it's easier to understand them'* [E2\_PPSC\_Lucy]. This student further reported that if she was having a bad day she could *'offload'* online. Another student, who in first year was non-verbal and who now attended mainstream classes full-time described how *'I feel now I am a lot more confident in myself since I first started in this school'* [C1\_PPM\_Shane].

In four sites availability of external therapeutic supports was limited. The fifth site in particular felt the needs of students with ASD were not being met due to a lack of support from external services. A *'token effort'* was how one parent [E1\_PPSC\_PAR60] described support and had grave concerns for his son's future post-18. In this site, the co-ordinating teacher also described her frustrations at the lack of wraparound services for students. In most sites, access to external services such as psychiatric support, the Health Service Executive (HSE), support through Child and Adult Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and psychological support were provided outside of school time and communication between schools and these services was rare or non-existent. One site in a large urban area described the critical role external agencies such as school patron bodies, the National Educational Psychological Service and the HSE played in supporting student mental health. At this site, relationships have developed with these agencies to such an extent that the Principal described how *'we know them so well now they are like part of the furniture'* [C2\_PPM\_P].

All sites helped to manage student anxiety by directing attention to the physical environment for students with ASD. In one site, when students became irritable or anxious they were taken for walks around the school grounds or allowed to use the sensory room. However, no consistent approach was adopted here and one particular student would use the sensory room as and when he pleased. In all five sites, teachers and students described the ASD designated space as a *'safe haven'* or a peaceful and calm place where students felt secure and safe.

There was a good level of communication between schools and parents in relation to student wellbeing. Both parents and teachers reported that they would discuss any concerns regarding students' wellbeing. Communication books were used in all five schools to report anxiety levels and both parents and teachers acknowledged the importance of frequent communication around mental health and wellbeing. In one instance a parent described how the English curriculum was

feeding her daughter's obsession with death, studying texts by Sylvia Plath and a novel entitled *My Sister's Keeper*. This student was receiving psychiatric support outside of school for her mental health concerns.

While positive mental health was promoted in four sites, there was scope for this to be formalised more explicitly in school documentation and in school-wide displays. In one school the guidance counsellor was referenced as being a named resource for students who were worried about mental health issues. Child protection and anti-bullying policies were available in all schools. While strategies were in place to promote positive wellbeing, concerns were reported by staff members as to their lack of competence and understanding when dealing with issues such as self-injurious behaviours, suicidal thoughts and also sexual and emotional wellbeing. One teacher described how one student began self-harming just before the State exams and felt he had to '*back off completely*' from putting added pressure on the student. He felt the only way to deal with it was to collaborate closely with the SNA and parents [C2\_PPM\_CT1].

Principals and special education staff including SNAs had a very good sense of the changing support needs students experienced as they progressed through their post-primary years. More support was needed and provided in first and second years to develop social skill capacity, and assist students to make the transition from the primary setting. Support was then tapered off through the Junior Cycle and the beginning of the Senior Cycle until it was again focused on the middle and end of the Senior Cycle. The support needed at this point centred on the development of self-management strategies for managing stress and anxiety including extra-curricular activities to promote calmness and relaxation. A break card system was used in one school to make mainstream teachers aware of increased anxiety or to '*serve as emotional antenna for the adults in the room*' [C2\_PPM\_P]. In another school students were taught to indicate their need for a break from activities by going to the prayer room, the special classroom, taking a walk, or going to the gym [C3\_PPM\_P]. Special classrooms were used by schools as a '*safety net*' for students who need a break or SNA support. Whereas no school had a staff member specifically designated as a resource for students with mental health issues, many of the staff members in contact with students with ASD provided support for the students in this area.

## Summary: Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture

Most post-primary schools were characterised by very good levels of inclusive practice and high expectations for students with ASD. Parents were satisfied with their children's access to certification options at most sites. Most of the schools demonstrated very good flexibility in their application of school rules to meet students' individual needs and preferences and valued the positive outcomes, for the whole school, of adaptations made for those with ASD. All schools valued communication with parents and had well-established good communication conduits in place. Parents were satisfied with these. At one site, communication with parents was in some instances unacceptable and the school principal identified a '*disconnect*' between parental expectations of what the school should provide and what the school could do. The lack of availability of external services, particularly therapeutic services, was noted by schools and parents here and was considered unacceptable.

All special classrooms and resources rooms used by students with ASD in the schools were characterised by careful organisation, appealing use of decorations and furnishings and flexibly managed to support students. These rooms served as 'safe havens' for students. Adaptations to mainstream classrooms were rarely in evidence but excellent school-wide adaptations to all classrooms were evident in one site. While movement breaks were provided in special classrooms, they were rarely in evidence during mainstream teaching observations.

Very good levels of student active engagement in school-wide and community-related activities with their peers were in evidence in four of the five sites. Student participation was supported by use of the SNAs, preparation for activities, and parental support. Parents and teachers respected the decisions of students not to participate in activities and alternative activities were provided in some sites. Reverse inclusion activities were on-going and acceptable in three sites and not supported acceptably in a fourth evaluation and not necessary in the fifth as all students with ASD were in mainstream. In three of the sites, the development of a curriculum appropriate to students with Moderate GLD was a source of tension with the recognition that these students needed to acquire social and daily living skills above traditional academic skills.

Sources of student anxiety were identified in all sites and acceptable strategies were put in place to prevent or alleviate these stressors. The lack of availability of external services to support student wellbeing when mental health issues arose was a significant cause for concern for parents and school personnel at most sites. SNA support was used to very good effect in four sites to help students manage stressful transitions and events. Staff expressed their need for support in dealing with high-stress situations involving self-injury, sexual behaviour or suicidal thoughts and considered their competence in this area to be unacceptable.

## Statement 3 – School Management

### 3.1 Leadership

All schools had systems and structures in place to support the educational provision for students with ASD and these were good in four sites and not acceptable in the fifth. These included regular meeting times between management and special class co-ordinators or ASD Teams, and structured communication between special education teachers and mainstream teachers. There was considerable variation in the details of how these systems and structures were set up and maintained. In some schools, these meetings were both for information sharing and pro-active planning opportunities. In other schools, the meetings were for information sharing and to relay problems to administration. In most schools, good practices were more evolved than written policies. Some school managements welcomed input from the special education staff at subject meetings with limited input at school-wide meetings.

The deployment of teaching and care staff in the schools varied widely. Most schools established strong teams responsible for managing the educational provision for students with ASD. There was evidence from observations, interviews and documents that these teams developed coherent strategies and policies for managing care and educational needs and for working with challenging behaviour. Timetable management was a significant administration challenge in all schools.

Internal transfers of teachers from mainstream to special class teaching and vice versa created mainstream timetabling problems particularly when substitute teachers acquired contracts of indefinite duration. Co-ordinators of special classes rarely had posts of responsibility in the school for this work, experienced high work demands and consequent stress levels and, in most schools, committed to the position for three years only. The role was considered by principals and co-ordinators alike to be potentially isolating with little support available in times of stress. Timetabling was particularly problematic at one site when mainstream teachers were given 'learning support' hours to fill their required teaching hours and hence were responsible for the delivery of instruction in special classes. This led to very high numbers of teachers who did not have any ASD-specific experience through Continuing Professional Development teaching students with ASD. In practice this meant supervision of table-top work rather than targeted instruction. Some schools received additional support in terms of training when needed on behalf of students from their patron bodies, from NEPS, from the SESS and Middletown Centre for Autism. However this support was not available to the extent desired in any of the schools.

### 3.2 Responsibility

The roles and responsibilities of teaching staff and SNAs in most schools were understood and managed at a very good level in four sites and at an unacceptable level in one site. Teaching and care staff worked as teams for the academic and social development and learning of the students and had a shared vision. Management, teachers and SNAs recognised the changing levels of need of many students with ASD across the school year and from first to sixth year. As observed by one principal: *'the beginning of the year is vital for building trust and a relationship – with a view to develop a more distant relationship'* [C1\_PPM\_P]. Another principal noted that *'we might enable dependency by allocating support evenly across the years of the post-primary school – earlier interventions in first year matter'* [C2\_PPM\_P]. An SNA commented, *'I assist, I don't take over. I encourage independence as much as possible'* [C3\_PPM\_SNA8]. In one site, teachers and the principal noted management difficulties when it came to the appropriate roles and responsibilities of SNAs in the school. Some special needs assistants were assuming teaching responsibilities and had significant supervision responsibilities in special classes when mainstream teachers were allocated hours there. These difficulties were complicated by general staff deployment strategies used and the lack of shared vision for the curriculum that students were expected to accomplish outside of mainstream subject involvement.

### 3.3 Appointment of Staff

Principals were aware of the need for careful selection and hiring of 'suitable' personnel for the ASD special classes. Principals reported that they made every effort to recruit staff with knowledge, experience, expertise and qualifications related to the learning and teaching of children with ASD. However they also reported that this was not always possible and pointed out that, due to panel arrangements, they were obliged on occasions to employ staff with no prior knowledge, experience or expertise in the area.

### 3.4 Review of Provision for Children with ASD

There was rarely evidence of a policy-driven, systematic review of the effectiveness of educational provision for students with ASD in the post-primary schools which was unacceptable overall. Student participation and progress in observed lessons was consistently assessed through checking for understanding and active teacher monitoring. Class subject tests were also used to assess progress. Behaviour rating scales and data collection using ABC charts was a feature of practice in almost all special classes. One school recently included individualised assessment of reading skills of the students with ASD and found the experience very informative. Some schools systematically conducted self-assessments with their students in terms of academic and emotional capacity. One school conducted six-weekly evaluations of the overall progress in their special classes in structured team meetings set at the beginning of the school year. There is scope for development of policies and procedures to drive systematic review of programmes in post-primary schools.

#### Summary: Statement 3 – School Management

Management systems and structures including communication varied considerably across the post-primary sites. Three sites had acceptable systems in place, one was excellent and one was unacceptable with no pro-active strategies available to teachers when working with administration in the school. Deployment of staff was a source of concern for principals with special classes where co-ordinating teachers experienced burn-out and were not typically in receipt of posts of responsibility for their additional work.

In four of the five sites the roles and responsibilities of all staff in contact with students with ASD were well understood, flexibly approached, and responsive to the changing needs of the students as they progressed through the school. In one site, role conflicts were evident due to timetabling problems and responsibilities here were not discriminated at an acceptable level. Principals at all sites made very good efforts to recruit staff with appropriate skills and dispositions for working with students with ASD. The panel system made it difficult for them to gauge dispositions appropriately. Systematic review of provision was unacceptable at all but one site where special class provision was regularly evaluated.

### Statement 4 – Staff Development

#### 4.1 Understanding and Knowledge of ASD for All Staff

Staff with special educational responsibilities including special class teachers, learning support/resource teachers, and programme co-ordinators of educational provision for students with ASD in all sites demonstrated excellent levels of understanding and knowledge of ASD. Most teachers in special classes in these schools had completed a post-graduate diploma in Special Educational Needs or ASD. New members of special educational ASD teams in four of the five sites were expected and supported to upskill through CPD with the Special Education Support Service or start graduate work in the area. In the site with no special class, the learning support/resource teachers actively pursued CPD in ASD to build capacity in the school.

Mainstream teachers' understanding and knowledge of ASD varied considerably and depended mostly on whether they had responsibility for teaching students with ASD in their subjects and to a lesser extent on whether there was a special class within the school. Mainstream teachers did not see any urgency in seeking or receiving CPD in educational provision for students with ASD if they infrequently or never came in contact with these students. Special class teachers and learning support/resource teachers were considered 'experts' by the staffs at all sites.

The principals of four of the five schools demonstrated a good and developing knowledge of ASD and its impact on learning and teaching but tended to defer to the expertise within their staff in this matter. As one principal observed, *'I rely on the co-ordinator to keep me up to date – very hard for me to go for a day – would have to be more than an "introduction", might rather send a member of the ASD TEAM'* (E\_PPSC\_P4). One principal did not demonstrate an acceptable understanding of the range of ASD and its impact on the potential for students with ASD to participate in mainstream subjects in the school.

Special needs assistants at all sites demonstrated clear and broad understandings of ASD and its implications for learning and teaching. They were particularly sensitive to the sensory needs of the students in their care and all were concerned that the students developed greater levels of independent functioning as they progressed through the post-primary environment. Some SNAs developed this awareness through completion of specially designed courses aimed at SNAs, although they noted these mostly had a focus on primary schools. Most SNAs developed their knowledge base from working with specialist teachers.

## 4.2 Continuing Professional Development

Overall, post-primary sites availed of CPD at very good levels but this was determined by the amount of direct contact staff had with students with ASD. Whole-school professional development on ASD was provided by the SESS in most schools during the past five years, but not recently. All schools were aware of their need for a cycle of CPD to maintain currency in the knowledge and skills needed to provide for students with ASD at second level. There was also an awareness of the sensory needs of students by staff in all schools. The school newest to educational provision for students with ASD was acutely conscious of staff CPD needs for these students, as noted by the principal, *'it would be good to bring someone in to talk to the whole staff on ASD – would be very beneficial to us. Would be presented rather than them having to look for it'* [C3\_PPM\_P].

The specialist teachers at all sites engaged in excellent levels of CPD by completing post-graduate diplomas, attending seminars and workshops provided by the SESS, availing of opportunities at their local education centre and taking on-line courses. All principals were supportive of these activities without reservation and actively encouraged participation by staff. Course information was posted in the staff rooms and specialist teachers all commented on how supportive their principals were. Programme co-ordinators were also a source of information about upcoming courses and CPD opportunities in schools.

Specialist teachers noted their need for CPD not only in special education but in their taught subjects. This was mirrored by mainstream teachers who felt compelled to address national curriculum changes and foci prior to considering CPD in any aspect of special education. Mainstream teachers also considered the presence of specialist teachers in their schools as a safety net for them, a resource they could access for support with students with ASD and during times of crisis. It is noteworthy that, at three sites, the SNAs and specialist teachers commented on their need for CPD specifically on the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) strand of the curriculum. One SNA recorded her concern that, *'sometimes you might be afraid that you are going to say the wrong thing'* [C2\_PPM\_SNA2], and a principal noted that the school has a *'strong need for CPD in relationships and sexuality – among the whole staff for students with special educational needs'* (E2\_PPSC\_P). There was no evidence that learning opportunities were extended to parents by any site.

Individual teachers on ASD teams had access to consultation with services provided by patron bodies on an as-needed basis. Some whole-school CPD on ASD had been accessed by the school several years earlier but needed to be renewed as noted by a class teacher, *'but it's like everything ... you just need to know and be refreshed. This is what these children are like and what their needs are and that is in the interest of everybody. So we would definitely need some in-service on it in this next year or so'* [C\_PPM\_CT1]. At one school, a specialist teacher noted the potential for learning in his discussions with parents.

All principals affirmed the provision of CPD provided by the Special Education Support Service (SESS) and one of the principals had specific post-graduate qualifications in the area of ASD. All principals also articulated a commitment to providing opportunities for staff to access CPD in the area of ASD if appointed or transferred without experience in the area. The principals in all sites, whilst highly supportive of CPD for their staff, shared a particular view on CPD in ASD for themselves. Principals considered they had limited opportunity to be absent from school to attend CPD so choosing carefully to derive maximum benefit for the school was critical. They viewed their roles as school leaders to keep the overall benefit of the whole school in mind when selecting CPD opportunities. This frequently meant choosing from a menu of workshops or inputs in which ASD was only one option. When that menu contained information sessions on subjects that would affect the whole school such as challenging behaviour, mental health issues, or curriculum updates, the principals would choose those workshops or seminars above those with a focus on ASD. They all tended to rely on their co-ordinating teachers and specialist staff to pursue CPD opportunities specific to ASD.

In terms of CPD, SNAs' uptake was significantly polarised across the sites. At one site, there was a critical mass of SNAs who reported they had not experienced meaningful targeted CPD in the school for several years. They required CPD in the teaching methodologies they supported in the special classes such as TEACCH but were not eligible to attend SESS seminars and workshops for teachers. They considered their morale to be very low, did not feel valued for their contributions and were not respected by the school administration [E1\_PPSC\_1]. The cascade effect of SNA dissatisfaction affected special class teachers and administration in this site and all expressed concerns about the unacceptable roles and professional preparation of the SNAs from their own individual perspectives.

Most SNAs in most sites attended CPD in their own time and at their own expense. Several pursued opportunities of personal and professional interest and all expressed their desire for professional avenues to credentialling. Many SNAs reported wanting more CPD but were reluctant to use their Saturdays for this. Whereas some SNAs perceived the principal as instrumental in whether they received targeted CPD, others pursued on-line options and attended workshops organised by their union IMPACT in their own time. All SNAs agreed that CPD specific to working in post-primary settings was not available to them. Some sites used external services to provide CPD for SNAs and one site used a Code of Practice for SNAs to clarify and manage their complex roles in the school. One SNA suggested that, during whole-school staff meetings when SNAs were not benefiting from the general meeting content, they could be provided with targeted in-service opportunities at these times in the school. Overall the availability of CPD for SNAs was considered unacceptable.

There was no systematic approach to CPD in any site which would identify annually the unique needs of teachers as well as the broader needs of the schools in this regard. Such a system would benefit the teachers and the schools by thoughtfully increasing the schools' capacity to provide an appropriate education for all students including those with ASD.

### **4.3 Information Sharing and Access to Specialist Information on ASD**

While there was evidence of good information sharing in all schools at an informal level, formal structures for promoting information sharing were unacceptable by their absence except at one site where they were excellent. There was almost no evidence that school staff members took opportunities to liaise with other schools to share ideas and expertise. One site was very open to visits from staff from other schools and facilitated many of these each year in a structured and planned manner. With the exception of one site, there were no formal structures in existence for teachers to share expertise within the school. Special needs assistants reported that teachers returning from CPD on specific topics related to ASD generally shared their learning with the rest of the specialist staff and with the SNAs as much as time permitted. The main forum for this type of sharing was specialist staff meetings. They shared their expertise mostly in response to requests for assistance and rarely delivered CPD to the whole staff on educational provision for students with ASD. They presented information about incoming students with ASD at school-wide staff meetings at the beginning of the school year. Informal discussions at break times and between classes formed the most common communication system in all but one site. Excellent systems were in place at one site for regular scheduled communication between the members of the ASD team and the mainstream teachers who taught their subjects to students with ASD across the school. This site had what could be considered a 'critical mass' of students with special educational needs and ASD compared to the general population of students, and some whole-school interventions and practices were supported here. These included weekly meetings between the ASD team and the principal, brief daily communication structures with relevant mainstream teachers, and creative use of SNAs to support students' care needs and relay information between mainstream classes and the ASD team when relevant.



The principal and specialist staff at the excepted site shared their expertise through attendance at conferences and other professional engagements as a feature of practice driven by the co-ordinator.

### **Summary: Statement 4 – Staff Development**

All staff with direct responsibility for working with students with ASD demonstrated excellent levels of understanding and knowledge of ASD. There was no expectation that whole-school knowledge of ASD was good practice and mainstream teachers sought additional information only if they had relevant teaching responsibilities in the area. Principals had good knowledge and understanding of ASD at four sites and one principal had unacceptable levels. SNAs demonstrated excellent knowledge and understanding of ASD.

Whole-school CPD on ASD was not current at any site but staff with teaching responsibilities in the area recognised this as a need. Specialist teachers in all sites had excellent qualification levels and engaged in CPD regularly. External expertise was generally not available for the development of competence in most sites with the exception of patron bodies in one site. All principals affirmed the importance and value of CPD by the SESS, Middletown Centre for Autism and their patron body. Principals tended to rely on specialist teachers to keep up to date on effective methods of working with students with ASD. Mainstream teachers considered specialist teachers and special classes as safety nets for them in their own work with students with ASD. SNAs' access to meaningful CPD was unacceptable in all settings. There was no systematic approach to CPD that would incorporate both the individual needs of school personnel and the needs of the whole school.

With the exception of one site, there was no evidence of systems in place in any other site to support sharing information and expertise. Most sharing of this nature was informally done in response to particular requests for help. The systems in place in one site were excellent and no acceptable system existed in the other sites.

### **Concluding Summary: Provision for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Post-Primary Schools**

Whilst there was considerable diversity in regards to the degree to which the post-primary sites documented their educational practices for students with ASD, practice was good and superior to documentation in four of the five sites. Assessment for learning including differentiated methods was acceptable at three sites and unacceptable at the other two. Elements of Functional Behavioural Assessment were used at all sites to support students with challenging behaviour but these elements were more obviously used in special classes than with mainstreamed students. The practices of schools to engage parents and students themselves in the development of individualised plans were excellent. Four of the five sites provided good open access to all curriculum areas to students and reduced curriculum timetables were developed with good input from parents and students. Differentiation for instruction was acceptable at four of the five sites. Good teaching strategies were observed in the same four sites including a wide range

of appropriate practices to support student engagement and learning. Both differentiation and instructional strategies were unacceptable at the fifth site.

There was no evidence of assessment policies to drive instruction at any site. Individualised plans – while in evidence at all sites – lacked SMART targets, and were rarely systematically reviewed. Individualised planning was generally unacceptable for students in mainstream classes and acceptable for students in special classes. Post-primary schools overall did not have adequate access to external services at any site to provide input to planning, assessment or review. Transitions within lessons and across the school day were excellent, and good procedures were in place to facilitate students moving from primary to post-primary environments. Transition practices for students moving to post-secondary options were acceptable at three sites, very good at one and unacceptable at one. Timetabling of Learning Support hours in special classes at one site led to unacceptable instruction and SNA responsibility for student learning. Progress on learning targets was monitored informally only at all sites and systematic review of progress was rarely in evidence.

Most post-primary schools were characterised by very good levels of inclusive practice and high expectations for students with ASD. Parents were satisfied with their children's access to certification options at most sites. All schools valued communication with parents and had well-established good communication conduits in place. Parents were satisfied with these. The lack of availability of external services, particular therapeutic services, was noted by schools and parents here and was considered unacceptable.

All special classrooms and resources rooms used by students with ASD in the schools were characterised by careful organisation, appealing use of decorations and furnishings and flexibly managed to support students. These rooms served as '*safe havens*' for students. Adaptations to mainstream classrooms were rarely in evidence but excellent school-wide adaptations to all classrooms were evident in one site.

Very good levels of student active engagement in school-wide and community-related activities with their peers were in evidence in four of the five sites. Parents and teachers respected the decisions of students not to participate in activities and alternative activities were provided in some sites.

Sources of student anxiety were identified in all sites and acceptable strategies were put in place to prevent or alleviate these stressors. The lack of availability of external services to support student wellbeing when mental health issues arose was a significant cause for concern for parents and school personnel at most sites. SNA support was used to very good effect in four sites to help students manage stressful transitions and events. Staff expressed their need for support in dealing with high stress situations involving self-injury, sexual behaviour or suicidal thoughts and considered their competence in this area to be unacceptable.

Three sites had acceptable management systems and structures including communication in place, one was excellent and one was unacceptable with no pro-active strategies available to teachers when working with administration in the school. Deployment of staff was a source of concern for principals with special classes where co-ordinating teachers experienced burn-out and were not typically in receipt of posts of responsibility for their additional work.

In four of the five sites the roles and responsibilities of all staff in contact with students with ASD were well understood, flexibly approached, and responsive to the changing needs of the students as they progressed through the school. In one site, role conflicts were evident due to timetable problems and responsibilities here were not discriminated at an acceptable level. Principals at all sites made very good efforts to recruit staff with appropriate skills and dispositions for working with students with ASD. The panel system made it difficult for them to gauge dispositions appropriately. Systematic review of provision was unacceptable at all but one site where special class provision was regularly evaluated.

All staff with direct responsibility for working with students with ASD demonstrated excellent levels of understanding and knowledge of ASD. Principals had good knowledge and understanding of ASD at four sites and one principal had unacceptable levels. SNAs demonstrated excellent knowledge and understanding of ASD.

Whole-school CPD on ASD was not current at any site but staff with teaching responsibilities in the area recognised this as a need. Specialist teachers in all sites had excellent qualification levels and engaged in CPD regularly. External expertise was generally not available for the development of competence in most sites with the exception of patron bodies in one site. All principals affirmed the importance and value of CPD by the SESS, Middletown Centre for Autism and their patron body. SNAs' access to meaningful CPD was unacceptable in all settings. There was no systematic approach to CPD that would incorporate both the individual needs of school personnel and the needs of the whole school.

With the exception of one site, there was no evidence of systems in place in any other site to support sharing information and expertise. Most sharing of this nature was informally done in response to particular requests for help. The systems in place in one site were excellent and no acceptable system existed in the other sites.

## 6. Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Special Schools

The analysis below is derived from the data collected at six special school sites including special schools for children with Mild GLD (1), Moderate GLD (1), Severe or Profound GLD (1), and ASD-specific special schools (3, including 1 former ABA centre, and one school with mostly post-primary age students). These were site types F, G, H, and I as described in Chapter Two on Methodology. Fifty-seven interviews were analysed including 12 child conversations, and 12 observations of practice informed the data. Children interviewed in special schools were reported to have ASD and a general learning disability according to the type of special school. The children interviewed in Autism-specific special schools were reported to have general learning disabilities in a range from moderate to high functioning autism.

### Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning

#### 1.1 Assessment

There was considerable variation in policy documentation for assessment within the special school settings. Four of the six special schools were observed to have formal assessment policies in place. Assessment policies reviewed were detailed and comprehensive in nature. One assessment policy asserted that the school could not meet its mission for children *'to enhance and develop their unique abilities and talents'* (Mission Statement) until the teachers *'can identify and name their current level of achievement on the step at which the pupil currently is on the "ladder of learning"'* [S\_SPGLD]. A second assessment policy stated that *'a teacher is empowered to support his/her pupils and teach more effectively when the patterns of the children's work are examined and reflected on'* [S\_MGLD]. The assessment policy of a third school was *'aimed to gather, record, interpret, use and report information on each child's progress and achievement in all areas'* [S\_ASD3]. The assessment policy in a fourth school was of an excellent standard and included a clear rationale, aims and objectives, outlined current assessment practices, sought to identify the interests and strengths of pupils, defined priority needs in terms of curricular needs and other needs, outlined the success criteria and listed both the formal and informal assessment measures used in the school [S\_ASD2]. The schools without a formal assessment policy in place relied on class-based tests and State examinations as measures of progress [S\_ASD1] which was unacceptable. Schools with an assessment policy addressed assessment of learning and for learning within each curricular area by outlining their assessment methods in their policy as, for example, in S\_ASD2 above. Assessment policy documents analysed were very good or excellent in four of the schools and unacceptable in two.

While the assessment process was reported to be part of the daily routine in five of the six special school settings, it was observed in practice in four out of six schools. In these schools, assessment was discreet in most instances and formed part of the daily learning and teaching routine as noted by a class teacher who stated that *'we don't see it as assessment as we do it every day'* [S\_ASD2\_CTI]. Assessment was seen to inform teaching, *'we are very aware of testing being integral to effective teaching'* [F\_SS\_MGLD]. One teacher stated that she assesses as she is presenting an activity and adjusts it accordingly [S\_SPGLD\_SCT2]. A teacher referring to her daily assessment practice stated that *'effective teaching can only take place on the back of effective*

assessment. *It is the cornerstone*' [S\_MGLD\_SCT2]. In one school, daily meetings were held by the class teacher and the SNAs to review and document progress [S\_ASD2\_P].

A wide variety of assessment tools was used in all the special schools. Included were ASD-specific assessments such as: VB-MAPP,<sup>61</sup> ABLLS-R,<sup>62</sup> PEP-3, PEP-R, and TTAP. All six schools referred to their use of the PEP-R assessment. Five out of the six schools referred to the VB-MAPP assessment while one school was not familiar with it. Four out of the six schools used ABLLS-R. Two schools referred to their use of standardised tests such as the MICRA-T and SIGMA-T where appropriate. One school stated that standardised tests were not used as *'they are just setting our children up for failure because they don't target our children'* [S\_ASD1\_SCT2]. Standardised tests were however used diagnostically in one site [S\_MGLD\_SCT2]. Communication assessments designed by a Speech and Language Therapist were used in one school.

Teachers and principals spoke of the challenges of finding assessment measures that were relevant to the needs of their children particularly for older students with complex needs [Site S\_MGLD\_P]. One teacher referred to assessment as our *'biggest struggle'* (S\_SPGLD\_SCT1), and the principal also agreed that *'assessment is a bit problematic for us'* (S\_SPGLD\_P). Yet another principal said that *'assessment is a bit of a bugbear for us to be honest'* [S\_ASD1\_P]. Teachers had mixed reactions to using autism-specific assessments, some finding them complicated and others the most useful form of assessment in their school. Two special schools devised a set of assessment measures to reflect the curriculum they were teaching. One of these schools used an extensive school-based checklist to record all aspects of teaching and learning of adaptive skills, reading, writing, oral language and Mathematics. The document was referenced to the Carolina Curriculum for Pre-Schoolers with Special Educational Needs, Division TEACCH, CHiPPS, MIST, Listen to this (Linda Richman), Developmental Assessment of Young Children and Listen and Collaborate. This assessment was completed for each child in the school [S\_MGLD] and passed on from class to class as the child progresses through the school.

All schools responded to challenging behaviour. Five of six schools reported using both Antecedent Behaviour and Consequence (ABC) charts and Functional Behavioural Assessment (FBA) approaches. Schools generally recorded and/or graphed each incident of behaviour, the time it occurred, its frequency and noted any triggers relating to the incident. Completed FBA forms were noted in a Planning File in one school [S\_MGLD]. At this school, feedback from SNAs supported the teacher when designing intervention programmes. Some teachers reported receiving training in Applied Behaviour Analysis, and SNAs were trained in behaviour by the behaviour support service 'Trasna'.<sup>63</sup> Behaviour Support Plans were in evidence in four of the six special schools. Generally these documented the antecedents to the behaviour, the types of behaviour, and reactive strategies outlining responses to varying levels of behaviours. Teachers reported that they analysed the documented behaviours to identify triggers: *'we fill in an incident*

<sup>61</sup> Sundberg, M.L. (2008) The Verbal Behaviour Milestones, Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP), Concord: AVB Press.

<sup>62</sup> Partington, J.W. (1998) Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLLS), Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services; Partington, J.W. (2006) Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills – Revised (ABLLS-R), Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services.

<sup>63</sup> Provided by the Brothers of Charity, Trasna Training Service aims to provide meaningful supports to families and staff in order that children with an intellectual disability presenting with challenging behaviour can be supported with respect and dignity in their current settings.

report. I have tick sheets and record the behaviours on a 15-minute basis. We examine this to see if there is a pattern' [S\_SPGLD\_SCT2]. Overall the assessment processes for assessing and managing challenging behaviour were acceptable in all sites.

There was no evidence to suggest that assessment took into account any additional needs that the student with ASD might have in all sites. However, at one site, all staff members were highly aware of the number of children with ASD who had seizure disorders and all were trained to recognise the particular signs of the onset of a seizure for each child. Detailed records were kept on frequency and intensity of seizures [S\_SPGLD].

There was no evidence to suggest that differentiated methods of assessment were used beyond ASD-specific assessments and school-specific assessments. At all sites, parents were not familiar with the assessment approaches and measures used in the schools. But they were, however, very confident that the schools were using the appropriate measures.

## 1.2 Individualised Planning

Individualised planning was a feature of practice for all students in the six sites. There was a variation in the structure and level of detail in the individualised planning observed ranging from fair to excellent. In addition to individualised planning, one school had Individual Record Sheets for each child used in the development of the individualised planning [S\_ASD3]. Some individualised planning was incomplete in one class observed, and targets were not time-bound [S\_ASD1]. Completed individualised planning in this class consisted of a two-page document with four targets. Strengths, learning needs and assessment measures were not documented.

Often, individualised plans were viewed as valuable, working documents used to inform teaching and learning at all sites. A special class teacher noted that: *'the IEPs are working documents. They get scribbled over and added to. Sometimes the targets are unachievable and I might have to go back to the parents'* [S\_ModGLD\_SCT3]. One teacher however, referred to Individual Education Plans (IEPs) as *'a paperwork exercise'* (S\_ASD1).

Individualised Plans varied across sites in terms of their focus. One individualised plan addressed the strengths and needs of the child under the following headings: personality; communication; receptive language; expressive language; SPHE; gross motor skills; sensory issues; toileting and sleeping [S\_SPGLD] and included an ABC Chart within the Action Plan. In another site, the targets involved daily-living skills or behaviour rather than academic areas [S\_ASD1]. The individualised planning reviewed in another school [S\_ASD2] was based on assessed strengths and needs in the area of communication; daily living; social and emotional development. The school reported that it was beginning to include curricular areas in the individualised planning.

In five of the six special schools, SMART targets, strengths and learning needs were an observed feature of practice in students' individualised planning. Targets were linked to the child's current level of performance in one school as exemplified in the following: *'Tony finds it difficult to wait but is responding to the wait card'* and the accompanying target which was, *'Tony will wait 5*

*seconds'* [S\_SPGLD]. In two schools, the individualised plans used by teachers in classes were incomplete with targets that were general in nature, and not SMART which was not acceptable. While there was variation in the standard of individualised planning within and across schools, strategies, methodologies and materials required to teach the identified learning targets were clearly defined in individualised planning in five out of six schools.

There was a lot of variation in the application of review dates in individualised planning which ranged from fair to very good. Two of the six schools did not identify review dates on the individualised planning analysed, although one of these schools noted the date the target was achieved on the plan. Three of the six schools had bi-annual review dates clearly stated on the individualised plans. Reviews occurred in September/October and January/February. In one school, detailed written reviews were documented under headings for each period. One school had monthly review dates documented for each target, and the special class teacher here noted that: *'we use the IEP as a working document. We do monthly targets and daily checklists and yearly reports'* [S\_SPGLD\_SCT1]. Overall, this was unacceptable at two schools, and good at the other four.

A collaborative approach was noted in almost all schools in relation to individualised planning. A number of people generally attended individualised meetings, including the class teacher, parent, and some members of the multidisciplinary team (MDT), if available. Where this was not the case, information from the MDT reports was used to inform individualised planning targets.

All schools had good structures in place for consulting with parents in compiling individualised planning for their child. Schools valued the input of parents in the planning process as noted by a teacher who said, *'we would develop a plan with the parents. It is parent led really'* [S\_ASD1\_SCT1]. Parents in all special schools were given copies of their child's individualised planning. Although not all parents recognised or understood the term 'IEP', it was clear they placed a high level of trust in teachers to plan for their children. One parent stated *'I trust them really and as long as he is making headway I don't analyse or find out what they have done'* [S\_MGLD\_PAR39], while another parent commented that *'we let the school work away on it. They have the experience and we wouldn't know too much about it'* [S\_ASD1\_PAR37]. In individualised planning in one school [S\_ASD2] a page from parents was included titled 'Hopes and Expectations'. This was considered central to programme planning and implementation and included direct quotes from parents in every individualised plan analysed. Parents were invited to attend individualised planning meetings in almost all sites. One parent noted that, *'we felt that our input was listened to, but we didn't dictate at all'* [S\_MGLD\_PAR25] and another parent stated that *'they work with us the whole time'* (S\_MGLD\_Par29). *Levels of involvement of parents varied considerably across sites. One school reported that parents were involved in an initial individualised planning meeting but had very little involvement after that, 'there's not a lot of input during the year'* [S\_ModGLD\_SCT1]. Overall, schools made good efforts to involve parents in the IEP process but respected their individual wishes to be more or less participatory.

Notably, the student themselves rarely attended individualised planning meetings. One school indicated that senior level students were involved in their own planning, through the use of their own individual learning plan document. Two of the six special schools involved students in their

educational planning where it was appropriate [S\_MGLD; S\_ASD3]. Students had the option of choosing their own FETAC modules in the senior cycle of one of these schools. As noted by the principal: *'they have their own individual plan document and can choose what subjects they want to do'* [S\_MGLD\_P]. Sources at the schools where students were not involved in their educational planning stated that it would not be appropriate or relevant for their students to do so. One principal stated that *'none of the pupils would get involved in the process. None of them would be able to do that'* [S\_ASD1\_P]. However, it was evident in three sites that children's likes, dislikes, strengths and needs influenced target setting as described by teachers in these sites: *'the pupils can't give any direct input into that but the way they interact with the sessions and the learning tells us that we have to change the emphasis'* [S\_MGLD\_SCT1]; *'The child is non-verbal and is not involved in his own plan. But the plan is based on what he likes and doesn't like'* [S\_ASD1\_PAR37]. Overall, student input was facilitated well by all schools whether it was direct or indirect.

Although almost all SNAs attended regular (weekly/monthly) team meetings to discuss individualised planning goals, progress and/or issues within the classroom for individual children, in general, SNAs almost never attended individualised planning meetings. However, they often were asked their opinions prior to the meeting and almost always were aware of the targets in individualised planning through feedback from the teacher and formal meetings.

All special schools reported the involvement of external services when planning for individual pupils, although the levels of support received varied considerably depending on availability. In all schools, external professionals such as occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and educational psychologists were either consulted for advice prior to an individualised planning meeting or attended the meeting. Additionally, one school reported receiving input from a music therapist, a behavioural therapist, and a social worker [S\_ASD2\_CT1, PAR36]. While some support from multidisciplinary teams (MDT) included pre-individualised planning team meetings and assistance with writing goals and targets, this level of support from external services was not typically found in all special schools. Teachers and parents noted the impact of cutbacks on the availability of external services. Three schools referred to the limited support received from the psychological services in particular. One parent remarked that *'I don't think the OT comes to the school that much. He hasn't gone to speech therapy in ages. When I had to move him from mainstream school, I had to get an educational psychologist assessment and I had to go privately'* [S\_MGLD\_PAR21]. Teachers also commented on reduced external supports. One teacher noted that *'our resources have been diminished. The SLT who left was specific to ASD and he hasn't been replaced'* [S\_MGLD\_SCT1]. A principal reflected on the effect reduced psychological services had at their school and observed that, *'some children are coming into this school without psychological assessments'* (S\_ModGLD\_P).

### 1.3 Transition

While there was good evidence to suggest that pupils with ASD were assisted to transition successfully between activities, environments and/or persons, there was no evidence to suggest that these processes had been specifically documented in individualised plans. Rather, they were considered part of teaching. Day-to-day transitioning was managed by all class teachers with the support of, and in consultation with, the SNAs. Visual schedules, individual flash cards, social



stories, print-labelling, gesture and physical objects were observed in use in almost all classrooms to facilitate transitions. Children in both the junior and senior ASD classes in most schools worked within the TEACCH framework. They had individual workstations, which were structured in a START and FINISH format. In a senior ASD class, the teacher supported transition between activities using a detailed daily schedule written on the Whiteboard. Completed activities were ticked off. Changes to familiar routines were signalled in meaningful ways for children. In one school, the speech and language therapist provided social stories to support transition where needed [S\_ASD1]. One teacher used a Tablet to show children the photos of the places they would be visiting on their school tour [S\_ASD2\_CT1]. Overall, excellent practice was observed in structuring transitions within and between class and school activities in all sites.

Parents, students and relevant members of the school team worked together in planning for major transitions such as from the Early Intervention Unit to the Special School or Mainstream school, from Mainstream School to Special School and from Special School to Post-School Placements. All schools had programmes in place to support transitions. Some were more structured than others and depended on the needs of the children. As one teacher stated, *'we take it from what the child's needs are'*, when describing how she accommodated the transition of a 13-year-old student from a mainstream setting to a special school and reported that *'the child came to visit for an hour a week and came with his own DVD player to watch while he was becoming acquainted with his new class'* [S\_MGLD\_SCT2].

Transition strategies involved teachers from both environments, the parents and the child. In situations when a child was moving from an early intervention class to a special class in the same special school, the transition was most easily accomplished. Both parents and teachers noted their satisfaction with this particular transition. In some instances, the child may have attended the school for July provision or would have visited the school and therefore the child was familiar with the new setting prior to enrolment.

In some schools, transition programmes for admission to the school began with meetings between the principal and the parents up to one year in advance. All principals were aware of the significance for parents of the decision to send their child to a special school. One principal required two meetings with parents before the child was invited to visit. The first meeting focused on the expectations of the parents for their child so that they could judge if the school met these expectations. At the second meeting, the principal introduced the class teacher to the parents and the school routine was discussed. The student could attend the school on the third meeting with the parents and paper work was attended to at this point [S-MGLD]. Children generally transitioned in on a phased basis depending on their needs. These transitions comprised short weekly school visits or shorter school days [S\_ASD2\_CT1]. Children were supported in these transitions by means of photo stories, mini-books and social stories [S\_ASD3\_SCT]. Two schools pointed out that a phased enrolment did not suit all children and that some children were least stressed by a direct enrolment. The schools pointed out that in this situation it was important that they responded appropriately to individual student's needs. Three of the principals reported that their efforts to improve their transition programmes were logistically difficult because of their dependence on the participation of several 'sending' schools, scheduling multiple visits from and to sending and receiving sites, and delays in replacing teachers using the panel system. One

principal noted that there was no point in bringing in pupils with ASD to a situation that would not be the same for them later [S\_ASD1].

Transitions to post-school placement were more structured than transitions into special schools. As one school was a developing school, students transitioned at 14 years of age. The school put a programme in place for a student who was transitioning to a secondary school. The student attended the school every week with a view to exploring if it was an appropriate placement for her/him. The principal noted that *'we don't close the door on them'* [S\_ASD\_P].

Five of the six special schools had transition programmes in place, referred to as The Leavers' Programme or The School Leavers Transition Programme, the aim of which was *'to assist the smooth transition of school leavers from ... (current placement) ... to their future placement'* [S\_SPGLD]. This transition programme began in special schools between one and two years prior to the child transitioning and was excellent practice. Evidence indicated that The Leavers' Programme involved significant planning in all schools. Although the time frame of the programme varied, schools tended to adopt a similar structure. The programme was co-ordinated by the principal and the class teachers. In one school, a post of responsibility was appointed to the co-ordination of this programme. Four schools provided support in the child's new setting.

Late notification of placements, and the difficulty of obtaining placements for students with complex needs, were the two challenges to successful transition identified by three principals. Late placements were issued in July/August, in the last week of August or two days before the school holidays. This limited the capacity of the schools to prepare the children for transition [S\_ASD1] and caused anxiety for some children [S\_MGLD\_SCT1]. A principal noted that in her experience *'parents of pupils with ASD tend to like an ASD-specific centre for long-term placement'* [S\_ASD1\_P]. One school noted that some of their students might not receive full-time placements [S\_SPGLD\_P].

All of the special schools collaborated with each student's receiving environment. In most schools staff from both the current and future schools visited each other's setting to support the transition. Overall, transition planning and management into and from special schools was very good at all sites.

## 1.4 Curriculum/Certification

In accordance with the range of special schools in the research, there was considerable variation across the content areas students had access to. All students accessed the general curriculum at a level relevant to their individual needs. Special schools for students with mild general learning disability differentiated the primary school curriculum. In the senior cycle, two sites offered Junior Certificate subjects (Foundation level) and FETAC Levels 1 to 3. The NCCA guidelines for Teachers of Pupils with Moderate General Learning Disability and Severe and Profound General Learning Disability were used in special schools where these students were enrolled. There was a very strong emphasis on communication, social, play and life skills in the curricula of all special schools. This rationale is encapsulated in an extract from a school's Plean Scoile [School Plan]: *'the ability to make one's needs known (to communicate) is fundamental to our ethos and to all of*

*our teaching. Facilitating communication permeates each day, being an integral part of each subject on the curriculum'* [S\_SPGLD\_P]. The curriculum was differentiated in all special schools to meet the specific needs of students. While there was evidence of very good differentiation in most sites there was scope for further development to meet the individual needs of students in two schools where it was not acceptable.

Individualised instruction by teachers, supported by SNAs, was an observed feature of differentiation in five of the six special schools. Activities in most observed lessons were differentiated based on the capabilities of the children, and SNA support was differentiated according to students' needs also. Individual work cards were used in some classes. There was evidence of appropriate graded reading schemes in one school where the interest content and low reading age of text was most appropriate to the needs and abilities of the student cohort [S\_ASD2]. A teacher noted that differentiation very much depended on the individual needs of the student and that there was an emphasis on a more mainstream approach with increased whole class teaching in the senior classes [S\_MGLD\_SCT2]. In one school, the curriculum was prioritised and adapted to make it skill-based and relevant to daily living and less emphasis was placed on subjects in which the students were not making progress [S\_ASD1]. In this school, programmes of work were individualised and differentiation was evident by pace, outcome, and learning needs. There was scope, however, for higher levels and greater quality of differentiation in this school. A range of curricula had been designed to provide students with a variety of educational experiences. However, systematic reference to and linkage with the primary or post-primary curriculum were lacking. In another site, although the class teacher spoke of the ongoing differentiation within her class, observed practice provided evidence of individualised content instruction only using a textbook [S\_ASD3].

Documentary evidence in all sites indicated that teachers sought the support of parents in identifying the interests of their children. There was good evidence that special interests were incorporated in lesson planning and execution. A teacher described how she incorporated the special interests of her pupils into a lesson as *'you have to take their special interests into consideration. If you don't make it fun, they won't do it. I did a shop in Maths and I used all their particular interests and put it in one'* [S\_ASD\_SCT1]. Another teacher noted that, *'utilising students' interests and strengths is key to get them going. It is so fundamental to what they do. We start with the special interest'* [S\_MGLD\_SCT2].

Modes of response were sensitively differentiated in all schools to suit the needs of children with ASD at an excellent level. One school stated that a social, environmental and scientific education (SESE) topic was taught on a whole-school basis each term. This allowed for consolidation of the topic across the school [S\_MGLD\_SCT2]. Strong SNA support was necessary to ensure successful delivery of curricular content due to the significantly individualised needs of pupils with severe or profound general learning disabilities. Tablets were used in three schools to promote social and communication skills. An SNA and the class teacher supported a child with ASD and profound hearing loss through the use of Irish sign language (ISL).

Play, imaginative skills and communication skills were developed through social, personal and health education (SPHE), drama, physical education (PE) and the use of tablets. A number of teachers had undertaken CPD in Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) and were investigating how it could be adapted to support the curriculum in their schools. They expressed concerns around the recommended teaching methodologies for Aistear as its play and social focus did not match well with the strengths of many students with ASD. All special schools observed used a visual medium to support teaching and learning.

Senior students with ASD were integrated into the full school and attended classes with different subject teachers. Expectations for independence changed with progress through the school in all sites. A class teacher stated that *'I use more verbal approaches and try and reduce the visual supports. We pull back on the individualised work and aim towards more group work'* [S\_MGLD\_SCT2]. Overall most schools used differentiated approaches to teaching at very good levels.

## 1.5 Teaching Methodologies

An excellent range of methodologies was observed to teach core skills and concepts to pupils with ASD in all sites. Recognising the presence of different learning styles a principal observed, *'these children think differently and experience the world differently and they have to be taught differently'* [S\_SPGLD\_P]. Teachers reported using a variety of methodologies ranging from general methodologies to those specific for students with ASD. Methodologies noted included the use of visual supports, reduced language, faded prompting, language groups, Assistive Technology (AT) devices, objects of reference, direct teaching, group teaching, peer modelling, forward chaining, backward chaining, TEACCH, PECS, ABA and social stories. One teacher noted that she used co-operative learning *'as they become more tolerant of each other'* [S\_MGLD\_SCT2].

Classrooms were structured to accommodate individualised work at workstations and with a large central table for group work activities in most sites. Teachers were observed providing students with multiple opportunities to respond, promote and maintain active engagement in almost all lessons. Lesson activities followed by activity breaks or relaxation time as warranted were a key feature of practice in lessons observed in three schools. All staff and management realised the value of first-hand experience for the students, and community visits and activities were used to their optimum at most sites.

While these excellent features of practice were evident in all sites, there were 'missed opportunities' to enhance instruction and learning in some observed lessons. These included the potential to be more proactive in tuning into individual students' early indicators of difficulties and to respond earlier in order to avoid students' experiencing anxiety or exhibiting behaviours that challenge. Opportunities to enhance learning were missed when teachers could have used more stimulating and age-appropriate materials to enhance students' engagement. A subject class taught on an entirely individualised basis, which utilised flash cards and text books, would have been considerably enhanced by using a variety of approaches such as a plenary session, the use of concrete materials, ICT and activities outside of those in the text book.

The use of teaching and environmental supports in special schools was excellent. All schools used a variety of visual supports as teaching tools, as a means of communication, to increase the independence of their students and to facilitate their participation in class/school activities. The TEACCH approach was used in all sites and its advantages for all children were well articulated. In the words of a principal, *'the environment must explain to the child at a glance what is expected of them here without the need for verbal explanations'* [S-SPGLD\_P]. Individual and whole-class age-appropriate visual schedules were in use in classrooms. As one teacher noted, *'we use the schedules for all the children in a variety of ways. Full day, half days. Work systems. Everyone works from left to right, top to bottom'* [S\_ASD1\_SCT2]. Students had personalised, individualised workstations. They worked either independently or with assistance. Workstations were clearly labelled with visual and/or print cues such as 'START' and 'FINISH'. Teachers and SNAs used visual flash cards with 'WAIT' and 'CHANGE' to support children with transitioning. The PECS and Lámh sign language were used in most schools to augment communication. The presence of technology was a notable feature of practice in most classrooms. Interactive Whiteboards and Tablets were used to support and enhance learning. Good safety features were almost always present in classrooms including coded locks, locks and door handles placed at the top of the door to safeguard students. Visual supports were also used to assist SNAs in their work. Teachers created lists of activities to be completed for SNAs to guide them when supporting children working from their workbaskets.

In almost all schools, teaching was based on assessment and took into account the children's strengths, interests and preferences when planning teaching. Teachers and parents collaboratively identified strengths and preferences as part of the individualised planning process. One teacher noted that *'we capitalise on their strengths by using what motivates them to provide optimal learning'* [S\_ASD2\_SCT1]. Another teacher described the rationale for utilising students' strengths by observing that it was the *'key to get them going. It is so fundamental to what they do. Their strengths give us an opportunity to develop their confidence'* [S\_MGLD\_SCT2]. In one school, while the timetables were individualised, the teaching content was not individualised or based on assessment [S\_ASD1].

In five of the six sites, teaching was well organised, structured and planned and staff gave advanced warning, where possible, of any changes to familiar routines in a way that was meaningful to the students with ASD.

In an observation in one school where less structure was employed by the teacher and the SNAs to promote 'child agency and choice', it was not clear that the students could achieve their individual learning targets. Allowing for 'child agency and choice' assumed that students could select and engage in specific activities. This was not evident when restricted choice was not used and some students did not engage in any activity for a significant portion of the time.

Visual displays of the students' work were evident in all sites. These were present throughout schools including the gym hall, in corridors, in classrooms and within individual workstations. A more systematic approach to displaying students' work throughout the school could have been utilised in three of the six sites. Two sites, while displaying students' artwork, were aware of the distraction such displays could cause and were sensitive to this when organising displays.

While excellent opportunities were provided for students with ASD to practise and use their knowledge and skills with different people, generalisation of learning was not systematically planned in schools but was dependent on curriculum opportunities and the individual choice of teachers which was not acceptable practice overall. Students were, in some instances, given opportunities for generalisation within the school day, for example in going to the local shop to buy their lunch or practising dressing skills at the swimming pool. One teacher stated that, *'we have been doing maths in the environment. Counting the number of cars in the car park'* [S\_ASD1\_SCT2).

The importance of the generalisation of skills to home settings was well recognised by all schools. A principal stated that *'the link with home and school is important in order to transfer skills. We need to link in with home in terms of telling them how it works in school so that they can implement those strategies. This is so important for children with ASD'* [S\_MGLD\_P]. Teachers communicated with parents through the Home-School Communication notebook to both inform them and seek their support in the teaching of mainly functional skills.

All teaching staff and SNAs were acutely aware of the sensory aspects of ASD and how these factors impacted on the children's learning. As one principal stated, *'sensory issues are a big interfering factor in their education'* [S-SPGLD\_P]. All schools used good and relevant strategies to support the children with these difficulties. Principals, teachers and SNAs received training on sensory differences from external professionals, such as the SESS, and occupational therapists. Two schools provided in-house whole-school CPD for their staff on sensory differences, funded by their Boards of Management. Teachers recognised that the sensory needs of students had to be addressed in order for teaching and learning to occur. All schools adapted the physical environment where possible to accommodate needs. The TEACCH structure, in use in all special schools, helped to support the student with sensory issues by providing structure and consistency. Schools provided sensory breaks through their use of sensory rooms, sensory gardens or the school grounds. Most schools used quiet rooms, and relaxation chairs to give students sensory breaks and to encourage them to self-regulate. The staff in one school try to *'dress as plainly as possible'* and were also very aware of smells such as coffee, perfumes and cigarettes and how these might impact on students' learning. Special needs assistants were considered to have a role that was *'hugely important'* [S\_MGLD\_P] when addressing the sensory issues of students. One SNA spoke of supporting children who could not attend school assemblies because of noise sensitivities [S\_ASD2\_SNA2). The principal of two schools commented on the importance of directing attention to students' sensory needs when selecting the most appropriate class for them in the school. It was noted that providing an environment that accommodated students' sensory needs was of greater importance than age or ability as it was observed that, when sensory needs are not accommodated, they led to severe challenging behaviour.

Overall, special schools offered an excellent range of teaching methodologies and most of them implemented them with clear structures and supports.

## 1.6 Team Approach

Staff in all sites were observed to work well together and with external professionals and services by joint planning and sharing of information and expertise. Collaborative planning existed at a number of levels:

- 1.7 Teachers and parents
- Teachers and external professionals
- 1.8 Teachers and SNAs
- Whole School Collaboration and planning.

Parents expressed satisfaction with the structure and level of communications they received from the special schools. Five of the six schools operated an 'open door policy' for parents and the sixth facilitated appointments. Parents were welcome to communicate with schools in person, by telephone or through the daily communication notebook. All schools accommodated parents who did not live close to the school. A principal spoke of meeting with prospective parents at venues close to where they lived. Parents appreciated this level of contact. As one parent observed, *'I'd be in touch with his teacher a lot on the phone and that. It is easy to work with her'* [S\_MGLD\_PAR24]. In addition, almost all parents were positive regarding their perception of internal collaborative practices within the school. A parent observed, *'they've achieved far more with him than I ever expected ... to achieve in life...with pairing him with the right members of staff. They always manage to find the right people that he's going to respond to best, and get the most out of him'* [S\_ASD1\_PAR29].

Teachers consulted with external professionals where necessary and where available. Support tended to be both informal and formal by consultation. Teachers used professional reports to inform planning and often found them helpful. Two teachers spoke of the challenge of implementing the recommendations of external professionals and said they would like more follow up or supports to discuss them. As one teacher said, *'I find the speech and language harder to manage myself. It is not my area of expertise'* [S\_ASD2\_CT1]. Four of the six sites mentioned the benefits of having in-house expertise as noted by one special class teacher, *'...sometimes the recommendations might be pie in the sky but the personnel we have in the school know their stuff'* [S\_MGLD\_SCT2]. Where services were to hand in the school, parents availed of these at one site for their child and teachers accessed support as they needed it. One teacher noted that *'we have a resident SLT who is fantastic. Anything you need help with social stories, or visuals she is a great help'* (S\_ASD1\_SCT3). Some professionals also provided CPD on a whole-school basis. Most schools referred to the limited availability of professionals external to the school. Principals and teachers in most schools referred to the proposed change in the resource allocation model in mainstream schools<sup>64</sup> and expressed concerns they would experience yet more reductions in support stemming from this.

<sup>64</sup> Delivery for Students with Special Educational Needs: A better and more equitable way: A proposed new model for allocating teaching resources for students with special educational needs in mainstream primary and post-primary schools (2014), NCSE.

Teachers consulted with SNAs on a regular basis. This ranged from informal meetings throughout the day to formal daily/fortnightly meetings. One SNA said that she had regular class meetings after school with the teacher and the three SNAs in the class to review the programme the teacher had put in place. The SNA reported that *'we might meet every two weeks. We would have unscheduled meetings between us. I'd go to the teacher and say that it isn't working and it would be changed'* [S\_ASD1\_SNA2]. Each of the three SNAs interviewed in one site stated their input depended on the attitudes of the individual teacher [S-ASD3]. One of these SNAs stated that, *'in some classes, my opinion would be asked for and in some it wouldn't'* [S-ASD3\_SNA3].

There was often clear evidence of a supportive team spirit between the teachers in the special schools. In the words of one principal: *'there is a lot of sharing between the teachers. Sometimes it is incidental. In our staff meetings we would have lots of sharing'* (S\_ASD1\_P). Some teachers took CPD together and collaborated on applying new learning in their school. Internal communication and collaboration were noted to occur within all schools, both through formal and informal means. Formal communication means including staff meetings, Croke Park hours, and internal online communication systems. Some schools particularly highlighted the benefit of Croke Park hours in providing teachers with time to collaborate and plan together. Informal peer-collaboration occurred often in most schools, in which peer support and information sharing were a feature of daily practice. Staff noted how they continually shared information and advised each other, particularly when difficulties arose. In-house mentoring occurred in some schools. One principal described how senior, more experienced teachers provided support to other staff in learning about teaching methodologies for children with ASD and children with complex needs. The strength of the SNA to the team was noted, as exemplified by one principal who stated, *'SNAs need to feel valued as well'*, highlighting the *'practical'* ideas they can bring to the table [S\_SPGLD\_P]. Special needs assistants also alluded to the informal communication that occurs on a daily basis within the classroom. Almost all SNAs felt that their contribution to the team was valued, listened to and respected. In general, SNAs were aware of their role within the classroom, noting how they worked *'under the direction of the teacher'* [S\_MGLD\_SNA1]. The need for respectful interactions and honesty between SNAs and teachers was noted, *'it's constant communication and it's constant talking to each other and respecting each other, and having a good working relationship with them, it's very important'* [S\_MGLD\_SCT1]. Overall, there was very good evidence that schools used collaborative practices effectively for planning and building expertise.

## 1.7 Data Collection/Monitoring of Progress/Outcomes

All of the special schools collected data at regular, identified intervals. This ranged from daily monitoring to weekly, fortnightly, monthly, termly and annual assessment. Teachers spoke knowledgeably of the assessment practices in their schools. Special needs assistants were involved in assessment practices. There were established structures in place to communicate progress with parents. Overall these practices were acceptable in all schools and excellent in some.



Teachers in five of the six sites engaged in daily collection of data on individual progress in language and communication, academic work, social skills, behaviour and emotional understanding, independence, play and use of leisure time. Some schools developed their own school checklists for this purpose. One teacher referred to the support of the SNAs in taking notes and observations on one-to-one assessments daily, *'so I can adjust the work as needs be'* [S\_ModGLD\_SCT3]. Information-gathering practices in all schools extended outside of daily monitoring activities. Monthly targets in individualised planning were ticked off and were accompanied by notes to inform future planning. Some schools wrote monthly and yearly progress reports. One school had a particularly well-developed data-collection practice in place and continually assessed and analysed data.

There is good evidence to suggest that almost all the special schools used the data collected to inform planning and review. In the words of one class teacher, *'assessment is ongoing. We assess in September and throughout the year and change their programme if they are not achieving'* [S\_MGLD\_SCT1]. One school had difficulty in accessing measures relevant to their student cohort. This school developed its own measures to meet the needs of their children. The principal explained that *'each child will have an individual planning document in each area of the curriculum. We adopted the evaluation as per the JCSP evaluations. Work begun, work achieved, work completed. We also have our functional curriculum with about eight areas for each student. We are thrilled with this approach'* [S\_ModGLD\_P]. Although teachers in this school did not refer to daily assessment, it was clear that they assessed fortnightly and every six weeks and adjusted programmes accordingly. Teachers reported using a wide variety of data-collection tools, formal and informal measures including checklists, observations, teacher-designed tasks and tests, children's work samples, portfolios, diagnostic tests, standardised tests, school-based checklists and ASD-specific tools such as ABLLS-R,<sup>65</sup> PEP 3 and VB-MAPP<sup>66</sup> to gather data. Photographs were used as a data collection tool in one site. Data collection practices were good in all special schools.

Information collected was shared and discussed between appropriate professionals and parents. An important element of data-collection sharing observed was between the class teacher and the SNA. Teachers put formal and informal structures in place to engage in discussion with their SNAs including daily progress report meetings, and informal checking. There is good sharing of information between teachers and classes as children progress in all schools. The daily home/school communication note book is used in all special schools as a means of sharing information between home and school. One class teacher described how she shares achievements with the parents, *'we send out a certificate when the child has reached targets. The parents get a real sense of what their child is doing at school. I send photos to the parents [by VIBER]'* [S\_ModGLD\_SCT3]. All special schools communicated at a very good level with parents.

<sup>65</sup> Partington, J.W. (1998) *Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLLS)*, Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services; Partington, J.W. (2006) *Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills – Revised (ABLLS-R)*, Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services.

<sup>66</sup> Sundberg, M.L. (2008) *Verbal Behaviour Milestones, Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP)*, Concord: AVB Press.

## Summary Statement 1: Teaching and Learning

Assessment policies were very good in four of the six schools and unacceptable in two. Five of the six schools were aware of autism-specific assessments and four of them used some of these regularly. Schools which served older children or those with complex needs found it difficult to locate and use assessments relevant to their populations and two of these sites had developed curriculum-specific assessment for their children. Acceptable methods of using Functional Behavioural Assessment to support children with challenging behaviours were evident in five of the six schools. These methods were rarely in evidence in the sixth site and was therefore unacceptable. Differentiated methods of assessment were not in evidence and most parents were not knowledgeable about assessments used with their children. In four of the six sites individualised planning including SMART targets and review dates were very good. Acceptable plans were observed in the other two sites. Very good structures existed in two sites and acceptable processes were followed in the other four to facilitate parental input in the individualised planning process. Most parents trusted the schools to develop appropriate plans and did not contribute specific targets. Older students participated acceptably in their own plans at two sites. Three sites attended carefully to the likes and dislikes of children in the planning process. More systematic ways of accessing and including children's participation in planning are needed at all sites. The overall level of child participation was unacceptable. SNAs contributed information to the planning process but did not participate in meetings around plans. External services were extensively used at all sites to support the planning process and were accessed through school patron bodies mostly.

Excellent transition protocols were evident, though not documented, in all sites for within lesson, class and school transitions. All sites planned for children to transition into their schools with careful attention to the needs of individual children. These transitions were excellent when children moved from Early Intervention classes to the school. Transitions out of special schools to post-school placements were carefully planned in five of the six sites and reflected very good practice. This transition was dependent for its success on the availability of placements for children with complex needs. An excellent broad range of curriculum options suited to the needs, interests, and capacities of the children was available at all sites. Curriculum guidelines were in use and access to the general curriculum was provided. Very good levels of differentiated teaching strategies were in evidence at four sites and acceptable levels at two. An excellent comprehensive range of specialised teaching methods suited to the strengths and needs of the children was observed in practice at all sites. Classrooms were structured to support individualised and group work and an excellent emphasis on visual supports and structured approaches (such as TEACCH) was evident at most sites.

In sites where children accessed the general curriculum subjects, reduced focus on differentiation was not acceptable. Children's assessed strengths and needs were taken into account in instruction at five of the six sites. Systematic attention to generalised learning was acceptable in two sites and not acceptable in the others. All sites demonstrated very good knowledge about and methods for attending to the sensory needs of their children. Evidence supports very good levels of collaborative planning in special schools. This included systems for including inputs from external professionals, parents, other staff members and SNAs. Schools valued the contribution of SNAs in particular with one exception where SNAs were dependent on individual teachers to

invite their input. Review of progress was excellent at five sites and unacceptable at one. Schools systematically collected data and used it to inform future plans. The data were shared with parents at all sites where collected.

## Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture

### 2.1 School Culture

Within the broad diversity of special schools, which included some schools where students with ASD were included and others specifically designated for students with ASD, there was good evidence of high expectations for all students. Parents were almost all very satisfied with their children's enrolment and progress in the schools. Parents sometimes commented on the lack of availability of speech and language therapy and occupational therapy in sites, but almost all expressed high levels of satisfaction with the school staff. As one parent remarked, *'we were very impressed with his teacher the first time we met her as we were with the principal. I have a more hands off approach this year – the nature of the school being specialist – I feel they have the knowledge'* [S\_GLD\_PAR25]. Another parent commented, *'I can't imagine him in any other setting...I am very satisfied where he is'* [S\_ASD2\_PAR36]. All schools had a clear sense of their mission to provide for students with ASD and their parents. They articulated their focus areas to include communication, social interactions, self-help and daily living skills, fostering self-esteem as well as academic progress when relevant. One principal noted that the school's capacity to provide opportunities for students with ASD to engage with other students in flexible and meaningful ways allowed them to *'give them confidence and ability in an environment which is not their natural one'* [S\_MGLD\_P]. Another principal expressed the school's commitment to providing a *'good quality of life experience every day'* for the children, and also said, *'we want them to be as independent as possible'* [S\_SPGLD\_P]. There was good evidence at all sites that independence skills were a key focus from completing simple tasks such as opening a bag of crisps to managing more complex self-care routines.

### 2.2 Communication

All six special schools used a home-school journal to facilitate communication between home and school. Five of the six special schools used the home-school journals on a daily basis, while one school sent the home-school journal home on Fridays. In five of the six schools, parents were encouraged to ring or text the school if they had any concerns. Schools also contacted parents by phone regularly. Almost all parents referred to high levels of engagement with the school. At one site, teachers and the multidisciplinary team met new parents a number of times during the year. One parent reported weekly school meetings to discuss their child's progress and being informed of the outcomes of these meetings through the home-school journal or by phone.

Schools communicated with parents in writing also. Two sites reported sending progress reports to parents during the year; one school did this once a year and another school [S\_ASD2] sent three reports to parents each year. This latter site reported the practice of offering home visits to parents and respected that some parents choose not to have a home visit. One school reported sending a newsletter to parents three times a year. One principal described sharing visual

supports and social stories with parents and was considerate of where parents were in terms of their child's diagnosis of ASD: *'we are very mindful of our parents, where they are on their journey, where they are on their level of acceptance'* [S\_MGLD\_P]. Three of the schools reported having active Parents' Associations.

In general, very good levels of communication with parents were noted in all schools, both through formal and informal means.

## 2.3 Learning Environment

Staff members demonstrated an excellent awareness at all sites of the importance of the learning environment for students with ASD. Both the external and internal aspects of the sites were considered to contribute to the overall learning potential of the schools. Parents commented on the importance of the layout of the schools, the facilities, the playground areas and the green spaces around schools. One parent noted that *'it is a very small school and doesn't have much land around it to go out and go for walks, but the layout inside the school is perfect'* [S\_ASD1\_PAR37]. Almost all parents agreed that the physical environment of the school supported their children's needs; one parent was not satisfied that the physical environment met her child's sensory needs and another parent believed that the classrooms were too small for children with ASD.

All six sites, including one purpose-built school, made and continued to make adaptations to the physical environment of the schools in order to meet the diverse needs of students with ASD, as expressed by one principal *'... we think about the nature of the child and what their needs are and we base everything around that'* [S\_SPGLD\_P]. Staff at one site was awaiting a new purpose-built school on which they had significant input regarding design features. A teacher there described the existing school as being unsuitable for children with ASD and observed that *'this school wasn't made with any idea of children with ASD being in it ... it is a noisy, visually disturbing environment, there's nothing really here that is conducive to children with ASD'* [S\_ASD1\_SCT1]. The principal at this site expressed his concern at the lack of spaces in the school, apart from the classrooms, to provide calming opportunities when children experienced high anxiety expressed through behaviours that challenge. He expected that the long-awaited new school building would alleviate this problem significantly.

All sites used TEACCH or elements of TEACCH in structuring the physical classroom environment to support the needs of students with ASD. All sites were aware of the impact of the sensory needs of students with ASD and considered this to be *'one of the biggest revelations we've had in recent times'* [S\_ASD1\_P]. Particular challenges were identified around creating learning environments suitable for meeting students' sensory needs and the concomitant difficulty that what works for one student might create difficulties for another. One school principal highlighted the difficulty in managing the environment to meet students' auditory sensitivities, *'... we cannot control auditory, I have yet to find a tool to control auditory and auditory is actually the one that's causing me the greatest trouble in terms of putting children together'* [S\_SPGLD\_P].

In sites where the children had moderate general learning disability or lower, the use of visual supports to scaffold learning, and match learning strengths of the students, had to be nuanced

to meet the students' need for a clear, instructive environment without attracting inappropriate interactions. A principal discussed this dilemma in terms of not having *'much visual supports in our school – all walls and doors are magnolia... They are visual learners too so we have to work around this. You have to keep visuals specific to the child – visuals all over the place are too much for them'* [S\_SPGLD\_P].

School staff showed good levels of awareness of the need for 'reduced language' when instructing children with ASD in all schools. One principal talked about the importance of this for all staff in the school so they would not think, *'when the principal is around I need to talk more so I am seen to be doing my job – less is more'* [S\_MGLD\_P]. All schools also demonstrated good evidence of using sensory breaks, movement breaks and proprioceptive activities to meet the sensory needs of children. Five of the six schools had sensory rooms and one had raised money to build one.

## 2.4 Extra-Curricular Activities

Extra-curricular activities in terms of activities taking place outside of the school day are not a feature of the Irish Education system. Rather schools provide a range of co-curricular activities with explicit links to the curriculum.

Students with ASD in special schools were included in co-curricular activities including sports events, trips, shows, as well as swimming, dancing, Mass, choir, morning walks and visits to nearby towns and cities. Differentiated access was provided in all sites through use of partial participation including attending some of an event, providing an extra bus to reduce noise levels during transport, deploying SNAs to support participation, using smaller groups, and providing alternative interesting activities for students who expressed their wishes not to participate in particular planned activities. Extensive preparation for co-curricular activity participation was in evidence at most sites. This ranged from discussing the proposed activity ahead of time to regular review of photos of the sites and activities to be visited. A couple of sites were incorporating Special Olympics participation for some students. In a particular site, whole-school activities were not held due to the sensitivities of the students in the school. Class groups met occasionally for events and the students were supported to participate in those. The principal here noted that, *'some children with ASD are not interested or overwhelmed – then we would do something else interesting with them'* [S\_SP\_P]. Planning for participation in co-curricular activities was carried out after consulting with and gaining the support of the parents in most sites. The two major reasons for reduced inclusion of students in these activities were an inappropriate fit between the activity and the sensory sensitivities of the child, and challenging behaviour.

All parents reported high levels of satisfaction with the inclusion levels of their children in co-curricular activities and events. Several commented positively on the efforts of the schools to include their children in spite of behaviours that challenge, lack of interest, and difficulties taking instruction. There was little evidence of parental participation in co-curricular events other than attending school shows. Mostly, parents trusted the schools to involve their children in school-wide and local events. Special schools included students in co-curricular activities at an excellent level which was satisfactory to the parents.

## 2.5 Student Wellbeing

All special schools demonstrated an excellent awareness of the importance of student wellbeing. School principals referred to the impact of sensory issues as well as puberty on anxiety as noted in the comment, *'quite often as children come into puberty you notice the escalation of stress, agitation ...'* [S\_MGLD\_P]. All sites demonstrated good evidence of their awareness of the vulnerability of their student population in the area of mental health and wellbeing. Sites with adolescents expressed concerns around appropriate education on and management of puberty and sexuality.

External services were used by many sites to support students' mental health and wellbeing. These included Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and referrals for psychiatric services. Three sites could directly refer a child to psychiatric support, with parental permission. One school has a Child Psychiatric Clinic, attended monthly by a psychiatrist. Parents could come to the school to visit the psychiatrist and subsequently the school could discuss the outcome of the consultation with the parents. One school reported having a behaviour consultant that visited the school. Schools used their grounds where possible to provide physical calming activities such as walks, visiting sensory gardens, and using playground equipment. As noted earlier, the importance of space, in addition to teaching spaces, for calming and sensory supports was noted by many sites. All sites used visual supports and SNA support to create and maintain clear, predictable, calm environments for the students as a means of managing anxiety. Several parents described their strategies for preparing their children for changes to schedules including chatting about them, using pictures, social stories, using 'change' cards, and reminding them about the changes. For some students this type of preparation had to be started well ahead of the anticipated change but, for others, anxiety was best managed by attending to potential changes immediately before they occurred. As one parent said, *'I prepare him the night before – explain to him – not earlier as he would worry too much about it. I go through it again the next morning with him and he is fine with that'* [S\_ASD1\_PAR34].

Teachers and SNAs used social stories and anticipatory visits locally to prepare children for significant events including Confirmation, haircuts, travel to local shows and shopping. An SNA commented in this regard that, *'we are trying to make their world bigger not smaller'* (S\_ModGLD\_SNA1).

## Summary Statement 2 – School Culture

High expectations for children were maintained in all sites and parents expressed satisfaction with their children's placements. An excellent wide variety of formal and informal communication systems operated between schools and parents. All sites demonstrated excellent awareness of the importance of the physical layout of the school and its environs to support children with ASD. Sites with children with complex needs were alert to the tension between adding visual supports to the environment and the simultaneous need to limit these for some children. All sites made excellent efforts to include the children in co-curricular events in the school and community. All sites demonstrated very good sensitivity to the interest levels and capacities of individual children in this regard. Schools demonstrated excellent awareness of sources of stress for their

children. They used external and internal services and supports when needed. They also relied on structure, predictability, SNA support and targeted preparation to help children manage stressful situations.

## Statement 3 – School Management

### 3.1 Leadership

All sites had clear, good management structures in evidence and a commitment to the on-going development of the professional expertise of their staff. Most schools rotated their teachers and SNAs into and out of educational provision for students with ASD and, in the cases of ASD-specific schools, across age and ability levels of the students. This process allowed for the continued upskilling of teachers and SNAs and greater understanding of ASD across the schools. All principals had extensive experience in special education and most had credentials in teaching children with ASD. There were clear expectations in evidence at all sites that staff understood the educational implications of ASD. Most principals clearly articulated their understanding of the developmental needs of the students as they progressed through the classes in the schools at a very good level. Principals referred to the need for all staff in the school to be knowledgeable about and take on board the need for reduced language as part of effective practice when working with students with ASD. One principal commented on the importance for teachers not to get caught up in the everyday work but to develop *'the ability to stand back and look! You cannot go on your own "wing and a prayer". You read literature – keep on learning yourself'* [S\_MGLD\_P]. This had permeated down to a class teacher in the same site who said that teachers need to *'step back and watch your effect on the children in the classroom – and take account of your presence in the classroom and how it affects the children'* [S\_MGLD\_SCT2]. There was evidence at most sites that teachers felt supported in their roles by the principal and encouraged to share their expertise and resources. Where this did not happen, a teacher expressed her awareness of the need for it when she said, *'expertise sharing? No we don't, but we should'* [S\_ASD3\_SCT1]. Overall, good leadership was evident in all schools.

### 3.2 Responsibility

All principals understood very well their roles in terms of leading and managing the development of appropriate school policy documents as well as organising and running school systems that provided needed support to the students as well as the staff. One principal described her role in the development of individualised plans in the school and attended some planning meetings selected by each teacher: *'I let teachers choose one or two Individual Plan meetings they would like me to attend – I like to know we are doing good practice. Procedures can slip'* [S\_ASD1\_P]. Principals responded to the shortage of therapists in their schools by providing more training to the direct care staff in the running of programmes developed by the speech and language or occupational therapists. The key for principals was expressed by one who said, *'the most important thing for a principal is to know autism – you can learn the rest'* [S\_ASD3\_P]. Principals at sites for students with moderate, severe or profound general learning disabilities all expressed their concerns about challenging behaviour, injuries at work and the mental and physical stress experienced by their staff.

Special class teachers discussed the importance of having a good working relationship with the SNAs in their classes in terms of their own levels of preparedness and their sense of efficacy. One teacher referred to the difficulties she experienced as a new teacher observing that, *'I had never changed a nappy and thought I was completely out of my depth. Special needs assistants need to be able to say to you that a lesson needed to be ended earlier – and I need to see this not as a criticism but as respecting the child'* [S\_MGLD\_SCT1]. This was corroborated by another class teacher who affirmed the importance of SNAs in educational provision, *'SNAs are critical for consistency of approach. They know the children'* [S\_MGLD\_SCT2].

Special needs assistants in all sites were clear about their roles and sensitive in particular to the growing independence needs of the students they were assigned to work with. One SNA described her role with a teenager with complex needs as, *'she likes to be independent – I learn to stand back'* [S\_GLD\_SNA1]. Another commented, *'in the senior section of the school I shadow and prompt and step back and promote independence'* [S\_GLD\_SNA2]. Yet another SNA reported, *'we try to get the students to have self-control. We are consistent in our approach and give a child a space to work through frustration'* [S\_Mod\_SNA1]. Many saw themselves as members of the classroom team but this tended to depend on individual teachers at one site. All SNAs expressed their clear awareness of their role in maintaining the safety needs of all the students in the schools.

While at all sites, principals, teachers and SNAs were clear on the various elements of their roles, many reported that the establishment and maintenance of functioning professional relationships between staff members across roles was both more valuable and more complicated to manage. When teachers and SNAs reported these professional relationships to be working well, both could give and take feedback and supported each other. Whereas instructional planning and delivery was clearly within the remit of the teachers, the lines of responsibility for all care needs were acceptable though somewhat blurred. At three sites teachers supported care needs as well as SNAs. Professionals' understanding of their roles in special schools was excellent.

### 3.3 Appointment of Staff

All principals made careful and excellent efforts to appoint appropriate staff to work with the particular children in their schools. All principals in these sites commented on the difficulties in finding and appointing staff who were suitable for their schools. Suitability was defined in terms of having good insight into how students with ASD see the world. One commented, *'we would be particular about the people we select to go into ASD'* [S\_ModGLD\_P]. SNAs tended to have worked for many years in each school and there was very little evidence of much turnover in this population. As one principal noted, *'there is not a lot of turnover of SNAs. We support them'* [S\_SPGLD\_P]. In sites that catered for children with general learning disabilities, in addition to those with ASD, SNAs were given opportunities to rotate out of ASD but *'some elect to stay in the area and are very dedicated'* [S\_ModGLD\_P].

Principals also commented at each site on the difficulties of providing substitute cover for teachers released to attend CPD or for those on sick or parental leave. One site acknowledged high levels of absenteeism among the staff particularly in situations where behaviours that challenge resulted in staff injuries.



### 3.4 Review of Provision for Children with ASD

It was clear from documentary analysis, observations and interviews conducted at most sites that teaching teams, including SNAs, met regularly and discussed the progress of individual children. Adjustments to practice were made in response to these meetings at most sites, and the process adequately documented and systematically accomplished in one site. Staff at the sites engaged informally in self-evaluative strategies. While acceptable, these were unsystematic and not comprehensive in scope or participation.

Data collection and analysis of individual learning targets and academic progress were absent and therefore unacceptable with one exception where data on all targets for all students were consistently collected, analysed and used in an excellent manner to inform instruction and interventions.

There was some evidence in practice that observations of behaviours of concern were carried out, analysed and acted upon. Two principals described the value of these kinds of observations in establishing whether particular sensory sensitivities were inhibiting learning opportunities for students. Several teachers described the use of data collection and analysis to inform intervention selection for challenging behaviours. In all but one site, the analysis and use of data to inform practice were not at acceptable levels.

### Summary Statement 3 – School Management

Evidence affirms very good management structures at all sites which supported the development of reflective teachers and continued growth and development. Principals, teachers and SNAs understood their roles and responsibilities very well. In terms of care needs, both teachers and SNAs provided supports in three sites. Principals made excellent efforts to recruit and hire teachers and SNAs appropriate for working with the children in their schools. There was very little turnover of SNAs at all schools.

Provision review was not acceptably done in five of the six sites. Data were collected on medical conditions and on behaviour but not systematically on provision effectiveness. Meetings were held regularly at four sites to evaluate provision but these were not systematically informed by relevant data.

## Statement 4 – Staff Development

### 4.1 Understanding and Knowledge of ASD for All Staff

Almost all staff across special schools demonstrated very good levels of understanding and knowledge of ASD. Such knowledge appeared to stem from the high levels of qualifications and CPD undertaken by staff. Most principals had an in-depth knowledge of ASD as evidenced by their qualifications in special education and ASD in particular. The Principal at one site highlighted the need to *'keep at the cutting edge of training and methodologies and knowing what we're about'* [S\_MGLD\_P]. Similarly, a teacher from a different site observed that, *'because we're an autism-*

*specific school, we have all received as much autism-specific training as feasible' [S\_ASD1\_SCT3]. The individualised nature of teaching and learning was noted by many staff members one of whom considered that 'our view as a staff would be that you need to get as much expertise as possible because all the children are very different and what works for some children doesn't work for the others, and it's very individualised' [S\_SPGLD\_P].*

The 'specialised' nature of ASD teaching was highlighted by most staff, and the need for regular additional training was emphasised. Principals were proud of the 'calibre' of their staff in terms of the high quality of preparation and skill they demonstrated daily. Principals and teachers in all schools outlined the high level of CPD and in-service training that is available to teaching staff, and the regular uptake of such services. Many teachers had post-graduate qualifications.

Almost all teachers appreciated the contributions of external agencies and multidisciplinary teams whose recommendations and advice, for the most part, were relevant and easy to implement. Positive interactions between school staff and external professionals were noted. Although most teachers valued the 'consultative approach', reductions in the support of external agencies (in part due to the failure to replace staff who had left) resulting in less input and less time to consult were highlighted in many sites.

In almost all schools, SNAs displayed an excellent practical understanding of the implications of ASD for classroom engagement and participation and self-care. The majority of SNAs within schools had a minimum of FETAC training level 5 or 6. The strength of the FETAC training was remarked on by some SNAs, where the work experience element of it was deemed 'invaluable'. Teachers described the 'practical' skills of SNAs, and their 'on the job' learning was heavily connected to teachers acting as mentors and sharing information from their own CPD experiences. One teacher noted how this CPD role took its toll on teachers when she said, '*I don't see it to be the teachers' onus to deliver the instruction to the SNA...it's hard to expect the teachers to come back and relay that information when they've got so much else going on*' [S\_ASD2\_SCT1]. Very good levels of understanding of ASD were evident overall by professionals in special schools.

## 4.2 Continuing Professional Development

Professionals at special school sites engaged in CPD at excellent levels overall. Principals and teachers affirmed the wide range and quality of CPD and in-service training that are available to staff, and the regular uptake of such services. The specialised nature of teaching students with ASD was consistently noted, alongside the fundamental need for regular up-skilling in this area as exemplified by a principal who said that, '*the challenge has been to keep on learning, you just have to keep an open mind and there'll always be something new*' [S\_MGLD\_P].

Access to ongoing professional development such as participation in workshops, conferences and specialist consultations was readily available to teachers in almost all schools. In addition, two schools noted how additional training was provided for some members of staff in the area of seizure management. Such training was provided commensurate with the degree of contact and responsibility the staff members had for students with ASD and seizure disorders.

The range, strength and relevance of CPD courses were emphasised, with particular mention of the Special Education Support Service and, to a lesser extent, Middletown Centre for Autism, Education Centres and TRASNA training. A desire for additional forms of this training was expressed across many sites. Two schools also outlined how they had the input of experts from the US to support staff development and their use of evidence-based strategies in their school. The geographical location of some CPD courses was a cause for concern at some sites where staff expressed a desire for more 'local' courses. One teacher commented in this regard that *'I find a lot of the courses are far too far away, you know, you have to really travel, and then if you don't choose to travel, you have to wait a couple of years for that course to come around, that it might be more local'* [S\_ModGLD\_SCT2].

In general, teachers noted the strong support of school principals and Boards of Management to engage in CPD training. Such support included information dissemination on upcoming courses, arrangement of substitute provision, as well as time and financial support. Principals affirmed the value of CPD training for staff and, in turn, the students. At the same time, principals and teachers noted the disruptive nature of leaving one's class to attend CPD training, both for the Principal and for the students. However, the value of the training appeared to compensate for such difficulties.

Principals in these sites maintained their presence at professional opportunities to meet peers at national meetings and focus groups related to their patron bodies. They were complimentary about the CPD offered to them through the Irish Primary Principals' Network and the SESS. However learning opportunities for parents were almost never in evidence.

A number of schools noted their need for additional training in particular areas including sensory integration, Crisis Prevention Intervention (CPI), and especially the areas of puberty and sexuality for teachers working with teenagers with ASD. These last named areas provided particular and sensitive challenges for all staff.

Individual CPD plans were not alluded to in the interviews. In addition, review of CPD across the school was rarely acknowledged. Only one principal kept records of staff training. Rather, individual teachers selected their own CPD based on an individual preference and need. This emerged as a particular area for development in terms of whole-school planning. CPD was availed of at excellent levels by principals and teachers in special schools although systematic and school-wide approaches to this were not in evidence.

A significant lack of availability of external CPD was noted for SNAs, in contrast to the availability of CPD from the SESS for teachers. Special needs assistants reported that, for many courses advertised, the limited number of places generally prevented them from engaging in CPD. They also noted how CPD, for the most part, had to take place outside of school hours. The need and desire for more training opportunities for SNAs were expressed by almost all SNAs, principals and teachers alike. Some SNAs specified their need for CPD in the areas of behaviour management and Crisis Prevention Intervention (CPI) to allay the 'fear' of some staff working in this area. Because of the lack of systematic and regular CPD for SNAs, they reported acquiring knowledge from their experience and having *'learned by their mistakes over the years'* [S\_ModGLD\_SNA1].

Special needs assistants did receive a lot of in-house CPD, organised and paid for by the school in many sites. In-house training particularly related to care needs (health and safety, CPI, Studio-3, manual handling, seizure-related training), in addition to ASD-specific methodologies and communication programmes from Speech and Language Therapists (Hannon programme, LAMH, PECS and Board Maker). This CPD generally occurred during Croke Park hours or in extra working days in late August prior to the start of the new school year. Principals, however, noted the difficulty in providing after-school CPD for SNAs when a number of them also worked as bus escorts. The principal at one site noted how SNAs in her school received a significant amount of CPD over the years, *'we haven't had an awful lot of turnover of SNAs and I'd like to think it's because they feel supported and are well-trained'* [S\_SPGLD\_P].

Some experienced SNAs also noted how 'basic' some of the CPD courses available outside of the school were. The lack of CPD was perceived by some SNAs to be strongly connected to the lower status of SNAs and their limited prescribed remit as described by one SNA, *'In terms of our own professional development and satisfaction you get from that, it's not there, there is no development for SNAs. Zero. There is no career progression, there is no career ladder, there is nothing. Once you're in the slot, you just put in the time and as your time increases, so does your security. But it has no bearing on the kind of job you do or what you're willing to take on'* [S\_ModGLD\_SNA1]. The challenges and frustrations pertaining to the prescribed *'role of the SNA'* were expressed a number of times in terms of working beyond that of a care role and the lack of CPD in this regard. A desire for specific training for each of the settings was expressed.

SNAs availed of CPD at excellent levels in special schools but reported a narrow range of opportunities and no progression options for them professionally.

### 4.3 Information Sharing and Access to Specialist Information on ASD

Information sharing of specialist information on ASD was a very good feature of practice in almost all sites. Staff was provided with opportunities to further their knowledge of ASD by liaising with colleagues and other educational professionals with relevant expertise. High levels of communication were noted in all schools, whereby the philosophy of a *'whole-school, team-approach'* was expressed by the majority of staff and appeared to underpin practice in almost all schools. Staff noted the high level of expertise within their schools, and how the skill-sets of different teachers were recognised and used to inform practice and develop the skills of others. Some staff noted the particular expertise of individual members of staff and the wealth of information they can bring to the school.

Teaching staff rarely referred to professional networks or the sharing of information and expertise with teachers from other schools. It is possible, however, that this occurs at CPD training events, but was not highlighted by staff. Similarly, professional networks or collaborative practices with other schools were never referred to by SNAs. In contrast, a number of principals described their involvement in peer-support and collaborative groups with other special school principals in the locality, as well as at a national level. The strength of such professional networks was noted, and regular meetings and phone calls served to support practice and management within the schools.

Formal and informal methods of communication were evident within almost all sites to facilitate the sharing of information and resources with colleagues following conferences, seminars or local training events. Information on ASD was made available in almost all schools through a variety of channels. There was a culture of cascading information gained through CPD amongst almost all staff and capacity based on good practice was built throughout the schools. One principal reported that *'we all are open, I hope, to learning from each other'* [S\_ASD2\_P]. Formal methods of in-school information sharing were evident in most schools, in which teachers often shared their learning from CPD courses at staff meetings, during Croke Park hours, or through internal online communication systems. This sharing of information was always encouraged and supported by school principals. Dissemination of literature also was a feature of practice in almost all schools following CPD training. One principal described this in terms of *'I suppose it comes back to our whole-school ethos which is communicate, talk about ... disseminate literature if someone goes on a course, bring it back, get it round to everybody'* [S\_MGLD\_P]. A teacher commented on how the principal is *'actively encouraging staff to do courses the whole time ... and there's never a meeting where there isn't someone feeding back information'* [S\_ASD1\_SCT1]. Where formal mechanisms did not exist at a site to share information, informal means usually accomplished this.

Teachers and principals identified some barriers to sharing information during Croke Park hours in the schools, the most critical of which was that staff was tired at the end of the day. One principal preferred peer observation as a better tool for sharing expertise, but in-house mentoring and peer observation were rarely in evidence in the schools. One setting used these strategies for new members of staff only to support their learning about classroom ecology and behaviour management. In addition, one setting used *'IEP [Individual Education Plan] support'* meetings every six weeks, to allow the sharing of expertise and peer support in target-setting and progress-monitoring where the teacher observed that, *'it's a really good time for an exchange of ideas'* [S\_ASD1\_SCT2].

Informal peer collaboration was a feature of practice in almost all schools. Staff noted how they continually shared information and advised each other, particularly when difficulties arose. Such practices occurred during lunch and other breaks. Notably, the use of documentation to share learning and skills amongst staff was rarely referred to. Information dissemination tended to be informal in nature at all schools and combined with the lack of school-wide systematic approaches to CPD to reduce the potential effectiveness of the very good levels of CPD uptake by all school professionals.

## Summary Statement 4 – Professional Development

Principals and teachers at all sites demonstrated excellent levels of knowledge about ASD through additional qualifications and regular engagement in Continuing Professional Development. SNAs were knowledgeable about and sensitive to the impact ASD have on the learning and behaviour of children in their care. Both teachers and principals engaged regularly in CPD and there was significant praise for that offered through the SESS, Middletown Centre for Autism, and school patron bodies. Schools provided significant CPD opportunities for their SNAs but recognised the difficulties in scheduling this due to their additional role, in many cases, as bus escorts.

SNAs were articulate and critical of the lack of systematic and national opportunities for them to develop skills and knowledge on a continuous basis. Teachers at most sites respected the professional expertise and knowledge of their colleagues and described informal methods used to share these. Whereas principals at these sites valued their engagement in peer support and collaborative groups regionally, the practice of teachers liaising with teachers from other schools was not in evidence. Formal and informal structures existed at most sites where a tradition of sharing CPD learning was well established.

### **Concluding Summary: Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Special Schools**

Assessment policies were very good in four of the six schools and unacceptable in two. Five of the six schools were aware of autism-specific assessments and four of them used some of these regularly. Schools which served older children or those with complex needs found it difficult to locate and use assessments relevant to their populations and two of these sites had developed curriculum-specific assessment for their children. Acceptable methods of using Functional Behavioural Assessment to support children with challenging behaviours were evident in five of the six schools. These methods were rarely in evidence in the sixth site and was therefore unacceptable. Differentiated methods of assessment were not in evidence and most parents were not knowledgeable about assessments used with their children. In four of the six sites individualised planning including SMART targets and review dates were very good. Acceptable plans were observed in the other two sites. Very good structures existed in two sites and acceptable processes were followed in the other four to facilitate parental input in the individualised planning process. Most parents trusted the schools to develop appropriate plans and did not contribute specific targets. External services were extensively used at all sites to support the planning process and were accessed through school patron bodies mostly.

Excellent transition protocols were evident, though not documented, in all sites for within lesson, class and school transitions. All sites planned for children to transition into their schools with careful attention to the needs of individual children. Transitions out of special schools to post-school placements were carefully planned in five of the six sites and reflected very good practice. This transition was dependent on the availability of placements for children with complex needs for its success. An excellent broad range of curriculum options suited to the needs, interests, and capacities of the children was available at all sites. Curriculum guidelines were in use and access to the general curriculum was provided. Very good levels of differentiated teaching strategies were in evidence at four sites and acceptable levels at two. An excellent comprehensive range of specialised teaching methods suited to the strengths and needs of the children was observed in practice at all sites.

In sites where children accessed the general curriculum subjects, reduced focus on differentiation was not acceptable. Children's assessed strengths and needs were taken into account in instruction at five of the six sites. Systematic attention to generalised learning was acceptable in two sites and not acceptable in the others. All sites demonstrated very good knowledge about and methods for attending to the sensory needs of their children. Evidence supports very good levels of collaborative planning in special schools. Review of progress was excellent at five and

unacceptable at one site. Schools systematically collected data and used it to inform future plans. The data were shared with parents at all sites where collected.

High expectations for children were maintained in all sites and parents expressed satisfaction with their children's placements. An excellent wide variety of formal and informal communication systems operated between schools and parents. All sites demonstrated excellent awareness of the importance of the physical layout of the school and its environs to support children with ASD. Sites with children with complex needs were alert to the tension between adding visual supports to the environment and the simultaneous need to limit these for some children. All sites made excellent efforts to include the children in co-curricular events in the school and community. All sites demonstrated very good sensitivity to the interest levels and capacities of individual children in this regard. Schools demonstrated excellent awareness of sources of stress for their children. They also relied on structure, predictability, SNA support and targeted preparation to help children manage stressful situations.

Evidence corroborates very good management structures at all sites which supported the development of reflective teachers and continued growth and development. Principals, teachers and SNAs understood their roles and responsibilities very well. In terms of care needs, both teachers and SNAs provided supports in three sites. Principals made excellent efforts to recruit and hire teachers and SNAs appropriate for working with the children in the schools. There was very little turnover of SNAs at all schools. Provision review was not acceptably done in five of the six sites. Data were collected on medical conditions and on behaviour but not systematically on provision effectiveness.

Principals and teachers at all sites demonstrated excellent levels of knowledge about ASD through additional qualifications and regular engagement in Continuing Professional Development. SNAs were knowledgeable about and sensitive to the impact ASD has on the learning and behaviour of children in their care. Both teachers and principals engaged regularly in CPD and there was significant praise for that offered through the SESS, Middletown Centre for Autism, and school patron bodies. Schools provided significant CPD opportunities for their SNAs but recognised the difficulties in scheduling this due to their additional role, in many cases, as bus escorts.

SNAs were articulate and critical of the lack of systematic and national opportunities for them to develop skills and knowledge on a continuous basis. Formal and informal structures existed at most sites where a tradition of sharing CPD learning was well established.

## 7. Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: July Education Programme<sup>67</sup>

The analysis below is derived from the data collected in three type J sites. These comprised two classes in a special school, a class in a mainstream school and a home site. A total of 19 interviews informed the data, one child conversation, three document reviews and four observations of practice were conducted. The analysis is therefore informed by less rich data than other forms of provision and the findings and implications more tentative as a result. All of the children in the special school were reported as having a moderate general learning disability and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Four of the children in the class in the mainstream school were described as having an assessment of ASD and two as having an assessment of Asperger's syndrome. One child was described as having a severe to profound general learning disability, another as having a moderate to severe general learning disability, two as having a moderate general learning disability and the remaining two as having a mild general learning disability. Two of these children were also described as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and/or oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). Severe sensory and language impairment with medical complications were identified as co-occurring special educational needs for the child with a severe general learning disability. The child in the home site had an assessment of ASD with no formal assessment of learning ability.

A specific requirement of the July Education Programme (JEP) is that the programme be educational in content and similar to the curriculum delivered during the school year.<sup>68</sup>

### Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning

#### 1.1 Assessment

A formal assessment policy was not available in any setting. Both overseers<sup>69</sup> reported that *'we don't have formal assessment'* [JEP\_S\_O]. There was excellent practice in school sites where assessments completed during the school year were documented in end of year schemes and reports and used to inform the July programme of work [JEP\_S\_T2]; [JEP\_S\_T1]; [JEP\_PSC\_O]. This was captured by one of the teachers in the special school who pointed out that *'I don't spend much time assessing what we do in July. We have been assessing all year and by the end of June, we have the reports written up. It is a little bit more relaxed'* [JEP\_S\_T1]. The overseer reported that teachers specifically employed for the JEP followed programmes devised by class teachers

<sup>67</sup> The following is a description of the July Education Provision according to the DES website: 'The scheme provides funding for an extended school year for children with a severe or profound general learning disability or children with autism. The extended year is more commonly known as July Provision or the July Education Programme. Where school-based provision is not feasible, home-based provision may be granted. Where an eligible school participates in the programme, an extra month's education is provided to a pupil who meets the scheme's criteria. Where school-based provision is not feasible, 40 hours' home-based provision may be grant aided.' – See more at: <http://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/July-Provision/#sthash.Qzrm9Wf0.dpuf>

<sup>68</sup> (Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2013) July Education Programme 2013 School Based Programme – Frequently Asked Questions: Revised April 2013, Athlone: Department of Education and Skills.

<sup>69</sup> The overseer of the programme must be a principal, deputy/vice-principal or permanent qualified teacher (Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2013)). July Education Programme 2013 School Based Programme – Frequently Asked Questions: Revised April 2013, Athlone: Department of Education and Skills.



and therefore did not undertake separate assessments [JEP\_S\_O]. An alternative approach was described by a class teacher who stated that *'all I do, hand on heart at the end of every two weeks is that I write up a checklist of things that work and I hand on to the teacher in the classroom of what I did with them, what I found was successful and what would need more work'* [JEP\_S\_T2].

All of the parents interviewed stated that they were not aware of which assessment was used during the JEP or if the learning was assessed, observing that the programme was a continuation of the school year. As a parent stated, *'they know... They know what works with him. It's just a continuation. I doubt if they reassess him'* [JEP\_PSC\_PAR54].

The parent in the home setting where the JEP was delivered was involved more in the planning and assessment of the child's learning compared to parents in the school settings. She reported that *'I talk to the tutor every day when he is finished. If he needs a bit of extra work she will do it'* acknowledging that *'it wouldn't be specific assessment but it is talking about what he does'* [JEP\_H\_PAR57]. This was corroborated by the tutor delivering the JEP.

In the two school settings, teacher observation and checklists were identified as the assessment tools used in assessing student's learning [JEP\_S\_T1]; [JEP\_S\_T2]; [JEP\_S\_O]; [JEP\_PSCT\_T]. In the home setting teacher observation and teacher recording of child's achievements were used to assess the child's learning. A teacher in one site reported that observations were noted following the reflections of group discussions on students' progress [JEP\_PSCT\_T]. Specific assessment of co-occurring needs was not evident during the JEP. While all children's individual strengths and needs were acceptably considered in the assessment systems evidenced in the JEP, there was no evidence of specific differentiated assessment methods which was unacceptable.

## 1.2 Individualised Planning

Individualised planning specific to the JEP was not a feature of practice. In both school sites, it was reported that children's individualised planning from the previous school year informed the JEP, but was not specific to it. As noted by a teacher in the special school site, *'the individual programmes they are using during the year would be continued'* [JEP\_S\_T1] and corroborated by the teacher in the primary site, *'we use the child's IEP'* [JEP\_S\_T2]. Parents did not report being involved in planning for the JEP. Where the JEP was delivered in the home, the child's targets were identified and agreed with the parent. The level of involvement of the children in planning for the JEP was acceptable given the complexities of their needs in most cases and the fact that their likes and dislikes were taken into account in all settings. It was unacceptable that the child's individualised planning was not available to the teacher and parent in the home setting.

## 1.3 Transition

In both school sites, there was evidence of the transfer of information between class teachers and the providers of the JEP. As described by a class teacher in the special school site, *'every June up to now, I had to update all their files. So that everyone knew how to approach the child, what their rewards were, what their schedule was... just to familiarise themselves with each child. We would*

*have profiles written up on the wall so that the people [the staff who were to be involved in the JEP] would know what to do. We would have to update all of these at the end of June. We would generally try and get the people in for a day or so [JEP\_S\_T1].* It was noted that, when staff involved in the JEP programme were invited in to the school prior to the commencement of the JEP, it was a gesture of goodwill as they did not receive remuneration for this.

In all sites, all staff members demonstrated excellent awareness of the importance of focusing on maintaining a routine for children with ASD. As this routine was already well established in schools, additional planning for transition to the JEP in schools was deemed to be unnecessary. As observed by an SNA, *'now you do a bit of extra things but you have to keep up the routine. Because of the autism, we have to keep up with routine as much as possible'* [JEP\_S\_SNA1]. One parent spoke of the ease of transition from school to the JEP programme as, *'when his routine is upset, he is upset. He finds routine changes very hard. The July Provision is just there in his school. It just slides along there'* (JEP\_S\_PAR47). In the home setting, it was unacceptable that there was no formal additional planning in place for transition from the child's school to the JEP. The teacher who was delivering the JEP in the child's home observed that the child took a while to settle with her as *'it wasn't the normal school environment'* [JEP\_H\_T]. She noted the lack of resources to support her use of a visual schedule, which she suggested would have helped with the process and pointed out that *'I don't have access to Boardmaker®70 and I don't have access to the internet where I am living at the moment. You do have more resources in the school'* [JEP\_H\_T].

A focus was evident on students' educational, health and care needs when planning for the JEP. A teacher in the special school site noted that it was important that staff delivering the JEP were informed about the students as *'the children are more needy in the severe and profound class. More children there are peg-fed, with epilepsy. There are children with serious difficulties. It is difficult to do this when you have little experience. We do our best to make sure that everyone is up to date. It is always difficult'* [JEP\_S\_T1].

The schools were aware of the complexities of introducing new staff to work on the JEP. In one setting, staff delivering the JEP were employed in the school or had been involved in the JEP previously and demonstrated an excellent understanding of children's needs in the context of the JEP. An excellent transition programme for the staff was in place in one setting. New staff members were inducted by the school staff. Personal time and commitment to this process was noted by the overseer [JEP\_S\_O]. New staff came to the school on a voluntary basis to receive induction from current staff outside of school hours without additional remuneration [JEP\_S\_O]. The overseer stated, *'I have to compliment the staff who do not do the July provision for how well they prepare the staff coming in. The preparation is voluntary and based on goodwill. To be fair, it works in a reasonable way'* [JEP\_S\_O]. This overseer suggested that it would be a good idea if a teacher delivering the JEP could be facilitated in visiting the school prior to the JEP commencing and while the school term was in session to shadow the existing class teacher. He suggested that this would greatly assist the transition process both for students and for teachers. There were no formal processes in place for staff induction for provision in the home setting and the practice was unacceptable.

<sup>70</sup> Mayer-Johnson (2015) Available at <http://www.mayer-johnson.com/support/productdocumentation/details/id/742> [Accessed Thursday 21st July 2015]

Parents were informed of changes in personnel for July provision in both school settings [JEP\_S\_PAR46]; [JEP\_S\_PAR51]. Parents didn't identify support for transition into and out of the JEP as presenting a difficulty. Parents considered that it was '*just an extension of school*' [JEP\_PSC\_PAR54]. One parent reported using pictures for the transitioning process with her child [JEP\_S\_PAR51].

## 1.4 Curriculum

In all sites, the programme for the JEP was a continuation of curriculum relevant to the previous academic school year. The focus on curriculum continuity was excellent in the mainstream site, very good in the special-school site and unacceptable in the home setting. The overseer in the special school reported that the JEP was informed by the Primary School Curriculum (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 1999) and the Guidelines for Teachers of Moderate General Learning Disabilities and Severe and Profound General Learning Disabilities (NCCA, 2007). The overseer noted that the focus of the JEP was on the continuation of the child's curriculum experience in order to avoid undue changes in routine for children with ASD. However, the overseer acknowledged that changes in staffing for the JEP could result in a change in emphasis in some children's programmes. This was not the experience in the mainstream setting, as the overseer of the programme was the class teacher, and the teacher delivering the programme was a mainstream teacher in the school.

There was evidence of an emphasis on outdoor, active learning and on the development of social skills in all sites during the JEP. Practice ranged from excellent in the school sites to good in the home-setting site. In one of the school sites, the overseer described life skills as being one of the key elements of July provision [JEP\_PSC\_O]. This was corroborated by the class teacher who explained that '*we have to look at what is useful for this child throughout his life. There are life trips out on a Wednesday. That might involve practising pedestrian crossing or going swimming. There are trips out. This year we went to the [local centre]. We would have had photographs. We had the menu from Supermacs and we would organise that before we went*' [JEP\_PSC\_O]. In the site where the JEP was delivered in the home, the teacher described arranging to go on weekly visits to the local library with another teacher who was providing the JEP also on an individual basis and encouraging both children to interact with each other during these sessions. All team members were aware of the additional support required in order to allow all children engage in the planned activities. For example, a special needs assistant (SNA) noted that a trip to a wild-life park constituted a '*big outing*' that would require 'lots of preparation' for a child '*who was not good with people*' [JEP\_PSC\_SNA1]. The role of the SNA in providing individualised support in relation to children's care and behavioural needs was noted by one teacher who stated that '*the SNA will differentiate for them*' [JEP\_PSCT\_T] which was acceptable.

In the special school site, where there were children with more complex needs, some unacceptable limitations in the capacity of the school to provide children with specific experiences were described. In the special school site it was reported that a parent had requested that her child be placed on a standing frame for a certain period during the school day as was normal procedure during the school year. However, due to the lack of availability of teachers who were trained to do this, it was not possible to facilitate the mother's request. The overseer

observed that *'there are certain things we can do and certain things we can't. We can't have the same level of consistency as we don't have the same level of staff. But we give it our best shot'* [JEP\_S\_O]. Access to the school pool was also not available due to the lack of trained staff during the JEP period [JEP\_S\_O].

All parents in all sites expressed satisfaction that the JEP was available for their children. Parents did, however, acknowledge that they did not really know what was covered in the programme commenting that *'they continue what they are doing in school. I wouldn't really know'* [JEP\_S\_PAR51]; *'I am happy with the programme but I don't really know what they do. I just left it to them'* [JEP\_S\_PAR47]. While one parent expressed satisfaction that the JEP was available she suggested that it could be *'better'* in terms of providing more hours [JEP\_H\_PAR57].

A good differentiated approach to children's learning and teaching was evident in all sites as well as in the home. This included suiting the pace and level of involvement in activities to individual children as well as individualised supports including SNA use. The interests and needs of all children were taken into consideration in all activities planned in the JEP.

## 1.5 Teaching Methodologies

In all sites, excellent attention was directed towards planning for children's learning and teaching and identifying relevant objectives. However, the format of this planning varied considerably between sites and was less formalised than that undertaken during the school year. Visual schedules were used by almost all teachers in the JEP programme. The use of the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS),<sup>71</sup> elements of the Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children (TEACCH)<sup>72</sup> and functional behaviour assessment (FBA) was very good in all school sites. Very good use of the Lámh<sup>73</sup> signing system was observed in one school site. This system was not used in the other school site or in the home-setting. Very good use of tablets was evident in all school sites. In all sites, excellent integration of learning outside of the classroom with the JEP was a feature of practice. General teaching methodologies as advised in the Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) were observed and included clear and direct instructions, review of previous learning, teaching in small explicit steps, providing feedback to the child, monitoring the child's response, teacher-modelling, displaying positive expectations for the child, cultivating respectful interactions, promoting a safe and secure classroom environment, monitoring the child's on-task engagement and anticipating possible off-task behaviour, activity-based learning, structured questioning and scaffolding of children's responses through guided discovery.

<sup>71</sup> Bondy, A. and Frost, L. (2002) *A Picture's Worth: PECS and Other Visual Communication Strategies in Autism*, Bethesda: Woodbine House.

<sup>72</sup> Schopler, E. (2001) TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children, in *The National Autistic Society (ed.) Approaches to Autism*, London: The National Autistic Society, p. 68.

<sup>73</sup> Lámh (2009) About Lámh, Accessed online on Monday 31st August 2009 at <http://www.lamh.org/About-Lamh.aspx>

In all settings, staff members were aware and had been informed of students' sensory differences, their impact on learning and teaching and strategies required to accommodate these differences. This awareness was excellent in the school sites and acceptable in the home setting, where the parent was the sole informant on the child's needs.

## 1.6 Team Approach

In school sites, parents were not specifically involved in planning for the JEP. One parent's comment resonated with the position of all parents who participated in considering (as noted previously) that the JEP was an extension of the school year and did not therefore require any additional involvement of parents, *'we are involved all the time and I suppose that July Provision is part of that'* [JEP\_S\_PAR48]. The parent of the student who was accessing the JEP in the home discussed the proposed programme of work with the teacher based on the communication the parent had with her child's class teacher, *'the tutor and myself worked it out... based on what the class teacher had said'* [JEP\_H\_PAR57]. In the two school sites, there was evidence of excellent communication between class teachers and staff involved in delivering the JEP. The overseer in the special school observed that *'we have a huge amount of communication and cooperation between the staff going out of the classroom and the staff going into the classroom'* [JEP\_S\_O]. The wide-ranging areas that had to be addressed for students with complex needs in the context of the JEP were referred to by the overseer as *'toileting, feeding, mobility, sensory programmes'* and further corroborated by one of the class teachers.

Evidence was also provided of communication between SNAs involved in July Provision as described by one, *'we would sit down in June and make out the toileting and feeding programmes and they are passed around'* [JEP\_S\_SNA1]. In one of the two school sites, regular Monday meetings were held for the SNAs who described these in terms of *'we have the Monday meetings and you know what is going on for the week. It helps an awful lot. You know where you are going'* [JEP\_PSC\_SNA2].

## 1.7 Data Collection/Monitoring of Progress/Outcomes

While it was evident in all settings that good attention was directed to monitoring and recording children's progress and using data to inform teaching and learning, this process was variously implemented by individual teachers and less systematised than would be expected during the schools' academic year.

Excellent sharing of information was observed with the parent on a daily basis where the JEP programme was delivered in the home. Good practice was evident in the two school sites through the use of communication diaries as noted by teachers in both settings, *'we have the notebook in every bag and I write every evening. That is the way we communicate always'* [JEP\_S\_T1]; *'we use home-school diaries on a need to know basis'* [JEP\_S\_T2]. One of the two settings also had a communication diary to support their communication with the bus escorts [JEP\_PSCT\_T].

## Summary: Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning

Excellent practice was evident in school sites where the JEP was informed by school assessment procedures in the previous school year. However, the lack of continuity between school assessment procedures and the provision in the home site was unacceptable. All sites directed good attention towards monitoring and recording children's progress and using the data to inform teaching and learning.

The parent in the home site where the JEP was delivered was involved more in the planning and assessment of the child's learning during the delivery of the JEP compared to parents in the school sites. All of the parents interviewed in school sites stated that they were not aware of which assessment was used during the JEP or if the learning was assessed, observing that the programme was a continuation of the school year. Children's individualised planning from the previous school year constructively informed the JEP in the school sites with no link between individualised planning and the JEP evident in the home site, which was unacceptable.

In school sites, there was very good communication between class teachers and SNAs with staff delivering the JEP prior to commencement of the programme. The level of involvement of children in planning for the JEP was unacceptable.

An individualised and differentiated approach to curriculum provision was evident in all sites. Excellent opportunities to develop and extend children's social and life skills were availed of during the JEP in school sites but were less developed in the home site. The generic and ASD-specific teaching methodologies that children were familiar with were maintained in the two school sites during the JEP which was good. However, due to the absence of a communication system between the school and the home site, continuity in the use of teaching methodologies was unacceptable.

## Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture

### 2.1 School Culture

In the three sites, an excellent culture of high ambitions and aspiration was in evidence. The teacher in the special class referred to collaborating with the overseer and SNAs, scrutinising children's individualised planning, planning for children's learning and becoming familiar with behaviour protocols [JEP\_PSC\_T]. The JEP was perceived in the school sites as an extension of the school year where changes to routines and the learning environment were minimal. The SNA in one of the sites described her role as '*the same as it is all year, it's a continuation*' [JEP\_S\_SNA2]. In the context of the JEP, a particular emphasis was evident in all sites on linking the children's curriculum access to social development and life skills. All three settings reported that a more relaxed and child-orientated curriculum was in place for July and visits to the local environment, and in one case beyond the local environment, were organised for students. In particular the JEP was observed to focus on the achievement of key social and communication skills and independence. Excellent attention to considering and accommodating children's strengths and needs was observed in all sites. The teacher providing the JEP in the home referred to going on outings to the local community, observing that '*it would be great to have a network from a social*

*point of view*' and noting with regard to the student that *'he loves baking and going to the shop'* [JEP\_H\_T]. The overseer in the special school was emphatic in stating that all children were supported and encouraged to take part in school-wide activities as much as possible. The overseer in the mainstream site concluded that *'outdoor activities and provision in general is "informal yet structured"'* and pointed out that the interests of individual children are taken into account and *'linked to the school year'* [JEP\_S\_O].

## 2.2 Communication

In the two school sites, teachers and overseers reported that parents were consulted in relation to the JEP and invited to contribute to identifying their children's learning priorities. It was reported that an open-door policy was in place with regard to the JEP and that parents understood that they could contact the school with regard to the JEP at any stage. In these settings also, a home-school journal system was in operation as described by one of the teachers: *'we have a notebook in every bag, which is used every day'* [JEP\_S\_T1]. However parental consultation rather than direct involvement describes parents' role in the JEP in sites other than the site where the JEP was being delivered in the home. In the school sites, parental involvement in the individualised planning process was excellent and as individualised planning engaged in during the academic year informed the JEP, schools considered that parents were involved in the JEP through this process.

The overseer in the special school considered that there was further scope to involve parents in the JEP. However parents expressed satisfaction with the JEP and were content to allow the teachers to design and lead the programme, as captured by one parent who was asked if she would like to be more involved and responded that *'I trust them'* [JEP\_S\_PAR47]. This was confirmed by another parent who stated that she was not really involved but that *'if I had an issue I would get on to them and deal with it'* [JEP\_S\_PAR53]. Similar views were expressed by parents in the mainstream site where a parent reported that the teachers *'let us know what is going to go on'* in terms of activities such as play therapy. This parent described communication as important and referred to the barbeque, which the overseer organises during the JEP for families and children, as *'a lovely touch'* and *'nice to get to talk to other parents'* [JEP\_PSC\_PAR50]. The overseer described it as: *'we have a BBQ for families to support transition out of the July Education Provision and for those who will be coming in September and it is a chance for everyone to meet up again, closer to September'* [JEP\_PSC\_O]. Parents corroborated the significance of this event, not only to facilitate transition and a return to school in September, but to nurture communication between staff and between families: *'They had a BBQ this year – I thought it was lovely – something you wouldn't do normally – families meeting up – so relaxed and all the kids were so good – two of them are going on to a special school and we won't see them again – it was lovely – meeting parents – having a bit of a chat, meeting people that are helping out and the teachers, it was really nice – a lovely touch – good to meet other parents'* [JEP\_PSC\_PAR50]. Another parent stated that: *'I trust the school a lot [with regard to review of provision]. There is an enormous amount of trust as he is not in a position to communicate'* [JEP\_PSC\_PAR48].

Where the JEP was being delivered in the home, communication between the teacher and the parent occurred on a daily basis and the child's learning objectives were identified in consultation with the parent.

In one site the availability of external professionals such as a psychologist and speech and language therapist during the JEP was very good. The overseer reported contacting these services directly towards the end of the school year to elicit their assistance during the JEP as it was believed that there was less pressure on these services at that time of year. She noted that staff *'learns from them'* and tries *'to implement new ideas and strategies'* [JEP\_PSC\_O]. There was an unacceptable level of external professional support available in the other school site during the JEP. However, one of the teachers noted in relation to support they had received during the school year that *'all of them really have been of benefit'* [JEP\_S\_T1]. There was no external professional support available in the site where the JEP was being delivered in the home and the teacher reported that the programme was devised between herself and the parent, adding that she did not have *'access to professional reports'* [JEP\_H\_T] which was unacceptable.

Communication between staff in the school sites and between the teacher and the parent in the home site was excellent. A strong sense of collegiality and collaboration was evident, which was characterised by a professional sharing of knowledge and support. As observed by the teacher in the primary mainstream site, *'we are X National School, we are not Y unit, we are one'* [JEP\_PSC\_T].

## 2.3 Learning Environment

The JEP was conducted in existing school structures and, therefore, the children were familiar with the physical structures and, as noted by a teacher in the special school, *'additional changes were not required'* [JEP\_S\_T2]. The facilities and the grounds in the school sites were excellent and described by all parents as being very suitable to the needs of their children. The availability of classroom space was excellent in one school site and unacceptable in another where, due to the complex needs of almost all of the children, individualised modifications to the classroom spaces were necessary for each child in order to create physical parameters to assist in managing behaviours that challenge.

One parent described how the school adapted the environment in the interests of her child's safety *'...he is very physically capable. They had to raise their fences by a couple of feet to keep him in. The school has lots of play facilities. They have wonderful grounds'* [JEP\_S\_PAR48]. One teacher noted that the absence of the mainstream school population resulted in the school yard being much bigger and therefore additional structure was built in for children during the JEP to overcome this challenge [JEP\_PSC\_O]. In the mainstream school, a ball-pool, snoezelen and relaxation room were available and used by the children during the JEP. Children's completed work was displayed in all settings.

Very good adaptations to the learning environment were evident for the child receiving the JEP in the home in order to meet his needs. The parent noted that *'we just moved...and took out any distractions. He loves music and he has a lot of instruments. We took them away and only gave him the specific things he needed...there was not a lot of adaptation needed'* [JEP\_H\_PAR57]. An outside area with a swing was utilised to provide movement breaks for the child between table-top activities. Limited learning and teaching resources were available to assist learning and the teacher specifically referred to the high cost of resources for the home setting (JEP\_H\_T).



In all sites, excellent attention had been directed to the physical learning environment despite the lack of availability of appropriate space in one school setting. Children's sensory differences were accommodated and both auditory and visual stimuli were controlled where necessary. All staff understood the importance of children having their own spaces and being able to work independently as noted by one of the teachers: children should have the *'option to be on their own'* as often they cannot cope with others *'in their space'* [JEP\_P\_SCT]. The learning environment was purposefully structured and children navigated the environment confidently. The school settings had sensory rooms, facilitating the children in taking movement and learning breaks outside of the classroom. In both school settings, curriculum-related displays, which included samples of children's work and photographs of children engaging in curriculum activities, created aesthetically attractive spaces. The positive impact of the support of visual schedules was specifically referred to by two parents in the mainstream [JEP\_PSC\_PAR52]; [JEP\_PSC\_PAR54]. The overseer affirmed the key role of the environment in providing for children with ASD and complex needs and observed that *'the school needs to adapt...not the other way around. You need to move things to suit the children. Children need space. You must consider the classroom and outside. Considering the learning environment is a journey and ongoing'* [JEP\_S\_O]. The overseer referred to constantly adapting the environment to suit the individual and the importance of creating an environment where children can cope, concluding that *'you must keep moving'* and *'start with individual children and their needs'* [JEP\_S\_O].

## 2.4 Extra-Curricular Activities

Extra-curricular activities in terms of activities taking place outside of the school day are not a feature of the Irish Education system. Rather schools provide a range of co-curricular activities with explicit links to the curriculum.

Outdoor and extra-curricular activities were an excellent feature of practice in the two school sites. The overseer in the mainstream primary school reported that the school involves the students on the JEP in as many areas as possible outside the regular curriculum and reported that, *'on Mondays, we have outdoor activities, every Friday, there is an athletics programme facilitating social skills. This is done continuously throughout the year, it promotes inclusion'* [JEP\_PSC\_O]. Children were supported in both school sites in participating in outings to the local community and beyond with a focus on developing children's social skills and independence. These outings were regular and well planned and reported to be enjoyed by the children.

In the mainstream setting, children went on two outings per week during the JEP and these outings were sometimes used to prepare children for potential family outings. The outings consisted of visits to local amenities and places of interest. One of the teachers in the special school maintained that the JEP was a very important means of *'rebalancing social skills'* [JEP\_S\_T1]. She commented that, although it may be worthwhile to have more activities, it is always good for children to be physically active. She concluded that *'activities need to be relevant. JEP is an opportunity to practise social skills and activities such as riding a bike'*.

All parents affirmed the leadership in the schools, noting that their children were *'very happy'* with the provision, which is encapsulated in the following statement: *'all very good positive people working with him – I'm very happy with provision'* [JEP\_PSC\_PAR50]. Another parent described JEP as *'an absolute gift'*. She went on to explain her reasons for this judgement: *'it gives you a chance to do things with the other three children'* [JEP\_S\_PAR46]. All parents felt that the continuing routine that JEP gave was important. This parent illustrated why this was so: *'most parents with children with ASD dread the summer holidays, you should look forward to holidays as parents of children – they need routine'*. She added that *'during August I have two SNAs coming on Saturdays and they do a little social programme around our town – he knows them so well and that is important – I have to pay for that myself – no Summer camp will take my big strong 16-year old, it's a different life – JEP gives you a chance to do things with the others knowing that he is being provided for also'* [JEP\_S\_PAR46]. Another parent highlighted the value of JEP and the way in which it focused on life skills in the following vignette: *'we went out to dinner... my daughter was 21. We went out to a Chinese for the first time, all of us. I couldn't have done it two years ago, that was an achievement for me anyway, the first time we went out together'* [JEP\_PSC\_PAR50].

Notably, due to the limited opportunities for social interaction in the home setting the teacher described arranging for another child and teacher participating in the JEP to accompany them to the local library and shop. Parents were aware of children's outings and expressed satisfaction with the opportunities provided for their children to participate in these planned activities as summed up by one parent who noted that her child is going *'different places, which is really beneficial'* [JEP\_PSC\_PAR50].

## 2.5 Student Wellbeing

Excellent practice was evident in supporting children's wellbeing, which was a particular focus of the extra-curricular activities that were planned in all sites. The overseer in the primary setting described *'a holistic approach to children's development promoting wellbeing'* and referred to the key role of the JEP in developing children's life skills, *'life skills are taught and seen as particularly important in terms of preparing children for independent living'* [JEP\_PSC\_O]. In this context, she also noted the importance of children accessing art and music and developing play skills. Excellent attention was directed in all sites to the impact of children's sensory needs on their engagement and learning as pointed out by a class teacher: *'sensory needs affect learning, staff are aware of the need for children to be comfortable as this may affect learning and behaviour'* [JEP\_PSC\_T]. Visual schedules were used effectively in each site and children were observed to refer to them to check the sequence of activities in the school day. While resources were limited in the site where the JEP was provided in the home, the child had access to resources such as pasta and water, which the teacher observed reduced the child's anxiety. In particular the teacher highlighted water as *'an important sensory resource'* [JEP\_H\_T].

In each site it was evident that children's anxiety levels were carefully monitored and that supports were in place in the event of a child needing to self-regulate or take a movement break. Both schools articulated a commitment and willingness to involve external services in the children's learning and teaching programme. However, the reduced availability of external services in psychology, speech and language therapy and occupational therapy was unacceptable

in the special school and stated to be a matter of concern. The home setting reported not having access to external services. Overall, there was a very positive and supportive climate of respect for student wellbeing in all three sites and the importance of helping children to '*relax*' and '*have fun*' was noted by one of the teachers [JEP\_PSC\_T].

## Summary: Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture

An excellent inclusive culture was observed in all sites, which celebrated each child's individual needs and identity. Children were constructively supported to participate in a range of extra-curricular activities outside of the school environment. Communication between staff in school sites and between the teacher and parent in the home site was excellent and a strong sense of collegiality and collaboration was evident.

Parents were consulted in arranging the JEP and invited to contribute to identifying their children's learning priorities. High levels of satisfaction were expressed by parents with the JEP. Parental consultation rather than involvement in the JEP was evident in the school sites with the parent in the home site being closely involved in the JEP.

In all sites, excellent attention was directed to the physical environment, which had been adapted to meet the needs of individual children. However, in the school site, where there were children with complex needs, the need to adapt the environment limited the availability of space for free-flow and group activities in the classroom. Excellent attention was directed towards supporting children in self-regulating and taking movement breaks in all sites. In the two school sites children were given excellent opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities outside of the school environment. In the home site these opportunities were limited. Children's wellbeing was considered important in all sites and excellent consideration was given to providing support in this regard. Excellent attention was directed in all sites to the impact of children's sensory needs on their engagement and learning.

The availability of external professionals such as a psychologist and speech and language therapist during the JEP was very good in one school site and unacceptable in both the other school site and the home site.

## Statement 3 – School Management

### 3.1 Leadership

There were excellent systems and structures in place throughout all sites which ensured organised and supported provision for children with ASD. Overseers in all sites demonstrated high levels of commitment to providing excellent standards in JEP-ASD provision.

The overseer in the special school advised that 80 per cent of the children in the school were entitled to access the JEP. He was also principal of this special school and endeavoured to ensure that the programme was provided each year. This involved significant extra administrative work in addition to securing 16 SNAs and seven class teachers. The overseer demonstrated an in-depth

awareness of the complex needs of the children in the school and referred to the school as being *'built around the child'* [JEP\_S\_O].

The overseer in the mainstream primary site was the class teacher for the ASD-specific provision in the school during the school year and adopted a proactive and positive leadership approach to the JEP. She displayed a comprehensive knowledge of the unique strengths and needs of the children. She was comfortable in her role as overseer and advised that *'as overseer, it is fine for me as I know what is going on – more difficult when it was my principal as he wouldn't have known what was going on – would know from our planning but would not be as familiar – he wouldn't be as connected with the kids in the unit – I know the children and I know the staff I'm bringing in. It would be more difficult to oversee if you were not in the [ASD] class'* [Site JEP\_PSC\_O]. Similar to the overseer in the special school, the role of overseer in the mainstream primary context involved significant administration in securing one class teacher and three and a half SNA-posts. Four volunteers from the local community had also been secured for the class and assisted in the JEP on a voluntary basis. While not a component of the JEP scheme, the contribution was observed to impact positively on the JEP in terms of providing additional support during outings and unstructured periods of the day while also assisting with organisational tasks during the school day.

The overseer in the site where the JEP was provided in the home was the parent who found the process of setting up JEP in the home unacceptable. The parent effectively created a *'schooling environment'* in her home with limited distractions for the student. The parent identified the appointment of appropriate staff to deliver the JEP as the greatest challenge and pointed out that, *'paperwork is difficult...'* [JEP\_H\_PAR1]. She highlighted that *'other parents found these difficulties also'*. She acknowledged that this was her first time organising JEP provision and that it was difficult to know *'what kind of teacher you have to get ... how to access these teachers'* [JEP\_H\_PAR1]. She did acknowledge that the DES provided *'notes to back up forms'*... and that they were *'quite good'* when contacted by phone. However, initially, all she knew was that she had to advertise for the position of teacher. She remarked that it would be helpful if the DES had a database which these overseers could access: *'if there was a list of places, a list of teachers that you could ring up'* [JEP\_H\_PAR1]. She identified *'word of mouth'* as the greatest assistance to her in organising the JEP: *'I asked in his [child's school] and C worked in the school so she is experienced but if I hadn't found her ...'* [JEP\_H\_PAR1]. She did articulate that *'Next year I will have no problem as I'm an expert now'* [JEP\_H\_PAR1].

Particular challenges were identified in establishing a management system and structure to ensure organised and supportive provision for the children with ASD in the special school, and the overseer remarked that these leadership challenges were increasing every July. Maintaining existing school staff for the period of the JEP was identified as the greatest challenge: *'very few want to work another 20 days'* [JEP\_S\_O]. He consistently emphasised the complex needs of the children in the school and noted that *'we have a very difficult school to work in from September to June. We have excellent staff, very well trained staff, highly committed staff but by the end of June they want to go'* [JEP\_S\_O]. He explained that the greatest increase in population in the school were children presenting with complex needs. He recognised that staff in the school were suffering *'burn out'* due to the complex and behavioural needs of the children [JEP\_S\_O]. Eighty per cent of staff employed for the JEP are not existing school staff. All staff described the

cohort in the special school as *'the two extremes'* meaning children with extreme challenging behaviour and those with extreme complex learning and medical needs. In order to provide for some continuity in children's experience, the principal had organised for the permanent school staff to support incoming new staff in their own time. Therefore, in-school support is provided by experienced staff for non-experienced staff during the initial stages of the JEP. In contrast to the special school, the staff in the primary mainstream site were mainly school staff and volunteers who had been on placement in the school during Transition Year (TY) or college placement. Both overseers insisted that it was important that staff is familiar to the children. This point, with regard to the importance of maintaining consistent core staff, was reinforced by almost all parents.

The staff in the two school sites felt supported stating that *'anything we want to put into place we are supported in doing that [by management]'* [JEP\_S\_T1]. The second teacher in that site was less enthusiastic: *'I can only go with what I get'*, but she did admit *'I have more than adequate resourcing for what I do'* [JEP\_S\_T2]. There were substantial indicators from interviews with all participants and observations that, due to the profile in the school, staff could benefit from greater support systems in terms of psychological support, speech and language therapy and occupational therapy to resolve concerns arising from children's behaviour and the complex needs of the overall cohort. The overseer in the mainstream primary school was described by the class teacher as *'brilliant'* and further that *'she set up all the schemes for me... introduced me to all [the programmes]'* [JEP\_PSC\_T]. The school management in the two school sites ensured that the deployment of both teaching and care staff was congruent with the unique learning style and individual characteristics of the children with ASD.

Parents in both school sites expressed satisfaction with the management, staff and provision as noted by a parent in the mainstream primary school: *'they have everything there'* [JEP\_PSC\_PAR50] to meet her child's needs. A parent in the special school observed that *'they [children with ASD] are treated with such dignity there'* [JEP\_S\_PAR46].

## 3.2 Responsibility

Roles and responsibilities for the JEP in both school settings and the parent and teacher where the JEP was being delivered in the home were clearly defined. In the special school site, the overseer reported that there was a good collaborative approach where staff generously shared their knowledge with non-experienced staff. Meetings were conducted on a weekly basis in the mainstream primary setting and were deemed effective by all staff for overall communication and to plan and review goals: *'we would organise goals and priorities for the week'* [JEP\_PSC\_T]. Harnessing and consolidating a team dynamic in the time-frame involved was more difficult in the special school setting as the overseer was working with 80 per cent of staff who were not familiar with the context or the student cohort. Therefore much of the organisation was the responsibility of the overseer. In the provision of the JEP in the home, the teacher and parent were observed to work very closely together and discussed the child's achievement and progress on a daily basis. The teacher in the home site was very clear on her role. Unlike her colleagues in

the school settings, she did not receive extra personal vacation (EPV)<sup>74</sup> days for work done in July. She also highlighted the disadvantage of not being paid until November, a point iterated by the principal in the special school as being less than satisfactory.

The SNAs described their role as supporting the children as they would do during the school year: *'my role is the same as the rest of the year... I'm not a full-time SNA during the year but I sub, the children know me – JEP is a little bit more laid back, they are not pushed as much... The day is not as structured as the rest of the year – routine is critical'* [JEP\_PSC\_SNA1]. The SNA described her role as including *'transitioning to and from the bus... bus is a big issue... particular (physical) needs of student are met – bus escort is more involved in transitioning from home'* [JEP\_PSC\_SNA1]. The SNAs assisted with preparing food, at mealtimes, with weekly outings, swimming, horse-riding and promoting children's independence. During the JEP, there were two outings each week. An equitable approach to the management of SNA support was observed in both school sites and SNAs did not exclusively support one child but rather worked with all children. A particular example of innovative practice was observed in the primary mainstream site where the SNA's skills as a hairdresser were utilised to support the care needs of children who exhibited anxiety having their hair cut at the hairdressers. This intervention was devised in consultation with the child's parents. Preparation for a visit to the hair salon is supported by social stories and Avril Webster's books.<sup>75</sup> Emergence of the skills to cope with this process is also supported by Tablets and real-life equipment. Eventually, *'the Tablet support is faded for the students and Joe will sit and get his hair done now without support'* [JEP\_PSC\_SNA1]. It was reported that these skills had now been transferred and generalised beyond the classroom context to the hair salon.

The overseer in the mainstream primary school was very aware of where and how to access additional support, expertise and resources for children and referred to the multidisciplinary support from external agencies in a very positive manner, *'there is an ASD specialist team and we have good interaction with them'* [JEP\_PSC\_O]. She stated that she reminds external agency staff that the JEP is in place and some appointments can be secured during this quieter time for such services, explaining that *'July is productive for all'* [JEP\_PSC\_O]. She described early intervention, occupational therapy and speech and language therapy services as adequate *'because I will ask for it'* [JEP\_PSC\_O]. According to the overseer, the external agencies like coming out to schools so they can make the link between home and school. However, this system was viewed less positively by all parents who now feel that they have less contact with these essential services because the link is made with the school and no longer with the family. The overseer in the special school was dissatisfied with the support the children in the JEP received throughout the year: *'one and a half days support from Physio, OT and SLT'*. He asserted that *'there is greater need for more'* [JEP\_S\_O]. All parents corroborated these views as encapsulated by a parent: *'lack of therapies is an ongoing issue'*, a view that was further reinforced by another parent who stated that *'the care of autistic children from the State is very poor'* [JEP\_S\_PAR46] and highlighted again by the parent who was the overseer for the JEP in the home: *'access to external professionals is*

<sup>74</sup> Under rule 58 of the Rules for National Schools, teachers in primary schools are entitled to EPV days for attending an approved summer continuing professional development programme. Department of Education (1965) Rules for National Schools, Dublin: The Stationery Office; Department of Education and Science (1997) Circular 37/97: Extra Personal Vacation. Rule 58 of the Rules for National Schools, Available at <https://www.education.ie/en/Education-Staff/Services/Breaks-Leave/Extra-Personal-Vacation-Days/>

<sup>75</sup> Webster, A. (2015) Off We Go! Series. Available at <http://www.offwego.ie>

*non-existent unless there is a crisis, I had to ring crying one day to get it because I was so distraught with him hitting the SNA, I got a call from school, it was very distressing' [JEP\_H\_PAR57].*

### 3.3 Appointment of Staff

Both overseers reported that they made every effort to recruit staff with knowledge, experience, expertise and qualifications in the learning and teaching of children with ASD and their commitment in this regard was excellent. An evidence-based approach to the use of teaching strategies and ASD-specific approaches were evident in both school sites in particular, which appeared to stem from the schools' excellent commitment to consistently accessing Continuing Professional Development in the area of ASD.

In both sites, SNAs displayed an excellent understanding of ASD as to its implications for managing children's care and behaviour needs, on-task engagement and participation. Peer mentoring of SNAs by the class teacher was a feature of practice in all school sites.

All overseers highlighted that it was not always possible to recruit staff with appropriate qualifications and/or prior experience in working with children with ASD. The overseer in the special school endeavoured to maintain some core staff with knowledge, understanding and experience of ASD for the duration of the July Education Programme. However, difficulties were identified in securing appropriate staff for the JEP, which he suggested would be unsustainable in the future as increasingly existing school staff did not wish to remain on for July and that currently only 20 per cent of existing staff were involved in the delivery of the JEP. The overseer had some success in convincing his permanent staff to deliver the JEP for a short time to ensure continuity in children's experience. Therefore, in-school support was provided by experienced staff for non-experienced staff during the initial stage of the JEP. The overseer described the recruitment procedure as follows: *'I go to those who have done placement in the school from College 1, College 2 and the Training Colleges that would be familiar with the children. They would have been in on placement or subbing' [JEP\_S\_O].* In contrast, staff in the mainstream setting were all known to the children, including the volunteers. This overseer did not seem as challenged by the appointment procedure because the *'SNA staff have been sub staff or have done college placements here' [JEP\_PSC\_O].* She agreed with her colleague in the special school setting that *'it is not good to be starting off such a short period with new people' [JEP\_PSC\_O].* However, this overseer was making JEP provision for just one class unlike the overseer in the special school who was serving 80 per cent of his overall school population and had to staff seven classes appropriately. It is significant that both overseers in the school settings articulated the view that EPV days, which teachers receive for their time committed to the JEP, could act as a real incentive for teachers to remain in their posts for July. It is noteworthy, also, that the teacher in the home setting was not entitled to EPV days as she was employed for just 40 hours in total.

It was clear from the parent in the site where the JEP was being delivered in the home that: *'first-time parents need more advice' [on the appointment procedure].* She went on to explain that her son availing of the JEP was *'our only child with SEN, so I needed a little bit of help' [JEP\_H\_PAR1].* She suggested a Helpline that would be specific to appointment procedures, and/or a *'specific website' [JEP\_H\_PAR1].* While a website does exist on the DES page, she explained that her *'questions were not addressed there' [JEP\_H\_PAR1].*

Parents valued having staff that were appropriately trained. One parent remarked that in the 'boom' much money was put into building units: *'lovely new unit but what's being done in it, that's what matters... It's vital that the people doing it are knowledgeable more than the fancy building'* [JEP\_S\_PAR46]. She suggested that the system *'needs a serious rejig'* and that: *'there should be more specialised programmes ... The expertise of the special school needs to be shared, they are involved in ASD for the last 30 years ... the special schools have a lot to give, they have been dealing with ASD for the last 30 years ... more units in these schools, the DES should look at this'* [JEP\_S\_PAR46].

### 3.4 Review of Provision for Children with ASD

Both school sites and the home setting were engaged in a very good process of ongoing reflection and review in relation to children's learning and teaching programmes, individualised planning, and environmental adaptations. Management in the two school sites were knowledgeable and enthusiastic about CPD and where it could be accessed. Very good daily review of children's learning and teaching was a feature of practice in all sites. The parent in the home in which the JEP was being delivered remarked, *'I review his programme every day with the tutor'* [JEP\_H\_PAR1]. Systems existed for scheduled and informal review of school-wide provision for all children and there was a very good culture of review and self-evaluation within the JEP. The Monday review and planning meetings for all staff in the mainstream setting was agreed by all to be effective for planning and review. This site also sent checklists to parents to review all provision in its ASD Unit. Therefore, parents informed all review processes including JEP.

Parents informed staff of difficulties experienced at home that might be addressed in JEP. These included going to the cinema, restaurant and hair salon. The overseer in the mainstream primary school explained that they got *'all sorts of requests, brushing teeth, putting on an item of clothing, all seem to us quite basic but can be the making or breaking of a family, mostly sensory related, home doesn't offer the structures we have in school... valuable things to work on'* [JEP\_PSC\_O].

In the mainstream primary school site, the JEP provision was called the *'July Camp'* by families [JEP\_PSC\_O]. The overseer considered that there was a need to: *'unpack this concept with parents'* [JEP\_PSC\_O]. While she acknowledged the positive connotation of the name with other siblings going to summer camps, she felt that *'parents need to know the educational aspect of the JEP'* [JEP\_PSC\_O].

The parent, as overseer in the site where the JEP was provided in the home, observed that *'it could be a lot better – my ideal situation would be if it were in his school or some school – 20 or 15 together in an area, in one area – have three hours academic and then the social as the social is the main part of ASD...It needs to be in a group setting, the social is essential'* [JEP\_H\_PAR1]. She also highlighted that *'there is an imbalance between home provision and provision in school as it is the full school day in the latter setting'* [JEP\_H\_PAR1].

Parents' review of the programme was extremely positive: *'it's four more weeks in his school routine, that is a huge bonus – eight weeks is too long. It is an essential programme, routine is important, the more you can continue the school programme the better – it gives us a few more*



*weeks also – it's like a rest – it's as good as respite'* [JEP\_S\_PAR53]. During child-conversations, children expressed high levels of satisfaction with the JEP. The overseer in the primary mainstream site cautioned that *'any break, we would see regression, for example, after Halloween'* [JEP\_PSC\_O].

While very good systems were in place documenting the robust reflection and review processes, this continues to remain a challenge for all sites.

### Summary: Statement 3 – School Management

An excellent management structure was in place in all JEP sites. The overseers in both school sites demonstrated a commitment and passion to providing excellent standards of JEP provision in the schools. It was evident that all overseers made every effort to retain school staff, recruit staff with knowledge, experience, expertise and qualifications related to the learning and teaching of children with ASD. Particular challenges were identified in retaining existing staff in the special school to deliver the JEP and ensuring that teachers had the particular skills and competencies required to meet the needs of children with complex needs. The parent, as overseer where the JEP was delivered in the home, identified a range of challenges in recruiting a teacher, the demands of providing an appropriate learning and teaching environment in the home, the lack of opportunities for socialising with other children and the reduced time allocated for the JEP in the home site.

All staff displayed an excellent understanding of their roles and responsibilities in relation to JEP. Very good review of provision for children with ASD in JEP occurred in the context of ongoing reflection and review during daily activities with good systems in place that documented this process.

## Statement 4 – Staff Development

### 4.1 Understanding and Knowledge of ASD for All Staff

Both overseers in the school sites had considerable experience, had attended a range of CPD programmes and had post-graduate qualifications in the area of special education and ASD. As summarised by the overseer in the mainstream school: *'I did the Applied Behaviour Analysis course with the SESS. I did the B.Ed. and was a mainstream teacher initially before Sp. Ed. I didn't start any formal training in ASD till I took up [the] post.'* Since 2006 she has taken many SESS courses, *'I have done pretty much all the SESS courses'* [Site JEP\_PSC\_O]. The overseer commented that the graduate diploma she completed was great because it was *'specific to ASD'* [Site JEP\_PSC\_O]. She added that there was now a need to review/revise her own CPD at this point: *'we have had a full cycle, going since 2006, cohort very different now and the equipment we bought then needs to be reviewed. It is important to keep CPD going'* [Site JEP\_PSC\_O]. Both overseers commended the CPD offered by the Special Education Support Service for addressing the needs of all children with ASD and of all ages.

The level of understanding and knowledge of ASD amongst teaching staff ranged from good to very good including the home tutor. This understanding and knowledge stemmed from a range of factors that included teachers' experience of teaching children with ASD, access to CPD and peer mentoring by school staff prior to, and during the JEP. In two lessons observed, however, peer mentoring, while acceptable, was observed to be inadequate in equipping teachers with the requisite knowledge and skills to support them in meeting the needs of the children who had complex needs in addition to ASD. Parents understood the importance of teachers working with children with ASD to have the requisite knowledge, understanding and skills.

All SNAs displayed an understanding of ASD commensurate with their role. Three out of five SNAs reported that they often engaged in some form of CPD or upskilling. All SNAs highlighted that, due to the limited availability of CPD organised specifically for them, they engaged in their own upskilling, although this was not always through evidence-based sources such as the use of Facebook® and blogs reported by one SNA.

Three of four teachers in the special school site noted the need for greater levels of CPD in the area of challenging behaviour and for working with children with severe or profound general learning disabilities. One teacher observed that the CPD courses available are more suited to the '*more able*' or the '*middle of the road*' child and considered that '*the learning curve is getting steeper*' for teachers [JEP\_S\_T1]. Similarly, one SNA referred to her lack of understanding and knowledge in the area of disabilities and on strategies for dealing with challenging behaviour and children with severe or profound needs. She expressed a desire for greater training: '*If you can't manage the behaviour at the very beginning...it's the key really, once you manage that, you can go forward*' [JEP\_S\_SNA].

One overseer also highlighted staff's lack of knowledge/understanding in addressing issues such as puberty and masturbation in a whole-class setting and in a mainstream primary school, particularly with children with severe needs. She described it as, '*a sensitive area...there is kind of a taboo around it*' [JEP\_PSC\_O]. She noted how, initially, they were '*lost at sea*' with it. However, following SESS input, she believed that she was better equipped to deal with these issues. This participant also emphasised the need for more assistance in supporting students' mental health.

## 4.2 Continuing Professional Development

Participants in all sites affirmed the wide availability of CPD courses for teachers in the area of special education and ASD, particularly through the SESS. However, a lack of CPD specific to ASD in the context of the July Education Programme was often referred to. All participants articulated the view that CPD was '*vital*' [JEP\_PSC\_T] for working in the area of ASD. Almost all participants described the CPD courses they had attended as excellent and two teachers affirmed the strength of online CPD courses.

One teacher highlighted the limited CPD opportunities available for mainstream class teachers, which she attributed to access issues and securing release from the classroom. She emphasised her desire to attend more CPD in the area. In particular, she noted the apprehension of

mainstream teachers working with children with ASD due to this lack of knowledge and its impact on the the daily transitioning processes in the classroom.

All SNAs noted the lack of CPD available for Special Needs Assistants, for example, by the SESS, which was contrasted with that available for teachers. The desire for greater levels of formalised training was emphasised by all SNAs. Almost all SNAs affirmed the strength of support within their schools, such as the within-school in-service training (often at a whole-school level), peer learning and a team approach within the school with a particular focus on care needs. The positive impact of this 'on-the-job', placement-focused training was highlighted by almost all SNAs and captured by one SNA: *'you learn by making mistakes...or listening to the girls that are here longer...it's all about the placement'* [JEP\_PSC\_SNA3].

### 4.3 Information Sharing and Access to Specialist Information on ASD

In all school sites, it was evident that staff shared information on ASD. The process involved in the JEP necessitated this information sharing with the advent of new staff members to implement the programme. Peer learning and 'on-the-job' learning appeared to often underpin practice in settings, and this was particularly emphasised by SNAs in the two school sites. The teacher delivering the JEP in the home articulated a need for formal information sharing and communication with the child's class teacher in order to optimise the child's learning and teaching experience.

In one site, formal team meetings were reported to occur on a weekly basis in planning the JEP. These meetings were attended by teachers and SNAs. In another site, a teacher considered that there was a variability of approaches used within the school for managing children's behaviours that challenge and articulated a need for greater coherence at whole-school level to address this. In the special school setting, reference was made to a 'specialist teacher', who acted as a referral point for knowledge and specialist information.

### Summary: Statement 4 – Staff Development

The level of understanding and knowledge of ASD amongst teaching staff ranged from good to very good. A wide availability of CPD courses for teachers in the area of special education and ASD, particularly through the SESS, was reported and the value of engaging in Continuing Professional Development programmes specific to ASD was recognised by all staff. Within-school CPD was a feature of practice in the two school sites, with an excellent focus on peer learning through informal information sharing. However, there was no CPD available specific to the JEP. In all school sites, it was evident that staff shared information on children's learning and teaching.

A greater level of understanding, knowledge and upskilling was identified as being required for teachers and SNAs in the areas of behaviours that challenge, supporting children with severe or profound needs, puberty/masturbation and mental health for children with ASD.

## **Concluding Summary: Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the July Education Programme**

Excellent practice was evident in school sites where the JEP was informed by school assessment procedures in the previous school year. However, the lack of continuity between school assessment procedures and the provision in the home site was unacceptable.

The parent in the home site where the JEP was delivered was involved more in the planning and assessment of the child's learning during the delivery of the JEP compared to parents in the school sites. All of the parents interviewed in school sites stated that they were not aware of the assessment used during the JEP or if the learning was assessed, observing that the programme was a continuation of the school year. Children's individualised planning from the previous school year constructively informed the JEP in the school sites with no link between individualised planning and the JEP evident in the home site, which was unacceptable.

In school sites, there was very good communication between class teachers and SNAs with staff delivering the JEP prior to commencement of the programme. An individualised and differentiated approach to curriculum provision was evident in all sites. The generic and ASD-specific teaching methodologies that children were familiar with were maintained in the two school sites during the JEP which was good. However, due to the absence of a communication system between the school and the home site, continuity in the use of teaching methodologies was unacceptable.

An excellent inclusive culture was observed in all sites, which celebrated each child's individual needs and identity. Communication between staff in school sites and between the teacher and parent in the home site was excellent and a strong sense of collegiality and collaboration was evident. Parents were consulted about the JEP and invited to contribute to identifying their children's learning priorities.

In all sites, excellent attention was directed towards the physical environment, which had been adapted to meet the needs of individual children. However, in the school site, where there were children with complex needs, the necessity to adapt the environment limited the availability of space for free-flow and group activities in the classroom. In the home site these opportunities were also limited. Children's wellbeing was considered important in all sites and excellent consideration was given to providing support in this regard. Excellent attention was directed in all sites to the impact of children's sensory needs on their engagement and learning.

The availability of external professionals such as a psychologist and speech and language therapist during the JEP was very good in one school site and unacceptable in the other school site and the home site.

An excellent management structure was in place in all JEP sites. It was evident that all overseers made every effort to retain school staff, recruit staff with knowledge, experience, expertise and qualifications in the learning and teaching of children with ASD. Particular challenges were identified in retaining existing staff in the special school to deliver the JEP and ensuring that teachers had the particular skills and competencies essential to meet the requirements of

children with complex needs. The parent, as overseer where the JEP was delivered in the home, identified a range of challenges in recruiting a teacher, the demands of providing an appropriate learning and teaching environment in the home, the lack of opportunities for socialising with other children and the reduced time allocated for the JEP in the home site.

All staff displayed an excellent understanding of their roles and responsibilities in relation to the JEP. Very good review of provision for children with ASD in the JEP was demonstrated in the ongoing reflection and review during daily activities with good systems in place that documented this process.

The level of understanding and knowledge of ASD amongst teaching staff ranged from good to very good. A wide availability of CPD courses for teachers in the area of special education and ASD, particularly through the SESS, was reported and the value of engaging in CPD programmes specific to ASD was recognised by all staff. Within-school CPD was a feature of practice in the two school sites, with an excellent focus on peer learning through informal information sharing. However, there was no CPD available specific to the JEP.

A greater level of understanding, knowledge and upskilling was identified as being required for teachers and SNAs to manage behaviours that challenge, in supporting children with severe or profound needs, and to deal with issues such as puberty and sexual behaviour and mental health for children with ASD.

## 8. Home Tuition<sup>76</sup>

The analysis below is derived from the data collected in three sites. Two were children's homes, and the third was a private facility which delivered pooled 'home provision' for groups of children. The sites are titled K. A total of 11 interviews, one child conversation and three observations of practice were conducted. The children were from three to five years of age and had been diagnosed with ASD. No information regarding presence or level of GLD was available for the children at any site. Given the significantly reduced number of sources for the data in this type of provision and the level of intrusiveness of observations of practice in private homes, the analysis here, including key findings and implications, should be considered extremely tentative.

### Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning

#### 1.1 Assessment

Excellent formal and acceptable informal assessment approaches were used in providing home

tuition for students. The VB-MAPP<sup>77</sup> was used extensively in the pooled home provision setting. Information from the VB-MAPP assessments was used here to devise individualised learning programmes. Data on children's progress were collected daily. According to the lead tutor here, each learning task has 10 learning units which were recorded daily (HT\_S\_T). Assessment took place in all learning contexts in this setting, e.g. table-top activities and outdoor play. Assessment approaches in the two home settings were based on informal evaluations of children's progress and both home programmes were informed by the evaluations conducted by the Early Childhood Services after the children were diagnosed. No formal approaches to assessment were in evidence for either of the home settings which was unacceptable. The tutor at one site mentioned that she engages in informal daily assessments using observation and adjusts her teaching as a consequence (HT\_H\_T2).

ABCs were acceptably used in the pooled setting when there were instances of behaviours that challenge. The data collected were used to determine the function of the behaviour. A behaviour support plan was also devised based on the data collected. Replacement behaviour teaching was not evident from the one plan reviewed in this setting. There was no evidence of data collection around challenging behaviours in the home settings. One tutor reported no challenging behaviours and the other used activity switching and planned distractions as well as movement breaks when the child engaged in challenging behaviour. Overall formal assessment practices were excellent in the pooled setting and not acceptable in the home settings.

<sup>76</sup> According to the DES website, 'The Home Tuition Scheme provides for tuition in the home for children who are unable to attend school due to a significant medical condition. The scheme is also available for children with special needs who are unable to attend school due to the non-availability of school placements. In addition children with autism of a pre-school age may avail of the scheme'. See more at: <http://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/Home-Tuition-Children-with-Special-Education-Medical-Needs/#sthash.vcK0zdHG.dpuf>

<sup>77</sup> Sundberg, M.L. (2008) The Verbal Behaviour Milestones, Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP), Concord: AVB Press.

## 1.2 Individualised Planning

All three settings had acceptable individualised plans in place for children with ASD. The plans were appropriate and were based on identified needs. The VB-MAPP<sup>78</sup> was used to assess needs and strengths in the pooled setting. It was noted that broad-based individualised planning including other areas of development outside of those covered in VB-MAPP was not in use here. An early intervention team devised the individualised planning in the home settings.

The plans viewed in all settings addressed a broad range of needs in the areas of language and communication, social skills, independence, play and academic skills (e.g. beginning writing, matching activities). Learning targets were SMART and a variety of materials, strategies and resources to teach the targets were detailed. Review dates were outlined in the plans viewed. The pooled setting reviewed individualised plans twice yearly. Specific evaluation criteria were not identified in the individualised planning in one of the home settings but were in the other.

External services were involved in developing or contributing to the individualised planning in the two home settings as the individualised planning being used by the tutors had been developed by the Early Childcare professionals after each child had been diagnosed with ASD. In the pooled setting input from external professionals was welcomed, however, direct input was rarely a feature of practice. The lead tutor there mentioned that the '*professionals work with the parents and child rather than the school*' [HT\_S\_T] and that there is no system in place rather it is '*done through the parents*'. Parents were involved in individualised planning in all three settings. At one of the home sites, the parent identified specific goals to develop functional skills as part of the individualised planning [HT\_H\_PAR42] and the parent in the second home setting was involved in approving goals selected. Children were not involved in the individualised planning process in any setting although their interests were included in goals in the home settings, which was acceptable.

## 1.3 Transition

Transition plans were not viewed at any of the three sites. However, evidence from interviews and documentation suggested that the process of transitioning out of all the sites was very good, carefully managed and individualised in nature. Strategies used in all sites to familiarise children with the future setting included visual supports, social stories and site visits. Relevant information regarding the children was shared with staff in the new school setting, as appropriate.

Staff in all settings were involved in preparing students for their new setting. For example, the tutor at one of the home sites deliberately focused on '*working on table-top activities, concentration, learning sounds, and spelling out words*' in advance of the transition to a primary school setting [HT\_H\_T2]. Similarly, the lead tutor at the pooled site supported specific skill development transferrable to mainstream schools, e.g. sitting, listening, following instructions, and asking for help. She also taught social strategies and play skills to enable the child '*to fit in to her new environment*' [HT\_S\_T]. The parent [HT\_H\_PAR42] of the child in a home setting had

<sup>78</sup> Sundberg, M.L. (2008) *The Verbal Behaviour Milestones, Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP)*, Concord: AVB Press.

visited the primary school setting and taken pictures (e.g. teacher, classroom, car park). The home tutor then made a book about the new school.

Parents in all three sites were involved in transition planning. All parents and staff in the pooled site highlighted a number of systemic issues involved in the transition process, both into and out of the setting. A parent mentioned delays in the identification of a suitable primary placement and stated that she was *'waiting all summer to get a phone call to see if there is a place'* for her child [HT\_S\_PARE35]. Staff in this setting also discussed their frustrations about delays in preparing students for transition into new settings. The lead tutor mentioned that the pooled site might only be notified in August of the students they will have in September. Parents had to wait until home tuition grants were signed by the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO). Delays impacted on the ability of the setting and parents to prepare individualised transition plans tailored to meet the needs of students with ASD.

Parents also mentioned the lack of autonomy in choosing a suitable provision for their child in their local schools. One parent stated that she *'can't see why she doesn't have the option'* where to send her child [HT\_S\_PAR35]. Another parent pointed out that *'it is a fight for everything. With a child with SEN, you are given a place. You can't decide and if you turn it down it is tough luck'* [HT\_S\_PAR58]. The lack of choice meant multiple schools for children in the same family. The pooled site director echoed parents' views with regards to delays and indicated that *'sometimes parents need a letter from every school in the area acknowledging that there is no place for their child'* [HI\_S\_DIR].

Activity transitions were supported at an excellent level through visual schedules in all sites. There was awareness amongst staff and parents at all sites of the potential stress that unplanned changes might produce.

## 1.4 Curriculum/Certification

Children in all sites had access to educational programmes which were individualised and differentiated based on students' interests, level and pace. All sites highlighted the importance of using children's strengths and interests as reinforcers and motivators. The lead tutor in the pooled site carried out a preference assessment to identify children's interests and preferences. This information was then used to motivate and engage children in learning. The tutor at one of the home sites also noted that incorporating the child's interests increased their engagement in learning activities.

All educational programmes focused primarily on developing communication skills. In the two home sites programme planning was centred on areas such as communication, social, play/leisure and academic skills. In the pooled site educational programmes were devised mostly using the VB-MAPP with some differentiation of the Junior Infant curriculum for older children in literacy and numeracy. Social skills appeared to be developed in the play area in this site. These skills were explicitly taught as part of highly structured programmes and consequently there was little evidence of naturalistic opportunities to socially engage with peers. Children with ASD did not have access to the Aistear curricular framework in any of the sites, which was unacceptable. Home tutors used the plans developed for the families after the diagnoses as sources of content



for their teaching. No curriculum guidelines were used by them which was unacceptable. They also incorporated targets from the parents. All parents indicated their satisfaction with the programmes in place for their children.

## 1.5 Teaching Methodologies

Applied behaviour analysis was the approach adopted in the pooled site. This included the use of extinction, prompts, fading, shaping, natural environment teaching (NET), incidental teaching and Discrete Trial Training (DTT) as the predominant methodologies. Teachers mentioned that naturalistic learning was important but there was little evidence of this, which was unacceptable.

In the two home sites a variety of teaching methodologies, activities, experiences and materials were used at a very good level to engage students in meaningful learning. While there was no evident use of methods such as PECS, TEACCH or ABA, learning through play was a dominant feature of practice in both settings. Tutors engaged in games, used toys and tablets, naturalistic opportunities such as walks and the garden, music and art. One tutor commented that the child *'likes to play...It is a natural way for the child to engage'* [HT\_H\_T2]. Tutors referred to their own professional experiences as well as using the internet and friends for ideas for teaching which was not acceptable. Evidence from observations in one home site suggested that all learning here was clearly meaningful with a very good, strong focus on independent activities.

Observations of lessons indicated high levels of child engagement in all sites. Multiple opportunities were provided for children to actively respond and participate. Staff were observed in one site to encourage on-task behaviours using the children's interests as motivators. There was evidence of child choice of activities in one site. Teaching in the pooled setting was highly structured and very teacher-led with children having very little input or choice.

ICT in the form of Tablet use was evident as a teaching tool in the two home settings for educational games and to structure *'formal lessons'* [HT\_H\_T2]. Real objects (in addition to pictorial representations) were a good feature of practice for instruction at all sites.

Teaching and organisational supports (e.g. visual schedules) were provided in all settings. In the pooled setting personalised visual schedules were displayed on walls and children were referred to these at 15-minute intervals when activities switched from academic to play based. Teaching in all sites was well organised, and planned. The VB-MAPP<sup>79</sup> was used to link assessment and teaching in the pooled setting. In the other settings, specific goals identified in collaboration with parents and external professionals were the focus of teaching activities. Assessment approaches in the home settings were informal and primarily based on records of the child's work and observation. Evidence from all settings indicated that children's special interests and preferences were taken into consideration. The tutor in one home setting mentioned that the student loved colouring and drawing. This interest and strength was also incorporated into the daily schedule. Children's completed work was on display in all settings.

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<sup>79</sup> Sundberg, M.L. (2008) *The Verbal Behaviour Milestones, Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP)*, Concord: AVB Press.

Opportunities were provided for all the children with ASD to practise and use their knowledge and skills with different people. In the pooled setting the children worked with different staff members on a regular basis each day. Home tutors also encouraged parents to undertake teaching activities. One home tutor mentioned that *'there is homework at the weekend so that Tim can experience working on tasks with different people'* [HT\_H\_T2]. Overall the teaching practices observed were very good in all settings.

## 1.6 Team Approach

At the pooled site all tutors shared information on the performance and progress of each child at an excellent level. As the children rotated to each tutor several times throughout the day, tutors had specific responsibilities for planning and delivering instruction on various elements of the VB-MAPP. This was co-ordinated by the lead tutor. The tutors discussed progress and difficulties daily as they prepared for the next day. At the home sites the tutors collaborated with the parents to the extent parents wished. External professionals were not part of these collaborations at any site. Clear and open communications with all parents were an excellent observed feature of practice at all sites.

## 1.7 Data Collection/Monitoring of Progress/Outcomes

There was a clear emphasis on monitoring and recording the student's progress in the pooled teaching site. At this site there were excellent extensive data collection and recording systems in place. The VB-MAPP<sup>80</sup> skill list was used to monitor and record children's progress. Data were recorded in a computerised database and kept in individualised folders. This information was used on an ongoing basis to inform teaching and learning. The behaviour specialist commented on this focus on data noting, *'when it [instruction] is not working we realise that we need to do something different'* [HT\_S\_BS]. Furthermore, children's progress was reviewed by external behavioural specialists from the broader provider system who had access to the database in line with confidentiality protocols.

There was an informal approach to monitoring and recording progress in the two home sites which was unacceptable. Observation was primarily used to assess student progress. One tutor used a portfolio to maintain a record of the child's work. The other tutor relied on her own informal observations and noted progress from these. She did not have a systematic approach to monitoring progress as she relied on her ability to 'see' the improvements for herself. Both tutors used information from these observations to inform teaching and learning.

Information collected was shared and discussed with parents both formally and informally in the pooled site. Formal meetings to share progress information and outcomes were arranged between parents and teachers at six weekly intervals and more detailed meetings held every six months.

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<sup>80</sup> Sundberg, M.L. (2008) *The Verbal Behaviour Milestones, Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP)*, Concord: AVB Press.

A communication booklet was also used to share information between home and the setting. In addition, parents received detailed progress reports at the end of the year including graphs of their child's progress on goals and targets. Daily informal progress discussions took place between parents and tutors in the two home sites. In one of these settings the child was actively involved through showing and telling parents what was done each day. Overall, communication with parents was excellent in all settings.

## Summary Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning

Assessment methods were excellent in the pooled provision setting and included the use of an autism-specific assessment instrument. Assessment in the home sites was unacceptable as it did not extend beyond the original diagnostic assessment report and no formal assessment was conducted by either tutor. There was acceptable evidence that ABC data were used to support children with challenging behaviour in the pooled setting and no evidence of this in the home settings. Acceptable individualised plans were used in all settings and all included input by parents. External professionals had constructed the plans for the home sites and informed the plans at the pooled setting only when parents had consulted them and shared information with the setting staff. While not documented, good systems were in place in all sites to facilitate transition into and out of the Home Tuition settings. The success of these systems was affected by the timeliness or lack of timeliness of notice of placements. Parents expressed concerns about the scarcity of special class placements which sometimes meant they had to accept such placements in schools different from those attended by other family members. Acceptable systems to support transitions within lessons and across the tuition daily time frame were in evidence at all sites.

Children's interests and needs formed an acceptable basis for the development of relevant curriculum in the home sites and the content areas of the assessment tool used in the pooled setting was the acceptable curriculum there. No curriculum guidelines were used in any setting and the curriculum was not informed by Aistear. The extent to which the pooled setting provided naturalistic opportunities for learning was unacceptable. All parents were very satisfied with their children's placements. Very good teaching methodologies were in evidence at all sites. A greater focus on the use of play to teach skills was evident in the home sites and the teaching at the pooled site was very highly structured. Teaching strategies were driven by the philosophy of the pooled site whereas the strategy selection in the home sites depended on tutors' personal experiences and advice from friends and other sources. Generalisation of learning across 'teachers' was acceptable in all sites through appropriate use of multiple tutors and involvement of parents. At the pooled site excellent team collaboration was in evidence. All tutors worked with all children during the day and shared and exchanged information systematically. In the home sites tutors collaborated acceptably with parents. The pooled site had excellent procedures in place to collect data on children's progress, use it systematically to inform instruction, and communicate it effectively to parents regularly. Data collection on progress in the home sites was unacceptable. Informal methods were used unsystematically. Parents were kept aware of progress in tutoring sessions through conversations.

## Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture

### 2.1 School Culture

An evaluation of school culture was difficult to undertake as to how policy informed practice in all three sites. No regulation exists in relation to the home tuition service apart from the requirement that all tutors be registered with the Teaching Council, and it was not evident in any site that frameworks (such as Aistear) or guidelines (such as NCCA documents) were used to inform practice. The pooled site demonstrated a clear understanding of how their provision operated and this was informed by policies developed by the management team. On-site observation, document analysis and interviews with parents and staff revealed practices and capacities to ensure a welcoming and supportive learning environment for students with ASD. It was evident that all sites held high aspirations for children and exemplified a positive culture informed by an understanding of the individual needs of the children. There was evidence in all three sites that staff were committed to developing children's key skills and promoting independence. In the two home sites, tutors felt their role was to teach the children key skills that would enable them to access learning and better cope once they attended school. However, while key elements of learning programmes for students in all sites aimed at developing key skills and fostering independence, use of the Aistear curriculum framework did not feature in any learning programmes analysed.

### 2.2 Communication

A high-level of communication with parents was evident in all three sites. This was facilitated in the pooled site (H1) through formal meetings, regular telephone contact, use of home-school journals and school reports and in all three sites through informal face-to-face meetings and individualised planning meetings. The pooled site used daily communication books and these were effective in transmitting information about the children. In all sites there was a strong sense of the value of parental involvement in planning for children, and the pooled site had an 'open door' policy whereby the teacher was the day-to-day point of contact for parents. In the two home sites, tutors and parents communicated informally whenever the tutor was on site. Involvement in all three sites was meaningful and parents in all interviews expressed their satisfaction with the level of communication with school/tutor. However, in the two home sites, little guidance from the DES exists as to roles and responsibilities for tutors.

Relevant external professionals were also communicated with when services were available, which was often on an ad hoc basis. Parents from two sites (H1 and H3) conveyed their frustration with the lack of support received from external professionals such as therapists. Parents in all three sites expressed their unhappiness with an absence of information or guidance as to the support and resource entitlements for their children. One parent declared '*nobody tells you where to go*' (HT\_S\_PAR35) once the diagnosis of ASD was given and added, '*Google has become my best friend*'. This sentiment was echoed by all five parents interviewed.

Parents and staff of the pooled home tuition service (H1) also expressed their unanimous frustration with the perceived lack of support from the Special Educational Needs Organiser as their point of contact for placements. Uncertainties existed for parents of children in this site as

to how long the children could access the service. According to parents and staff, the allocation of primary school placements for the children could be fraught with anxiety and uncertainty in that the SENO allocated placements in schools based on availability. However, if parents declined the offer of a placement then they would also be refused access to further home tuition.<sup>81</sup> One parent described how she had freedom of choice in relation to where her typically developing children went to school, but felt she had no control over where her children with ASD would be placed (HT\_S\_PAR58).

## 2.3 Learning Environment

The learning environment in all three sites was thoughtfully laid out. The pooled home tuition service was housed in what was originally a home and therefore adaptations were made to support children's needs. In all sites, dedicated learning spaces were organised, bright and attractive. Visual schedules and timetables were age-appropriate, displayed appropriately and kept to a minimum. Children were aware of routines, which were characterised by predictability of a sequence of activities in the school day. In all sites, space was used flexibly and creatively. In the pooled site, workstations were individualised and age appropriate.

In the home sites, both outdoor and indoor spaces were used imaginatively and the tutors engaged in play-based learning with the children. Few physical adaptations were deemed necessary by parents and tutors in these sites. Movement breaks were incorporated in an excellent manner into the schedule in both home sites. This involved playing outside, jumping on trampolines, playing games, running, and cycling. Visual schedules were used on a daily basis in both sites and an example of a pictorial task analysis was observed in one home site (H2) to support independent toileting for one child.

In the pooled site there was no evidence of movement breaks incorporated into the schedules for children. The schedule of teaching occurred in 15-minute blocks – with one block of work, followed by one block of structured play. This had the capacity to provide a movement break but not in response to a need. Evidence of a variety of visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and tactile resources was found in all sites. ICT was used in all sites and all had access to the internet.

Staff in all three sites demonstrated a good awareness of the sensory aspects of ASD. One of the home tutors discussed how sensory issues might impact on a student's behaviour. She mentioned that Michael will have the *'odd meltdown and sometimes he will bite himself... Sometimes it's sensory if he is biting'* [HT\_H\_T2]. This tutor also acknowledged the difficulties the child may have because of the sensory aspects of ASD and noted, *'If the sensory system is out, it is a bit more difficult'*. Similarly, the other home tutor identified that the child's biggest sensory difference was an *'inability to cope with noise'* [HT\_H\_T1]. When the tutor first began to work with Michaela in the pre-school setting she observed Michaela putting her hands over her ears because she

<sup>81</sup> As per Circular 0038/2015 re Home Tuition Scheme – Special Education Component

'Please note that where a child has not availed of a placement available to him/her, they will not be eligible for any provision under the Home Tuition scheme at any point during the academic year nor will they be eligible under the terms of the July Education Programme.'

was overwhelmed by the noise. The head tutor at the pooled provision site mentioned that children could get agitated very quickly and that the light or sound could be hurting them. She also mentioned that some children hand flap and was aware that this behaviour might have an impact on learning. The behaviour specialist here mentioned that staff were made aware of the impact of sensory needs during their own training at the school.

Staff in all three sites identified strategies to support children's sensory differences. One home tutor used pressure points, lifting, trampoline, sensory ball, and jumping, and the second home tutor worked with the student to develop self-regulatory strategies, '*when things become too loud*' for the student, e.g. how to use a break card in pre-school [HT\_H\_T1]. The head tutor in the pooled site noted using Differential Reinforcement of Alternative Behaviour (DRA) and Differential Reinforcement of Other Behaviour (DRO) as approaches to support sensory differences as well as maintaining an emphasis on teaching '*appropriate behaviour*'. This site had a sensory room which was thoughtfully laid out and contained appropriate sensory equipment. It was not scheduled on any child's daily visual schedule and currently was used for rainy days which was inappropriate.

## 2.4 Extra-Curricular Activities

Extra-curricular activities in terms of activities taking place outside of the school day are not a feature of the Irish Education system. Rather schools provide a range of co-curricular activities with explicit links to the curriculum.

Co-curricular activities by virtue of the provision were rarely a feature of practice in the home tuition sites. Tutors and teachers involved students in acceptable co-curricular activities such as cycling (HT3), trampolining (HT2 and HT3) and, on the day of the visit to the pooled site, children were engaged in baking. Organised play activities were a key feature of provision in the two home sites. Organised play opportunities were also a feature of practice in the pooled site.

## 2.5 Student Wellbeing

A secure, safe and positive environment was observed in all sites and was characterised by predictability. It was evident that student wellbeing was carefully considered in all home tuition sites. There was a good awareness in all sites of the potential for children to experience anxiety as a consequence of their ASD. All sites consistently fostered positive relationships with the children and acknowledged its importance in promoting positive child wellbeing. There was a marked difference in approach as to how the children's sensory needs were addressed in each site. Structure, predictability, and high levels of engagement throughout the day characterised the pooled site. There appeared to be a lack of awareness of some aspects of the student's sensory needs in the pooled site. For instance, movement breaks were not scheduled and students learning was so structured, opportunities to self-regulate, or have some 'down time' were not a feature of practice which was not acceptable. Staff claimed that there were no sensory issues with any of the current cohort of students. In this site, while children were calm, learning and on task, the highly rigid structure of the environment left no opportunity for children to

spontaneously engage in play, interact in naturalistic ways with peers, or determine, through choice, activities they wanted to engage in. However, in conversation with parents, all parents described how happy they were with the service and how contented their children were. One parent in the pooled site described how her child *'enjoys going to school every day'* (HT\_S\_PAR35), while another described her child as *'happy out'* (HT\_H\_PAR55). Children in the home sites were observed to be highly engaged, learning, communicating in naturalistic ways and appeared *'happy'*. Sensory needs in these sites were accommodated through use of choice activities, play, distraction, and adjustment of activity length.

The availability of support from external professionals varied between sites. Both home tutors and pooled site personnel expressed their unhappiness with their inability to access support from external professionals.

While there existed awareness and understanding of the anxieties associated with ASD for the children, little support was given to parents in coping with their anxiety and stress caused by the demands of parenting a child with ASD in the home, sometimes alongside other siblings with ASD. In addition, all parents felt they had to seek out information about resource and support entitlements. Interviews with all parents highlighted the effects of having to *'fight the fight'* (HT\_H\_PAR55) with the DES for resources and the anger, frustration, disempowerment and anxiety felt by all in the process of accessing appropriate supports and educational placements. This was encapsulated by the teacher in the pooled provision site when she said she often had *'parents in tears at the door'* (HT\_S\_T) when their child was being *'forced'* to accept a school placement allocated by the SENO.

There appears to be a good level of communication between sites and parents on child well-being. Both parents and tutors reported that they would discuss any concerns regarding children's wellbeing. Systematic procedures were in place to facilitate communication in the pooled site by way of a meeting six weeks after enrolment and then the individualised planning meetings were held bi-annually. In the home sites, opportunities to discuss student wellbeing and progress occurred informally on site on a daily basis.

While positive mental health was promoted in all sites, this was not reflected in any pooled/home-tutor documentation, nor was there an awareness of the need for this.

## Summary Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture

The pooled site had very good management policies and practices developed nationally and these clearly supported a positive and welcoming environment for the children. There were no policies managing the home sites other than specific tutor requirements. The absence of the use of national frameworks or guidelines to inform practice was unacceptable in all sites. Excellent communication systems were used in the pooled site and the home tutors met with parents during each visit to the homes. Access to external services in all sites was unacceptable. Parents' access to clear and timely information on their entitlements for their children was unacceptable.

Learning environments in all sites were carefully organised and structured, and were bright and attractive. Visual supports were used in all sites in meaningful and appropriate ways. Overall very good use of space was observed. Staff in all sites demonstrated good understanding of the sensory needs of children with ASD. However, a sensory room in the pooled site was not scheduled for use by the children. A good emphasis on self-regulation teaching was evident in one home site. Co-curricular activities were not a significant feature of practice in any site. Play activities and some use of community resources were used in the home sites. Co-curricular engagement was unacceptable at all sites.

Staff at all sites demonstrated a good awareness of the potential sources of anxiety and distress in their children with ASD. The pooled site had untapped potential to support children in anxiety management through use of their sensory room. External professionals were not acceptably available to support families in the area of anxiety management. All parents reported extreme levels of stress as regards learning about services and supports in a systematic and supportive manner. Good communication structures facilitated communication between tutors and parents when it came to the wellbeing of all the children.

## Statement 3 – School Management

### 3.1 Leadership

No formal management structure existed in the two home sites. While the pooled site had its own management structure (as part of a national chain of similar sites), there was no link with the DES. The management structure of the pooled site included specific and delineated roles. A member of the management team visits this site weekly and staff and peer reviews also take place. The management took responsibility for staff recruitment, training and Continuing Professional Development. The Director of Services saw her main challenge as the unpredictability of the Home Tuition Grant, '*... the structure of the whole system and how it is funded, the home tuition grant, ... we don't know how long the child will be in the service because it is all based on the child being in receipt of that grant, it is very unpredictable...*' (HT\_S\_DIR). Both parents at the home sites reported difficulty accessing the Home Tuition Grant. Two of the three parents using the pooled site appreciated the help that the school gave in accessing the Home Tuition Grant, '*School-based sites are very helpful, they helped me through the whole process*' (HT\_S\_PAR58). Overall, the management structure of the pooled site was excellent and the absence of one for the home sites was unacceptable.

### 3.2 Responsibility

Clear roles and responsibilities were evident among the tutors and teachers at the pooled site. As tutors developed skills and were evaluated by their managers, their responsibilities increased. Training of new staff was structured and managed in an excellent, data-based manner.

In the home sites, the tutors demonstrated a good awareness of their responsibilities but were not cognisant of training opportunities available to them to increase their skills.



### 3.3 Appointment of Staff

In the pooled site, staff appointment procedures were excellent. Here, staff are recruited by a manager who has particular responsibility for recruiting and training. According to the Behavioural Specialist, all staff work with the children during the day, *'teachers<sup>82</sup> and tutors do the same job during the day, as do management'* (HT1\_S\_BS). *'Teachers'* work a longer day than tutors, develop programmes, do administrative work and are the point of contact for parents and other professionals. At the pooled site, the staff received training from the organisation including six weeks training for tutors before they started working with children. Staff here worked as a team with the behaviour specialist noting, *'I don't feel like I'm on my own... I feel like I have support'* (HT1\_S\_BS).

At the home sites, recruiting staff as Home Tutors was unacceptably left up to parents and both parents found tutors by advertising on websites. One parent received a recommendation for finding a tutor by the child's Early Intervention Team. She was using the tutor to support her child in their local preschool for two days weekly and noted that accessing the grant *'didn't turn out to be that easy in the end I'm afraid'* (HT\_H\_PAR55). The other parent reported the process of finding a tutor *'extremely difficult'* and highlighted that a person with literacy challenges would find it challenging as the process, *'...was a nightmare'* [HT\_H\_PAR42]. One parent, who is now using the pooled site, expressed her frustration at the lack of information and support around the process of finding a tutor, *'no one ever tells you ... you have to find out this information for yourself ... nobody tells you anything ... you just don't know where to go ... there isn't any actual format there ... where do you go? what do you do? ... you are literally just left ...'* [HT\_S\_PAR35].

### 3.4 Review of Provision for Children with ASD

Daily review, albeit informally in one site, was a feature of all sites. The pooled site systematically collected data on all skills taught and used the data to inform all instructional decisions in an excellent manner. The home sites would benefit from a structured framework for reviewing provision for children with ASD.

## Summary Statement 3 – School Management

Excellent, clear management practices and structures were evident in the pooled site. The absence of management structures for the home sites was unacceptable. Roles and responsibilities were clearly defined in the pooled site. In the home sites, the process parents went through to find appropriate tutors for their children was unacceptable. Parents reported high levels of anxiety and stress associated with the Home Tuition Grant application process as it occurred so close to the identification process for their children, which was, in itself, extremely challenging for them.

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<sup>82</sup> Experienced tutors can be promoted to 'teacher' title within this organisation.

Specific procedures existed in the pooled site for hiring tutors whereas the parents depended on recommendations or had no support for hiring home tutors. Review of provision was excellent at the pooled site with written reports sent to parents regularly. There were no systems for review of provision in the home sites which was unacceptable.

## Statement 4 – Staff Development

### 4.1 Understanding and Knowledge of ASD for All Staff

In each of the three settings, all staff demonstrated an understanding and knowledge of ASD which ranged from very good to unacceptable. In the home settings, tutor knowledge was directly linked to initial teacher preparation as well as continuing professional development. One tutor was highly experienced in ASD provision abroad and the other tutor had little formal knowledge of ASD. Staff at the pooled site, while not qualified teachers, had completed undergraduate degrees, several were Board Certified Behaviour Analysts (BCBA), and many were '*familiar with the method of TEACCH and augmentative communication systems*' [HT\_S\_DIR].

The three personnel interviewed at the pooled site were knowledgeable about ASD and demonstrated a very good clear understanding of how it impacts upon learning and development. For example, in relation to behavioural difficulties, the Director of Services felt that '*certain children cannot be in certain environments that are over-stimulating*'. She spoke of the need for '*environmental adaptations*' such as removing posters and visuals from the classroom walls as well as storing materials out of reach of children '*who engaged in classroom destruction*' [HT\_S\_DIR]. The lead tutor at this site who works directly with the children was especially attuned to the particular needs of children with ASD to learn in environments that were supportive, enabled children to make choices, express their needs, to anticipate events and activities and to negotiate transitions. She highlighted the importance for children with ASD having '*their own individualised little station and there is a visual schedule for each and every child, there's a box for each and every child, so nobody is rushing around trying to share bits and pieces, everybody has their own bits and pieces, the day goes a lot smoother*' [HT\_S\_T].

This approach led to reduced waiting, predictability and clear expectations for all the children. This tutor also spoke of the need to use weighted vests and referenced the need for occupational therapy and, in certain instances, a sensory diet programme.

In relation to the home tuition sites, both tutors differed in their training and qualifications, with one tutor having undertaken ABA training in addition to being a qualified primary school teacher. This tutor felt that the most important aspects of the learning environment were structure and routine. She discussed the need to reduce clutter within the environment and to limit children's choices to a maximum of four in order to avoid confusion. She also believed in the use of visual schedules so that the child would be aware of what was happening and when during the day. In relation to sensory difficulties, she described an inability to cope with noise as the biggest issue for the child with whom she works. She was teaching the child to use a break card when things got too loud for her, and expressed her belief that the child must develop skills to enable her to cope within a noisy environment other than covering her ears. She would like to see the child

being able to ask an adult for help and to know that she can have time/space away from an overwhelming environment. Although this tutor used the VB-MAPP in her work she did not have specific training in its use. Overall, her understanding of ASD was very good.

The second home tutor, although she was also a qualified primary school teacher, did not have specialised training in special educational needs and much of her knowledge of ASD has been '*learned on the job*' through meeting with other professionals in the field including a behaviour/play therapist, a speech and language and occupational therapist. For instance, she explained how she acquired her knowledge of PECS and speech and language strategies:

*'I learned about PECS from the first child I worked with, the Speech and Language therapist explained to me how to use it and also gave me some written instruction...And then I worked with this child last year for three months and I've worked with him this year for two months so I am in contact with his other tutor and there is a speech and language therapist working with this other family so I get support in speech and language'* [HT\_H\_T2].

With regards to ASD, this tutor spoke of how the sensory aspects of ASD often result in the child having a '*meltdown*' where he will bite himself. Accordingly, she noted that '*it's just more difficult for him to concentrate and to be engaged because he's spending his energy trying to regulate*' [HT\_H\_T2]. Her interventions in these instances were derived from her experiences, her reading, or the internet. Her overall understanding and knowledge of ASD were unacceptable.

Understanding and knowledge of ASD was very good and systematically provided in the pooled setting and dependent on the specific professional experiences of individualised tutors in the home settings where it varied from very good to unacceptable.

## 4.2 Continuing Professional Development

Both home tutors were critical of the lack of professional development opportunities available to them. According to home tutor one '*there is no access to CPD for home tutors*' [HT\_H\_T1]. She further explained that as home tutors are not employed by the Department of Education and Skills (DES), they are not recognised by the department for continuing professional development opportunities that are available to primary school teachers working within the primary school system. Both tutors also confirmed that they do not have access to the supports offered by the Special Education Support Service (SESS) either.<sup>83</sup> Both tutors described how they have to personally access training and pay for it from personal resources. They also stated that they were not certain of what training was available or where they could access training on ASD. One tutor, unsure of where to source professional development, resorted to '*going online and typing in what I need*' [HT\_H\_T2]. The other home tutor explained that she also has had to access CPD in her own time in whatever way and means available to her. She felt '*lucky to have a strong network of professional friends who point her in the right direction*' [HT\_H\_T1].

<sup>83</sup> Since home tutors are required to be qualified teachers registered with the Teaching Council, they are eligible to access CPD from services such as the Special Education Support Service. Home Tutor applications for CPD must be reviewed and approved by the DES before they can access SESS courses. The tutors interviewed did not demonstrate any awareness of this.

At the pooled site, there was a systematic structured approach to CPD. Tutors received six weeks of initial training during which they received information on autism and also on the teaching methodologies that are used at the site which is constantly updated and the staff informed. This is followed by specific training on the methodologies [HT\_S\_DIR]. They were then observed by a trainer for a week, received feedback and were required to meet a specified criterion on the correct use of particular teaching approaches before they were permitted to work with a child independently. In-house training in other areas including first aid and communication were also provided systematically. Management made PECS<sup>84</sup> training available to the staff. Peer observations of teaching were an integral part of working at the site to preserve high levels of fidelity in Discrete Trial Training use.

The pooled site tutors cannot avail of training provided by the DES or access SESS supports. Tutors who have worked for six months at this site may be eligible for financial support for a college programme as CPD at the discretion of management.

### **4.3 Information Sharing and Access to Specialist Information on ASD**

With regards to sharing information and having access to specialist information on ASD, neither the home tutors nor the pooled site personnel believed that there was a systematic approach in place to facilitate such an exchange. From the perspective of the pooled site lead tutor, parents generally engaged specialist services such as occupational therapy and speech and language therapy privately for their child. As a result, there was little if any information sharing between these professionals and staff at the pooled site.

A similar situation prevailed in the home sites. No external agency support was used by tutors at these sites. No links were established and the tutors were not knowledgeable about possible external supports they might call on as needed.

### **Summary Statement 4 – Staff Development**

Staff at the pooled site had very good knowledge and understanding of ASD as they all received similar training and CPD. Tutors in the home sites varied from very good to unacceptable in their understanding and knowledge of ASD. They depended on their qualifications, prior experience, and learning from their previous tutoring experiences for their professional development. Other learning opportunities included the internet and accessing friends with more experience.

In terms of CPD, both home tutors were not aware of their eligibility to apply for SESS courses. Their approaches to upskilling themselves in ASD and ASD-specific teaching approaches were limited and unacceptable overall. The pooled provision ensured all tutors had access to CPD internally provided which was acceptable. These tutors did not have access to DES-supported CPD.

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<sup>84</sup> Bondy, A. and Frost, L. (2002) A Picture's Worth: PECS and Other Visual Communication Strategies in Autism, Bethesda: Woodbine House.

Systems to support the exchange of information between tutors were excellent at the pooled site and did not exist between tutors at the home sites. Access to external expertise on ASD was not acceptable at any site.

### **Concluding Summary: Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Home-Tuition Sites**

Assessment methods were excellent in the pooled provision setting and included the use of an autism-specific assessment instrument. Assessment in the home sites was unacceptable as it did not extend beyond the original diagnostic assessment report and no formal assessment was conducted by either tutor. There was acceptable evidence that ABC data were used to support children with challenging behaviour in the pooled setting and no evidence of this in the home settings. Acceptable individualised plans were used in all settings and all included input by parents. External professionals had constructed the plans for the home sites and informed the plans at the pooled setting only when parents had consulted them and shared information with the setting staff. While not documented, good systems were in place in all sites to facilitate transition into and out of the Home Tuition settings. Parents expressed concerns about the scarcity of special class placements which sometimes meant they had to accept such placements in schools different from those attended by other family members. Acceptable systems to support transitions within lessons and across the tuition daily time frame were in evidence at all sites.

Children's interests and needs formed an acceptable basis for the development of relevant curriculum in the home sites, and the content areas of the assessment tool used in the pooled setting was the acceptable curriculum there. No curriculum guidelines were used in any setting and the curriculum was not informed by Aistear. The extent to which the pooled setting provided naturalistic opportunities for learning was unacceptable. Parents were all very satisfied with their children's placements. Very good teaching methodologies were in evidence at all sites. A greater focus on the use of play to teach skills was evident in the home sites and the teaching at the pooled site was very highly structured. At the pooled site excellent team collaboration was in evidence. In the home sites tutors collaborated acceptably with parents. The pooled site had excellent procedures in place to collect data on children's progress, use it systematically to inform instruction, and communicate it effectively to parents regularly. Data collection on progress in the home sites was unacceptable. Informal methods were used unsystematically. Parents were kept aware of progress in tutoring sessions through conversations.

The pooled site had very good management policies and practices developed nationally and these clearly supported a positive and welcoming environment for the children. There were no policies managing the home sites other than specific tutor requirements. The absence of the use of national frameworks or guidelines to inform practice was unacceptable in all sites. Excellent communication systems were used in the pooled site and the home tutors met with parents during each visit to the homes. Access to external services in all sites was unacceptable.

Learning environments in all sites were carefully organised and structured, and were bright and attractive. Staff in all sites demonstrated good understanding of the sensory needs of children with ASD. Play activities and some use of community resources were used in the home sites. Co-curricular engagement was unacceptable at all sites.

Staff at all sites demonstrated a good awareness of the potential sources of anxiety and distress in their children with ASD. The pooled site had untapped potential to support children in anxiety management through use of their sensory room. External professionals were not acceptably available to support families in the area of anxiety management. Good communication structures facilitated communication between tutors and parents around all the children's wellbeing.

Excellent, clear management practices and structures were evident in the pooled site. The absence of management structures for the home sites was unacceptable. Roles and responsibilities were clearly outlined in the pooled site. In the home sites, the process parents went through to find appropriate tutors for their children was unacceptable. Parents reported high levels of anxiety and stress associated with the Home Tuition Grant application process as it occurred so close to the identification process for their children, which was, in itself, extremely challenging for them.

Specific procedures existed in the pooled site for hiring tutors whereas the parents depended on recommendations or had no support for hiring home tutors. Review of provision was excellent at the pooled site with written reports sent to parents regularly. There were no systems for review of provision in the home sites which was unacceptable.

Staff at the pooled site had good knowledge and understanding of ASD as they all received similar training and CPD. Tutors in the home sites varied unacceptably in their understanding and knowledge levels on ASD. They depended on their qualifications, prior experience, and learning from their previous tutoring experiences for their professional development. In terms of CPD, both home tutors were not aware of their eligibility to apply for SESS courses. Their approaches to upskilling themselves in ASD and ASD-specific teaching approaches were limited and unacceptable overall. The pooled provision ensured all tutors had access to CPD internally provided which was acceptable. Access to external expertise on ASD was not acceptable at any site.

## 9. Findings, Discussion, and Implications for Future Practice

### Introduction

In this final chapter, a summary of the key findings of the research is presented with reference to the Evaluation Framework (Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) and National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 2013). These findings are discussed and implications for future practice emerging from the findings are identified.

### Statement 1 – Teaching and Learning

#### 1.1 Assessment

##### Summary of Findings

There was an understanding and a recognition of the importance of assessment of, and for learning in all sites, with practice in early intervention and most special school sites being very good. In all primary school sites assessment information was collected, reviewed and evaluated and used to structure, plan, measure and support children's learning and progress, with practice variously identified as very good, good and acceptable. Assessment policies containing a comprehensive range of assessment tools were in place in three of the five primary sites. In all post-primary sites, formative assessment practices were in evidence and acceptable. The absence of assessment policies at post-primary level was unacceptable. Most special schools used autism-specific assessment instruments where appropriate, as did the pooled provision home tuition site. This practice was not in evidence in the sites where tuition was delivered in the home. Where the July Education Programme (JEP) was delivered in school sites, assessment practice was informed by school assessment procedures that were in place in the previous school year. Assessment practices in the home sites were unacceptable. A positive approach to the management of behaviours that challenge was evident in all sites, with functional behaviour assessment almost always identified as a feature of practice. Almost all<sup>85</sup> parents in all sites were less than clear as to the purpose and process of assessment for their children.

##### Implications for Future Practice

The assessment practice observed in all sites should be elaborated in written assessment policies and more direct reference to the rationale for selecting specific assessment tools. Schools, as well as home tutors, should access CPD in utilising ASD-specific assessments where appropriate to evaluate language and communication, behaviour, social and emotional development and independence. Students' co-occurring special educational needs and their associated implications

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Quantification Equivalencies in this Chapter						
A few		Some	Half	A Majority	Almost All	All
Up to...	20%	40%	50%	60%	80%	100%

for assessments require elucidation in assessment policies. The potential for Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to augment the assessment process should be further explored. There is scope to extend students' involvement in their own learning through implementing explicit student self-assessment strategies. In order to ensure that students derive optimal benefit from the JEP, the assessment of students' learning vis-à-vis the JEP and its link with students' school assessments requires clarification particularly in the home site as there was no transfer of information or planning.

Providing parents with accessible information with regard to assessment in all sites should be considered. While there was an understanding and a recognition of the importance of assessment of, and for learning in all sites, there was a sense in all sites of teachers/tutors being overwhelmed by the multifaceted requirements of the assessment process. The development of guidelines on assessment incorporating these elements would be of benefit to all sites and ensure clarity in the assessment process.

## 1.2 Individualised Planning

### Summary of Findings

Individualised planning was at a very good well-developed stage and often in evidence in early intervention classes, primary and special schools and at an initial stage of development (acceptable in special classes and unacceptable for students in mainstream classes), and sometimes in evidence in post-primary schools. The individualised planning process was often informed by teachers' and parents' discussions and interactions with students. Where the JEP was delivered in a school site, it was linked to the existing individualised planning in place for the student during the school year. There was no link with the student's individualised planning where the JEP was delivered in the home. In home tuition sites, parents' targets in relation to the individualised planning process were incorporated by the tutors.

### Implications for Future Practice

The individualised planning process should ensure realistic targets, that the student has the potential for attaining, are identified, should extend students' involvement in the individualised planning process and ensure that there is adequate access to external professionals in supporting the process. In post-primary schools' strategies, methodologies and materials necessary to teach the learning targets require greater elucidation, and learning targets should be specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-bound (SMART). In particular the environmental and instructional adaptations and accommodations required to support the student across subject areas in mainstream classes should be described in planning and in place in classrooms. In early intervention sites, the specific targeting of play and leisure skills should be a key focus of the individualised planning process. Attention should be given to incorporating specific planning for the JEP within the individualised planning process and systematic structures established to provide for detailed feedback from the JEP to the class teacher and the home tutor in particular as there was no sharing of information. Home tutors would benefit from developing expertise



through CPD around individualised planning. As noted previously in relation to assessment, parents require information in a readily accessible format that clearly explains the individualised planning process in all sites.

## 1.3 Transition

### Summary of Findings

Very good transition protocols were in place for children transitioning to and from the early intervention classes. A good understanding of the importance of supporting students' transition from primary to post-primary school was evident in all relevant sites. Post-primary sites and special school sites often had very good protocols in place to support the transition of students to adult services. There was an excellent awareness in almost all sites of the importance of clearly signalling transitions within the school day for students and internal transitions were managed sensitively and in an age-appropriate manner.

### Implications for Future Practice

The transition protocols in place should be more clearly documented. Roles and responsibilities related to transition should be clearly delineated and timelines identified for the completion of activities intrinsic to the transition process. In post-primary schools, developing a flexible transition plan for post-school placement should be prioritised and included in students' individualised planning two years prior to their anticipated transition. Transition should feature more prominently in individualised planning and students should be allocated a more active role in the transition process. In a few cases, delays in assessing children with ASD were reported, which impacted negatively on the transition process to primary school as appropriate strategies could not be put in place to support the transition process. The absence of formal structures to transition students from school to the JEP requires attention and schools' reported attention to this process should be formally acknowledged.

## 1.4 Curriculum

### Summary of Findings

A good child-centred, individualised and differentiated approach to the curriculum, which addressed students' holistic development, was evidenced in the home-tuition sites, early intervention, primary, special schools and both school and home-based JEP sites. The focus on developing and extending students' social and life skills was a particularly positive feature of the JEP. However the potential to focus on these skills where the JEP was being delivered in the home was limited and unacceptable. At post-primary level, a range of certification options was available, however, the absence of a policy as well as variations in practice in relation to curriculum inclusion, differentiation and the access rates across all subject areas is unacceptable, a cause for concern and requires attention.

### **Implications for Future Practice**

The absence of specific curriculum guidelines for early intervention classes is creating uncertainty for schools and home-tuition sites in providing for children's curriculum experiences in the early years. The potential of Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2009) and Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), 2006) to contribute to children's experiences also should be further explored and developed. Guidance in relation to children's access to Irish in the curriculum is required to address the dilemma posed by children's access to Irish in the Gaeltacht areas. The Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities (NCCA, 2007) could be further employed in post-primary sites to augment students' learning and teaching. Explicitly locating the curriculum provided for students in special schools clearly within the relevant curriculum frameworks, and experiences available to their peers in mainstream schools to support students' holistic development, should be considered. Guidance is required in areas of the curriculum that should be focused on during the implementation of the JEP. This would allow for an emphasis on extra-curricular activities that target the specific challenges associated with ASD. Similarly, guidance is required on curriculum focus for home tuition. The implications for a student's social skills when the JEP is being delivered in the home and in home tuition sites should be considered and addressed.

## **1.5 Teaching Methodologies**

### **Summary of Findings**

In all early intervention classes and almost all primary and special schools, the selection and use of generic and ASD-specific teaching methodologies was excellent, based on best practice and the individual needs of each student, and considered the students' strengths, interests and preferences. In school-based JEP sites, practice ranged from excellent to acceptable. Where practice was acceptable, it was attributable to the limited availability of experienced teachers during this period. A variety of activities and methodologies was used to teach core skills and concepts to students with ASD in all post-primary sites although differentiation methods were unacceptable in some mainstream classrooms. Almost all classroom and school environments were well-structured and students navigated the environment comfortably and confidently. Particular attention was directed towards visual approaches to learning and accommodating students' sensory differences in almost all sites. Information and communication technology (ICT) was identified as an appropriate methodological approach to support students with ASD and was used widely in all sites except early intervention sites, where the JEP was delivered in the home and in home-tuition sites.

### **Implications for Future Practice**

Including reference to all teaching methodologies in use in the School Plan and clearly stating the rationale for the selection and use of these teaching methodologies would further consolidate the positive practice evidenced. In post-primary sites, further documentary evidence is required to demonstrate the link between assessment and teaching especially in relation to individualised plans for students. Assessment of individual targets should be part of post-primary practice.

There is also scope to extend the practice of displaying students' completed work to mainstream subject classrooms in post-primary sites. In the provision of the JEP, it is critical that at least one experienced member of staff is in a classroom to ensure continuity of teaching methodologies for students' experiences. In home-tuition sites, a need to support the development of knowledge and skill in the application of methodologies of greatest benefit to young children with ASD was identified.

## 1.6 Team Approach

### Summary of Findings

Variations were evident within site types and between sites as regards the level of joint-planning, and sharing of expertise and information that was manifest. Formal and informal sharing of information among colleagues was evident and a range of collaborative practices from unacceptable to excellent was apparent. This was excellent in early intervention sites and good in most post-primary and special school sites. It was very good in the primary sites. In the context of the delivery of home tuition and the home-based JEP, daily communication was evidenced between tutors and parents but multidisciplinary teams were not a feature of practice here. Special needs assistants considered that their input was recognised and valued in almost all sites.

### Implications for Future Practice

In sites where information sharing was informal, there is a need to formalise these structures and a need was identified in all sites to ensure that communication with parents is in accessible, parent-friendly language. A limited availability of external professionals was often reported and requires addressing in the context of implementing a team approach. In a few post-primary sites, appropriate levels of information sharing within the schools was unacceptable due to timetable and staff deployment issues which needed to be addressed at leadership level. Parents' involvement in planning for the JEP in school-based sites could be further extended on a more formal basis.

## 1.7 Data Collection/Monitoring of Progress/Outcomes

### Summary of Findings

Very good formal and informal processes for data-collection and monitoring of children's progress and outcomes were in place in all early intervention classes. These processes ranged from good to very good in the primary and special school sites. In the post-primary sites, most data collection and progress monitoring occurred around students' performance in the mainstream subjects of the schools and only rarely were targets set for non-academic competencies which was not acceptable. Data collection processes and monitoring of progress ranged from excellent to not acceptable in Home Provision and was good in JEP.

## Implications

Robust systems of data collection and monitoring of progress/outcomes for children can potentially inform and enhance the quality of teaching and learning and thus should be developed and used. The processes involved in data collection and monitoring of students' progress and outcomes should occur in post-primary and some home-provision sites where this was identified as an area for development. Parents can have a significant role in data collection and monitoring of progress, provided they understand and are supported in the process. In this context, all sites should provide information for parents on data collection and monitoring of children's progress and outcomes in a parent-friendly manner. Special needs assistants (SNAs), under the direction of the class teacher, have a potential role in supporting data collection, which could further assist the process. Where the JEP is delivered in the home, the development of specific structures for sharing data between the student's class teacher and the teacher/tutor in the home would be of benefit.

## Statement 2 – Inclusive School Culture

### 2.1 School Culture

#### Summary of Findings

A culture of high ambitions and aspirations for students with ASD was a feature of provision and a positive school culture supporting provision for students with ASD was evident in almost all sites. Across all sites, there was evidence that teachers and SNAs understood, valued and had clear expectations for the growing independence of students as they progressed through the schools. It was clear that the principal has a pivotal role in fostering inclusive school environments. Almost all parents articulated high levels of satisfaction with the educational provision for their children across all sites and this was corroborated by the children during child conversations.

#### Implications for Practice

There was potential to enhance school culture further by including students more in planning for their own learning through inviting them to explicitly identify learning goals and adopt a role in the monitoring and review of these goals.

### 2.2 Communication

#### Summary of Findings

Communication between staff in all sites almost always ranged from good to excellent and a strong sense of collegiality and collaboration was evident, which was characterised by a professional sharing of knowledge and support. All sites displayed an understanding of the importance of communicating with parents of students with ASD and formal and informal effective communication was evidenced in all sites. The value of advice and support from external professionals and services, where available, in supporting children with ASD was affirmed by all sites.

### **Implications for Practice**

Documenting the practices involved for cultivating communication with parents/guardians in the School Plan would further clarify the communication process. Accessing continuing professional development (CPD) focused on promoting positive and effective communication with parents would assist principals and school staff in developing communication structures. Promoting parental awareness of the range of communication systems in place in schools and clearly articulating these procedures would further support the communication process. Facilitating meaningful collaboration with parents at the post-primary level was identified as challenging and more complex than at primary level due to the numbers of teachers involved. Naming a key contact in school for parents and allocating time for this named person to communicate with parents during the school day presents as a possible solution to this dilemma that emerged. While high levels of satisfaction were expressed by parents with the school-based JEP, their role could be extended beyond consultation to greater involvement, while simultaneously respecting parents' readiness to allow teachers to lead and deliver the programme. Communicating directly with the child's class teacher where the JEP is delivered in the home would augment continuity in children's learning.

## **2.3 Learning Environment**

### **Summary of Findings**

Commendable attention was directed towards creating well-structured, bright and spacious learning environments in almost all sites. Excellent practice was often evident in supporting children to self-regulate and take movement breaks as required. Where there were ASD-specific classrooms, they were exemplary in design and created both an aesthetically pleasing and ASD-friendly school environment. Workstations in all ASD-specific classrooms were individualised and age appropriate. In almost all instances, the use of lockers in post-primary schools was acknowledged as a potential challenge for students and these were almost always located in calm, quiet areas of the school and students could access SNA support when necessary there. Home tuition sites including JEP in the home used both a dedicated internal space in the house, outdoor facilities such as gardens, and play areas. Challenges as regards purposeful structuring of the environment and the needs of other family members were identified where the JEP is delivered in the home.

### **Implications for Practice**

The experiences of children with ASD are positively augmented by the creation of a purposefully ASD-specific environment. The greater availability of visual supports such as simplified maps, clear labelling of areas, colour coding of corridors, thematic layout of subject rooms could provide support to students in navigating post-primary school buildings.

## 2.4 Extra-Curricular Activities

### Summary of Findings

While extra-curricular activities are not a feature of provision in the context of the Irish Education system, in all sites students participated in a range of co-curricular activities such as the school-tours; sports days; fundraising activities; the annual school drama and horse-riding. Almost all schools demonstrated a commitment to including students in a meaningful and beneficial manner in these activities. In sites where students engaged in work experience, this was almost always successful and schools worked collaboratively with parents, students and placements to facilitate positive outcomes for students. Parents valued students' inclusion in co-curricular activities. In all sites, the role of the SNA was integral to supporting student access to extra-curricular activities. Many SNAs gave freely of their time and made participation in activities such as trips abroad possible for students with ASD. Students availing of the JEP programme in schools benefited greatly from co-curricular activities. This was less a feature of practice where the JEP was delivered in the home or where home tuition was being delivered.

### Implications for Practice

Schools provided for co-curricular rather than extra-curricular activities. Co-curricular activities were less a feature of practice where the JEP was delivered in the home or where home tuition was being delivered. This requires attention in view of the potential for these activities to mitigate the social and communication differences experienced by students with ASD.

## 2.5 Student Wellbeing

### Summary of Findings

Key features of promoting student wellbeing involve building relationships with children, parents and available multi-professionals. Students' wellbeing was fostered in an affirmative and proactive manner in almost all sites. A safe, secure and positive environment was almost always evident and interactions were respectful and affirming. Almost all sites consistently promoted positive relationships, and positive mental health was supported formally and informally. Child-protection and anti-bullying policies were available in all schools. Schools communicated with parents with regard to their children's mental health. Staff in almost all instances displayed an awareness of the potential indicators of student anxiety. Students' wellbeing was fostered in an affirmative and proactive manner in home tuition sites and in both home- and school-based JEP sites. In all sites students were supported to interact with peers during unstructured times such as breaks and lunch. The SNA was pivotal in supporting this interaction and in almost all sites it was successful.

### Implications for Practice

Clearly documenting the strategies adopted by the school to support students' wellbeing in the School Plan and outlining the system that is in place to identify and address children's potential mental health problems in school documentation would further augment the positive

practice identified. Identifying a staff member as a resource for students who may be concerned about mental health issues would also be of assistance. An awareness of the issues for parents' wellbeing related to their child with ASD is important for schools.

## Statement 3 – School Management

### 3.1 Leadership

#### Summary of Findings

There were clear management structures in place at all sites with a commitment to educational provision for students with ASD articulated by all principals. Principals in special schools tended to have advanced qualifications in special education and ASD whereas principals at other sites considered provision for children with ASD as part of their commitment to overall quality education for all students in the schools. All principals expressed their support for upskilling teachers who take on responsibility for educating students with ASD in the school. Principals frequently rotated staff within their schools to support those working in special classes or difficult classes and to grow expertise among all staff. In larger post-primary schools, principals worked to ensure efficient communication structures were in place to support distributed leadership to co-ordinating teachers of educational provision. In non-ASD-specific sites principals were frequently torn between attending CPD opportunities around topics of interest to the whole school community versus those of concern to a smaller portion thereof. Maintaining existing school staff for school-based JEP was identified as challenging. The overseer's role in managing the JEP programme involves considerable administrative and management duties in addition to having an in-depth understanding of students' needs.

#### Implications for Practice

The importance of the availability of CPD for principals to inform the management, administrative and instructional-related duties specific to ASD provision was evident. In all sites practices were more advanced than evidenced in documentation and clearly articulating the rationale for practice in relation to students with ASD could potentially augment provision. At sites where there was a special class, principals were aware of the potential isolation of the teacher in the school and highlighted the importance of continuing support for the teacher in the special class. The presence of more than one special class at a site seemed to ameliorate that isolation and increase the salience of the specialised provision among the general staff. While it is not feasible or necessary to provide more than one class in every school, the findings underline the importance of whole-school support for a teacher in a special class. Harnessing the positive practice evidenced in rotating teachers and SNAs between mainstream and special classes and articulating a transparent, consistent and clear rationale in school documentation on this practice could further support ASD provision in schools.

## 3.2 Responsibility

### Summary of Findings

For most sites, there was a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities among all professionals working with the students. Principals deployed personnel in their schools with care for the staff and with a view to sharing the responsibility for educational provision among those willing to undertake it. When post-primary timetables were not appropriately managed, it led to a large number of mainstream teachers with responsibilities for instruction in special classes. This adversely affected the quality of education the students received. These timetabling issues created increased stress for co-ordinating teachers and had a cascading effect on teaching and documentation. In the sites where seamless teamwork was observed, specific roles tended to merge and staff did what needed to be done whether they were teachers or SNAs. In these sites the views of all members of the teams were invited and respected while still maintaining clear lines of ultimate responsibility. Principals at larger schools relied on co-ordinating teachers as communication conduits in the school.

### Implications for Future Practice

Post-primary schools would benefit from guidelines for managing teacher timetables and the use of learning support hours to bolster teaching in special classes. All school sites commented on the dearth of availability of external services to advise and support them in working with students. This was particularly evident in the school-based JEP site, where a majority of teachers did not have significant experience in working with students with complex needs. A clearer articulation of appropriate practices for SNAs at the post-primary level would provide greater certainty for schools and SNAs in this regard.

## 3.3 Appointment of Staff

### Summary of Findings

Principals and overseers made consistent efforts to recruit and hire personnel with an understanding of ASD and who would constitute a good match with the students and their needs. Their efforts were hampered frequently by the panel system which required them to hire specific teachers who might not be the best 'fit' for special classes. Principals went to significant trouble to find staff in-house to replace those moving to teaching in a special class in post-primary schools. They welcomed the potential to hire teachers with restricted recognition if they had ASD experience or qualifications. Special school principals in particular were aware of the need for hiring teachers and SNAs who would fit well with the students and who were willing to complete CPD to expand and develop their skill sets. The appointment of tutors/teachers in home provision and the JEP in the home creates a particular problem for parents.

### Implications for Future Practice

It would advantage principals appointing personnel for special classes to be able to recruit those most suitable without having to manage within the constraints of the panel system. There are no public lists of available and qualified personnel for parents who may be in a very vulnerable



state with children who have been newly assessed with ASD. Providing targeted assistance in such instances would be of significant benefit to parents.

### **3.4 Review of Provision**

#### **Summary of Findings**

Promoting a culture of ongoing reflection on and review of children's learning and teaching experiences impacts positively on provision. Review of practice was excellent in the early intervention sites and the school-based home provision site, and good in the primary sites and special schools. Review of provision occurred within the framework of self-evaluation in some sites but not in most. Teachers and principals tended to evaluate the effectiveness of provision at the micro rather than macro level with careful attention to the delivery of instruction and the day-to-day learning of students with ASD. Post-primary schools tended to rely on examination results in the context of reviewing students' progress and this was unacceptable. Mainstream, special class and co-ordinating teachers were very sensitive to the successful participation of individual students during lessons and engaged in continuous review and checking for understanding.

#### **Implications for Future Practice**

All sites would benefit from functional systems for engaging in timely review of provision in appropriate-sized teams. In particular, post-primary schools would benefit from functional systems to rate the progress of students on their individual targets in addition to their examination performance. This practice of schools reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of current provision should be documented in school plans and consequent changes in practice recorded. The JEP presents particular opportunities for challenges experienced by parents in relation to their children to be addressed and could beneficially be linked to school-based review systems.

## **Statement 4 – Staff Development**

### **4.1 Understanding and Knowledge of ASD**

#### **Summary of Findings**

Across all sites there was evidence of excellent knowledge of ASD among most staff. In particular, direct care and teaching staff in special classes understood and demonstrated the changing needs of students with ASD as they progressed through the schools. The staff emphasised the need for the growing independence of students and structured their teaching and support to enable this development. Principals were also very aware of the need for graduated levels of support for students to promote independent behaviour and responsibility commensurate with age and ability. Most of this knowledge and awareness was developed through consistent attendance at relevant CPD offered through the SESS and to a lesser extent MCA, school patron bodies and other external agencies. In home provision the knowledge levels of tutors depended on prior experiences which were inconsistent. There were high expectations for newly appointed staff

working in special classes or special schools to upskill themselves. There was a positive cascading effect of the presence of well-integrated special classes in mainstream schools in terms of overall staff awareness and knowledge about ASD. Schools new to ASD provision were keenly aware of their need to upskill and learn and expressed their need for whole-school in-service as well as the development of specialist expertise. The importance of geographical location was evident here as schools which were small, rural, or isolated found it particularly difficult to access relevant CPD in a timely manner. Schools used mostly informal systems to share information and expertise and this was variably effective.

### **Implications for Future Practice**

Many sites expressed their needs for specific targeted CPD in areas such as relationships and sexuality for students in puberty, working with behaviours that challenge, and whole-school information on special education and the educational implications of autism in particular. Tutors providing home tuition were especially aware of their need to upskill and resorting to using friends and colleagues who were more knowledgeable than they or the internet as sources of information. Providing information on the availability of CPD through the SESS for all teachers/tutors involved in home tuition and the JEP would be a significant benefit.

## **4.2 Continuing Professional Development**

### **Summary of Findings**

Teachers of special classes at all levels and teachers in special schools consistently availed of CPD from the SESS, MCA, ICEP,<sup>86</sup> local Education Centres and other providers. Most teachers in these situations had specialist qualifications through participation in graduate diplomas in special education and/or ASD, and expected newly appointed teachers to acquire the same. Schools provided admirable support structures for teachers to pursue CPD which entailed considerable administrative demands. Principals secured substitute teachers for those taking CPD courses and colleagues covered for them frequently. Principals and teachers valued the range and depth of CPD available in particular through the SESS. The highest level of engagement by principals in CPD programmes specifically on ASD was from those in special schools. Many had specialist qualifications and some had led the movement to engage experts to deliver programmes such as TEACCH in Ireland. Principals also found support in specialist national peer groups, professional associations for principals and local support groups. In larger schools and in post-primary schools principals tended to engage in CPD in topics such as mental health issues, challenging behaviour and other topics of importance to the whole school and expected and supported co-ordinating teachers and specialist teachers to attend CPD specific to ASD. Mainstream teachers attended CPD in the area of ASD in direct proportion to their involvement in teaching children with ASD in the school at all levels unless they were expecting to rotate into a special class situation. Only special schools extended opportunities to parents to upskill themselves about ASD. It was a source of universal and continued frustration to principals, teachers, parents and the SNAs themselves that no formal structured CPD exists for SNAs in schools either at the level of being

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<sup>86</sup> The Institute of Child Education and Psychology (ICEP) is a provider of online Continuing Professional Development in psychology and special needs.

appointed or in terms of professional pathways. All schools and all stakeholders including the children identified the key roles SNAs play in educational provision and care for children with ASD in schools. Many SNAs attended CPD in their own time and at their own expense because they wanted to learn more about ASD to better support the students and the school teams. Principals found it difficult to provide in-house CPD for SNAs sometimes as several served concurrently as bus escorts and were not available at the end of the school day.

### **Implications for Future Practice**

The role SNAs play in classes for children with ASD might be considered to require a more formal education on ASD as their support in managing behaviour is much more significant than when working with children who have different special educational needs. Their own argument in the current research is that they would be better able to support teachers in the application of ASD-specific interventions and teaching methodologies if they also received some CPD around these. Appropriate CPD for SNAs would best be examined at the national level. Finally, it would be beneficial for all schools with expertise in ASD to consider extending opportunities to the parents of their children with ASD to develop skills and knowledge in the area.

## **4.3 Information Sharing and Access to Specialist Information**

### **Summary of Findings**

Schools with special classes and special schools considered specialist teachers to be resident experts and had numerous informal and formal systems for sharing information. These included conversations during breaks and lunch times, short meetings between classes, presentations at staff meetings and subject meetings, explicit delivery of inservice information, sharing of documents and other materials from CPD opportunities and use of the school intranet. Schools considered Croke Park hours both positively and negatively in this regard. Teachers had opportunities to systematically focus on important school issues but the requirement to attend these reduced teachers' willingness in some instances to do extra school tasks. The demands of teaching students with ASD increased the fatigue factor associated with attending Croke Park hours at the end of the day. Where there were no special classes, the resource/learning support teacher was considered the expert in the school. Some post-primary schools had functional systems for specialist teachers to communicate with subject teachers on a regular basis. These systems were better ensconced in schools with well-established special classes. Principals invested in developing systematic ways for specialist knowledge to be disseminated to reduce the potential isolation of teachers in special classes. Principals and co-ordinating teachers were keenly aware of the possibility that clusters of special classes could become schools within schools and not be seen as integral to the host school. Schools new to ASD provision at any level struggled to set up these systems and would benefit from support from more 'expert' schools.

### **Implications for Future Practice**

Teachers and principals would benefit from systematic involvement in professional organisations such as the Irish Learning Support Teachers Association (ILSA), the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE) and attendance at professional conferences pertinent to their school

populations which would support the development of communities of practice around the demanding work of providing for students with ASD.

## Conclusion

The research findings indicate a wide range of positive practice in relation to teaching and learning, the promotion of an inclusive school culture, school management and staff development. A number of key areas also emerged as requiring further development.

Positive practice was evident in the areas of assessment, individualised planning and the management of transitions. The demands of the assessment process presented challenges in documenting the rationale for selecting specific assessment approaches; differentiating assessment for individual children; aligning assessment approaches with the curriculum for children with ASD, and acknowledging the impact of a child's co-occurring special educational need for assessment. In particular special schools had difficulty sourcing and using relevant assessment instruments for students with complex needs. The importance of providing a range of curriculum experiences aimed at children's holistic development was well understood in all sites. However, the potential of Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) to augment children's experiences in the early years was not exploited. Practice and protocols were at various degrees of development at key transition points, however they required particular attention where students were moving to post-school provision. At post-primary level, the full range of certification options available nationally has not been available to all post-primary schools. For example, the Junior Certificate School Programme has not been an optional offering for mainstream schools other than those with the DEIS designation (and in some special schools). Formally involving children in their own learning requires attention in all sites. There was an appreciation in all sites that generic teaching methodologies and approaches augmented by a repertoire of ASD-specific approaches have a key role in the education of children with ASD. A team approach to providing for children with ASD was a feature of practice and, while the role of parents in their children's education was understood, the potential for the greater involvement of parents in children's education provision was evident. For home-based tutoring, parents at a vulnerable stage in their own learning about ASD and close to their child's diagnosis were not well placed to select a tutor for their child. No information from a 'reliable' source such as a DES-supported website or early childcare agency resource was available to parents who had to depend on word of mouth and their own acumen when interviewing potential candidates for tutoring.

Children benefited from well-structured, spacious, aesthetically pleasing and bright learning environments. However, where provision was delivered in the home in the context of home tuition and the home-based JEP, challenges were identified in purposefully structuring the home environment for learning. The role of co-curricular activities in supporting children's inclusion and in augmenting social, communication, personal and emotional development was evident. This was identified as a particular strength of the school-based JEP. The wellbeing of children with ASD was a concern in all sites and the potential for children to experience anxiety because of their inflexibility of thought and their social, communication, behaviour and sensory differences was well understood. Clearly, articulating the importance of promoting children's wellbeing by

nominating a staff-member as a resource for children who may be concerned about mental health issues in school documentation would further support this process. A range of issues was identified that impact on the wellbeing of parents and families of children with ASD which schools should be aware of. The issue of staff wellbeing and ensuring that there is an awareness of this in schools through strategies such as staff-rotation were also identified.

It was evident that the leadership and instructional role of the principal in the delivery of quality provision was pivotal. The need for CPD focused specifically on the significance of this role emerged as an area for further attention. The management of teachers' timetables and special class provision in post-primary schools emerged as an issue to be addressed due to the complexities of post-primary environments in this regard. Hours designated for special class teaching were allocated in different ways in different schools. In one instance, only half of the teaching hours weekly were allocated to the special class teacher. The remaining hours were distributed across mainstream subject teachers with little experience or interest in working in the special classes. Also, when multiple special classes were part of a post-primary school, co-ordination hours were given to one special class teacher leaving more hours to be covered by other teachers. When this was not managed appropriately, the students in special classes lacked structured instruction based on their assessed needs for up to half of each week. It could be considered good practice for special class teachers to retain some teaching hours weekly in their subject in mainstream. This would ensure less isolation as a special class teacher and support the perception by mainstream teachers and students that the teacher was still a part of mainstream teaching. It would also allow the teacher to maintain currency in his/her subject. However, the use of special class instructional hours to complete mainstream teachers' timetable requirements does not serve the needs of the students with ASD in the special classes. It contributed to the development and adoption of inappropriate instructional roles for SNAs. Small numbers of teachers interested in working with these students, careful collaborative planning with the special class lead teacher and clear information on effective and ASD-friendly teaching strategies would be minimal requirements for ensuring this system worked.

There was an appreciation in all sites that staff with knowledge of, experience, expertise and qualifications in the learning and teaching of children with ASD promote positive practice. In this context the impact of the panel, recruiting staff substitute teachers and providing for both the delivery of the JEP and home-tuition emerged as requiring attention. Expertise in assessment and in autism was clearly more evident in the home-tuition setting where provision was pooled. Tutors had significant training and curriculum-related CPD available to them. Their quality of instruction was regularly monitored. No systematic data collection methods on children's learning based on specific targets in their individualised plans were in evidence, therefore evaluation of the quality of teaching strategies in the home settings was not possible to clearly determine. In particular the wide range of CPD provided for teachers newly appointed to ASD provision was affirmed and the potential for expertise to be shared in mainstream schools and across provision types evident. Most teachers and principals interviewed, excepting the few who were not aware of the opportunities, were hugely supportive and appreciative of the CPD provided by the SESS. In spite of the challenges faced by the logistics of appropriate substitute arrangements in all settings, particularly special schools, teachers valued the sequence, breadth, and depth of support courses and other professional development opportunities provided by the SESS. Other agencies were also referred to in relation to CPD provision including the patron

bodies of some schools and MCA. A need was identified to provide more access to CPD for staff in managing children with complex needs. Despite the increase to a fourth year of Initial Teacher Education Programmes (ITE) at the primary level across the country, and the addition of special educational input at that level, it is likely that intense, high-quality CPD around ASD provision will continue to be critical in order to develop and maintain appropriate expertise in the teaching profession. Concern was expressed in all sites as to the variable and inadequate availability of external services. These services included therapies and psychological and psychiatric supports. As educational provision for children with ASD has grown, external support services have remained static or been reduced. This has potentially negative implications for student wellbeing and mental health, staff wellbeing and parent wellbeing. Without appropriate oversight and modelling of specific therapeutic strategies, even highly qualified special education teachers do not feel competent in providing support where children have complex needs. This was a particular concern in special schools.

Special class provision in primary and post-primary schools emerged as an opportunity for whole-school capacity building for teaching children with ASD and special educational needs. The existence of special classes meant those teachers typically upskilled by accessing the suite of courses available through the SESS, and could be consulted by mainstream teachers on issues they might have with children with ASD in their classes. Mainstream teachers at both levels were more comfortable having children with ASD in their classes when there was a special class presence in the school and the expertise of the special class teacher served as 'safety nets' for them when issues of concern arose. The special schools in this study had built high levels of expertise across their staff in ASD teaching. More teachers and principals in special schools than in any other environment tended to have graduate qualifications in special education. Their expertise and excellence could be used in particular to support mainstream schools introducing new special class provision for students with ASD.

Lack of the timely availability of Early Intervention classes and special classes emerged as a difficulty for parents. Delays in notification of these placements made it difficult to plan for seamless transitions which increased anxiety and stress for the families and the children. It is essential that Early Intervention and special class placement options be available to parents during this critical period of their child's learning where the teachers are more likely to have accessed CPD from the SESS than home tutors, and be able to provide more informed expert instruction and support. Also this provision would then be in a school setting with access to typically developing peer models. Availability would mitigate school choice dilemmas for families and would reduce the potential for isolation of tutors and children. In spite of the difficulties identified in setting up and managing home tutoring, until school-based placements are readily available to parents, home tutoring and pooled provision will continue to provide valued support and educational provision options.

Professional development for SNAs emerged as an issue for concern. Special needs assistants were noted to have access to the children with ASD in schools in unique ways including in the school yard, on school buses, during break times, at lockers, and during many non-instructional areas and times. This allowed SNAs opportunities to observe and potentially impact the social development of the children, their interactions with mainstream students or others in the school.

Their role included moving from class to class across the school in post-primary settings coming into contact regularly with many teachers in the school. In early intervention settings, they were expected to support the teachers in managing on-task behaviour during instructional activities. In all settings SNAs assisted in the management of challenging behaviours, and engaged directly with the children during much of the school day. Given this broad range of duties, teachers, principals and SNAs themselves were critical of the lack of a professional pathway, which impacted negatively on their professional identity. This was in evidence through the absence of specific entry requirements for the position of SNA, and a consistent lack of opportunities and challenges to upskill themselves systematically through CPD. Considering the extensive number of hours SNAs spend in direct contact with children with ASD in all relevant sites, it is not unreasonable to consider their levels of knowledge and skill around ASD, their promotion of communication and social interaction among children across the school, and their effective and efficient support of teachers during instruction as possible areas for CPD. These opportunities should be offered in the same way they are offered to other professionals in the schools. Their co-attendance at selected CPD with teachers would contribute to more effective instruction and to the collaborative ethos of schools.

While there was an awareness of the importance of documentation in all sites, challenges emerged for schools in the recording process and practice was almost always ahead of the documentation. Schools appeared to be overwhelmed and confused as to documentation requirements. In particular, post-primary schools were observed to experience difficulty in adequately documenting their policies and practice on provision for children with ASD. The excellent practices, if appropriately documented, would provide a guide for new teachers and a support for those in the school new to working with students with ASD. Compiling CPD audits would further contribute to whole-school capacity. Documentation would also allow for the development of individual student profiles including key effective teaching and management strategies which would be of great support to all teachers in the schools and assist with the school self-evaluation process.

Finally, the Aistear curriculum framework could inform the work of the pooled setting to broaden the tightly structured timetable to include appropriate play-based activities. Home tutors in home settings would benefit from accessing CPD on ASD-specific teaching methodologies to supplement their use of play-based learning. In neither setting option were peer interaction activities used to their potential.

The findings of the research should be considered with reference to the limitations previously cited. The Evaluation Framework (MCA and NCSE, 2013), while piloted for the purposes of the research, was not used previously. The sample size further presents limitations as to the generalisability of the findings. The profile of participants may be particular to this sample and not reflective of the overall target population. Participants for the home-based JEP and Home-Tuition provision volunteered to participate and therefore participation was based on a process of self-selection. However, the research team considers that the research has fulfilled its aim in producing evidence-based findings in the exploration of specific contexts and individuals. Embedding the MCA/NCSE Framework in the School Self-Evaluation process is suggested as an initial step in addressing the areas identified in the study as requiring further attention and consolidating the many positive features of provision that were identified.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Middletown Centre for Autism/NCSE Evaluation Framework to Underpin the Evaluation of Educational Provision for Students with ASD

### Background

The Minister for Education and Skills recently requested that the NCSE prepare policy advice on educational provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Two pieces of research were commissioned by the NCSE to provide an evidence base to support the development of the advice. The first, which was commissioned earlier this year, is a systematic review of national and international evidence relating to best practice in the provision of education for persons with ASD, which also includes a number of country case studies. This evidence review will build on a previous review published by the NCSE in 2009 (Parsons *et al.*, 2009).

The second piece of research is an evaluation of state-funded educational provision for students with ASD including early intervention and the extended school year (in the home and at school). The contract for this work was awarded to a team of researchers in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

It is critical that the evaluation of educational provision is conducted in a coherent and consistent way. The Middletown Centre for Autism, in conjunction with the NCSE has developed an evaluation framework that sets out criteria and indicators against which provision can be systematically measured. This Framework will underpin the evaluation of educational provision for students with ASD.

### How was the Framework Developed?

The Framework document draws on a range of evaluations and policy and best practice guidelines produced in Ireland, Northern Ireland, the wider United Kingdom, the USA, Canada and Australia. The selection of documentation was guided by the ASD specialist team at Middletown Centre and advised on by the NCSE and while not exhaustive, it is a good representation of worldwide documentation addressing policy and practice for students with ASD. Themes were identified from this documentation and these were developed and applied to the Irish educational context.

The Framework consists of four structured themes relating to educational provision of students with ASD-teaching and learning, inclusive school culture, school management and staff development. Each theme has a number of criteria and associated performance indicators.

## **What is the Purpose of the Framework?**

The Framework has been developed to provide a common understanding of good practice in educating students with ASD and to provide a systematic structure that the researchers will use in evaluating provision. It should be noted that the Framework has been developed specifically for the purposes of this evaluation only.

It has been designed for use in all educational settings including mainstream schools, special classes in mainstream schools and special schools. Relevant elements of the Framework are also applicable to early intervention and the extended school year as provided in the home.

The researchers will use this Framework to inform the development of their research instruments for data collection and criteria for weighting the evidence and evaluating provision.

## **Note**

The word parents in this document should also be taken to include guardians and caregivers.

## **Statement 1**

### **Teaching and Learning**

High standards of teaching and learning are executed throughout the school. Teaching staff use a range of teaching methodologies which cater to each student's individual learning needs. Regular assessment of teaching and learning is undertaken to inform the learning programme so that each student with ASD is enabled to make progress and achieve their potential.

Criteria	Performance Indicator
<p><b>1.1 Assessment</b></p> <p>On-going assessment information is gathered, reviewed, evaluated and used to structure, plan, measure and support the student's learning and progress. Alternative and adapted modes of assessment are utilised where required.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The school's assessment policy consists of a written statement of the aims of assessment, and outlines how the school will address assessment of learning and assessment for learning within each curricular area.</li> <li>● The assessment process is part of the daily routine and takes place in all relevant learning contexts within the school setting. Assessment is discreet, suitable for the student's communication needs and does not interrupt general teaching and learning.</li> <li>● A variety of assessment tools are used which are selected in consideration of the student's stage of learning and development and individual learning needs. ASD specific assessments are utilised where appropriate to evaluate language and communication, behaviour, social and emotional development, play and leisure skills and independence.</li> <li>● Assessment tools selected provide specific information about the barriers to learning for the student with ASD. The teacher uses this information to provide individualised support to the student to maximise his/her learning potential. Where there are instances of behaviour that challenges, a functional behavioural assessment is considered from which environmental accommodations and positive behaviour supports could be identified and implemented.</li> <li>● Assessment takes into account any additional needs that the student with ASD might have e.g. visual impairment or comorbidity</li> <li>● Differentiated methods of assessment are used which provide flexibility in the mode of communication required to participate in the assessment process. Access to reasonable accommodations is provided where necessary to maximise participation in learning and during academic assessment.</li> </ul>
<p><b>1.2 Individualised Planning</b></p> <p>A current and relevant individualised plan is in place to address the priority learning needs of the student with ASD.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The individualised plan is based on assessed needs and strengths and includes essential information for planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating the student's programme.</li> <li>● The individualised plan addresses a broad range of developmental and educational needs and addresses all curricular areas. It includes functional targets in the areas of language and communication, social interaction, behaviour and emotional development, independence, play and use of leisure time.</li> <li>● Learning targets are formulated in consideration of the student's present level of performance and age, the student's specific strengths and needs, the student's rate of progress, the relevance of learning needs to the student's home, school and/or community life and the student's motivation and interests.</li> <li>● Learning targets are clearly stated in the individualised plan and are specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time bound. Where relevant, strategies, methodologies and materials required to teach learning targets are clearly outlined. Environmental and instructional adaptations and accommodations that are needed to support the student are identified.</li> <li>● Review dates are agreed and outlined in the plan.</li> <li>● Students are involved in their own educational planning and assessment where appropriate and are consulted on their involvement in the school day and school activities. Parents are involved and consulted on an on-going basis in the student's individualised plan.</li> <li>● External services are consulted and involved in the planning process where appropriate.</li> </ul>

Criteria	Performance Indicator
<p><b>1.3 Transition</b></p> <p>Transition planning is an on-going process that is tailored to meet the individual needs of students with ASD.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A flexible transition plan is developed for each student with ASD and included within their individualised plan.</li> <li>• The individualised plan provides details of strategies (e.g. visual supports, flexible scheduling, verbal warnings) to assist the student with ASD to transition between activities, environments (e.g. from class to class, school to school) and/or persons.</li> <li>• The school plans for immediate (day to day), intermediate (year to year) and long term transitions (e.g. primary to post primary level etc.) that the student with ASD may encounter.</li> <li>• Parents, students and relevant members of the school team work together in planning for major transitions which includes the identification of:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The most supportive setting for educational transitioning.</li> <li>• Each member of the school learning team are aware of their individual responsibilities within the transition process for each student with ASD</li> <li>• Strategies are in place to familiarise the student with ASD with the future setting (videos and visits to a new school setting, social stories, schedules, meet teachers, view classrooms)</li> <li>• Timelines are set for the completion of activities</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Students transitioning to adulthood are introduced to post-school options and personnel, where relevant, well in advance of completing school.</li> <li>• Prior to the transition of a student with ASD, relevant information (unique needs and interests, strengths, behaviours, resources and general information) regarding the student is delivered to staff as appropriate within the receiving environment (e.g. new school setting)</li> </ul>
<p><b>1.4 Curriculum/ Certification</b></p> <p>Students with ASD have access to the full curriculum and there is a range of certification options available as appropriate.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students have access to all areas and subjects within the national curriculum. Any exceptions to this are noted and clearly explained.</li> <li>• There is clear evidence of differentiation in teaching and learning including:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level and pace: The teacher engages the student in working on a similar topic at a level and pace suitable to their individual needs.</li> <li>• Interest: The teacher promotes learning by incorporating the student's interests and preference to motivate and engage in learning.</li> <li>• Access and response: Each student has access to the full curriculum and the teacher successfully differentiates modes of response to suit the individual needs of the student with ASD.</li> <li>• Teaching style: a variety of methodologies including ICT are used to reflect the different ways that students can learn.</li> <li>• Sequence: The student with ASD is introduced to different components of the learning content in accordance with his/her assessed stage of readiness.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• A range of certification options are available for students as appropriate that recognise all forms of learning.</li> </ul>



Criteria	Performance Indicator
<p><b>1.5 Teaching Methodologies</b></p> <p>Teaching and instruction integrate a variety of appropriate methodologies, activities, experiences and materials for students to engage in meaningful learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Teaching methodologies are individualised, based on assessed abilities and on internationally recognised good practice.</li> <li>● Teaching and environmental supports (e.g. visual and organisational supports, adaptive equipment, and additional adult assistance) are provided to increase the student’s independence and participation which facilitate and promote engagement with school activities; expressive and receptive communication; and ease with transitions.</li> <li>● Teaching is based on assessment and takes into account the student’s strengths, interests and preferences. A variety of activities are used to teach core skills and concepts to the student with ASD.</li> <li>● Multiple opportunities are provided for students to respond, promote and maintain active engagement.</li> <li>● Teaching is well organised, structured and planned; staff give advanced warning, where possible, of any changes to familiar routines in a way that is meaningful to the student with ASD.</li> <li>● Students completed work is on display and there is a balanced range of individual and group work.</li> <li>● There is a clear plan showing methodologies for systematically promoting the maintenance and generalisation of skills learned. Opportunities are provided for students with ASD to practise and use their knowledge and skills with different people, in different situations and settings, and to develop flexibility, by making planned changes and posing problems to solve.</li> <li>● All teaching staff are aware of the sensory aspects of ASD and how these may impact on the child’s learning and use suitable strategies to support the child with these difficulties.</li> </ul>
<p><b>1.6 Team Approach</b></p> <p>A team approach is adopted within the school environment and with external professionals and services when required.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Staff within the school work effectively together and with external professionals and services by joint planning and sharing of information and expertise.</li> <li>● Professional roles and responsibilities are respected and understood.</li> <li>● Joint working takes place in different settings as appropriate including in-class support</li> <li>● There are clear means of communication with all relevant professionals working with each student with ASD, with parents/caregivers and with the student with ASD, where appropriate.</li> </ul>
<p><b>1.7 Data Collection/ Monitoring of Progress/ Outcomes</b></p> <p>There is a clear emphasis on monitoring and recording student progress and the effectiveness of teaching methodologies. Data are used on an on-going basis to inform teaching and learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The whole school team engages in on-going collection of data related to individual progress in language and communication, academic work, social skills, behaviour and emotional understanding, independence, play and use of leisure time.</li> <li>● Teachers use checklists, observations, formal and informal measurement including ASD specific tools and data is collected across a wide range of environments.</li> <li>● Information collected is shared and discussed between appropriate professionals in line with confidentiality protocols. This information is also shared with parents.</li> <li>● There is evidence that data is used to inform planning and review.</li> </ul>

## Statement 2

### Inclusive School Culture

There is a culture of inclusion throughout the school; fostering an environment of both academic and personal growth. Parents are encouraged to participate in their child’s education. There is an inclusive and supportive environment; staff and management promote positive mental health and well-being for students with ASD.

Criteria	Performance Indicators
<p><b>2.1 School Culture</b> The school has a culture of high ambitions and aspirations for its students with ASD. This includes a positive school culture and a focus on achievement of key skills and independence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The whole school plan outlines the schools policies, practices and capacity to ensure the learning environment is welcoming and supportive of students with ASD.</li> <li>• The school provides opportunities and resources for students with ASD to participate in wider school activities both at school and in the wider community.</li> <li>• The school values the skills of students with ASD beyond their academic abilities and demonstrates this through the development of projects which utilises and promotes the strengths and learning styles of each individual student with ASD.</li> <li>• Achievements in both academic and non-academic arenas are highlighted and celebrated within a culture that promotes the understanding of diversity and individual merit.</li> <li>• The student with ASD and his/her typically developing peers have a range of opportunities to engage together in both classroom and leisure activities.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2.2 Communication</b> The school has an effective communication system in place.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A process is in place to ensure that parents have the opportunity to communicate both formally and informally with the school and external educational services where relevant.</li> <li>• Formal processes and procedures are clearly explained to parents. Parents are given the opportunity to express their views and/or concerns at regular formal and informal parent-teacher meetings.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2.3 Learning Environment</b> The school is committed to improving the physical environment of the school, meeting the diverse physical, emotional, social and aesthetic needs of students with ASD.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The learning environment considers the individual learning styles and interests of students with ASD and adapts the physical environment to provide visual structure and predictability.</li> <li>• Adequate space is provided for students with ASD to find comfort and to self-regulate when necessary and the facility to have learning and movement breaks during class time.</li> <li>• A range of supports (e.g. tactile, visual, and auditory) are made available to assist students with ASD to understand and navigate the school environment.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2.4 Extra-Curricular Activities</b> Students are welcomed and enabled to engage in a range of social and leisure activities organised by the school.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students with ASD can participate in a range of activities that provide opportunities for social contact with other students, staff and where possible, the broader community outside of the school.</li> <li>• Opportunities exist for the student with ASD to develop new leisure skills and hobbies and experience new challenges outside of academic subjects.</li> <li>• The involvement of parents in the development of extra-curricular activities is welcomed.</li> </ul>

Criteria	Performance Indicators
<p><b>2.5 Student Wellbeing</b></p> <p>The school promotes an environment that is conducive to positive mental health and awareness.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The school promotes positive mental health amongst the students. Information on mental health is available for students and there are visible supports around the school e.g. posters and leaflets.</li> <li>• The school ensures that a system is in place to identify and support possible mental health problems at the earliest stage.</li> <li>• The school engages with local statutory and voluntary agencies where appropriate to provide support and information for students and their families.</li> <li>• A staff member is named as being a resource for students who are worried about mental health.</li> <li>• Stress reducing initiatives and facilities are available for students with ASD e.g. time out, access to sensory resources e.g. garden or room where possible.</li> <li>• Parents are seen as key partners in the provision of a positive environment and in regard to mental health are included at every stage from awareness and prevention to intervention where necessary.</li> <li>• The school is proactive in tackling incidences of bullying and employs a range of methods including peer education to promote understanding of diversity.</li> <li>• The school has in place a pastoral care system and child protection policies which outlines guidelines for working with students with ASD.</li> </ul>

## Statement 3

### School Management

The school management team promotes and facilitates an ASD competent environment, which is demonstrated in the school’s plan for special educational needs. The school management team ensure that high standards of provision are in place and that practice is monitored, reviewed and evaluated. Systems are in place to create the conditions for the staff team to work together effectively.

Criteria	Performance Indicator
<p><b>3.1 Leadership</b> The school has a clear management structure, which ensures that high standards in ASD provision are understood and attained.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are clear systems and structures in place throughout the school which ensure organised and supported provision for students with ASD.</li> <li>• There is a system of communication between the teaching and support team and the school management team.</li> <li>• The school management provides and effectively communicates the whole school policies on the inclusion of students with ASD. They ensure consistency in approach and action across the school.</li> <li>• The school management ensure that the deployment of both teaching and care staff are congruent with the unique learning style and individual characteristics of the students with ASD.</li> <li>• The school management team ensures that additional teaching and care resources are equitably deployed and promote the NEPS Continuum of Support to assist this process.</li> <li>• School management seeks additional health and other supports for students with ASD where the need is indicated.</li> <li>• The school management team discusses and reviews policies and practices and ensures compliance with legal requirements.</li> <li>• The school management team regularly reviews the school’s progress in relation to inclusion and ensures that standards are maintained.</li> <li>• There are clear support systems available for teaching staff to resolve concerns arising regarding learning and behaviour.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3.2 Responsibility</b> There are clear lines of responsibility for ASD within the school and all staff is familiar with this structure.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly defined roles, responsibilities and lines of communication are identified in the school plan for special educational needs and are clearly understood by all teaching and support staff.</li> <li>• Teaching and support staff have a clear understanding of where they can seek additional support, expertise and resources for their students with ASD.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3.3 Appointment of Staff</b> Robust recruitment and selection procedures exist that facilitate the recruitment of suitably qualified teaching and support staff.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruited staff members have appropriate qualifications and prior learning or experience working with students with ASD.</li> <li>• School management ensures that those involved in recruitment and selection within the school have the requisite qualifications, experience and professional background.</li> </ul>

**3.4 Review of Provision for Children with ASD**

A culture of reflection and review is promoted within the school and this is facilitated by systems enabling on-going informal and scheduled formal reviews.

- Systems exist for scheduled and informal review of school-wide provision for all students with ASD and there is a culture of comprehensive review and self evaluation within the school.
- School management ensure that programmes throughout the school are reviewed and updated regularly and is based on rigorous assessment of the academic, socio-emotional and overall developmental progress of all students with ASD.
- School management ensures that the school’s review process is organised, informed and involves a range of professionals, the parent and the student where appropriate.
- The outcomes of all review meetings are clearly communicated to parents and other professional where appropriate and the implications of reviews are discussed and planned for by the school management team.

## Statement 4

### Staff Development

The school management promotes a culture of further learning and information sharing amongst all staff. There is a clear plan for continued professional development for staff which facilitates the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes required for adopting best practices in educational provision for students with ASD.

Criteria	Performance Indicators
<p><b>4.1 Understanding and Knowledge of ASD for All Staff</b></p> <p>All school staff has a basic understanding of ASD. Specialist school staff demonstrates knowledge and understanding of best practices in education for students with ASD.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teaching staff have a good understanding of ASD, how it impacts on teaching and learning and up-to-date strategies on how to tailor their delivery to best meet the unique learning styles of students with ASD. There is regular consultation with specialist staff and informal training and guidance is provided in a timely fashion, upon request.</li> <li>Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) have a practical understanding of the implications of ASD for classroom engagement and participation, self-care and independence, social interactions and behaviour. This understanding is coupled with training in practical strategies designed to support students across these areas; this training is reviewed and updated regularly.</li> <li>Other staff or external professionals who come into contact with students with ASD have an understanding of ASD and the level of this understanding is regularly reviewed.</li> </ul>
<p><b>4.2 Continuing Professional Development</b></p> <p>Specialist teaching staff, non-specialist teaching staff, Special Needs Assistants and other relevant school personnel is provided with opportunities to further develop their knowledge and skills regarding current best practices in educational provision for students with ASD.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ongoing professional development such as participation in workshops, conferences and specialist consultations is provided at a level commensurate with the degree of contact and responsibility the staff member has for the student with ASD.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Specialist teaching staff has access to theoretical and practical instruction and training regarding internationally recognised good practice and are offered advanced training opportunities to further develop their expertise.</li> <li>Support staff and Special Needs Assistants are provided with opportunities to further their knowledge and understanding of ASD. SNAs are given specific instructions and guidance regarding their responsibilities to the student with ASD. Adequate supervision and support is available for SNAs as required.</li> <li>Basic ASD awareness training is readily available to all staff, including non-specialist teaching staff.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Learning opportunities are extended to parents of students with ASD where possible.</li> <li>Individual Continuing Professional Development plans are reviewed annually.</li> </ul>
<p><b>4.3 Information Sharing and Access to Specialist Information on ASD</b></p> <p>Staff are provided with opportunities to further their knowledge of ASD by liaising with colleagues and other educational professionals with relevant expertise.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School management provides opportunities for staff to liaise with teachers and principals from other schools to share ideas and expertise.</li> <li>There is a forum within the school for staff to share new information and resources with colleagues regarding conferences, seminars or local trainings attended.</li> <li>Information on ASD is made available in the school through a variety of channels. There is a culture of cascading information gained through CPD amongst the staff and capacity based on good practice is built throughout the school.</li> </ul>

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## Appendix 2: Data Collection Instruments in English

### Principal Information Letter

#### Autism Provision Research Project

Dear Principal,

A team of researchers in Mary Immaculate College Limerick is conducting a study of educational provision for students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) in the Republic of Ireland. This research has been commissioned by the National Council for Special Education and is led by Dr. Patricia Daly and Dr. Emer Ring. This study aims to evaluate a sample of the range of educational provision currently being made for students with ASDs and to publish a report detailing the findings of the research. The research criteria are based on an evaluation framework developed by the Middletown Centre for Autism and the National Council for Special Education, a copy of which the researchers will make available on their visit to your school.

We would like to thank you for your interest in this study and for agreeing to participate in the research project. Your participation in the research will be entirely voluntary, you will be free to refuse to answer any question and you may choose to withdraw from the project at any time. The process will comprise a two-day visit to your school by members of the research team. During the visit to your school, a two-person research team will engage in a period of classroom observation of up to one hour in a selected class where students with ASDs are enrolled. The lesson where the observation takes place will be agreed with the class teacher prior to the visit. The research team will also review school policies, which impact on provision for students with ASDs, individualised planning, assessment materials and samples of students' work.

During the visit to your school, one researcher will conduct individual interviews with relevant teachers and special needs assistants. We will also conduct an individual interview with yourself and student-conversations, utilising a 'draw and write' technique will be conducted with a selection of students with ASDs in your school. Student-conversations will comprise a discussion with the students in relation to their school-experience and they will then be asked to draw a picture of school. It will be stressed that they do not have to answer questions or draw a picture and may leave the group at any time. We are also interested in conducting telephone interviews with parents of students with ASDs in your school. It will be necessary to audio-record all of the interviews to ensure that all of the information is retained. All data will be closely examined to identify the themes and issues emerging from the research.

Electronic and written information will be kept strictly confidential, subject to the limitations of the law, and will be available only to the research-team. Excerpts from the data collected during the research process may be used in the final report, but under no circumstances will your name or any identifying characteristic be included. Data collected for the research will be stored securely on a password protected computer and in locked cabinets. All data will be destroyed after a period of five-years. Data may be used in an anonymous form in any publications that arise from this research.

We would be grateful if you would distribute the enclosed envelopes to the relevant teachers, special needs assistants and parents. Ruth Madden is the Research Associate for the project and you may contact her via email at [Ruth.Madden@mic.ul.ie](mailto:Ruth.Madden@mic.ul.ie) or via telephone at 061-204339.

I would be grateful if you would sign the attached consent form below, which will be collected by the researcher from you on day one of the school visit.

We would like to thank you for your interest in this research and look forward to meeting with you.

In the meantime please do not hesitate to contact either Dr. Patricia Daly (061 204309) or Dr. Emer Ring (061 204571) if you have any queries.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr. Patricia Daly and Dr. Emer Ring

## Principal Consent Form

### Autism Provision Research Project

Name:	
School:	
Phone:	
E-mail:	

I \_\_\_\_\_ am willing to participate in the research study entitled "An Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders in the Republic of Ireland" being conducted by Mary Immaculate College, Limerick on behalf of the National Council for Special Education. I have been given sufficient information about the project and I understand the nature of the research project. I am satisfied that the data can be used in anonymous form in any publications that arise from this project.

Signed:	
Date:	

## Teacher Information Letter

### Autism Provision Research Project

Dear Teacher,

A team of researchers in Mary Immaculate College Limerick is conducting a study of educational provision for students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) in the Republic of Ireland. This research has been commissioned by the National Council for Special Education and is led by Dr. Patricia Daly and Dr. Emer Ring. This study aims to evaluate a sample of the range of educational provision currently being made for students with ASDs and to publish a report detailing the findings of the research. Research criteria are based on an evaluation framework developed by the Middletown Centre for Autism and the National Council for Special Education, a copy of which the researchers will make available on their visit to your school.

Your participation in the research would be greatly appreciated and would considerably enhance this research project. Your participation in the research will be entirely voluntary, you will be free to refuse to answer any question and you may choose to withdraw from the project at any time. The evaluation process will comprise a two-day visit to your school by members of the research team. During the visit to your school, a two-person research team will engage in a period of classroom observation of up to one hour in a class where students with ASDs are enrolled. The lesson where the observation will take place will be agreed with you. The research team will also review school policies, which impact on provision for students with ASDs, individualised planning, assessment materials and samples of students' work.

During the visit to your school, one researcher will conduct separate individual interviews with class teachers and special needs assistants. An interview will also be conducted with the principal and student-conversations, utilising a 'draw and write' technique will be conducted with students. Child-conversations will comprise a discussion with the children in relation to their school-experience and they will then be asked to draw a picture of school. It will be stressed that they do not have to answer questions or draw a picture and may leave the group at any time. It will be necessary to audio-record all of the interviews to ensure that all of the information is retained. All data will be closely examined to identify the themes and issues emerging from the research.

Electronic and written information will be kept strictly confidential, subject to the limitations of the law, and will be available only to the research-team. Excerpts from the data collected during the research process may be used in the final report, but under no circumstances will your name or any identifying characteristics be included. Data collected for the research will be stored securely on a password protected computer and in locked cabinets. All data will be destroyed after a period of five-years. Data may be used in an anonymous form in any publications that arise from this research.

We would be grateful if you would sign the attached consent form below, which will be collected by the researcher from you on day one of the school visit.

Ruth Madden is the Research Associate for the project and you may contact Ruth via email at [Ruth.Madden@mic.ul.ie](mailto:Ruth.Madden@mic.ul.ie) or via telephone at 061-204339.

We would like to thank you for your interest in this research and look forward to meeting with you.

In the meantime please do not hesitate to contact either Dr. Patricia Daly (061 204309) or Dr. Emer Ring (061 204571) if you have any queries.

If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:

MIREC Administrator  
Mary Immaculate College  
South Circular Road  
Limerick

061-204515  
[mirec@mic.ul.ie](mailto:mirec@mic.ul.ie)

Yours Sincerely,

Dr. Patricia Daly and Dr. Emer Ring

## Teacher Consent Form

### Autism Provision Research Project

Name:	
School:	
Phone:	
E-mail:	

I \_\_\_\_\_ am willing to participate in the research study entitled "An Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders in the Republic of Ireland" being conducted by Mary Immaculate College, Limerick on behalf of the National Council for Special Education. I have been given sufficient information about the project and I understand the nature of the research project. I am satisfied that the data can be used in anonymous form in any publications that arise from this project.

Signed:	
Date:	

## Special Educational Needs Assistant Information Letter

### Autism Provision Research Project

Dear Special Needs Assistant,

A team of researchers in Mary Immaculate College Limerick is conducting a study of educational provision for children with autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) in the Republic of Ireland. This research has been commissioned by the National Council for Special Education and is led by Dr. Patricia Daly and Dr. Emer Ring. This study aims to evaluate a sample of the range of educational provision currently being made for students with ASDs and to publish a report detailing the findings of the research. The research criteria are based on an evaluation framework developed by the Middletown Centre for Autism and the National Council for Special Education, a copy of which the researchers will make available on their visit to your school.

Your participation in the research would be greatly appreciated and would considerably enhance this research project. Your participation in the research will be entirely voluntary, you will be free to refuse to answer any question and you may choose to withdraw from the project at any time. The evaluation process will comprise a two-day visit to your school by members of the research team. During the visit to your school, a two-person research team will engage in a period of classroom observation of up to one hour in a selected class where students with ASDs are enrolled. The research team will also review school policies, which impact on provision for students with ASDs, individualised planning, assessment materials and samples of students' work.

During the visit to your school, one researcher will conduct separate individual interviews with class teachers and special needs assistants. An interview will also be conducted with the principal and student – conversations, utilising a 'draw and write' technique will be conducted with students. Student – conversations will comprise a discussion with the students in relation to their school-experience and they will then be asked to draw a picture of school. It will be stressed that they do not have to answer questions or draw a picture and may leave the group at any time. It will be necessary to audio-record all of the interviews to ensure that all of the information is retained. All data will be closely examined to identify the themes and issues emerging from the research.

Electronic and written information will be kept strictly confidential, subject to the limitations of the law, and will be available only to the research-team. Excerpts from the data collected during the research process may be used in the final report, but under no circumstances will your name or any identifying characteristics be included. Data collected for the research will be stored securely on a password protected computer and in locked cabinets. All data will be destroyed after a period of five-years. Data may be used in an anonymous form in any publications that arise from this research.

If you are interested in participating in the research, I would be grateful if you would sign the attached consent form below, which will be collected by the researcher from you on day one of the school visit.

Ruth Madden is the Research Associate for the project and you may contact Ruth via email at [Ruth.Madden@mic.ul.ie](mailto:Ruth.Madden@mic.ul.ie) or via telephone at 061-204339.

We would like to thank you for your interest in this research and look forward to meeting with you.

In the meantime please do not hesitate to contact either Dr. Patricia Daly (061 204309) or Dr. Emer Ring (061 204571) if you have any queries.

If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:

MIREC Administrator  
Mary Immaculate College  
South Circular Road  
Limerick

061-204515  
[mirec@mic.ul.ie](mailto:mirec@mic.ul.ie)

Yours Sincerely,

Dr. Patricia Daly and Dr. Emer Ring



## SNA Consent Form

### Autism Provision Research Project

Name:	
School:	
Phone:	
E-mail:	

I \_\_\_\_\_ am willing to participate in the research study entitled "An Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders in the Republic of Ireland" being conducted by Mary Immaculate College, Limerick on behalf of the National Council for Special Education. I have been given sufficient information about the project and I understand the nature of the research project. I am satisfied that the data can be used in anonymous form in any publications that arise from this project.

Signed:	
Date:	

## Parent/Guardian Information Letter

### Autism Provision Research Project

Dear Parent/Guardian,

A team of researchers in Mary Immaculate College Limerick is conducting a study of educational provision for children with autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) in the Republic of Ireland. This research has been commissioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and is led by Dr. Patricia Daly and Dr. Emer Ring. This study aims to evaluate a sample of the range of educational provision currently being made for children with ASDs and to publish a report detailing the findings of the research. It is hoped that the findings of this research will assist the NCSE in providing policy advice to the Minister for Education and Skills. Research criteria are based on an evaluation framework developed by the Middletown Centre for Autism and the NCSE, a copy of which will be made available by the researchers during the visit to the school.

The research will comprise a two-day visit to the school by two researchers from Mary Immaculate College. On day one of the visit to your school, a two-person research team will engage in a period of classroom observation of up to one hour in a selected class where students with ASDs are enrolled. The lesson where the observation will take place will be agreed with the class teacher. The research team will also review school policies, which impact on provision for students with ASDs, individualised planning, assessment materials and samples of students' work.

On day two of the visit to your school, one researcher will conduct individual interviews with class teachers and special needs assistants. This researcher will also conduct an individual interview with the principal and student-conversations, utilising a 'draw and write' technique will be conducted with students with ASDs in the school. Students will be asked questions in relation to their experience of school and asked to draw a picture of school. It will be stressed that they do not have to answer questions or draw a picture and may leave the group at any time. It will be necessary to audio-record the student conversations to ensure that all of the information is retained. All data will be closely examined to identify the themes and issues related to the issue being researched.

The school, which your child attends has been invited and has agreed to participate in the research project and your co-operation would be greatly appreciated. We now invite you to participate in a short telephone interview. Interviews will take place in the week beginning March 24th 2014 on a day and time that suits you. Again, it will be necessary to audio-record the interview with you to ensure that all of the information is retained. Your participation in the research will be entirely voluntary, you will be free to refuse to answer any question and you

may choose to withdraw from the project at any time. Electronic and written information will be kept strictly confidential, subject to the limitations of the law, and will be available only to the research-team. Excerpts from the data collected during the research process may be used in the final report, but under no circumstances will your name or any identifying characteristics be included. Data collected for the research will be stored securely on a password protected computer and in locked cabinets. All data will be destroyed after a period of five-years. Data may be used in an anonymous form in any publications that arise from this research.

1. If you are interested in participating in a parent/guardian-telephone interview as part of this research, we would be grateful if you would sign the attached consent form and indicate a suitable day and time to receive the call.
2. If you are interested in having your child participate in the student conversation, we would be grateful if you would sign the attached form providing consent for your child to participate in the research.

We would be grateful if you would return these consent forms to the school by 26/03/14 in the envelope provided. Following receipt of these forms, Ruth Madden, who is the Research Associate for the project will be in touch with you at your preferred date and time to conduct the interview with yourself. The interview with your child will take place on day two of the researchers' visit to the school.

In the meantime please do not hesitate to contact either Dr. Patricia Daly (061 204309) or Dr. Emer Ring (061 204571) if you have any queries.

If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:

MIREC Administrator  
Mary Immaculate College  
South Circular Road  
Limerick

061-204515  
[mirec@mic.ul.ie](mailto:mirec@mic.ul.ie)

Yours Sincerely,

Dr. Patricia Daly and Dr. Emer Ring

## Parent/Guardian Consent Form for Child to Participate

### Autism Provision Research Project

I \_\_\_\_\_ give permission to have my child \_\_\_\_\_ participate in the research entitled 'An Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders in the Republic of Ireland' being conducted by Mary Immaculate College, Limerick on behalf of the National Council for Special Education. I have been given sufficient information about the project and I understand the nature of the research project. I am satisfied that the data can be used in anonymous form in any publications that arise from this project.

Signed:	
Date:	

## Parent/Guardian Consent Form

### Autism Provision Research Project

Name:	
School:	
Phone:	
E-mail:	

I \_\_\_\_\_ am willing to participate in the research study entitled 'An Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders in the Republic of Ireland' being conducted by Mary Immaculate College, Limerick on behalf of the National Council for Special Education. I have been given sufficient information about the project and I understand the nature of the research project. I am satisfied that the data can be used in anonymous form in any publications that arise from this project.

Suitable day:	
Suitable time:	
Contact details:	

Signed:	
Date:	

## Student Information Letter

### Student-Conversations

The researcher will tell the student that she would like to talk to them about school. The researcher will tell the students that she has already talked to/will be talking to the principal, teachers, special needs assistants and parents about school. The researcher will tell the students that this is called 'research' and that s/he is talking to everyone and that s/he will write what they all say in a book.

S/he will show students the recording device and tell them that when you press this button, the device turns on and starts recording and that when you press another button, it turns the recorder off. S/he will conduct a demonstration of recording for the students and allow them to participate in this process to ensure they understand the concept and allow them to hear themselves.

Students will be told that they do not have to take part in the research if they do not want to. They will be told that if they do take part, they can leave the group at any time and that it is okay for them to do this.

While conducting the student-conversations due cognisance will be taken of the challenges in communication experienced by students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs), students' attention span, motivation and co-operation level and the questions differentiated with regard complexity and pace. Particular attention will be paid to the difficulties experienced by students with ASDs in processing questions and an extended response-time allowed (Dent, 1986; Dockrell, Lewis and Lindsay, 2000; Parsons *et al.* 2009). The researcher will remain sensitive to the students' responses and terminate the student-conversation if it becomes apparent that a student is not comfortable with participating. Due attention will be directed to the principles outlined by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2012) in *Guidance for Developing Ethical Research Projects Involving Children*. Following the questioning-phase of the student-conversations, an exploratory design will be employed using arts-based participatory techniques that have an appreciation for students as experts in their own lives (Lambert *et al.*, 2013). Students will be asked to draw a picture of school and the researcher will converse with individual students during this process with regard to their picture (Pridmore and Bendelow, 1995; Dixon *et al.*, 1999; Lambert *et al.*, 2013).

Prior to commencing the student-conversation, students' assent will also be elicited. Assent is conceived as a student's affirmative agreement to participate in the research provided s/he understands to some degree the purpose of the research and the consequences of participating in it (Sieber, 1992; Alderson and Goodwin, 1993).

The following are the proposed script and questions

*Hello – my name is \_\_\_\_\_*

*I am visiting your school today because I would like to talk with you about school. I would like to know about what you do in school, what you like about school and what you don't like about school. When we are finished talking, I would like you to draw a picture of school and some of the things we have talked about.*

*I will also be talking to the principal, the teacher, the special needs assistant and some of your parents about school. I am doing all of this talking because I am doing 'research'. 'Research' is where you find out lots of things and then write them in a book. I will be writing what you say to me in a book and I will also be putting some of your pictures in the book. Your name or school will not be written in the book, only what you say and draw. I am really glad that you are helping me with this.*

*However, you don't have to talk with me if you don't want to. If you want to stop answering questions all you have to do is say "I'd like to stop". If you do not want to draw a picture that is alright too. You can leave the group at any time and go back to your other work.*

*I am going to be recording what you say so that I can listen carefully to it again later as what you will say is very important. I have a recorder here to do this. When I press the green button, the recorder is on and when I press the red button the recorder is off. We will see if the recorder is working before we begin. When I press the green button, we can all say 'hello' together and I will play it back to you so that you can check if it is working.*

*Before we start, I would like to be sure that all of you are happy to start so I brought along a sheet for each one of you to sign for me. I will read the writing and you can put a mark on the green hand if you agree with (or are happy with) all the things that I say) and a mark on the red hand if you do not agree with (or are not happy) with all of the things that I say. Remember you don't have to talk to me if you don't want to so it is alright to put a mark on red hand.*

## Student Consent Form

Student's Name:

Are you happy to talk to me about school today?



Are you happy for me to write down what you tell me in my book?



Are you happy to draw a picture about school?



Are you happy for me to put your picture in my book?





## Documentary and Class-Room Analysis Schedule



### Documentary and Class-Room Analysis Schedule

School:
Date:
Time:

Key – D – Documentation; PTI – Principal Teacher Interviews; TI – Teacher Interview; PI – Parent Interview –  
 SNAI – special needs assistant interview SC – Student Conference

#### 1. School Culture and Leadership

		Observation	
1.1	The school has a culture of <b>high ambitions</b> and <b>aspirations</b> for its students with ASD. This includes a <b>positive school culture</b> and a focus on achievement of <b>key skills</b> and <b>independence</b> .		TI – PTI – D
1.2	The school provides <b>opportunities</b> and <b>resources</b> for students with ASD to participate in <b>wider school activities</b> both at school and in the wider community.		PI – TI
1.3	The student with ASD and his/her peers who do not have ASDs have <b>a range of opportunities</b> to engage together in both classroom and leisure activities.		TI

## 2. Learning Environment

		Observation	
2.1	The school is committed to improving the <b>physical environment</b> of the school, meeting the diverse <b>physical, emotional, social</b> and <b>aesthetic</b> needs of students with ASD.		○ – PTI
2.2	The learning environment considers the <b>individual learning styles</b> and <b>interests</b> of students with ASD and <b>adapts the physical environment</b> to provide <b>visual structure</b> and <b>predictability</b> .		○ – TI
2.3	<b>Adequate space</b> is provided for students with ASD to <b>find comfort</b> and to <b>self-regulate</b> when necessary and the facility to have <b>learning and movement breaks</b> during class time.		○
2.4	A <b>range of supports</b> (e.g. tactile, visual, and auditory) are made available to assist students with ASD to understand and navigate the school environment.		○

## 3. Assessment

		Observation	SOURCE
3.1	The school's <b>assessment policy</b> consists of a <b>written statement of the aims of assessment</b> , and outlines how the school will address <b>assessment of learning</b> and <b>assessment for learning</b> within each curricular area.		D

		Observation	SOURCE
3.2	The assessment process is <b>part of the daily routine</b> and takes place in <b>all relevant learning contexts within the school setting</b> .		D – TI
3.3	A <b>variety of assessment</b> tools are used which are selected in consideration of the student’s <b>stage of learning and development</b> and <b>individual learning needs</b> . <b>ASD specific assessments</b> are utilised <b>where appropriate</b> to evaluate language and communication, behaviour, social and emotional development, play and leisure skills and independence.		TI – D
3.4	Where there are instances of behaviours that challenge, a <b>functional behavioural assessment</b> is considered from which <b>environmental accommodations</b> and <b>positive behaviour supports</b> could be identified and implemented.		TI

#### 4. Individualised Planning

		Observation	SOURCE
4.1	A <b>current and relevant individualised</b> plan is in place to address the priority learning needs of the student with ASD.		D

		Observation	SOURCE
4.2	The <b>individualised</b> plan is based on <b>assessed strengths and needs</b> and includes essential information for <b>planning, implementing, monitoring</b> and <b>evaluating</b> the student's programme.		D
4.3	Learning targets are formulated in consideration of the <b>student's present level of performance</b> and age, the student's <b>specific strengths</b> and <b>needs</b> .		D
4.4	Learning targets are <b>SMART (specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time bound)</b> . <b>Strategies, methodologies</b> and <b>materials</b> required to teach the identified learning targets are clearly outlined.		D
4.5	<b>Review</b> dates are <b>agreed</b> and <b>outlined</b> in the plan.		D
4.6	Students are <b>involved in their own educational planning</b> and <b>assessment where appropriate</b> and are <b>consulted</b> on their involvement in the school day and school activities.		D – TI – PTI – SC
4.7	Parents are <b>involved</b> and <b>consulted</b> on an on-going basis in the student's individualised plan.		D – TI – PTI – PI

		Observation	SOURCE
4.8	A collaborative approach to individualised planning is adopted within the school.		D – TI – PTI – SNAI
4.9	<b>External services</b> are consulted and involved in the planning process where appropriate.		D – TI – PTI

## 5. Transition Planning

		Observation	SOURCE
5.1	Transition planning is a collaborative, <b>on-going</b> and <b>flexible</b> process that is <b>tailored</b> to meet the individual needs of students with ASD.		D – TI – PTI – IP
5.2	Parents, students, relevant staff members and external agencies <b>work together in planning for major transitions</b> which includes the identification of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The <b>most supportive</b> setting for educational transitioning.</li> <li>• Each member of the team is <b>aware</b> of their individual responsibilities within the transition process for each student with ASD.</li> <li>• Strategies are in place to familiarise the <b>student with ASD with the future setting</b> (videos and visits to a new school setting/post-school setting, social stories, schedules, meet teachers, view classrooms)</li> <li>• <b>Timelines</b> are set for the completion of activities.</li> </ul>		D – TI – PI – PTI

## 6. Curriculum

		Observation	
6.1	Students with ASD have access to the <b>Aistear curriculum framework/primary/post-primary school curriculum.</b>		O – TI – PTI – D
6.2	The curriculum content is <b>differentiated with reference</b> to students' <b>capacities</b> and <b>learning needs.</b>		O – TI
6.3	The <b>curriculum</b> provides a range of <b>opportunities</b> to develop <b>communication, social, play/leisure and imaginative skills.</b>		O – TI
6.4	<b>Models of provision</b> within the school are designed to <b>optimise</b> the <b>educational experience</b> of students with ASDs.		O – PI – PTI – PI

## 7. Teaching Methodologies

		Observation	
7.1	Teaching and instruction integrate a variety of <b>appropriate methodologies, activities, experiences and materials</b> for students to engage in <b>meaningful</b> learning.		O – TI

		Observation	
7.2	<p><b>Teaching and environmental supports</b> (e.g. visual and organisational supports, ICT, AT (Assistive Technology) and AAC (augmentative and alternative communication including sign-language), and additional adult assistance) are provided to <b>increase the student's independence</b> and participation which facilitate and promote <b>engagement</b> with school activities; expressive and receptive communication; and ease with transitions.</p>		○
7.3	<p>Teaching is <b>individualised where necessary</b> and based on <b>assessment</b> and takes into account the <b>student's strengths, interests and preferences</b>. A variety of activities are used to teach core skills and concepts to the student with ASD.</p>		○ – TI – D
7.4	<p>Multiple opportunities are provided for students to <b>respond, promote and maintain active engagement</b>.</p>		○
7.5	<p>Teaching is <b>well organised, structured and planned</b>; staff give advanced warning, where possible, of any changes to familiar routines in a way that is meaningful to the student with ASD.</p>		○
7.6	<p>Students' completed work is on display and there is a <b>balanced range of individual and group work</b>.</p>		○

		Observation	
7.7	<b>Relevant</b> teaching staff are aware of the <b>sensory aspects</b> of ASD and how these may impact on the child's learning and use suitable strategies to support the child with these difficulties.		O – TI – PTI
7.8	<b>Special Needs Assistant</b> -support is effectively managed.		O

## 8. Data Collection/Monitoring of Progress/Outcomes

		Observation	
8.1	There is a clear emphasis on monitoring and recording student progress and the effectiveness of teaching methodologies. Data are used on an on-going basis to inform teaching and learning.		O – D – TI
8.2	Information collected is <b>shared</b> and <b>discussed</b> with <b>parents</b> and <b>appropriate professionals</b> in line with <b>confidentiality</b> protocols.		O – D – PI – TI
8.3	Data-collection and monitoring processes are used to inform <b>pupil-self-evaluation, teacher-self-evaluation</b> and <b>whole-school evaluation</b> .		TI – PTI – D



## 9. Team Approach

		Observation	
9.1	Staff within the school <b>work effectively together</b> and with <b>parents, external professionals</b> and services by joint planning and sharing of information and expertise.		O – TI – PTI
9.2	There are <b>clear means of communication</b> with <b>parents/ caregivers</b> , with all <b>relevant professionals</b> working with each <b>student</b> with ASD, and with the student with ASD.		O – PI – TI – PTI

## 10. Parental and Child-Involvement

		Observation	
10.1	Parental <b>role</b> and <b>involvement</b> is valued and invited by the school.		O – D – TI – PTI – PI –
10.2	The student is involved in planning and all education decisions, as appropriate.		O – D – TI – PTI – PI –

## 11. Staff Development

		Observation	
11.1	Provision is made for developing the understanding and knowledge of ASD for all staff.		PTI – TI
11.2	School management provides for systematic CPD for all staff working with children with ASD.		PTI – TI – CPD schedule
11.3	Avenues and opportunities are provided for staff with specialist ASD knowledge to share with other staff-members in the school.		O – PTI – TI – SNAI
Comments			

No.	Percentage/Value
1	0-10% of time – Never or almost never
2	11-20% – Rarely
3	21-50% – Sometimes
4	51-90% – Often
5	91-100% – Always or almost always

## School Principals' Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

<p><b>School Culture and Leadership</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are the benefits of having specific educational provision for students with autistic spectrum disorders in the school?</li> <li>2. Are there challenges in having educational provision for students with autistic spectrum disorders in the school?</li> <li>3. Do you see educational provision for students with autistic spectrum disorders as being integral to educational provision in the rest of the school?</li> <li>4. Are there particular approaches adopted on a school-wide basis in meeting the needs of students with autistic spectrum disorders?</li> <li>5. How is special needs assistant support managed in the school as it relates to autistic spectrum disorder?</li> <li>6. Are there particular issues related to the management of provision for students with autistic spectrum disorders for you as principal of the school?</li> <li>7. Have you had any professional preparation and/or previous experience with providing for students with autistic spectrum disorder?</li> <li>8. Do you see your school's provision for students with autistic spectrum disorder linked with the ethos/mission of your school/trustees?</li> </ol>
<p><b>Learning Environment</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. Have you had to make any particular adaptations to the physical environment of the school to meet the diverse needs of students with autistic spectrum disorders?</li> </ol>
<p><b>Assessment</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. What methods of assessment are used in the school for students with autistic spectrum disorders?</li> </ol>
<p><b>Individualised Planning</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. Is there individualised planning in place for all students with autistic spectrum disorder in the school?</li> <li>12. To what extent are parents, students and external services involved in individualised planning?</li> </ol>
<p><b>Transitions</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>13. Are there protocols in place to plan for students' transition into school and out of the school?</li> <li>14. Who is involved in the transition planning?</li> </ol>
<p><b>Curriculum</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>15. To what extent do students in your school have access to the general curriculum (post-primary: exam subjects)?</li> </ol>
<p><b>Teaching Methodologies</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>16. What awareness would the staff have around specific ASD-teaching methodologies?</li> <li>17. What awareness would the staff have around the sensory aspects of autistic spectrum disorders?</li> <li>18. How is this awareness developed?</li> </ol>

<b>Team Approach</b>
<p>19. Are there external professionals you consult with in relation to the students with autistic spectrum disorders in the school?</p> <p>20. In what ways are the teachers supported by the external professionals?</p> <p>21. In what ways do the teachers work within the school to communicate with other members of staff around issues related to students with autistic spectrum disorders?</p>
<b>Parental/Carer Involvement</b>
<p>22. Are parents/carers of students with autistic spectrum disorder involved in their student's education programmes?</p> <p>23. Are there particular structures in place that facilitate parental involvement?</p>
<b>Staff Development</b>
<p>24. Is in-service education in the area of autistic spectrum disorders readily available and easy to access?</p> <p>25. How are your staff supported to pursue in-service education in this area?</p> <p>26. Are there opportunities for principals to access in-service education related to your role in this area?</p>
<b>Conclusion</b>
<p>27. Is there any other aspect of your experience of providing for student with autistic spectrum disorders that you think is important and that hasn't been addressed in this interview?</p>

## Teacher's Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

<b>School Culture and Leadership</b>
<p>1. To what extent does your school support the participation of students with autistic spectrum disorders in all school activities?</p> <p>2. How is this facilitated?</p>
<b>Learning Environment</b>
<p>3. What elements of the learning environment (whole-school physical environment) are critical in supporting the learning of students with autistic spectrum disorders?</p>
<b>Assessment</b>
<p>4. What methods of assessment do you use in curriculum planning and provision?</p> <p>5. Are there methods of assessment that you find particularly effective?</p> <p>6. How often do you engage in assessment of student's learning and teaching?</p> <p>7. Are there specific assessment approaches you use in relation to challenging behaviour?</p>
<b>Individualised Planning</b>
<p>8. In what ways are parents/carers, external agencies and perhaps the students themselves involved in Individualised Planning?</p> <p>9. How are the Individualised Plans used in the school?</p>
<b>Transitions</b>
<p>10. Are there protocols in place to plan for student's transition into school and out of the school?</p> <p>11. Who is involved in the transition planning?</p>

**Curriculum**

- 12. To what extent do students with autistic spectrum disorders have access to the general curriculum (post-primary: exam subjects)?
- 13. In what way is the curriculum differentiated for students with autistic spectrum disorders?
- 14. In what ways are students' communication, social, play/leisure and imaginative skills developed in the curriculum?

**Teaching Methodologies**

- 15. What teaching methodologies in the general curriculum have you found useful with students with autistic spectrum disorders?
- 16. Are there specific teaching methodologies that you use because the students have autistic spectrum disorder?
- 17. Can you give us any example of how you take account of student's special interests, strengths and preferences when teaching a student with autistic spectrum disorders?
- 18. Students with autistic spectrum disorders experience sensory differences – how do these affect the student's learning?
- 19. What strategies do you use to accommodate these sensory differences?
- 20. How is special needs assistant support managed in your classroom?

**Monitoring Progress/Outcomes**

- 21. How do you monitor and record student's progress?
- 22. In what ways do you share progress data with parents/carers?

**Team Approach**

- 23. Are there external professionals you consult with in relation to the students with autistic spectrum disorders in your class?
- 24. In what ways are you supported by the external professionals?
- 25. Do you find the recommendations and advice provided by professionals useful and easy to implement in the classroom?
- 26. In what ways do you communicate and work with other staff within the school to communicate around students with autistic spectrum disorders?

**Parental/Carer Involvement**

- 27. Are parents/carers of students with autistic spectrum disorder involved in their student's education programmes?
- 28. Are there particular structures in place that facilitate parental involvement?
- 29. Are there structures in place that support communication between you and parents?

**Staff Development**

- 30. Is in-service education in the area of autistic spectrum disorders readily available and easy to access?
- 31. How are you supported to pursue in-service education in this area?
- 32. Are there opportunities for you to share your expertise in this area with your colleagues?

**Conclusion**

- 33. Is there any other aspect of your experience of providing for students with autistic spectrum disorders that you think is important and that hasn't been addressed in this interview?

## Special Needs Assistant Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

<b>School Culture and Leadership</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How would you describe your role when working with students with autistic spectrum disorders in the school?</li> <li>2. Do you have a role in terms of transitioning the students on and off their transport?</li> <li>3. Are you involved in supporting students with autistic spectrum disorder during non-instructional times such as break-times, lunch-time period and other school-related activities?</li> </ol>
<b>Learning Environment</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Are you involved in supporting students with autistic spectrum disorders to engage in school-wide activities?</li> </ol>
<b>Curriculum</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. What are the key elements of your role in managing students' care needs?</li> </ol>
<b>Team Approach</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. In what ways do you take part in team-planning for students with autistic spectrum disorders in the school (IEPs/Transition/Behaviour)</li> </ol>
<b>Staff Development</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Is in-service education in the area of autistic spectrum disorders readily available and easy to access?</li> <li>8. How are you supported to pursue in-service education in this area?</li> </ol>
<b>Conclusion</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. Is there any other aspect of your experience of supporting students with autistic spectrum disorders that you think is important and that hasn't been addressed in this interview?</li> </ol>

## Parents'/Carers' Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

<b>Background</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. When did you first notice that your child might have different needs?</li> <li>2. How old is your child now and at what age was your child diagnosed as having autistic spectrum disorder?</li> <li>3. Can you tell me a little bit about the process of diagnosis?</li> <li>4. When was your child first enrolled in this school?</li> <li>5. Is this your school of choice for your child at the moment?</li> </ol>
<b>School Culture and Leadership</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. How satisfied are you that the education provision made in this school meets the assessed needs of your child?</li> <li>7. How do you think educational provision for children with autistic spectrum disorders integrates with educational provision in the rest of the school?</li> <li>8. To what extent is your child included in school-wide activities?</li> </ol>

<b>Learning Environment</b>
9. Are you satisfied that the physical environment of the school supports the needs of your child e.g. layout of classroom, layout of the school and use of the school yard
<b>Assessment</b>
10. What methods of assessment are used in the school for your child?
<b>Individualised Planning</b>
11. Is there Individualised Planning in place for your child?
12. How involved are you in the development and review of this?
13. Is your child involved in any way in developing his/her own individualised plan?
14. How involved are professionals external to the school in this process e.g psychologist, speech and language therapist, occupational therapist?
15. How do you contribute to, and support the implementation of your child's programme?
<b>Transitions</b>
16. How does your child deal with change or new environments?
17. How do you as a parent help with transition or change?
18. What supports are or were available to assist transition or change from or to school?
19. Were different agencies involved to support transitions to and from school?
<b>Curriculum</b>
20. In terms of the areas of learning such as literacy, numeracy, art, music, physical education, social, personal and health education, science, history and geography – how satisfied are you that they meet the needs of your child? [primary]
21. Are you satisfied that your child has the same access to the curriculum subject areas and examinations as other children? [post-primary]
22. Are you satisfied with the resources that are in place to support your child?
<b>Team Approach\Parental/Carer Involvement</b>
23. Do you know if the class teacher, the SNA and other members of the teaching staff discuss your child's individual strengths and needs and then decide on the subjects and levels which most suit your child?
24. Should you as the parent be involved in these discussions?
<b>Conclusion</b>
25. Is there any other aspect of your experience that you think is important and that hasn't been addressed in this interview?

## Student Conversation Questions

1. Tell me about what you do at school?
2. What do you like the best in school?
3. Why do you like doing this (these) best?
4. Is there anything you don't like doing in school?
5. Why don't you like doing this (these)?
6. Who helps you with your work in school?
7. Who are your friends in school?
8. What do you do with your friends?
9. What do you like best doing with your friends?
10. Do you like school?
11. Would you like to draw a picture of school?
12. It would be great if you could put yourself, your friends and some of the things you do in the picture?
13. Can you talk to me about what you have drawn?

*Thank you all very much for helping me with my work and telling me all about what you do in school. Thank you too for drawing all of those lovely pictures, which I will keep and put some of them in the book that I was telling you about earlier.*



## Teaching Experience Form

### Teaching Experience

Teaching Qualifications	Other Academic Qualifications
<p><b>Number of Years Teaching Experience <i>Prior</i> to Appointment in this School (state in terms of days/ weeks/months/years e.g. 3 days April 2012/4 weeks May 2013/March-June 2009/2000-2010 etc <i>whichever is relevant</i>)</b></p>	
In Mainstream Primary/Post Primary School:	In Special School (state category of school)
In Special School/Class for Children with ASDs:	In Other Setting (give details):
In Present Position:	Total Number of Years Teaching Experience:

#### *In-service Education*

*(State year, period of programme and accrediting body or institution)*

#### Special Education

#### Autistic Spectrum Disorder-Specific Education



## Appendix 3: Data Collection Instruments in Irish

### Litir Eolais an Phríomhoide

#### Tionscadal Taighde faoin Soláthar d'Uathachas

A chara,

Tá foireann thaighdeoirí ó Choláiste Mhuire gan Smál i mbun staidéir faoi láthair ar an soláthar oideachais atá á fháil ag daltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais i bPoblacht na hÉireann. Tá an taighde seo coimisiúnaithe ag an gComhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta agus é stiúrtha ag an Dr. Patricia Daly agus an Dr. Emer Ring. Tá sé mar aidhm ag an taighde seo léirmheas a dhéanamh ar shampla de réimse an tsoláthair oideachais atá ar fáil faoi láthair do dhaltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais agus foilseofar tuarascáil le torthaí an taighde. Tá na critéir thaighde bunaithe ar an gcreatlach mheastóireachta atá forbartha ag an Middletown Centre for Autism agus ag an gComhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta, cuirfidh na taighdeoirí cóip de ar fáil nuair a thagann siad ar cuairt go-dtí do scoil.

Ba mhaith linn ár mbuíochas a chur in iúl duit as ucht spéis a léiriú sa staidéar seo agus as ucht a bheith sásta páirt a ghlacadh sa tionscadal taighde. Is ar bhonn deonach a ghlacfaidh tú páirt sa taighde, agus is féidir diúltiú ceist a fhreagairt agus is féidir tarraingt siar ón tionscadal aon am ar mhian leat. Is é a bheidh i gceist leis an bpróiseas ná cuairt dhá-lá ar do scoil ó bhail den bhfoireann taighde. Le linn na cuairte chuig do scoil, breathnóidh an fhoireann taighde de bheirt ar thréimhse sa seomra ranga a mhairfidh suas go huair a' chloig le rang roghnaithe ina bhfuil daltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais. Beidh an ceacht ina dtarlóidh an bhreathnóireacht aontaithe leis an múinteoir ranga roimhré. Déanfaidh an fhoireann taighde athbhreithniú ar pholasaithe na scoile, an tionchar atá ag na polasaithe seo ar sholáthar do dhaltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais, ar phleanáil aonair, ar ábhair mheasúnaithe agus ar samplaí de shaothar na ndaltaí.

Le linn na cuairte ar do scoil, rachfaidh taighdeoir amháin i mbun agallaimh aonair le múinteoirí agus le cúntóirí riachtanais speisialta ábhartha. Reachtaílfear agallamh aonair leat fhéin chomh maith mar aon le comhráití le daltaí, ag baint úsáide as an teicnócht 'tarraing agus scríobh' le rogha de dhaltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais id' scoil. Is é a bheidh i gceist leis na comhráití leis na daltaí ná comhrá leo maidir lena dtaithí scoile agus iarrfar orthu ansan pictiúr a tharraingt den scoil. Déanfar soiléir dóibh nach bhfuil aon iachall orthu aon cheist a fhreagairt ná an pictiúr a tharraingt agus go mbeidh siad in ann an grúpa a fhágáil aon uair. Ba mhaith linn chomh maith agallaimh a dhéanamh ar an nguthán le tuismitheoirí dhaltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais id' scoil. Beidh gá gach agallamh a thairfeadú ar téip

chun a chinntiú go gcoimeádfar an t-eolas ar fad. Déanfar iniúchadh agus scrúdú géar ar na sonraí chun na téamaí agus na ceisteanna a thagann chun solais ón dtaighde a aithint.

Coimeádfar faisnéis leictreonach agus scríofa faoi rúin, faoi réir ag teorainneacha an dlí, agus ní chuirfear ar fáil iad ach amháin don bhfoireann taighde. Tá seans go n-úsáidfear giotaí óna sonraí bailithe le linn an phróisis taighde sa tuarascáil deiridh, ach ní tharlóidh sé riamh go luafar d'ainm ná aon shainthréith a bhaineann leat. Stórálfar sonraí a bailíodh don taighde go sábháilte ar ríomhaire cosanta ag pasfhocal agus i gcaibinéid faoi ghlas. Sciosfar na sonraí tar éis tréimhse cúig bliana. D'fhéadfaí sonraí a úsáid i bhfoirm anaithnid in aon fhoilseachán a thagann chun cinn mar thoradh ar an taighde seo.

Bheimis go mór faoi chomaoin agat ach na clúdaigh litreach iniata a thabhairt do na múinteoirí, do na cúntóirí riachtanas speisialta agus do na tuismitheoirí ábhartha. Is í Ruth Madden an comhlach taighde don tionscadal agus is féidir teagmháil a dhéanamh léi trí ríomhphost ag [Ruth.Madden@mic.ul.ie](mailto:Ruth.Madden@mic.ul.ie) nó ar an nguthán ag 061-204339.

Bheimis go mór faoi chomaoin agat ach an fhoirm iniata a shíniú, baileoidh an taighdeoir an fhoirm seo uait ar an gcéad lá den chuairt scoile.

Ba mhaith linn ár mbuíochas a chur in iúl duit as ucht spéis a léiriú sa taighde seo agus táimid ag súil le bualadh leat.

Idir an dá linn ná bíodh leisce ort teagmháil a dhéanamh leis an Dr. Patricia Daly (061 204309) nó leis an Dr. Emer Ring (061 204571) má tá aon cheist agat.

Le gach dea-ghuí,

Dr. Patricia Daly agus Dr. Emer Ring

## Foirm Toilithe an Phríomhoide

### Tionscadal Taighde faoin Soláthar d'Uathachas

Ainm:	
Scoil:	
Guthán:	
R-phost:	

Táim \_\_\_\_\_ toilteanach a bheith rannpháirteach sa tionscadal taighde den teideal "Measúnú ar Sholáthar Oideachais do Pháistí le Neamhoird de chuid Speictream an Uathachais i bPoblacht na hÉireann' atá á reachtáil ag Coláiste Mhuire gan Smál, Luimneach, ar son na Comhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta. Tá faisnéis leordhóthanach faighte agam faoin tionscadal agus tuigim cén saghas tionscadail thaighde atá i gceist. Táim sásta gur féidir na sonraí a úsáid i bhfoirm anaithid in aon fhoilseacháin a thagann ar an saol mar thoradh ar an tionscadal seo.

Sínithe:	
Dáta:	

## Litir Eolais an Mhuinteora

### Tionscadal Taighde faoin Soláthar d'Uathachas

A Mhúinteoir,

Tá foireann thaighdeoirí ó Choláiste Mhuire gan Smál i mbun staidéir faoi láthair ar an soláthar oideachais atá á fháil ag daltaín le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais in Éirinn. Tá an taighde seo coimisiúnaithe ag an gComhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta agus é stiúrtha ag an Dr. Patricia Daly agus an Dr. Emer Ring. Tá sé mar aidhm ag an taighde seo léirmheas a dhéanamh ar shampla de réimse an tsoláthair oideachais atá ar fáil faoi láthair do dhaltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais agus foilseofar tuarascáil le torthaí an taighde. Tá na critéir taighde bunaithe ar an gcreatlach mheastóireachta atá forbartha ag an Middletown Centre for Autism agus ag an gComhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta, cuirfidh na taighdeoirí cóip de ar fáil nuair a thagann siad ar cuairt go-dtí do scoil.

Bheimis go mór faoi chomaoin agat dá mbeifeá sásta a bheith rannpháirteach sa taighde agus cuirfeadh do rannpháirtíocht go mór leis an tionscadal taighde seo. Is ar bhonn deonach a ghlacfaidh tú páirt sa taighde, agus is féidir diúltiú ceist a fhreagairt agus is féidir tarraingt siar ón tionscadal aon am ar mhian leat. Is é a bheidh i gceist leis an bpróiseas ná cuairt dhála ar do scoil ó bhail den bhfoireann taighde. Le linn na cuairte chuig do scoil, breathnóidh an fhoireann taighde de bheirt ar thréimhse sa seomra ranga a mhairfidh suas go huair a' chloig le rang roghnaithe ina bhfuil daltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais. Beidh an ceacht ina dtarlóidh an bhreathnóireacht aontaithe leat roimhré. Déanfaidh an fhoireann taighde athbhreithniú ar pholasaithe na scoile, an tionchar atá ag na polasaithe seo ar sholáthar do dhaltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais, ar phleanáil aonair, ar ábhair mheasúnaithe agus ar samplaí de shaothar na mac léinn.

Le linn na cuairte ar do scoil, rachfaidh taighdeoir amháin i mbun agallaimh aonair le múinteoirí agus le cúntóirí riachtanais speisialta ábhartha. Reachtaílfear agallamh aonair leat fhéin chomh maith mar aon le comhráití le daltaí, ag baint úsáide as an teicnócht 'tarraing agus scríobh' le rogha de dhaltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais id' scoil. Is é a bheidh i gceist leis na comhráití leis na daltaí ná comhrá leo maidir lena dtaithí scoile agus iarrfar orthu ansan pictiúr a tharraingt den scoil. Déanfar soiléir dóibh nach bhfuil aon iachall orthu aon cheist a fhreagairt ná an pictiúr a tharraingt agus go mbeidh siad in ann an grúpa a fhágáil aon uair. Ba mhaith linn chomh maith agallaimh a dhéanamh ar an nguthán le tuismitheoirí dhaltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais id' scoil. Beidh gá gach agallamh a thairfeadh ar téip chun a chinntiú go gcoimeádfar an t-eolas ar fad. Déanfar iniúchadh agus scrúdú géar ar na sonraí chun na téamaí agus na ceisteanna a thagann chun solais ón dtaighde a aithint.

Coimeádfar faisnéis leictreonach agus scríofa faoi rúin, faoi réir ag teorainneacha an dlí, agus ní chuirfear ar fáil iad ach amháin don bhfoireann taighde. Tá seans go n-úsáidfear giotáí óna sonraí bailithe le linn an phróisis thaighde sa tuarascáil deiridh, ach ní tharlóidh sé riamh go luafar d'ainm ná aon shainthréith a bhaineann leat. Stórálfar sonraí a bailíodh don taighde go sábháilte ar ríomhaire cosanta ag pasfhocal agus i gcaibinéid faoi ghlas. Scriosfar na sonraí tar éis tréimhse cúig bliana. D'fhéadfaí sonraí a úsáid i bhfoirm anaithnid in aon fhoilseachán a thagann chun cinn mar thoradh ar an taighde seo.

Bheimis faoi chomaoin agat ach an fhoirm toilithe anseo thíos a líonadh isteach, baileoidh an taighdeoir an ghoirm uait ar an gcéad lá den chuairt ar an scoil.

Is í Ruth Madden an comhlach taighde don tionscadal agus is féidir teagmháil a dhéanamh léi trí ríomhphost ag [Ruth.Madden@mic.ul.ie](mailto:Ruth.Madden@mic.ul.ie) nó ar an nguthán ag 061-204339.

Ba mhaith linn ár mbuíochas a chur in iúl duit as ucht spéis a léiriú sa taighde seo agus táimid ag súil le bualadh leat.

Idir an dá linn ná bíodh leisce ort teagmháil a dhéanamh leis an Dr. Patricia Daly (061 204309) nó leis an Dr. Emer Ring (061 204571) má tá aon cheist agat.

Sa chás go bhfuil tú amhrasach faoin staidéar seo agus go mba mhaith leat labhairt le duine neamhspleách, is féidir teagmháil a dhéanamh le:

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Le gach dea-ghuí,

Dr. Patricia Daly agus Dr. Emer Ring

## Foirm Toilithe an Mhúinteora

### Tionscadal Taighde faoin Soláthar d'Uathachas

Ainm:	
Scoil:	
Guthán:	
R-phost:	

Táim \_\_\_\_\_ toilteanach a bheith rannpháirteach sa tionscadal taighde den teideal "Measúnú ar Sholáthar Oideachais do Pháistí le Neamhoird de chuid Speictream an Uathachais i bPoblacht na hÉireann' atá á reachtáil ag Coláiste Mhuire gan Smál, Luimneach, ar son na Comhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta. Tá faisnéis leordhóthanach faighte agam faoin tionscadal agus tuigim cén saghas tionscadail thaighde atá i gceist. Táim sásta gur féidir na sonraí a úsáid i bhfoirm anaithid in aon fhoilseacháin a thagann ar an saol mar thoradh ar an tionscadal seo.

Sínithe:	
Dáta:	



## Litir Eolais an Chúntóra Riachtanais Speisialta

### Tionscadal Taighde faoin Soláthar d'Uathachas

A Chúntóir Riachtanais Speisialta,

Tá foireann thaighdeoirí ó Choláiste Mhuire gan Smál i mbun staidéir faoi láthair ar an soláthar oideachais atá á fháil ag daltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais i bPoblacht na hÉireann. Tá an taighde seo coimisiúnaithe ag an gComhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta agus é stiúrtha ag an Dr. Patricia Daly agus an Dr. Emer Ring. Tá sé mar aidhm ag an taighde seo léirmheas a dhéanamh ar shampla de réimse an tsoláthair oideachais atá ar fáil faoi láthair do dhaltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais agus foilseofar tuarascáil le torthaí an taighde. Tá na critéir thaighde bunaithe ar an gcreatlach mheastóireachta atá forbartha ag an Middletown Centre for Autism agus ag an gComhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta, cuirfidh na taighdeoirí cóip de ar fáil nuair a thagann siad ar cuairt go-dtí do scoil.

Bheimis go mór faoi chomaoin agat dá mbeifeá sásta a bheith rannpháirteach sa taighde agus cuirfeadh do rannpháirtíocht go mór leis an tionscadal taighde seo. Is ar bhonn deonach a ghlacfaidh tú páirt sa taighde, agus is féidir diúltiú ceist a fhreagairt agus is féidir tarraingt siar ón tionscadal aon am ar mhian leat. Is é a bheidh i gceist leis an bpróiseas ná cuairt dhá-lá ar do scoil ó bhail den bhfoireann taighde. Le linn na cuairte chuig do scoil, breathnóidh an fhoireann taighde de bheirt ar thréimhse sa seomra ranga a mhairfidh suas go huair a' chloig le rang roghnaithe ina bhfuil daltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais. Beidh an ceacht ina dtarlóidh an bhreathnóireacht aontaithe leis an múinteoir ranga roimhré. Déanfaidh an fhoireann taighde athbhreithniú ar pholasaithe na scoile, an tionchar atá ag na polasaithe seo ar sholáthar do dhaltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais, ar phleanáil aonair, ar ábhair mheasúnaithe agus ar samplaí de shaothar na ndaltaí.

Le linn na cuairte ar do scoil, rachfaidh taighdeoir amháin i mbun agallaimh aonair le múinteoirí agus le cúntóirí riachtanais speisialta ábhartha. Reachtaílfear agallamh aonair leat fhéin chomh maith mar aon le comhráití le daltaí, ag baint úsáide as an teicnócht 'tarraing agus scríobh' le rogha de dhaltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais id' scoil. Is é a bheidh i gceist leis na comhráití leis na daltaí ná comhrá leo maidir lena dtaithí scoile agus iarrfar orthu ansan pictiúr a tharraingt den scoil. Déanfar soiléir dóibh nach bhfuil aon iachall orthu aon cheist a fhreagairt ná an pictiúr a tharraingt agus go mbeidh siad in ann an grúpa a fhágáil aon uair. Ba mhaith linn chomh maith agallaimh a dhéanamh ar an nguthán le tuismitheoirí dhaltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais id' scoil. Beidh gá gach agallamh a thairfeadh ar téip chun a chinntiú go gcoimeádfar an t-eolas ar fad. Déanfar iniúchadh agus scrúdú géar ar na sonraí chun na téamaí agus na ceisteanna a thagann chun solais ón dtaighde a aithint.

Coimeádfar faisnéis leictreonach agus scríofa faoi rúin, faoi réir ag teorainneacha an dlí, agus ní chuirfear ar fáil iad ach amháin don bhfoireann taighde. Tá seans go n-úsáidfear giotáí óna sonraí bailithe le linn an phróisis thaighde sa tuarascáil deiridh, ach ní tharlóidh sé riamh go luafar d'ainm ná aon shainthréith a bhaineann leat. Stórálfar sonraí a bailíodh don taighde go sábháilte ar ríomhaire cosanta ag pasfhocal agus i gcaibinéid faoi ghlas. Scríosfar na sonraí tar éis tréimhse cúig bliana. D'fhéadfaí sonraí a úsáid i bhfoirm anaithnid in aon fhoilseachán a thagann chun cinn mar thoradh ar an taighde seo.

Sa chás go bhfuil spéis agat a bheith rannpháirteach, bheimis faoi chomaoin agat ach an fhoirm toilithe anseo thíos a líonadh isteach, baileoidh an taighdeoir an fhoirm uait ar an gcéad lá den chuairt ar an scoil.

Is í Ruth Madden an comhlach taighde don tionscadal agus is féidir teagmháil a dhéanamh léi trí ríomhphost ag [Ruth.Madden@mic.ul.ie](mailto:Ruth.Madden@mic.ul.ie) nó ar an nguthán ag 061-204339.

Ba mhaith linn ár mbuíochas a chur in iúl duit as ucht spéis a léiriú sa taighde seo agus táimid ag súil le bualadh leat.

Idir an dá linn ná bíodh leisce ort teagmháil a dhéanamh leis an Dr. Patricia Daly (061 204309) nó leis an Dr. Emer Ring (061 204571) má tá aon cheist agat.

Sa chás go bhfuil tú amhrasach faoin staidéar seo agus go mba mhaith leat labhairt le duine neamhspleách, is féidir teagmháil a dhéanamh le:

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Le gach dea-ghuí,

Dr. Patricia Daly agus Dr. Emer Ring

## Foirm Toilithe an Chúntóra Riachtanais Speisialta

### Tionscadal Taighde faoin Soláthar d'Uathachas

Ainm:	
Scoil:	
Guthán:	
R-phost:	

Táim \_\_\_\_\_ toilteanach a bheith rannpháirteach sa tionscadal taighde den teideal "Measúnú ar Sholáthar Oideachais do Pháistí le Neamhoird de chuid Speictream an Uathachais i bPoblacht na hÉireann' atá á reachtáil ag Coláiste Mhuire gan Smál, Luimneach, ar son na Comhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta. Tá faisnéis leordhóthanach faighte agam faoin tionscadal agus tuigim cén saghas tionscadail thaighde atá i gceist. Táim sásta gur féidir na sonraí a úsáid i bhfoirm anaithid in aon fhoilseacháin a thagann ar an saol mar thoradh ar an tionscadal seo.

Sínithe:	
Dáta:	

## Litir Eolais an Tuismitheora/an Chaomhnóra

### Tionscadal Taighde faoin Soláthar d'Uathachas

A Thuismitheoir/Chaomhnóir,

Tá foireann thaighdeoirí ó Choláiste Mhuire gan Smál i mbun staidéir faoi láthair ar an soláthar oideachais atá á fháil ag daltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais i bPoblacht na hÉireann. Tá an taighde seo coimisiúnaithe ag an gComhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta agus é stiúrtha ag an Dr. Patricia Daly agus an Dr. Emer Ring. Tá sé mar aidhm ag an taighde seo léirmheas a dhéanamh ar shampla de réimse an tsoláthair oideachais atá ar fáil faoi láthair do dhaltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais agus foilseofar tuarascáil le torthaí an taighde. Tá na critéir thaighde bunaithe ar an gcreatlach mheastóireachta atá forbartha ag an Middletown Centre for Autism agus ag an gComhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta, cuirfidh na taighdeoirí cóip de ar fáil nuair a thagann siad ar cuairt go-dtí do scoil.

Is é a bheidh i gceist leis an dtaighde ná cuairt dhá-lá ar an scoil ó bheirt taighdeoirí ó Choláiste Mhuire gan Smál. Le linn na cuairte chuig do scoil, breathnóidh an fhoireann taighde de bheirt ar thréimhse sa seomra ranga a mhairfidh suas go huair a' chloig le rang roghnaithe ina bhfuil mic léinn le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais. Beidh an ceacht ina dtarlóidh an bhreathnóireacht aontaithe leis an múinteoir ranga roimhré. Déanfaidh an fhoireann taighde athbhreithniú ar pholasaithe na scoile, an tionchar atá ag na polasaithe seo ar sholáthar do dhaltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais, ar phleanáil aonair, ar ábhair mheasúnaithe agus ar samplaí de shaothar na mac léinn.

Ar an dara lá den chuairt ar do scoil, rachfaidh taighdeoir amháin i mbun agallaimh aonair le múinteoirí ranga agus le cúntóirí riachtanais speisialta. Reachtáilfaidh an taighdeoir seo agallamh aonair leis an bpríomhoide mar aon le comhráití le daltaí, ag baint úsáide as an teicníocht 'tarraing agus scríobh' le rogha de dhaltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais sa scoil. Is é a bheidh i gceist leis na comhráití leis na daltaí ná comhrá leo maidir lena dtaithe scoile agus iarrfar orthu ansan pictiúr a tharraingt den scoil. Déanfar soiléir dóibh nach bhfuil aon iachall orthu aon cheist a fhreagairt ná an pictiúr a tharraingt agus go mbeidh siad in ann an grúpa a fhágáil aon uair. Ba mhaith linn chomh maith agallaimh a dhéanamh ar an nguthán le tuismitheoirí dhaltaí le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais id' scoil. Beidh gá gach agallamh a thaifeadú ar téip chun a chinntiú go gcoimeádfar an t-eolas ar fad. Déanfar iniúchadh agus scrúdú géar ar na sonraí chun na téamaí agus na ceisteanna a thagann chun solais ón dtaighde a aithint.

Ghlac an scoil ina bhfuil do pháiste mar dhalta ann le cuireadh a bheith rannpháirteach sa tionscadal taighde agus ba mhór againn do chomhoibriú. Ba mhaith linn anois cuireadh a thabhairt duit agallamh gairid a dheanamh ar an nguthán linn. Cuirfear tús leis na hagallaimh an tseachtain dár tús 24 Márta agus reachtáilfear iad ag am am agus ar lá atá oiriúnach duitse. Arís, beidh gá an t-agallamh a thaifeadú ar téip chun a chinntiú go gcoimeádfar an t-eolas. Is ar bhonn deonach a ghlacfaidh tú páirt sa taighde, agus is féidir diúltiú ceist a fhreagairt agus is féidir tarraingt siar ón tionscadal aon am ar mhian leat. Coimeádfar faisnéis leictreonach agus scríofa faoi rúin, faoi réir ag teorainneacha an dlí, agus ní chuirfear ar fáil iad ach amháin don bhfoireann taighde. Tá seans go n-úsáidfear giotaí óna sonraí bailithe le linn an phróisis thaighde sa tuarascáil deiridh, ach ní tharlóidh sé riamh go luafar d'ainm ná aon shainthréith a bhaineann leat. Stórálfar sonraí a bailíodh don taighde go sábháilte ar ríomhaire cosanta ag pasfhocal agus i gcaibinéid faoi ghlas. Scriosfar na sonraí tar éis tréimhse cúig bliana. D'fhéadfaí sonraí a úsáid i bhfoirm anaithnid in aon fhoilseachán a thagann chun cinn mar thoradh ar an taighde seo.

Má tá suim agat agallamh tuismitheora/caomhnóra a dhéanamh mar chuid den taighde seo, bheimis faoi chomaoin agat ach an fhoirm toilithe iniata a shíniú agus lá agus am oiriúnach chun glaoh a thógáil a chur in iúl ann.

Sa chás go mba mhaith leat go mbeadh do pháiste rannpháirteach sna comhraití leis na daltaí, bheimis faoi chomaoin agat ach an fhoirm toilithe ina léirítear go bhfuil cead á thabhairt agat gur féidir le do pháiste páirt a ghlacadh sa taighde.

Bheimis faoi chomaoin agat ach na foirmeacha anseo thíos a sheoladh ar ais go-dtí an scoil faoin 26/03/14 sa chlúdach litreach atá curtha ar fáil chuige. Tar éis di na foirmeacha a fháil, déanfaidh Ruth Madden, Comhlach Taighde an Tionscadail, teagmháil leat chun do rogha dáta agus am don agallamh a chinntiú leat. Reachtáilfear an t-agallamh le do pháiste ar an dara lá de chuairt na dtaighdeoirí chuig an scoil.

Idir an dá linn ná bíodh leisce ort teagmháil a dhéanamh leis an Dr. Patricia Daly (061 204309) nó leis an Dr. Emer Ring (061 204571) má tá aon cheist agat. Sa chás go bhfuil tú amhrasach faoin staidéar seo agus go mba mhaith leat labhairt le duine neamhspleách, is féidir teagmháil a dhéanamh le:

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Le gach dea-ghuí,

Dr. Patricia Daly agus Dr. Emer Ring

## Foirm Toilithe an Tuismitheora/an Chaomhnóra maidir le Rannpháirtíocht an Pháiste

### Tionscadal Taighde faoin Soláthar d'Uathachas

Tugaim, \_\_\_\_\_, do mo pháiste, \_\_\_\_\_, a bheith rannpháirteach sa tionscadal taighde den teideal "Measúnú ar Sholáthar Oideachais do Pháistí le Neamhoird de chuid Speictream an Uathachais i bPoblacht na hÉireann' atá á reachtáil ag Coláiste Mhuire gan Smál, Luimneach, ar son na Comhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta. Tá faisnéis leordhóthanach faighte agam faoin tionscadal agus tuigim cén saghas tionscadail thaighde atá i gceist. Táim sásta gur féidir na sonraí a úsáid i bhfoirm anaithid in aon fhoilseacháin a thagann ar an saol mar thoradh ar an tionscadal seo.

Sínithe:	
Dáta:	

## Foirm Toilithe an Tuismitheora/an Chaomhnóra

### Tionscadal Taighde faoin Soláthar d'Uathachas

Ainm:	
Scoil:	
Guthán:	
R-phost:	

Táim \_\_\_\_\_ toilteanach a bheith rannpháirteach sa tionscadal taighde den teideal 'Measúnú ar Sholáthar Oideachais do Pháistí le Neamhoird de chuid Speictream an Uathachais i bPoblacht na hÉireann' atá á reachtáil ag Coláiste Mhuire gan Smál, Luimneach, ar son na Comhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta. Tá faisnéis leordhóthanach faighte agam faoin tionscadal agus tuigim cén saghas tionscadail thaighde atá i gceist. Táim sásta gur féidir na sonraí a úsáid i bhfoirm anaithid in aon foilseacháin a thagann ar an saol mar thoradh ar an tionscadal seo.

Lá a oireann dom:	
Am a oireann dom:	
Sonraí Teagmhála:	

Sínithe:	
Dáta:	

## Litir Eolais na Daltaí

### Comhráití le Daltaí

Déarfadh an taighdeoir leis an dalta go mba mhaith léi labhairt leo faoin scoil. Cuirfidh an taighdeoir in iúl do na daltaí go bhfuil sí tar éis labhairt/nó go mbeidh sí ag labhairt leis an bpríomhoide, le múinteoirí, le cúntóirí riachtanais speisialta agus le tuismitheoirí faoin scoil. Cuirfidh an taighdeoir in iúl do na daltaí go nglaoití 'taighde' ar seo agus go bhfuil sé/sí ag labhairt le gach duine agus go scríobhfaidh sé/sí faoina rudaí a deireann said uile i leabhar.

Taispeánfaidh sé/sí an gléas taifeadta don daltaí agus déarfadh sé/sí leo go dtagann an gléas ar siúl nuair a bhrúann tú an cnaipe seo agus go dtosnaíonn sé ag taifeadú agus gur féidir an gléas a mhúchadh trí chnaipe eile a bhrú. Taispeánfaidh sé/sí do na daltaí conas taifeadú a dhéanamh agus tabharfaidh sé/sí cead dóibh a bheith rannpháirteach sa phróiseas seo chun a chinntiú go dtuigeann siad an coincheap agus chun gur féidir leo iad féin a chloisint.

Cuirfear in iúl do mhic léinn nach bhfuil orthu páirt a ghlacadh sa taighde munar mhian leo. Déarfad leo sa chás go nglacann siad páirt sa taighde gur féidir leo an grúpa a fhágáil aon uair gur mhian leat agus go bhfuil sé ceart go leor dóibh amhlaidh a dhéanamh.

Nuair a bheidh na comhráití leis na daltaí á reachtáil tabharfar aird ar na dúshláin ó thaobh na cumarsáide a bhíonn ag daltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais, achar airde na ndaltaí, leibhéal inspreagtha agus comhoibrithe agus cuirfear ceisteanna éagsúla ag brath ar chastacht agus ar luas. Tabharfar aird ar leith do na deacrachtaí a bhíonn ag daltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais ceisteanna a phróiseáil agus go mbíonn níos mó ama ag teastáil chun ceisteanna a fhreagairt (Dent, 1986; Dockrell, Lewis and Lindsay, 2000; Parsons *et al.* 2009). Beidh an taighdeoir aireach faoi fhreagairtí na ndaltaí agus cuirfidh sé/sí deireadh leis an gcomhrá má bhíonn sé soiléir nach bhfuil an dalta compórdach. Tabharfar aird chuí do na prionsabail atá léirithe sa cháipéis *Guidance for Developing Ethical Research Projects Involving Children*, foilsithe ag an Roinn Leanáil agus Gnóthaí Óige (2012). Tar éis na ceisteanna a chur, bainfear úsáid as deardh taiscéalaíoch ag baint úsáide as teicníochtaí rannpháirtíochta ealaínbhunaithe ina léirítear tuiscint gurab iad na daltaí atá ina saineolaithe ina saolta féin (Lambert *et al.*, 2013). Iarrfar ar dhaltaí pictiúr a tharraingt den scoil agus beidh an taighdeoir ag caint leis na daltaí aonair le linn an phróisis seo faoina bpictiúir (Pridmore and Bendelow, 1995; Dixon *et al.*, 1999; Lambert *et al.*, 2013).

Sar a chuirfear tús leis an gcomhrá leis an dalta, lorgófar aontú na ndaltaí. Is é atá i gceist le haontú ná aontú dearfach an dalta go bhfuil sé/sí sásta páirt a ghlacadh sa taighde ar an mbonn go dtuigeann sé/sí, go pointe éigin, cuspóir an taighde agus na hiarmhairtí a bhaineann le rannpháirtíocht ann (Sieber, 1992; Alderson and Goodwin, 1993).



Seo a leanas an scríopt agus na ceisteanna molta

*Dia dhuit, is mise \_\_\_\_\_*

*Táim anseo inniu mar go mba mhaith liom labhairt leat faoin scoil. Ba mhaith liom a fháil amach cad a déanann tú ar scoil, cad a thaitníonn leat faoin scoil agus cad nach dtaitníonn leat faoin scoil. Nuair atáimid críochnaithe ag caint, ba mhaith liom dá dtarraingeofá pictiúr den scoil agus de roinnt de na rudaí a phléamar inár gcomhrá.*

*Beidh mé ag caint chomh maith leis an bpríomhoide, leis an múinteoir, leis an gcúntoir riachtanais speisialta agus le roinnt dod' thuismitheoirí faoin scoil. Tá an chaint seo ar fad á dhéanamh agam mar go bhfuil 'taighde' ar siúl agam. Tarlaíonn 'Taighde' nuair a bhfaigheann tú amach an-chuid rudaí agus nuair a chuireann tú isteach i leabhar iad. Scríobhfaidh mé an méid a déarfaidh tú liom isteach i leabhar agus cuirfidh mé roinnt dod' pictiúir sa leabhar chomh maith. Ní bheidh d'ainm ná do scoil sa leabhar díreach an méid a deireann tú liom agus do phictiúr. Tá áthas an domhain orm go bhfuil tú ag cabhrú liom leis seo.*

*Ach, ní gá duit labhairt liom muna dteastaíonn uait. Má theastaíonn uait na ceisteann a stopadh, ní gá duit ach 'Ba mhaith liom é seo a stopadh' a rá liom. Muna dteastaíonn uait pictiúr a tharraingt tá sé sin ceart go leor chomh maith. Is féidir leat an grúpa a fhágail aon uair gur mhaith leat agus filleadh ar an obair eile a bhí ar bun agat.*

*Táim chun ár gcomhrá a thairfeadú ionas gur féidir liom éisteacht leis go cúramach níos déanaí toisc go bhfuil an méid a bheidh le rá agat an-tábhachtach. Tá tairfeadán anseo chun é seo a dhéanamh. Brúfaidh mé an cnaipe glas chun an tairfeadán a chur ag obair agus nuair a bhrúfaidh mé an cnaipe dearg stopfaidh an tairfeadán ag obair. Chífidh an bhfuil an tairfeadán ag obair sar a gcuirfidh tús lenár gcomhrá. Nuair a bhrúim an cnaipe glas déarfaimis 'dia dhuit' le chéile agus ansan seinnfidh mé duit é ionas gur féidir leat a sheiceáil an bhfuil sé ag obair i gceart.*

*Sar a dtosnóimid, ba mhaith liom a bheith cinnte go bhfuil gach uile duine agaibh sásta tosnú, mar sin tá bileog an duine agam daoibh chun é a shíniú dom. Léifidh mé an scríbhneoireacht agus is féidir leat marc a chur ar an lámh ghlas má aontaíonn tú (nó má tá tú sásta) leis na rudaí a deirim agus mar an lámh dhearg muna n-aontaíonn tú (nó muna bhfuil tú sásta) leis na rudaí a deirim. Ná dean dearmad nach gá duit labhairt liom muna dteastaíonn uait agus mar sin go bhfuil sé ceart go leor marc a chur ar an lámh dhearg.*

## Foirm Toilithe an Dalta

Ainm an Dalta:

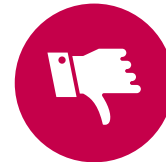
An bhfuil tú sásta labhairt liom innin faoin scoil?



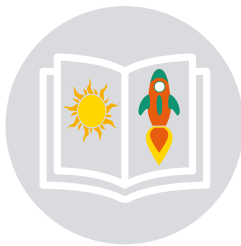
An bhfuil tú sásta go scríobhfaidh mé síos an méid a deireann tú liom i mo leabhar?



An bhfuil tú sásta pictiúr a tharraingt den scoil?



An bhfuil tú sásta cead a thabhairt dom do phictiúr a chur i mo leabhar?



An bhfuil tú sásta labhairt liom innin faoin scoil?



## Sceideal um Anailís Seomra Ranga agus Faisnéise



### Sceideal um Anailís Seomra Ranga agus Faisnéise

Scoil:
Dáta:
Am:

#### 1. Cultúr agus Ceannaireacht Scoile

		Breathnóireacht
1.1	Tá an scoil <b>ard-uaimhianach</b> maidir leis na <b>hardaidhmeanna</b> gur féidir lena mic léinn le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais a bhaint amach. Sa chultúr seo tá cultúr dearfach scoile agus cuirtear béim ar <b>eochairscileanna</b> agus ar <b>neamhspleáchas</b> a bhaint amach.	
1.2	Cuireann an scoil <b>deiseanna</b> agus <b>acmhainní</b> ar fáil do mhic léinn le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais chun gur féidir leo a bheith rannpháirteach in <b>imeachtaí níos leithne</b> sa scoil agus sa phobal araon.	
1.3	Tá <b>réimse deiseanna</b> ag an mac léinn le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais agus lena p(h) iaraí nach bhfuil neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais acu a bheith i bpáirt lena chéile i ngníomhaíochtaí lasmuigh agus laistigh den seomra ranga.	

#### 2. Timpeallacht Foghlama

		Breathnóireacht
2.1	Tá an scoil tiomanta chun feabhas a chur ar <b>timpeallacht fhisiceach</b> na scoile, chun freastal ar na <b>riachtanais fhisiceacha, mhothúchána, sóisialta agus aeistéitice</b> atá ag mic léinn le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais.	
2.2	Tógann an timpeallacht foghlama <b>scileanna foghlama aonair</b> agus <b>spéiseanna</b> na mac léinn le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais san áireamh agus déantar <b>athchóiriú ar an timpeallacht fhisiceach</b> chun <b>struchtúr</b> agus <b>intuarthacht amhairc</b> a sholáthar.	

		Breathnóireacht
2.3	Cuirtear <b>dóthain spáis</b> ar fáil do mhic léinn le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais chun <b>a bheith compórdach</b> agus chun féinrialú a chur i bhfeidhm de réir mar is gá agus chun gur féidir <b>sosanna foghlama agus gluaiseachta</b> a thógaint le linn am ranga.	
2.4	Cuirtear <b>réimse de thacaíochtaí</b> (tadhlaigh, radharcach, éistitheach) ar fáil chun cabhrú le mic léinn le neamhoird de chuid speictream an uathachais timpeallacht na scoile a thuiscint agus a láimhseáil.	

### 3. Measúnú

		Breathnóireacht
3.1	Is é atá i <b>bpolasaí measúnaithe</b> na scoile ná <b>ráiteas scríofa ina dtugtar cur síos ar aidhmeanna an mheasúnaithe</b> , agus ina dtugtar cur síos ar conas a thabharfaidh an scoil aghaidh ar <b>mheasúnú ar fhoghlaim</b> agus ar <b>mheasúnú le haghaidh foghlama</b> laistigh de gach réimse den gcuraclam.	
3.2	Tá an próiseas measúnaithe mar <b>chuid de ghnáthchúrsaí an lae</b> sa scoil agus tarlaíonn sé i <b>ngach comhthéasc foghlama ábhartha laistigh den suíomh scoile</b> .	
3.3	Baintear úsáid as <b>réimse d'uirlisí measúnaithe</b> a thógann san áireamh <b>céim foghlama agus forbartha</b> an mhic léinn agus <b>riachtanais fhoghlama aonair</b> an mhic léinn. Baintear úsáid as measúnuithe <b>deartha go sonrach do neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais</b> de réir mar is cuí chun <b>teanga</b> agus cumarsáid, iompar, forás mothúcháinach agus forbairt shóisialta, scileanna súgartha agus neamhspleáchas a mheas.	
3.4	Nuair atá iompraíocht dhúshlánach i gceist, déantar <b>measúnú ar iompraíocht fheidhmiúil</b> agus mar thoradh ar seo aithnítear <b>socruithe timpeallachta</b> agus <b>tacaíochtaí iompair dearfacha</b> gur féidir a chur i bhfeidhm.	

### 4. Pleanáil Aonair

		Breathnóireacht
4.1	Tá <b>plean aonair reatha agus ábhartha</b> in áit chun aghaidh a thabhairt ar na riachtanais fhoghlama tosaíochta a bheadh ag mac léinn le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais.	

		Breathnóireacht
4.2	Tá an plean <b>aonair</b> bunaithe ar <b>láidreachtaí</b> agus ar <b>riachtanais measta</b> agus tá buneolas ann maidir le <b>pleanáil</b> , le <b>cur i bhfeidhm</b> , le <b>monatóireacht</b> agus le <b>measúnú</b> chláir an mhic léinn.	
4.3	Cuirtear spriocanna foghlama le chéile ag tagairt <b>do leibhéal feidhmíochta reatha</b> agus d’aois an mhic léinn, mar aon le <b>láidreachtaí</b> agus <b>riachtanais ar leith an mhic léinn</b> .	
4.4	Tá na tréithe seo a leanas ag na spriocanna foghlama – <b>sonrach, inmheasta, aontaithe, réalaíoch</b> agus faoi cheangal <b>ama</b> . Tá cur síos soiléir tugtha faoina <b>straitéis</b> , na <b>modheolaíochtaí</b> agus faoin <b>ábhar</b> atá ag teastáil chun na sainspriocanna foghlama a mhúineadh.	
4.5	Tá <b>dátaí athbhreithnithe aontaithe</b> agus <b>leagtha amach</b> sa phlean.	
4.6	Tá mic léinn <b>páirteach ina bpleanáil</b> agus <b>measúnú oideachais féin de réir mar is cuí</b> agus iarrtar a gcomhairle uathu maidir lena rannpháirtíocht sa lá scoile agus i ngníomhaíochtaí na scoile.	
4.7	Tá <b>baint</b> ag tuismitheoirí le plean aonair an mhic léinn agus téann an scoil i <b>gcomhairle</b> leo faoin bplean ar bhonn leanúnach.	
4.8	Tá cur chuige comhoibríoch maidir le pleanáil aonair i bhfeidhm laistigh den scoil.	
4.9	Baintear úsáid as <b>seirbhísí seachtracha</b> sa phróiseas pleanála de réir mar is cuí.	

## 5. Pleanáil Idirlinne

		Breathnóireacht
5.1	Is próiseas <b>comhoibríoch, leanúnach</b> agus <b>solúbtha</b> í pleanáil idirlinne atá deartha go sonrach chun freastal ar riachtanais aonair na mac léinn le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais.	

		Breathnóireacht
5.2	<p>Oibríonn tuismitheoirí, mic léinn, baill foirne lena bhaineann sé agus gníomhaireachtaí seachtracha le chéile chun <b>tabhairt faoi phleanáil do mhórhóirí idirlinne</b> ina measc bheadh:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aimsiú an tsuímh <b>is tacúla</b> do thrasdul oideachais.</li> <li>• An tuiscint go bhfuil gach ball foirne <b>aireach</b> faoina bhfreagrachtaí aonair laistigh den bpróiseas idirlinne do gach mac léinn le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais.</li> <li>• Go raibh straitéis in áit chun cabhrú leis an mac léinn <b>le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais dul i dtaithe ar an suíomh atá le teacht</b> (físeanna agus cuairteanna ar an suíomh scoile/suíomh iarscoile nua, scéalta sóisialta, sceidil, bualadh le múinteoirí féach ar an seomra ranga)</li> <li>• Leagtar amach <b>amlínte</b> do chríochnú na ngníomhaíochtaí.</li> </ul>	

## 6. Curaclam

		Breathnóireacht
6.1	Tá teacht ag mic léinn le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais <b>ar chreat curaclaim Aistear/ar churaclam na bunscoile/na meánscoile</b>	
6.2	<b>Déantar freastal ar éagsúlacht chumais</b> in ábhar an <b>churaclaim</b> a déanann tagairt <b>d'inniúlachtaí</b> agus do <b>riachtanais</b> fhoghlama na mac léinn.	
6.3	Cuireann an <b>curaclam</b> réimse <b>deiseanna</b> ar fáil chun scileanna <b>cumarsáide, súgartha</b> agus <b>samhlaíochta</b> a fhorbairt.	
6.4	<b>Tá múnláir an tsoláthair</b> laistigh den scoil deartha chun <b>taithí oideachais</b> na mac léinn le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais a optamú.	

## 7. Modheolaíochtaí Teagaisc

		Breathnóireacht
7.1	Tá roinnt <b>modheolaíochtaí, gníomhaíochtaí, taithí</b> agus <b>ábhair ábharthacha</b> in úsáid sa teagasc agus sa mhúineadh chun gur féidir le mic léinn tabhairt faoi fhoghlaim <b>bhríoch</b> .	

		Breathnóireacht
7.2	<b>Cuirtear tacaíochtaí teagaisc agus timpeallachta</b> (mar shampla, tacaíochtaí amhairc agus eagraíochtúla, TFC, Teicneolaíocht Oiriúnaitheach agus Cumarsáid Mhalartach Bhreitheach, teanga chomharthaíochta san áireamh, agus cúnamh breise ó dhaoine fásta), ar fáil chun <b>neamhspleáchas agus rannpháirtíocht na mac léinn a mhéadú, rud a chuireann le rannpháirtíocht</b> i ngníomhaíochtaí scoile, le cumarsáid ghabhálach agus a chabhraíonn chun tréimhsí idirlinne a éascú	
7.3	<b>Déantar teagasc aonair nuair is gá</b> , teagasc atá bunaithe ar mheasúnú agus a thógann san áireamh <b>láidreachtaí, suimeanna agus roghanna na mac léinn</b> . Baintear úsáid as réimse de ghníomhaíochtaí chun na bunscileanna agus bunchoincheapa a theagaisc do mhic léinn le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais.	
7.4	Cuirtear an iliomad deiseanna ar fáil do mhic léinn chun chun freagairt, chun rannpháirtíocht ghníomhach a chothú, a chur chun cinn agus a úsáid.	
7.5	Is teagasc <b>dea-eagraithe, dea-structúrtha</b> agus <b>dea-phleanáilte</b> a chuirtear ar fáil; tugann an fhoireann rabhadh roimhré, nuair is féidir, faoi aon athrú a d'fhéadfadh teacht ar gháth chúrsaí an lae ar bhealach a déanann ciall do mhac léinn le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais.	
7.6	Tá saothar críochnaithe na mac léinn curtha ar taispeáint agus taispeántar <b>réimse cothrom de ghrúpobair agus de shaothar aonair</b> .	
7.7	Tá foireann teagaisc <b>ábhartha</b> ar an eolas faoina gnéithe céadfacha de neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais agus faoin tionchar a d'fhéadfadh a bheith ag na gnéithe seo ar fhoghlaim an pháiste agus baintear úsáid as straitéisí oiriúnacha chun tacú leis an bpáiste deileáil leis na deacrachtaí seo.	
7.8	Déantar bainistiú éifeachtach ar thacaíocht an <b>Chúntóra um Riachtanas Speisialta</b> .	

## 8. Bailiú Sonraí/Monatóireacht ar Dhul Chun Cinn/Torthaí

		Breathnóireacht
8.1	Tá béim shoiléir curtha ar mhonatóireacht agus ar dhul chun cinn na mac léinn a thairfead agus ar éifeachtacht na modheolaíochtaí teagaisc. Baintear úsáid as sonraí ar bhonn leanúnach chun cur le teagasc agus le foghlaim.	

		Breathnóireacht
8.2	Déantar an t-eolas a bailíodh a roinnt agus a phlé le tuismitheoirí agus le <b>daoine gairmiúla</b> cuí de réir na bprótacal a bhaineann le <b>rúndacht</b> .	
8.3	Baintear úsáid as próisis bailithe sonraí agus monatóireachta chun cur le <b>féinmheastóireacht na mac léinn, féinmheastóireacht an mhúinteora</b> agus <b>féinmheastóireacht na scoile trí chéile</b> .	

## 9. Cur chuige Foirne

		Breathnóireacht
9.1	<b>Comhoibríonn</b> an fhoireann laistigh den scoil le chéile agus le <b>tuismitheoirí</b> agus le <b>daoine/seirbhísí gairmiúla seachtracha</b> go héifeachtach trí chomhphleanáil agus trí eolas agus saineolas a roinnt.	
9.2	Tá <b>bealaí soiléire cumarsáide</b> le <b>tuismitheoirí/cúramóirí</b> , le gach duine <b>gairmiúil ábhartha</b> atá ag obair le gach mac léinn le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais, agus leis an <b>mac léinn</b> .	

## 10. Rannpháirtíocht Tuismitheoirí agus Páistí

		Breathnóireacht
10.1	Tá meas ag an scoil ar ról agus <b>rannpháirtíocht na dtuismitheoirí</b> .	
10.2	Tá an mac léinn páirteach i ngach cinneadh a bhaineann le pleanáil agus le hoideachas, de réir mar is cuí.	

## 11. Forbairt Foirne

		Breathnóireacht
11.1	Déantar foráil chun an tuiscint agus an t-eolas atá ag an bhfoireann uile faoi neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais a fhorbairt.	
11.2	Cuireann bainistíocht na scoile Forbairt Ghairmiúil Leanúnach chórasach ar fáil do gach ball foirne atá ag obair le páistí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais.	
11.3	Cuirtear bealaí agus deiseanna ar fáil don bhfoireann a bhfuil saineolas acu faoi neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais eolas a roinnt ar bhaill foirne eile sa scoil.	



Uimhir	Céatadán/Luach
1	0-10% – Riamh/Beagnach riamh
2	11-20% – Go hannamh
3	21-50% – Uaireanta
4	51-90% – Go minic
5	91-100% – I gcónaí/Beagnach i gcónaí

## Sceideal Agallaimh Leath-structúrtha le Príomhoide na Scoile

### Cultúr agus Ceannaireacht na Scoile

1. Cad iad na leasanna a bhaineann le sain-sholáthar oideachais do dhaltáí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais a bheith ar fáil sa scoil?
2. An bhfuil dúshláin ann toisc go bhfuil soláthar oideachais do dhaltáí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais ar fáil sa scoil?
3. An dóigh leat go bhfuil soláthar oideachais do dhaltáí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais mar dhlúthchuid den soláthar oideachais atá ar fáil sa chuid eile den scoil?
4. An bhfuil cur chuige ar leith i bhfeidhm sa scoil trí chéile chun freastal ar riachtanais daltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais?
5. Conas a déantar tacaíocht an chuntóra riachtanais speisialta a bhainistiú sa scoil de réir mar a bhaineann sé le neamhord ar speictream an uathachais?
6. An bhfuil ceisteanna ar leith duitse, mar phríomhoide na scoile, a bhaineann le bainistiú an tsoláthair do dhaltáí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais?
7. An bhfuair tú aon ullmhúchán gairmiúil agus/nó an bhfuil aon taithí roimhe seo agat freastal ar riachtanais dhaltáí le neamhord ar speictream an uathachais?
8. An bhfeiceann tú nasc idir sholáthar do scoil do dhaltáí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais agus éiteas/misean do scoil/na nAontaobhaithe?

### Timpeallacht Fhoghlama

9. An bhfuil aon athchóirithe ar leith déanta agat ar timpeallacht fhisiceach na scoile chun freastal ar riachtanais éagsúla daltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais?

### Measúnú

10. Cad iad na modhanna mheasúnaithe atá in úsáid sa scoil do dhaltáí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais?

### Pleanáil Aonair

11. An bhfuil pleanáil aonair in áit do gach dalta le neamhord ar speictream an uathachais sa scoil?
12. Cé chomh rannpháirteach is atá tuismitheoirí, daltaí agus seirbhísí seachtracha sa phleanáil aonair?

### Idirlinnte

13. An bhfuil prótacail in áit do phleanáil idirlinne do thrasdul daltaí isteach agus amach as an scoil?
14. Cé atá páirteach sa phleanáil idirlinne?

### Curaclam

15. Cén leibhéal rochtana atá ag daltaí id' scoil ar an gcuraclam ginearálta (iar-bhuscoil: ábhair scrúdaithe)?

### Modheolaíochtaí Teagaisc

16. Cén feasacht a bheadh ag an bhfoireann maidir le modheolaíochtaí a bhaineann go sonrach le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais?
17. Cén feasacht a bheadh ag an bhfoireann maidir leis na gnéithe céadfacha de neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais?
18. Conas a déantar forbairt ar an bhfeasacht seo?

### Cur chuige Foirne

19. An bhfuil daoine gairmiúla seachtracha go dtéann tú i gcomhairle leo maidir le daltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais sa scoil?
20. Conas mar a thugann daoine gairmiúla seachtracha tacaíocht do mhúinteoirí?
21. Cad iad na bealaí ina oibríonn na múinteoirí laistigh den scoil chun cumarsáid a dhéanamh le baill foirne eile faoi cheisteanna a bhaineann le daltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais?

### Rannpháirtíocht Tuismitheoirí/Cúramóirí

22. An bhfuil tuismitheoirí/cúramóirí daltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais páirteach i gclár oideachais a ndaltaí?
23. An bhfuil struchtúir ar leith i bhfeidhm chun rannpháirtíocht tuismitheoirí a éascú?

### Forbairt Foirne

24. An bhfuil oideachas inseirbhíse i limistéar na neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais ar fáil go héasca agus an féidir teacht ar go héasca?
25. Conas a tugtar tacaíocht dod' fhoireann chun oideachas inseirbhíse a aimsiú sa limistéar seo?
26. An bhfuil deiseanna do phríomhoidí teacht ar oideachas inseirbhíse a bhaineann le do ról sa limistéar seo?

### Críoch

27. An bhfuil aon ghné eile dod' thaithí maidir le freastal ar riachtanais dhaltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais atá tábhachtach dar leat ach nár pléadh san agallamh seo?

## Sceideal Agallaimh Leath-structúrtha le Múinteoirí

### Cultúr agus Ceannaireacht na Scoile

1. Cé mhéid tacaíocht a thugann do scoil do dhaltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais ionas gur féidir leo a bheith rannpháirteach i ngníomhaíochtaí uile na scoile?
2. Conas a déantar é seo?

### Timpeallacht Foghlama

3. Cad iad na gnéithe den timpeallacht foghlama sa scoil trí chéile atá ríthábhachtach chun tacú le foghlaim dhaltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais?

### Measúnú

4. Cad iad na modhanna mheasúnaithe a úsáideann tú i bpleanáil agus i soláthar an churaclaim?
5. Cad iad na modhanna mheasúnaithe is éifeachtaí dár leat?
6. Cé chomh minic is a dtéann tú i ngleic le measúnú ar fhoghlaim agus ar theagasc na ndaltaí?
7. An bhfuil cur chuige mheasúnaithe ar leith in úsáid agat maidir le hiompraíocht dhúshlánach?

### Pleanáil Aonair

8. Cén baint atá ag tuismitheoirí/cúramóirí, gníomhaireachtaí seachtracha agus b'fhéidir ag na daltaí iad fhéin sa Pleanáil Aonair?
9. Conas a bhaintear úsáid as Pleananna Aonair sa scoil?
10. An bhfuil pleanáil aonair in áit do gach dalta le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais sa scoil?

### Idirlinnte

11. An bhfuil prótacail in áit do thrasdul an dalta isteach sa scoil agus amach ón scoil?
12. Cé atá páirteach sa phleanáil idirlinne?

### Curaclam

13. Cén leibhéal rochtana atá ag daltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais ar an gcuraclam go ginearálta (iar-bhunscoil: ábhair scrúdaithe)?
14. Ar cén bhealach a fheastalaíonn an curaclam ar éagsúlachtaí cumais dhaltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais?
15. Conas a déanann an curaclam forbairt ar scileanna samhlaíochta, súgartha/caitheamh aimsire, sóisialta agus cumarsáide na ndaltaí?

### Modheolaíochtaí Teagaisc

16. Cad iad na modheolaíochtaí teagaisc sa churaclam go ginearálta atá úsáideach dar leat chun daltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais a theagaisc?
17. An bhfuil modheolaíochtaí teagaisc ar leith a úsáideann tú toisc go bhfuil neamhord ar speictream an uathachais ag na daltaí?
18. An féidir leat sampla a thabhairt dom faoi conas a thógann tú riachtanais speisialta, láidreachtaí agus roghanna na ndaltaí san áireamh agus dalta le neamhord ar speictream an uathachais á múineadh agat?
19. Bíonn difríochtaí céadfacha ag daltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais – conas a chuireann siad isteach ar fhoghlaim na ndaltaí?
20. Cad iad na straitéisí a úsáideann tú chun freastal ar na difríochtaí céadfacha seo?
21. Conas a déantar bainistiú ar thacaíocht an chúntóra um riachtanais speisialta id' sheomra ranga?

### Monatóireacht ar Dhul Chun Cinn/ar Thorthaí

22. Conas a déanann tú monatóireacht agus taifeadú ar dhul chun cinn na ndaltaí?
23. Conas a roinneann tú sonraí faoi dhul chun cinn le tuismitheoirí/cúramóirí?

### Cur chuige Foirne

24. An dtéann tú i gcomhairle le daoine gairmiúla seachtracha faoina daltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais id' rang?
25. Cad iad na tacaíochtaí a thugann na daoine gairmiúla seachtracha duit?
26. An gceapann tú go bhfuil na moltaí agus an chomhairle a thugann na daoine gairmiúla duit úsáideach agus go bhfuil sé éasca iad a chur i bhfeidhm sa seomra ranga?
27. Cad iad na bealaí ina oibríonn tú laistigh den scoil chun cumarsáid a dhéanamh le baill foirne eile faoi cheisteanna a bhaineann le daltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais?

### Rannpháirtíocht Tuismitheoirí/Chúramóirí

28. An bhfuil tuismitheoirí/cúramóirí daltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais páirteach i gclár oideachais a ndaltaí?
29. An bhfuil struchtúir ar leith in áit a éascaíonn rannpháirtíocht tuismitheoirí?
30. An bhfuil struchtúir in áit a thugann tacaíocht do chumarsáid idir tú féin agus tuismitheoirí?

### Forbairt Foirne

31. An bhfuil oideachas inseirbhíse i limistéar na neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais ar fáil go héasca agus inrochtana go héasca?
32. Conas a tugtar tacaíocht duit chun oideachas inseirbhíse a aimsiú sa limistéar seo?
33. An dtugtar deiseanna duit do shaineolas sa réimse seo a roinnt le do chomhghleacaithe ?

**Críoch**

34. An bhfuil aon ghné eile dod' thaithí maidir le freastal ar riachtanais dhaltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais atá tábhachtach dar leat ach nár pléadh san agallamh seo?

## Sceideal Agallaimh Leath-struchtúrtha le Cúntóir Riachtanais Speisialta

**Cultúr agus Ceannaireacht na Scoile**

1. Conas a dhéanfá cur síos ar do ról agus tú ag obair le daltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais sa scoil?
2. An bhfuil ról agat maidir le trasdul na ndaltaí ar agus as a gcóras iompar?
3. An bhfuil baint agat le tacú le daltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais le linn amanna neamh-theagaisc cosúil le sosanna, le ham lóin agus le gníomhaíochtaí eile a bhaineann leis an scoil?

**Timpeallacht Fhoghlama**

4. An bhfuil baint agat le tacaíocht a thabhairt do dhaltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais chun tabhairt faoi gníomhaíochtaí atá ar siúl don scoil ar fad?

**Curaclam**

5. Cad iad na heochair-ghnéithe dod' ról maidir le riachtanais chúraimí na ndaltaí a bhainistiú?

**Cur chuige Foirne**

6. Conas a ghlacann tú páirt i bpleanáil na foirne do dhaltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais sa scoil (Pleananna Oideachais don Dalta Aonair/Idirlinn/Iompar)

**Forbairt Foirne**

7. An bhfuil oideachas inseirbhíse i limistéar na neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais ar fáil go héasca agus gur féidir teacht ar go héasca?
8. Cén saghas tacaíochta a bhfaigheann tú chun dul sa tóir ar oideachas inseirbhíse sa limistéar seo?

**Críoch**

9. An bhfuil aon ghné eile dod' thaithí maidir le tacú le daltaí le neamhoird ar speictream an uathachais atá tábhachtach dar leat ach nár pléadh san agallamh seo?

## Sceideal Agallaimh Leath-struchtúrtha le Tuismitheoirí/le Cúramóirí

**Sceideal Agallaimh Leath-struchtúrtha le Tuismitheoirí/le Cúramóirí**

1. Cathain ar thug tú faoi deara ar dtús go mb'fhéidir go raibh riachtanais difriúla ag do pháiste?
2. Cén aois é do pháiste anois agus cén aois a bhí sé/sí nuair a deineadh an fáthmheas go raibh neamhord ar speictream an uathachais air/uirthí?
3. An féidir leat rud éigint a insint dom faoi phróiseas an fháthmheasa?
4. Cathain ar chláraigh do pháiste sa scoil seo don chéad uair?
5. Arbh í seo do rogha scoile dod' pháiste faoi láthair?

**Cultúr agus Ceannaireacht na Scoile**

6. Cé chomh sásta is atá tú go bhfuil an soláthar oideachais atá á sholáthar ag an scoil ag freastal ar riachtanais mheasta do pháiste?
7. Conas mar a chomhtháthaíonn soláthar oideachais do pháistí le neamhord ar speictream an uathachais leis an soláthar oideachais sa chuid eile den scoil, dar leat?
8. Cén leibhéal rannpháirtíochta atá ag do pháiste tógtha i ngníomhaíochtaí uile na scoile?

**Timpeallacht Fhoghlama**

9. An bhfuil tú sásta go dtugann timpeallacht fhisiceach na scoile tacaíocht do riachtanais do pháiste m.sh. leagan amach an tseomra ranga, leagan amach na scoile agus úsáid an chlóis scoile.

**Measúnú**

10. Cad iad na modhanna mheasúnaithe úsáidte sa scoil dod' pháiste?

**Pleanáil Aonair**

11. An bhfuil Pleanáil Aonair in áit dod' pháiste?
12. Cé chomh rannpháirteach is atá tú i bhforbairt agus i léirmheas na pleanála seo?
13. An bhfuil páirt ag do pháiste ar aon bhealach i bhforbairt a bplean aonair féin?
14. Cé chomh rannpháirteach is atá daoine gairmiúla ó lasmuigh den scoil sa phróiseas seo, m.sh., síceolaí, teiripeoir urlabhra agus teanga agus teiripeoir saothair?
15. Conas a chuireann tú le, agus conas a thugann tú tacaíocht do chur i bhfeidhm an chláir dod' pháiste?

**Idirlinnte**

16. Conas mar a dheileálann do pháiste le hathrú nó le timpeallachtaí nua?
17. Mar thuismitheoir, conas a chabhraíonn tú le hidirlinn nó le hathrú?
18. Cad iad na tacaíochtaí atá nó a bhí ar fáil chun cabhrú leis an idirlinn nó leis an athrú ón scoil nó go dtí an scoil?
19. An raibh eagraíochtaí difriúla páirteach san idirlinn chuig nó ón scoil?

**Curaclam**

20. Maidir le réimsí foghlama cosúil le litearthacht, le huimhearthacht, le healaín, le ceol, le corpoideachas, le hoideachas sóisialta pearsanta agus sláinte, le heolaíocht, le stair agus le tír eolas – cé chomh sásta is atá tú go bhfuil siad ag freastal ar riachtanais do pháiste? (scoil náisiúnta)
21. An bhfuil tú sásta go bhfuil an rochtain chéanna ag do pháiste ar réimsí ábhar agus ar scrúduithe an churaclaim is mar atá ag páistí eile? [meánscoil]
22. An bhfuil tú sásta leis na hacmhainní atá in áit chun tacú le do pháiste?

**Cur chuige Foirne/Rannpháirtíocht Tuismitheoirí/Cúramóirí**

23. An bhfuil a fhios agat an bpléann an múinteoir ranga, an cúntóir riachtanais speisialta agus baill eile den bhfoireann teagaisc láidreachtaí agus riachtanais aonair do pháiste chun cinneadh a dhéanamh faoina hábhair agus na leibhéil is oiriúnaí dod' pháiste?
24. An ceart go mbeifeá-sa, mar an thuismitheoir, páirteach sa phlé seo?

**Críoch**

25. An bhfuil aon ghné eile dod' thaithí a cheapann atá tábhachtach agus nár pléadh san agallamh seo?

## Foirm Toilithe an Dalta

1. Abair liom cad a déanann tú ar scoil?
2. Cad é an rud is mó a thaitníonn leat faoin scoil?
3. Cén fáth go dtaitníonn an rud/na rudaí leat níos mó ná aon rud eile?
4. An bhfuil aon rud nach maith leat a dhéanamh ar scoil?
5. Cén fáth nach maith leat na rudaí/an rud seo a dhéanamh?
6. Cé a thugann cabhair duit le do chuid oibre ar scoil?
7. Cé hiad na cairde atá agat ar scoil?
8. Cad a déanann tú le do chairde?
9. Cad iad na rudaí is mó a thaitníonn leat a dhéanamh le do chairde?
10. An dtaitníonn scoil leat?
11. Ar mhaith leat pictiúr a tharraingt den scoil?
12. Bheadh sé go hiontach dá gcuirfeá tú féin, do chairde agus roinnt de na rudaí a bhíonn ar siúl agat sa phictiúr chomh maith?
13. An féidir leat labhairt liom faoin rud atá tarraingte agat?

*Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir as ucht cabhrú liom le mo chuid oibre agus as ucht labhairt liom faoina rudaí go léir atá ar siúl agaibh ar scoil. Táim buíoch daoibh freisin as ucht na bpictiúr áilne seo a tharraingt, coimeádfaidh mé iad agus cuirfidh mé cuid acu sa leabhar a luaigh mé libh cheana.*

## Foirm Taithí Teagaisc

### Taithí Teagaisc

Cáilíochtaí Teagaisc	Cáilíochtaí Acadúla Eile
<b>Líon na mBlianta caite i mbun Teagaisc <i>roimh</i> do Cheapachán sa Scoil seo (luaigh i laethanta/seachtainí/míonna/blianta m.sh. 3 lá Aibreán 2012/4 seachtain Bealtaine 2013/Márta-Meitheamh 2009/2000-2010. &amp;rl pé acu is ábhartha)</b>	
I Scoil Náisiúnta Phríomhshrutha:	I Scoil Speisialta (sonraigh catagóir na scoile)
I Scoil Speisialta/Rang do Pháistí le Neamhoird de Chuid Speictream an Uathachais:	I Suíomh Eile (tabhair sonraí):
Sa Phost Reatha:	Líon Iomlán na mBlianta Taithí Teagaisc:

### ***Oideachas Inseirbhíse***

***(Luaigh bliain, tréimhse an chlair agus an comhlacht/institiúid chreidiúnaithe)***

#### **Oideachas Speisialta**

**Oideachas a phléann go sonrach le Neamhoird de chuid Speictream an Uathachais**





## Appendix 4: Participant Codes

<b>EI_P</b>	<b>Early Intervention Primary</b>
EI_P_P	Principal
EI_P_SCT	Special Class Teacher
EI_P_SNA	Special Needs Assistant
EI_P_PAR31	Parent – use current identifiers
EI_P_CH1	Child + pseudonym
<b>EI_S</b>	<b>Early Intervention Special School</b>
EI_S_P	Principal
EI_S_SCT	Special Class Teacher
EI_S_SNA	Special Needs Assistant
EI_S_PAR	Parent – use current identifiers
EI_P_CH1	Child + pseudonym
<b>PM</b>	<b>Primary Mainstream</b>
PM_P	Principal
PM_SCT	Primary Mainstream Special Class Teacher
PM_CT	Primary Mainstream Class Teacher
PM_LS/RT	Learning Support/Resource Teacher
PM_SNA	Special Needs Assistant
PM_PAR30	Parent – use current identifiers
PM_CH1	Child + pseudonym
<b>PSC</b>	<b>Primary Special Class</b>
PSC_P	Principal
PSC_SCT	Primary Special Class Teacher
PSC_CT	Class Teacher in a School where there is a Primary Special Class
PSC_SNA	Special Needs Assistant in Primary Special Class
PSC_PAR30	Parent of a Child in a Primary Special Class
PSC_CH1	Child in a Primary Special Class

<b>PPM</b>	<b>Post-Primary Mainstream</b>
PPM_P	Principal
PPM_SCT	Special Class Teacher
PPM_CT	Class Teacher
PPM_SNA	Special Needs Assistant
PPM_PAR29	Parent of a Student included in a Post-Primary Mainstream School
PPM_CO	Co-ordinators of Provision for Students with Special Educational needs
PPM_CH8	Student included in a Post-Primary School
<b>PPSC</b>	<b>Post-Primary Special Class</b>
PPSC_P	Principal in Post-Primary School with a Special Class
PPSC_SCT	Special Class Teacher
PPSC_CT	Class Teacher
PPSC_SNA	Special Needs Assistant
PPSC_PAR26	Parent
PPSC_CO	Co-ordinators of Provision for Students with Special Educational needs
PPSC_CH4	Student in a Post-Primary School
S_MGLD	Mild
S_ModGLD	Moderate
S_SPGLD	Severe and Profound
S_ASD1	ASD Special School
	S_ASD1 = Scoil Trieste (I_SS_ASD originally)
	S_ASD2 = Scoil Aislinn (Ia_SS_ASD originally)
	S_ASD3 = Redhill (Ir_SS_ASD originally)

<b>a</b>	<b>Home-Tuition</b>
HT_H_CH1	Home-Tuition in Home and Child Number for Child (following on from existing number of children in study)
HT_H_PAR1	Home Tuition in Home and Parent Number (following on from existing number of parents in study)
HT_H_T	Home Tuition in Home: Tutor

Home-tuition delivered on a group basis	
HT_S_CH1	Home Tuition in Setting and Child Number for Child (following on from existing number of children in study)
HT_S_PAR1	Home Tuition in Setting and Parent Number (following on from existing number of parents in study)
HT_S_T	Home Tuition in Setting: Tutor
HT_S_DIR	Home Tuition in Setting: Director
July Education Provision	
JEP_H_CH1	July Education Provision in Home and Child Number for Child (following on from existing number of children in study)
JEP_H_PAR1	July Education Provision in Home and Parent Number (following on from existing number of parents in study)
JEP_H_T	July Education Provision in Home: Tutor
Special School Setting	
JEP_S_O	July Education Provision in Special School: Overseer
JEP_S_T	July Education Provision in Special School: Teacher
JEP_S_SNA	July Education Provision in Special School: Special Needs Assistant
JEP_S_PAR1	July Education Provision in Special School and Parent Number (following on from existing number of parents in study)
JEP_S_CH1	This won't be actually needed as no children participated in child conference in special school
Primary School Setting	
JEP_PSC_O	July Education Provision in Primary School Special Class: Overseer
JEP_PSC_T	July Education Provision in Primary School Special Class: Teacher
JEP_PSC_SNA	July Education Provision in Primary School Special Class: Special Needs Assistant
JEP_PSC_PAR1	July Education Provision in Primary School Special Class and Parent Number (following on from existing number of parents in study)
JEP_PSC_CH1	July Education Provision in Primary School Special Class and Child Number (following on from existing number of children in study)



