# How can support teachers contribute to the leadership and management of Special Educational Needs provision in mainstream schools?

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# Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study Doctor of Education, is entirely my own work and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Now that this journey is nearing its conclusion, I look forward to spending much more time with two very special people, my grandsons, Jack and Daniel.

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# List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| **ADHD** | Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder |
| **ASD** | Autistic Spectrum Disorder |
| **CPD** | Continual Professional Development |
| **DEIS** | Delivering Equality in Schools |
| **DES** | Department of Education and Skills |
| **DfES** | Department for Education and Skills |
| **EAL** | English as an Additional Language |
| **EPSEN** | Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs |
| **GAM** | General Allocation Model |
| **GEP** | Group Education Plan |
| **ICT** | Instructional Consultation Team |
| **IEP** | Individual Education Plan |
| **INTO** | Irish National Teachers' Organisation |
| **ISM** | In-School Management |
| **IT** | Information Technology |
| **ITE** | Initial Teacher Education |
| **LRE** | Least Restrictive Environment |
| **LS** | Learning Support |
| **NCCA** | National Council for Curriculum and Assessment |
| **NCSE** | National Council for Special Education |
| **NEPS** | National Education Psychological Service |
| **OECD** | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| **OT** | Occupational Therapist |
| **PD** | Professional Development |
| **PE** | Physical Education |
| **PDST** | Professional Development Service for Teachers |
| **PL** | Professional Learning |
| **PLC** | Primary Language Curriculum |
| **RQ** | Research Question |
| **RT** | Remedial Teacher |
| **SEBD** | Social, Emotional, Behavioural Disorder |
| **SEN** | Special Educational Needs |

| | |
|---|---|
| **SENCo** | Special Education Needs Coordinator |
| **SENO** | Special Education Needs Organiser |
| **SERC** | Special Education Review Committee |
| **SESS** | Special Education Support Service |
| **SET** | Special Education Teacher |
| **SLT** | Speech and Language Therapist |
| **SNA** | Special Needs Assistant |
| **TPN** | Teacher Professional Network |
| **TTA** | Teacher Training Agency |
| **UN** | United Nations |
| **UNCRC** | United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child |
| **UNCRPD** | United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities |
| **UNESCO** | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation |

**How can support teachers contribute to the leadership and management of Special Educational Needs provision in mainstream schools?**

## Celia Walsh

In the past two decades, the development of education for persons with special educational needs in Ireland has reflected the international trend to develop more inclusive educational policies and has led to significant growth in the number of pupils with SEN attending mainstream primary schools. This research considers approaches to leadership and management in inclusive and special education in eight mainstream primary schools. It adds to existing literature by exploring the role of the Special Educational Teacher (SET) with responsibility for the day-to-day provision of special education from the perspectives of the eight SETs and their principals. The study identified the responsibilities, tasks, and duties of those coordinating SEN provision, both formally as part of the in-school management (ISM) team and informally as part of the SEN structure, and the factors that help them fulfil those responsibilities. The extent to which these teachers initiate change and innovation in their schools was also examined. The research comprised a case study approach, with data generated through qualitative research involving focus group interviews, followed by one-to-one semi-structured interviews with SETs and their principals. Reflective diaries were also maintained by the SETs.

Findings indicate that school context is fundamental to the SETs' capacity to lead and influence SEN provision. Shared leadership is evident, with collaborative professionalism and collective initiative existing in all schools, particularly in the implementation of co-teaching approaches. Both formal and informal planning structures are evident, facilitating school-based collaboration and dialogue, principally led by the SET. There is a lack of opportunities to acquire formal qualifications in SEN in the region where the study took place. However, a proposal is provided for the development of in-school communities of practice which could create a sustainable model of professional learning. Increased individual and collective teacher autonomy in SEN provision has recently proved challenging for schools. The findings indicate a lack of confidence in relation to the additional responsibility of SEN resource allocation. A proposal to establish school-to-school networks focussed on SEN matters is offered which may alleviate teacher concerns and provide support and opportunities for mutual dialogue and collective initiatives.

# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Defining Special Educational Needs and Inclusive Education

Traditionally, special education in the Republic of Ireland was provided in a distinctly separate system within special schools, catering for pupils with 'special educational needs' (SEN). The term 'special education needs' is defined in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) as:

> a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition . . . (Government of Ireland, 2004, section 1)

Over the past three decades, there has been unprecedented change in the nature of special education provision due to the growth internationally of the movement towards the integration of pupils with special needs, influenced by international agreements and statements such as the 1994 Salamanca Statement on special needs education (UNESCO, 1994), the 1989United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006) (Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009). This concept, which refers to the placement of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream settings, has gained momentum and has evolved into the more all-encompassing term 'inclusion'. This refers to the manner in which the local school facilitates access to and participation in the curriculum and school cultures. Inclusion also involves the restructuring of policies and practices in schools so that they respond to the diversity of pupils with SEN, through the provision of appropriate educational resources and teaching methodologies (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). In the Irish context, inclusion is defined as:

> Addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners through enabling participation in learning, cultures, and communities and removing barriers within and from education through the accommodation and provision of appropriate

> structures and arrangements to enable each learner to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her attendance at school. (Winter & O'Raw, 2010, p. 39)

In practice, this transition from integration to inclusion signals a move away from the deficit, or potentially discriminatory, medical model of education, in which educational difficulties are explained solely in terms of a child's deficits (Ainscow, 2007), to a more social model, where the emphasis is on assessed need rather than disability category (Logan, 2017).

### 1.2 The Current Policy Context

In the two decades up to 2020, the education of persons with special educational needs has undergone revision in Ireland, reflecting the international trend to develop policy towards the inclusion of pupils with SEN into mainstream schools (Tiernan, Casserly, & Maguire, 2018). Significant growth in the number of pupils with SEN attending mainstream primary schools is indicated by an increase in those who accessed additional supports from resource teachers. This figure grew from 20,138 in 2011 to 31,536 in 2017, an increase of 63.8%, while during the same period the number of pupils attending special schools grew from 7,665 to 8,225, representing only a 6.7% increase.

Further evidence is provided by the increased state expenditure on the provision of special education. Figures rose from €468 million in 2004 to €900 million in 2008 (92% increase), continuing to rise, albeit more slowly, to €1.3 billion in 2011 (44% increase) and culminating in €1.68 billion in 2017, a figure representing 18.9% of the Department of Education and Skills' (DES) total gross allocation (Department of Public Expenditure & Reform, 2018). The majority of this expenditure in 2017 (88%) relates to the pay bill for support staff in mainstream schools. The total number of SEN teaching posts grew from 9,740 in 2011 to 13,400 in 2017. In the same six-year period, the number of special needs

assistants (SNAs) provided to schools to assist children with SEN who also have additional and significant care needs grew from 10,575 to 13,990.

### 1.3 Historical Context

In Ireland, prior to the 1990s, some pupils with disabilities had been denied an education, while others were segregated from mainstream education in special schools and special classes (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). Change began with the Special Education Review Committee Report (1993) signalling a new direction in policy and recommending as much integration as possible. This was followed in 1996 by the Commission Report on the Status of People with Disabilities, which was pivotal in promoting an awareness of inclusion, while highlighting the lack of support services and resources for pupils with SEN. Successful litigation by parents which challenged inadequate educational provision for their children with SEN also has an impact by promoting change in SEN policy and practice (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007).

Changes in legislation, principally the Education Act 1998, provided for the legal right of all children to education. This was followed by the Equal Status Act 2000, outlawing discrimination in the provision of goods and services on nine grounds, including special needs. The most significant legislation, however, was the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004, which established the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), a centralised organisation to administer provision for SEN from a centralised structure, and created local support structures, such as regional SEN organisers, to deliver special educational provision. These legislative changes represented a significant alteration in government policy towards the creation of more inclusive educational environments (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). These developments have converged to provide a commitment to ensuring that children with disabilities now have access to an

appropriate education. The promotion and support of inclusive educational settings, now demanded as a right (O'Gorman and Drudy, 2010), has ensured that the right of parents to choose the appropriate setting for their child's education, underpinned in legislation by the Education Act (1998), is a reality in practice.

From 2005, provision for pupils with SEN was organised under the general allocation model (GAM), designed to provide truly inclusive schools (DES, 2005), with resources determined by such factors as gender (more weighting for boys), socio-economic disadvantage, and school size. However, the model was based on categories of disability rather than assessed needs, and it required unnecessary labelling (Logan, 2017). The allocation of SEN resources was divided between children deemed to have 'low-incidence' disabilities, for example sensory impairments, autism, and assessed syndromes, who were assigned to resource teachers (RTs); and children with 'high-incidence' disabilities, such as specific learning difficulties and borderline or mild general learning disability, who were catered for by learning support teachers (LSTs), appointed on the basis of school enrolment levels (Shevlin & Griffin, 2007).

Some challenges emerged in the implementation of the GAM model of provision. The level of student need for support varied greatly from school to school, and the existing allocation system could not reflect this variation. In addition, a formal diagnosis of disability was required in order to access resources under the 'low-incidence' category. Many pupils were on long waiting lists for a professional diagnosis, during which time resource teaching support could not be provided, although some parents could afford to access private assessments, which reinforced the disadvantage experienced by less well-off families. Finally while pupils with the same category of disability received the same level of resource teaching support, their needs could vary significantly, indicating that allocation should be based on assessed needs rather than disability category (Byrne, 2017). Clearly,

while the aim of implementing the GAM model was to promote inclusion, dependency on assessment procedures and the overemphasis on deficit labels was actually creating a system that was discriminatory (Rose, 2017) and inequitable, and potentially confirming social disadvantage while reinforcing social advantage (Byrne, 2017). Since it was neither equitable nor effective to allocate additional state resources without considering the actual level of educational need within schools (Byrne, 2017), a better way had to be explored.

Following extensive consultation, a revised model of allocating additional teaching supports for pupils with SEN in Irish schools was launched and implemented in 2017 by the Department of Education (DES). This new system reflects a shift from the previously dominant medical model, based on categories of deficit labels, to a more social model based on the needs of pupils. The need for formal assessments as part of the application process for additional resources was removed (Walshe, 2017), allowing the professional assessment to focus on the identification of learning needs rather than on diagnosis for the purpose of resource allocation (Byrne, 2017). Resources are allocated to schools based on the profiled needs of each school rather than individual needs. The criteria used to indicate a school's need for additional resources include the number of enrolled students with very complex special educational needs, the overall level of academic achievement, and the school's socio-economic context (Byrne, 2017). Principals and SEN teams are afforded more autonomy to make professional judgements regarding SET deployment (Rose, 2017).

This new reality requires more creative approaches to ensure that resources are distributed effectively when supporting learning needs (Rix, Sheehy, Fletcher-Campbell, Crisp, & Harper, 2013), although more than half of the schools involved in the pilot of the new model identified the need for greater coordination of SEN going forward (Byrne, 2017) – a challenge for schools which is investigated in this study. Under this revised model, the roles of RT and LST were combined into one role, Special Education Teacher (SET), in

2017, while this study was proceeding. As the majority of the literature reviewed refers to these teachers as support teachers, that is the term used in the literature review. Due to the implementation of the new model, the term SET is used in Chapters Four, Five, and Six. In schools participating in this study where SEN coordinators have been appointed, the SET is referred to as SEN coordinator in Chapters Four and Five.

## 1.4 Research Context

In Ireland, as in most educational systems, the role of support teachers, previously known as 'remedial teachers', was until recently quite narrow, attempting to 'remediate' the specific difficulties of children with SEN by withdrawing them from the mainstream classroom and teaching them in small groups or individually (Griffin and Shevlin, 2007). International moves towards more inclusive school practice have brought changes in many education systems in the provision of educational support to pupils with SEN, particularly in the role, professional qualifications, and responsibilities of support teachers. These new responsibilities include the provision of professional guidance to general educators and support staff on the implementation of effective inclusion programmes, and the coordination, at school level, of educational provision for pupils with SEN by undertaking a more proactive role in curriculum development and programme modification (Agaliotis & Kalyva, 2011). These changes are reflected in the introduction of new terms like 'special needs coordinator' (Crowther, Dyson & Millward, 2001) and 'support coordinator' (Pijl & Van den Bos, 2001).

The issue in Irish primary schools is that there is no specific designated post for the coordination of special needs. This results in difficulties for SEN teams in coordinating provision and working collaboratively in the school setting and also with the various educational stakeholders and sectors, with particular challenges in coordination between

the areas of health, welfare, and education (Drudy & Kinsella, 2009). In some schools, special needs resource or learning support teachers may take on a coordinator's role either in a voluntary capacity or as part of the duties attached to a post of responsibility for which an additional allowance is paid. The main role of these teachers, however, is 'the provision of supplementary teaching to pupils either in the pupils' own classroom or in a learning support room' (DES, 2000). While some Irish schools have opted to appoint a teacher as a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo), this practice is not formalised and tends to vary in different school contexts (O'Gorman and Drudy, 2010). This warrants exploration in order to establish how school context impacts on these coordinators' ability to carry out their assigned tasks and responsibilities successfully; to this end, school settings of wide variation were selected as cases for this study. In addition, there is no mandatory professional learning for teachers in these roles, while it is only in recent years, with the extension of the undergraduate primary teaching degree from three to four years, that all teachers engage in a module in SEN.

### 1.5 Research Aims and Questions

Given this significant growth in the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream settings, it is timely to examine the impact of this transition in Irish mainstream primary schools. This study aims to investigate: 'How can support teachers contribute to the leadership and management of Special Education Needs provision in mainstream schools?' It considers approaches to leadership and management in inclusive and special education. The research seeks to answer the following research questions:

**Table 1.1 Research Questions**

| | |
|---|---|
| Research question 1 | To what extent do SETs lead and manage SEN provision in the school, while achieving a balance between supporting pupils and staff? |
| Research question 2 | What contribution do SETs make to leading and managing change, with a specific focus on SEN policy development and strategic planning? |
| Research question 3 | What are the specific tasks and responsibilities assigned to the SET's role? |
| Research question 4 | What are the key practices and strategies that allow the SETs to fulfil their tasks and responsibilities effectively? |
| Research question 5 | What, if any, are the barriers that prevent these teachers from successfully fulfilling their tasks and responsibilities? |

The specific aspects of the study to be undertaken in relation to SEN provision in primary schools will be dependent on the research evidence that exists documenting the factors impacting on the successes and challenges of managing SEN provision worldwide. This investigation will focus on the contribution to leadership in the school made by special education teachers whose role includes the overall coordination of SEN provision, and also those who support school principals by informally contributing to the coordination of this essential aspect of school life. Given the unique context in Irish primary education, where schools are not required to have a formal role of SEN coordinator but where many have created such positions through the middle management system (Travers, 2017) or through teacher volunteerism, this study will examine the tasks for which these teachers are responsible, the duties they undertake in their schools, and the impact of their role in the coordination of SEN provision at school level.

The study will be based on investigating how models of SEN provision in the Irish context compare with successful models of provision in other systems, documenting the challenges and barriers that inhibit successful SEN coordination, and identifying the structures and strategies that facilitate the effective management of inclusion, while alleviating some of

the challenges experienced by principals and teachers in this area (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004).

## 1.6 Conclusion

This study was carried out at a time of significant transition in special education in Ireland, with the revised model of resource allocation about to be implemented. The literature review will examine how the management of SEN provision at school level has evolved through policy and legislation internationally, thereby setting the context for examining how the manner in which schools cater for pupils with SEN has developed in Ireland.

The various approaches to the coordination of SEN provision in primary schools at an international level will be investigated and documented in the literature review. In the European context this will include the education systems of Britain and Northern Ireland, the Netherlands, Greece, Spain, Sweden, and Finland, while a broader world view will be accessed by focussing on Australia and the United States. Legislation, policy documents, and reports which have shaped government decision-making and strategic planning in regard to inclusive education in each of these countries will be appraised. Models of provision and practice regarding inclusion will be identified, and the effectiveness and advantages or disadvantages associated with each will be documented.

In Chapter Three, the chosen research methodology will be documented, along with an account of how aspects such as ethics will be managed. Findings will be presented and analysed in Chapter Four, followed by discussion of their implications in Chapter Five. Finally, the relevance of the project and conclusions regarding its implications, along with recommendations for policy, research, and practice, will be evaluated and presented in Chapter Six.

# Chapter Two: Literature Review

The literature review will examine how the leadership and management of SEN provision at primary school level have evolved through policy and legislation internationally, thereby setting the context for examining how the manner in which mainstream schools cater for pupils with SEN has developed in Ireland. First the term 'inclusion' is defined, followed by an overview of the evolution of international special education policy and legislation. International and national developments regarding special education provision are then discussed. The final sections of the chapter concern the role of the special education coordinator, with particular focus on professional development, leadership, the in-school management of SEN provision, and the duties and responsibilities of the role.

## 2.1 Defining Inclusion

Many western countries have introduced school reforms aimed at providing a more inclusive education. Inclusion, a term that is open to a variety of interpretations in a 'multitude of contexts' (Cole, 2005, p. 287), is about reforming mainstream schools to make them more responsive to the individual differences of students, at the heart of which is adaptive instruction (Imants, Van der Aasvoort, De Brabander, & Ruijssenaars, 2001). According to Cole (2005), inclusion is a process, part of the ongoing struggle for human rights and equity. Dyson and Millward (1997) have identified 'two competing paradigms' in the approaches to pupil diversity adopted in schools. In the 'psycho-medical paradigm', remedial and adapted-curriculum-type activities require pupils to be placed in segregated settings and offered alternative curricula, with a high value being placed on actions by special educators 'which cure or ameliorate those deficits' (Imants et al., 2001, p. 36).

In the interactive paradigm, regular teachers adopt a flexible approach and respond to a wide range of individual differences, with the values of participation and access being

paramount (Imants et al., 2001). Advocates for the adoption of the interactive paradigm call for equal access to mainstream school curricula, along with equal opportunities for pupils to participate in all aspects of school life (Florian, 1998; Shevlin, Kenny, & McNeela, 2002). The process of identifying children as 'different' and then labelling them according to categories has the effect of investing the source of the difficulty within the individual child, effectively placing the pupil on 'separate tracks and alternative curricula' (Imants et al., 2001, p. 36). This approach is in conflict with inclusive education, which stresses the adaptation of conditions in the educational setting and the adoption by everyone in that setting of a unified, collaborative approach in order to accommodate those with learning difficulties. Values of participation, access, and equality are stressed. Such an approach demands that the support teachers' role would include a strong emphasis on coordinating tasks (Imants et al., 2001).

A key component of this chapter will be an examination of the literature on the provision of special education to pupils with learning difficulties in a variety of education systems. The international context will be reviewed through an examination of the evolution of this role in the United States, Australia, and Europe, with particular emphasis on our neighbouring countries, Britain and Northern Ireland, where the role of SENCo has been established and enshrined in legislation for almost two decades. The Irish context will be examined later in this chapter, since a number of large-scale studies on the provision of special education have included an examination of the role of Learning Support or Resource teachers, who have assumed responsibility for coordinating SEN provision, in some cases adopting the title of SENCo, similar to that in the British education system.

## 2.2 International Legislation Policy and Provision relating to Inclusion

### *2.2.1 Legislation policy and provision relating to inclusion in Britain*

In Britain the Warnock Report (DES, 1978) was a major benchmark for the education of children with special needs. It was the first comprehensive examination in Britain of the whole field of special education, and it is generally considered to have been a turning point in this area, as it laid out general principles for the organisation of special education needs provision which are still regarded as applicable today (Visser, 1993).

Following publication of the report, three strands of development emerged to address the issues it had highlighted. The first of these was legislation, with the passing of five major Education Acts between 1978 and 1993, including the 1993 Education Act and its *Code of Practice for the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs* (Department for Education (DfE), 1994), incorporating and promoting the concept of parental partnership to an extent previously unheard of in connection with SEN (Gascoigne, 1995). The second strand related to research on the effective school. Shortly after the report, research appeared which showed that factors exist in the provision of education which can have a profound effect on the achievements of pupils, including those with special needs. While previously there existed a general under-expectation of what these pupils could achieve, the evidence now pointed to school factors being able to mitigate them. The third strand was a move away from segregation of provision towards a more inclusive approach. The Education Reform Act 1988 (DfE, 1988) provided legislation against segregation in terms of a separate curriculum, so that separate 'special classes' almost ceased to exist, while in-class support or collaborative teaching became a feature of educational provision for pupils with SEN (Visser, 1993). This development in turn led to the SEN coordinator or support teacher, where they existed, being increasingly placed in a position where advice on teaching and learning styles was requested by colleagues.

Further change in the provision of special needs education came with the introduction of the Code of Practice in Britain in 1995, which for the first time defined the roles of teachers, parents, and ancillary staff in regard to pupils with SEN. It became necessary therefore to have a whole-school integrated approach to the management of SEN. Although prior to 1994 many schools chose to appoint at least one teacher to coordinate SEN provision across the school, the Code of Practice (1994) placed a statutory obligation on all schools to identify a specialist teacher to coordinate provision for SEN pupils, and it described the roles and responsibilities of the SENCo (MacKenzie, 2007). The coordination of the policy and practice for SEN and responsibility for the day-to-day operation of SEN provision also became duties of the SENCo role (Cowne, 1996).

The Code of Practice directed that the SENCo should have responsibility for:

- ensuring liaison with parents and other professionals in respect of children with special educational needs;
- advising and supporting other practitioners in the setting, including contributing to the professional learning of staff;
- ensuring that appropriate Individual Education Plans are in place;
- ensuring that relevant background information about individual children with special educational needs is collected, recorded, and updated;
- coordinating provision and use of resources;
- liaising with external agencies as appropriate;
- coordinating children's special education programmes, in collaboration with relevant teachers;
- communicating information about special education needs to principals, staff, parents, and school governors relating to legal requirements, new developments, and research findings. (Dean, 1996, p. 16)

In the decade following the introduction of the Code of Practice, there was a concerted effort by the British government to provide an increasing definition of the role through the

production of advice and guidance. The provisions include the 1988 Education Reform Act, focussing on raising standards for all pupils, and the introduction of the National Curriculum as an entitlement for all pupils, advocating a more 'inclusive' system of education that could respond effectively to pupil diversity (Crowther et al., 2001).

The tradition of special education as separate from regular education and heavily based on a categorical perspective was being increasingly challenged as part of inclusive educational reforms. According to Emanuelsson (2001, p. 135), in this categorical perspective 'the process of labelling children as "having difficulties" has the effect of investing the source of any difficulty or problem within the individual child'. The responsibility for dealing with these 'problems' is then easily transferred to 'specialists', a process that is in conflict with the perspective of inclusive education. This perspective requires changes and development of schools and teaching that can accommodate rather than exclude those with learning difficulties in order to address deep structures of inequality (McDonnell, 2003). In a study of support coordinator roles in the UK, the Netherlands, Spain, and Australia, Emanuelsson (2001) found that all school personnel are responsible for those with SEN rather than just 'specialists', thereby creating a need for collaboration, which has resulted in the coordination of tasks being prioritised within the support teacher's role description. However, responses from the study revealed evidence of a lack of preparedness among regular teachers to welcome collaborative support, while favouring adherence to the traditional categorical perspective views.

The role of the SEN coordinator is seen as an enabler or facilitator whose principal task is to develop the expertise and confidence of all staff to teach pupils with special needs, while also ensuring that both policy and practice reflect the implementation of the rights of children and young people with special educational needs and their parents. According to Gascoigne (1995, p. 13), 'the SENCo is the individual who bears the brunt of the

additional administration and organisation within the school'. The SENCo, along with the head teacher and the designated governor, is responsible for the implementation of the school's SEN policy, and is the key contact point for parents and 'the filter through which the school's contact with external specialists and agencies will take place' (Gascoigne, 1995, p. 13).

In 1998, the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) published the *National Standards for SENCos*, which laid down a very demanding set of roles, responsibilities, and competencies for future SENCos. Four areas where coordination was essential for effective special educational needs provision were identified by the TTA: 'strategic direction and development of special educational needs provision in the school; teaching and learning; leading and managing staff; and efficient and effective deployment of staff and resources' (MacKenzie, 2007, p. 212).

All coordinators were required to audit special education needs provision in their schools – including their own skills – and to seek out opportunities for professional development, where needed (TTA, 1998). The role of the SENCo was given an additional aspect: that of managing and training support staff, an onerous responsibility given the large increase in the number of additional staff working in schools in the previous decade. This additional dimension to the SENCo's role often involved recruitment, appointment, deployment, and monitoring the work of teaching assistants, as well as taking responsibility for advising them on meeting the needs of pupils with SEN and providing ongoing induction and training. In practice, however, the variety of status of the SENCos in different establishments led to a very varied response (Morewood, 2012).

The TTA guidelines also reflected the centrality of the SENCo role and the assumption that the SENCo would be the agent for achieving a whole-school approach to special education

needs, while the idea of a management or leadership role for the SENCo was also implicit in the guidance. Some practitioners (Cowne, 2003) argue that the publication of these standards has meant a better definition of the SENCo's role and an enhancement of the status of special needs. However, this may be true only where the SENCo is given time, resources, and opportunities for development to carry out the role. Since this is not the case in many school settings, the SENCo is left feeling ineffective (Cole 2005; Forlin, 2001; Szwed, 2007). In the Northern Ireland context, where SEN provision is under the same system as in England and Wales, challenges for the SENCo include time allocation, bureaucracy, and financial constraints, along with a lack of professional development for staff and a disappointing level of collaboration with outside agencies and therapeutic services (Abbott, 2007).

In 2001, the 1994 Code was revised 'to give a fresh impetus to the inclusion of all pupils' (Layton, 2005), with the resulting *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2001) confirming the centrality of the SENCo role and explicitly linking it to leadership, although without a firm recommendation or direction to appoint SENCos to senior leadership teams. Further changes and, arguably, increased responsibilities for those in the role of SENCo were heralded by the publication of the government's strategy for improving SEN management and provision, *Removing Barriers to Achievement* (DfES, 2004), formulated to document where measures for improvement should be targeted (MacKenzie, 2007). Central to the government strategy were: early intervention, removing barriers to learning, raising expectations and achievement, and delivering improvements in partnership. The pivotal role of SENCos in coordinating provision across the school and in linking class teachers with SEN specialists was highlighted, along with a recommendation that the SENCo

should be ‘a key member of the senior leadership team, able to influence the development of policies for whole school improvement’ (DfES, 2004, p. 58).

The lists of duties outlined in the 1994 Code of Practice, the 1998 TTA Guidelines, the Revised Code (2001), and the Government Strategy (2004)

> place an emphasis on the important strategic role of SENCos to advocate and promote special educational needs across the setting by ensuring quality provision is in place through working with staff to coordinate resources. (Tissot, 2013)

Tissot (2013, p. 34) asserts that these varied descriptions show that the guidance provided by government gives ‘global scope without giving much detail or being overly prescriptive’, with little focussed direction on how these duties are to be implemented in an individual school or setting. This highlights the importance of thorough training, so that those assuming the SENCo role can manage the provision of special education with competence and confidence (Abbott, 2007; Cowne, 2005; Wearmouth, Paige Smith, & Soler, 2004, cited in MacKenzie, 2007).

Researchers have found, however, that there were varying perceptions of the role, which in turn led to variations in practice as the identity and duties of special educational needs change over time (Cole, 2005; Szwed, 2007). Pearson and Ralph (2007) argue that despite the government’s issuing of guidance documents, a high degree of local interpretation existed at local level. The next section will examine SEN provision in other international settings.

### *2.2.2 Developments in coordinating SEN provision at school level internationally*

These changes had a high impact on educational provision in the area of SEN in other countries, such as Spain, where the development of policy and legislation regarding inclusive education has been dominated by the Experimental Plan for School Integration (1985), followed by the comprehensive Law for the Organisation of the Educational

System (LOGSE) (1990), which promoted integration, making schools responsible for providing a suitable education. This legislation led to the establishment of a single education system with a new organisational structure, which catered for diversity, promoting the integration of all children and making schools responsible for the provision of a suitable education. Both of these impacted on the role and functions of support teachers, making them responsible for designing programmes in collaboration with class teachers to prevent learning difficulties and to support pupils with SEN, for monitoring curricular modifications, and for providing specialised advice to class teachers. Under this legislation also, the support teacher, who previously had focussed on providing help individually to pupils with SEN, now found their role widened, with an obligation to follow a curricular model and an inclusive philosophy. In a role very similar to that envisaged for the SENCo in Britain, they were now required to support the whole classroom, adapt the curriculum, and develop learning activities for pupils with SEN in coordination with the class teacher, assess and diagnose learning difficulties, monitor curricular modifications, and provide specialised advice to class teachers (Arnaiz & Castejón, 2001).

Arnaiz and Castejón (2001) found, in their study of 136 support teachers, that in practice the role of the support teacher in Spain is seen as teaching and providing direct support to pupils with special needs, the majority of which is provided outside of the regular classroom and in small groups. They recommend that future perspectives of the role should be directed towards developing a curricular model where responsibility for these students is shared throughout the school.

In Sweden, the Education Act (1985) provided equal access to education for all children and provides for special support for students having ‘difficulties with schoolwork’ (Berhanu, 2011). Special teachers were the occupational group that worked primarily with

children in need of support, focussing on problems that were seen as individual deficits. SENCos were introduced to the Swedish education system in the early 1990s in an attempt to challenge this traditional way of dealing with school difficulties and initiate changes towards more inclusive practices (Heimdahl Mattson & Malmgren Hansen, 2009). In this context, instead of classifying pupils as deficient in one or more areas, inclusion means that pupils' differences are celebrated and seen as assets. The SENCo is expected to analyse educational difficulties at several levels in schools, in addition to their individual work with pupils. SENCos in Sweden are viewed as having a pivotal role in initiating change towards more inclusive practices by supervising teachers and other staff, developing the school's organisation, and removing obstacles in the learning environment (Lindqvist, 2013). However, studies have shown that it has been difficult to challenge schools' tendency to direct solutions and measures towards the individual child, due to the SENCo's lack of autonomy or input into decision-making on the organisation and development of schools (Lindqvist, 2013; Lindqvist & Nilholm, 2011).

The philosophy of integration was brought strongly to the fore of education in Finland with the passing of the new Comprehensive Schools Act in 1983. Further reform occurred in 1998 with the Basic Education Act, amended in 2010, aiming to guarantee educational equality and equal educational services for all those subject to compulsory education (Takala, Pirttimaa, & Törmänen, 2009). The Strategy of Special Needs Education (2007) and the National Core Curriculum are also documents of significance, as they emphasised the importance of the wide basic education network which supports the right of every child to attend the nearest mainstream school, where a pupil would regularly be assigned. While pupils have easy access to special education, support is based mainly on a withdrawal system – due, according to Takala et al. (2009), to the lack of scheduled time for planning co-teaching and consultation.

In the Netherlands, where special education and regular education have a long tradition of separation at the levels of institutions, professionals, and students, the Compulsory Education Act (1969) and the Expertise Centres Act (1998) provide guidelines regarding general and special education. In 1990, the government policy document 'Together to School Again' made a new start to integrating pupils with SEN, including the appointment of special services coordinators, with the dual role of coordinating services for students with special needs at class and school level and the support of teachers by acting as a consultant for colleagues (Imants et al., 2001). The long-term target of inclusion policy is to implement adaptive instruction in ordinary primary schools, thereby decreasing the number of referrals of pupils to special education. To facilitate the mutual adjustment between mainstream education and special education, diverse new instruments, procedures, structures, roles, and decision-making models for pupil assistance have been introduced in regular primary schools over a relatively short period. Research shows, however, that collegial consultation is implemented very scarcely and that teacher professional development or systematic improvement in instruction is not promoted (Imants et al., 2001).

A new policy is currently being implemented, called Appropriate Education, with financial measures to equalise funding for students with special education needs across the country, aimed at improving the realisation of education for every child with SEN (Van Leeuwen, Thijs, & Zandbergen, 2013). In their study of the impact of this new policy, Van Leeuwen et al. (2013) found that in regions with negative equalisation rates and growing student populations, a shift towards inclusive primary education seemed to result in an increase in problems in mainstream education and increased dropout rates among students with special needs. This prompted the authors to recommend that support and guidance should be provided to mainstream schools to help them use their resources more effectively to

respond to the increasing number of students with special education needs in mainstream education (Van Leeuwen et al., 2013).

In Greece, the landmark law 2817/2000 promotes the right of every child to inclusive education in regular educational settings, while the passing of law 3699/2008 expands on this and encourages a policy of education and integration of those with special education needs (Syriopoulou-Delli, 2010). Inclusion therefore has a prominent place in Greek education policy. In practice, however, support for students with SEN is mainly provided through traditional withdrawal programmes, due to the restricted and restrictive beliefs of Greek educators which hinder the development of inclusive practices (Agaliotis & Kalyva, 2011). Their concerns include time shortage, lack of specialised knowledge, high curriculum demands, and potential problems for pupils without disabilities (Agaliotis, 2002). While SENCos have not been officially introduced in Greece, many qualified support teachers assume the role by being expected to advise colleagues and principals on professional issues relating to SEN (Agaliotis & Kalyva, 2011).

In a study involving 228 special education teachers and 238 general education teachers aimed at identifying the key factors that define the role of SENCo in Greek schools, it was found that both groups believe that each school should have a full-time SENCo who is trained in both special and general education. The authors recommended ‘a manageable role with unambiguous responsibilities and clear rights’ (Agaliotis & Kalyva, 2011, p. 550), accompanied by the provision of official guidelines to schools regarding the caseload of SENCos in order to facilitate a focus on the strategic coordinating dimension of their role (Agaliotis & Kalyva, 2011).

In Australia, where each state and territory defines its own policy for educational practice for students with special needs, support is categorised into two main approaches: one for

students with specific disabilities (intellectual, physical, vision, hearing, autism, or speech/language) and the other for students with learning difficulties or learning disabilities. Support for students with specific disabilities is usually provided by personnel trained in the specific disability area, and coordinated at local level. The Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and the Disability Standards for Education (2005) support the full participation of students with disabilities in mainstream schools (Konza, 2008). Most students with learning difficulties were traditionally retained in the regular classroom and withdrawn to a resource room with a support teacher or resource teacher for part of the day (Van Kraayenoord, 1996, cited in Forlin, 2001).

In recent years, concerns regarding the limitations of this approach have led to a more consultative role for support teachers (Forlin, 2001). In the state of Queensland, the responsibilities of the Support Teacher (Learning Difficulties) (ST(LD)) are listed in the *Standard Work Profile for the Support Teacher (Learning Difficulties)*. They include diagnosis, testing, teaching, and monitoring of pupils with SEN; collaboratively planning with class teachers and other specialists; supporting whole-school professional development programmes, including the demonstration of lessons; networking of support teachers; and collecting and monitoring of data about students with SEN, in order to measure progress and inform planning.

A study carried out by Forlin (2001) to identify the role of the support teacher in Queensland found that 95% of ST(LD)s were involved in identifying the needs of students; 95% were also required to assess and monitor pupil needs and maintain appropriate records. While 95% also reported advising teachers and external agencies, they indicated difficulties in undertaking collaborative planning due to lack of time and increased paperwork. Nearly 90% of ST(LD)s were responsible for managing the special education needs programme across the whole school, while in addition almost half of them were

involved in developing and implementing behaviour modification programmes, a duty outside of their role description. These duties bear significant similarities to the duties outlined for Special Needs Resource and Learning Support teachers as outlined in SP ED Circular 08/02 (DES, 2002), the Learning Support Guidelines (DES, 2000). They also reflect the role of the SET as outlined in the Guidelines for Supporting Pupils with SEN in Mainstream Schools (DES, 2017), which include identifying pupils' priority learning needs, planning interventions in consultation with class teachers, implementing a range of support models, and assessing, recording, and reviewing pupil progress to inform targets for further interventions. Forlin's (2001) study therefore provides a template for examining the role of Irish support teachers in the overall provision of support to pupils with SEN in Irish schools.

Finally, in the US, government policy on inclusive education has been defined by three significant Acts, which generally support the principle of the least restrictive environment (LRE) for the provision of appropriate public education to those with SEN. These include the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public L. 94-142, 1975); the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004). The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2001) mandate that US schools must be held accountable for educational outcomes for all students, including those within any category of disability. The US is said to be successful in providing a free and appropriate public education to all students regardless of their disability status. Increasingly, students with mild to moderate or significant disabilities are educated in general classrooms, with additional services and support provided depending on the nature of the disability, while the special educator serves as a consultant or co-teacher in general education settings (Vaughn, Wanzek, & Denton, 2014).

Special educators may take on the role of providing instructional coaching or consultation to teachers who work with students with SEN. Research carried out in 22 schools in the US has described how a particular model of intervention services, Instructional Consultation Teams (IC Teams), has reduced the number of special education referrals and placements of minority students, by providing effective support for the instructional process to teachers (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006). Research on special education provision in the US demonstrates that efforts to include more students with SEN in mainstream schools and classrooms have been successful and promise better educational results for students. However, efforts to achieve such results through the development of inclusive educational systems have been uneven at best, with minority students, poor students, and students with intellectual impairments faring less well than their peers with higher incomes and other disabilities who are white (Ferguson, 2008).

### *2.2.3 Synthesis*

To sum up, while all systems reviewed have been influenced by the worldwide move towards inclusive education, demonstrated by the introduction of legislation and structures to support its introduction in schools, in practice it appears in several countries that pupils with SEN attending regular schools continue to be segregated. This is due to the prevalence of models of provision dominated by the withdrawal from regular classrooms of individuals or small groups for specialised teaching by support teachers, practices that do not constitute inclusion, according to MacGiolla Phádraig (2007), highlighting the necessity of continuing efforts to create effective models of in-class support based on increased teacher collaboration and whole-school approaches in our own system.

In addition, the role of SENCos and support teachers in most systems appears to be dominated by teaching duties, with much less allocated time for teachers to engage in

planning, consultation, and collaboration (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) as envisaged in their role descriptor such as that of SENCos in Sweden, Greece, the Netherlands, and the UK and the support teachers in Australia, Finland, and Spain. The introduction of instructional coaches (IC) teams in the US appears to be an exception to this trend, with a reduction in referral of students to special education settings (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006) and the emergence of the role of the special educator as a consultant or co-teacher in general education settings (Vaughn et al., 2014). A similar policy of implementing adaptive instruction in ordinary primary schools in the Netherlands has not been so successful, due to limited collegial consultation and the lack of teacher professional development (Imants et al., 2001), highlighting the importance of a collaborative approach and upskilling of teachers if such a policy were to be introduced in Ireland.

In Australia, the outline of the role of the ST(LD) provided by Forlin (2001) demonstrates a potential template for the development of a similar role in Ireland, although the designation of specific time for teachers to engage in collaborative planning should be prioritised. The challenge presented by the lack of scheduled time for the coordination and planning of SEN provision is indicated in all systems reviewed and is presented as a barrier to the development of more inclusive practice, such as co-teaching in Finland (Takala et al., 2009), illustrating the necessity of prescribing for this essential element of inclusive practice when developing policy in our own system. Furthermore, the SENCos' lack of impact on school policy and decision-making due to not holding a formal leadership role, as evidenced in the UK and Sweden (Lindqvist & Nilholm, 2011; Szwed, 2007), indicates the need for a formal position in the school management team if such a role were created in our system.

In examining the evolution of the coordination of SEN provision in primary schools over the past two decades, I propose to review the evidence that exists in the literature on the following aspects:

- overall management of staff and resources;
- workload, including the specific tasks and amount of teaching of pupils that support teachers undertake;
- their involvement in policy implementation and planning for special education provision at school level;
- the preparation, training, and qualifications that teachers on SEN teams have achieved;
- the advice, training, and support they provide to other school staff members;
- structures that exist to facilitate collaboration with parents and health care professionals in the provision of special services;
- record-keeping and the organisation of individual planning for each pupil with SEN, specifically the writing and review of Individual Education Plans (IEPs);
- the allocation of time for planning and consultation with colleagues.

These areas have been identified in the literature (Agaliotis & Kalyva, 2011; Arnaiz & Castejón, 2001; Cole, 2005; Crowther et al., 2001) as representing the most significant aspects of the successful management of SEN provision and the collaborative planning (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) and implementation of inclusive school strategies and practices.

## 2.3 The Irish Context

Special education in Ireland has undergone rapid change in the first two decades of this millennium. Similar to in other European countries such as Great Britain, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Greece, a significant move away from the delivery of special educational provision in separate locations has occurred. A consequent trend towards the inclusion of pupils with special education needs in mainstream settings has resulted in a

significant increase in the number of resource teachers, from 78 in 1997 (INTO, 1998) to 6,464 in 2015 (INTO, 2016). Figures for 2018, following the amalgamation of the Learning Support (LS) and Resource Teaching (RT) roles, indicate that there were 14,594 Special Education Teachers (SETs) in Irish primary schools in that year.

### *2.3.1 Policy development*

Policy development in special education changed direction from a segregated system with the publication of the White Paper on Educational Development (1980), which confirmed that inclusion would become official policy, followed by The Education and Training of Severely and Profoundly Mentally Handicapped Children in Ireland report in 1983, which acknowledged for the first time in Ireland that no child was ineducable. Policy was further influenced by the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (1993), the first comprehensive review of special educational provision, whose principles affirmed the right of children with special educational needs to an appropriate education, emphasising each child's individual needs and the rights of parents. The impact of this report was evident in the 1995 Government White Paper on Education 'Charting Our Educational Future', which included the objectives of access to and participation in the education system for all students, according to their potential and ability and also ensuring a continuum of provision for special educational needs (Carey, 2005; Griffin & Shevlin, 2007).

Other documents of note include the Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities (1996), which recommended enacting an inclusive Education Act and adopting a social model of disability, while advocating inclusive education for all, based on the key principle of equality. The Reports of the Task Forces on Autism (2001) and on Dyslexia (2002) provided a route map for policy formation for the development of

appropriate and effective educational provision for pupils identified with these disabilities (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007).

The Education Act (1998) was the first piece of legislation that provided a statutory basis for policy and practice regarding all education; it represented the 'first legislative step towards inclusive education for persons with special education needs' (Meaney, Kiernan, & Monahan, 2005, p. 16). However, its limitations for children with SEN were evident due to vague language and the lack of imperatives on the provision of additional support (Carey, 2005). Also, the almost exclusively medical definition of special educational needs as the 'needs of students who have a disability' ignored 'critical environmental and contextual issues' (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p. 58). Nonetheless, the legal rights of children with SEN to an appropriate education were further strengthened by the Education (Welfare) Act (2000), which provided for the entitlement of every child to a certain minimum education, and the Equal Status Act (2004), which prohibited discrimination in the provision of education on nine grounds, including disability.

### *2.3.2 Provision of special education*

Policy and legislative changes have resulted in more students with SEN attending mainstream primary schools. As a consequence of the need to cater for the diverse range of students in inclusive school settings (Banks, Frawley, & McCoy, 2015), significant growth occurred in the appointment of learning support or resource teachers (LS/RT) in mainstream settings, who had responsibility for the provision of additional support to pupils with SEN. The development of SEN policy, and the overall administration and management of SEN provision at school level in Ireland, have proven to be daunting tasks for school principals and in-school management teams (INTO, 2003). Support and class teachers also experienced significant and frustrating challenges in catering for the often

diverse and complex needs of pupils with SEN, due to the lack of professional learning opportunities (Walsh, 2004). Attempts were made to address these concerns in subsequent years by the following legal and structural changes.

In 2004, the first comprehensive legislation was enacted in relation to educational provision for those with special needs: the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (DES, 2004). It radically changed the educational landscape for pupils with SEN, adopting a definition of SEN that focuses on the effects of disability rather than the cause, and speaks of the provision of an inclusive educational environment (Carey, 2005). It further ensured the provision of inclusive education unless a specialised placement is required for a pupil for a specific reason. The Disability Act (2005) supports the provision of an impartial, independent educational assessment, to determine the educational needs of children with disabilities (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). If a special educational need is identified for a child, then that aspect of the assessment is referred to the National Council for Special Education or to the principal of their school. The report indicates the health and educational needs arising from the disability, the services considered appropriate to meet those needs, and the timescale ideally required for their delivery. The implementation of this Act means that more children come to the notice of the specialist intellectual disability agencies who were involved in undertaking these assessments (McConkey, Kelly, Craig, & Shevlin, 2015), while the provision of assessment reports to schools provides vital information to principals and support teachers to inform the planning process involved in meeting these pupils' needs.

The provisions of the EPSEN Act represent a significant modification in systemic organisation, with the establishment of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), responsible for many facets of school provision for SEN, including carrying out relevant research and providing advice to government (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). The remit

of the NCSE also includes the appointment of Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) within a specific geographical area. Their role involves the provision of a localised service to facilitate identification, assessment, and resource provision for pupils with SEN (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). The duties of the SENO also include liaising with local health and support services and advising schools and parents regarding SEN (DES, 2005). In practice, however, the SENO's principal function is to process applications from schools for resources for pupils with SEN. In contrast, the SENCo's role is specific to one school, with responsibilities for coordinating the provision of special education, planning interventions, liaising with parents and agencies, and organising professional development for SEN staff (DES, 2005).

### *2.3.3 Developments in provision*

In 2005, Circular 02/05 introduced the general allocation scheme (GAM) to provide schools with the requisite resources to respond to special educational needs. Each school's resources were determined by factors including gender, socio-economic disadvantage, and school size, while pupils assessed as having 'complex and enduring needs' (termed 'low-incidence') continued to be allocated resource teaching hours based on professional assessment reports, combined with SENOs' evaluation of the application. The establishment of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) in 1999 to provide assessments and support to schools, followed by the Special Education Support Service (SESS) in 2003, to coordinate and develop professional development opportunities for school personnel working with pupils with SEN, completed the provision of systemic support structures for SEN (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007).

### *2.3.4 The revised model of provision (2017)*

As mentioned in Chapter One, a revised model for allocating additional teaching supports to students with SEN in Irish schools was launched and implemented in 2017 by the Department of Education (DES). This model reflects a transition from the previously dominant medical model, based on categories of deficit labels, to a more social model based on the needs of pupils, and should reduce exclusionary practices, stigmatisation, and discriminatory activities towards people who were being labelled (Algraigray & Boyle, 2017; Rose, 2017). This new approach signals a breaking of the link between the need for an assessment and the provision of resource hours and SNA support (NCSE, 2014). Resources are now allocated to schools based on the profiled needs of each school rather than individuals. The criteria used to indicate a school's need for additional resources include the number of enrolled students with very complex SEN, the overall level of academic achievement as indicated through the collating of standardised test scores, and the school's socio-economic context (Byrne, 2017). Instead of the use of categories of disability, students are now identified through a range of descriptors to ensure they are included on the basis of actual needs rather than category (Tiernan & Casserly, 2018), thereby facilitating a move away from labelling and stigmatising pupils (Banks, Frawley & McCoy, 2015). It is envisaged that this system will be more equitable and allow schools more autonomy in the deployment of teaching resources to pupils with SEN (Byrne, 2017).

Collaborative autonomy exists in schools where teachers have the opportunity to work with administrators in making decisions pertaining to curriculum, instruction, and scheduling (Willner, 1990). Under the revised allocation system, principals and SEN teams are now responsible for making judgements about the allocation of additional resources to facilitate learning – a positive development since decisions on school policy in such areas as timetabling, record-keeping, resource management, and pastoral care of pupils need to be

taken at school level (Rix et al., 2013). This view is endorsed by Skerritt (2019), who believes that autonomy over what is taught in schools can enable autonomous teachers to better support particular students by offering them a curriculum that is better tailored towards their needs. Teachers can now place stronger focus on what is needed to enable improved learning and development, including teaching, facilities, materials, and support (Norwich, 2017). Schools will continue to receive support from NEPS psychologists, while some of the existing educational support services, including the Special Education Support Services (SESS) and the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS), are now combined into a single NCSE Support Service (Byrne, 2017).

Opinions on this model of provision have been mixed, with reservations being expressed by principals who identify the requirement for 'a well-constructed, watertight SEN policy' to mediate the challenges of parental demands and expectations (Dillon, 2017, p. 91), since resource teaching hours will no longer be prescribed by the NCSE. Additional concerns are raised by Dempsey (2017, p. 89) regarding the lack of a complaints process for parents 'if they dispute their child's plan and contact time with special education teachers'. However, on a positive note, time wasted travelling between schools should be reduced, and the lack of teacher continuity which affected smaller schools to a greater extent should decrease (Devine, 2017), since school resources are confirmed for at least a two-year period.

The next section will trace the evolution of SEN provision in primary schools internationally and nationally, but first it is important to define the contrasting models of provision that are evident in education systems and the manner in which they influence SEN provision at school level.

### *2.3.5 Models of provision*

The medical model of disability, which views disability as a 'problem' that belongs to the disabled individual, was hugely influential in shaping the direction of policy and the provision of services for people with disabilities in Ireland until the mid-1990s. The focus it placed on the impairment, and the restrictions it placed on individual abilities, gave rise to classifications of disability. Eleven categories of disability were defined in the Education Act 1944 (UK), with educational provision being closely tied to the category of disability, resulting in the development of category-specific schools for pupils with SEN. Special educational provision in Ireland followed this trend with a focus on within-child factors, such as an impairment or physical disability, while failing to take account of complex social and cultural factors (Thomas & Loxley, 2001). This approach has also been adopted in the organisation of additional support to pupils with assessed special educational needs who require substantial additional support in mainstream settings. Resource teaching hours and SNA support were allocated to pupils who qualify within ten categories of disability as described in Circular 08/1999 (DES, 1999).

The social model of disability, in contrast, is based on the view that society is responsible for creating barriers to the full participation of disabled people because of how it is organised. In terms of education, inclusion can occur in schools by identifying and eliminating the disabling barriers which are within your control, such as teaching practices and curriculum design (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). This model is reflective of the system of resource allocation implemented in Irish schools since 2017, as it asserts that dependency on assessment procedures and the overemphasis on deficit labels have proven in several respects to be discriminatory, while the allocation of additional resources to schools rather than individuals is a more appropriate means of promoting inclusion (Rose, 2017). The next section will discuss models of SEN provision in education systems internationally.

## 2.4 Professional Development

### *2.4.1 Professional development for SENCos*

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) acknowledges that teacher professional development is an essential element of the move towards inclusive education. Teachers are therefore expected to develop knowledge on special education, on appropriate teaching processes, and on working with support personnel (OECD, 2005). In the Irish context, this view concurs with O'Gorman and Drudy (2010), who identified an urgent need for specific professional learning for all teachers regarding inclusion. More recently, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes have introduced mandatory inclusive education modules incorporating differentiation content, along with SEN placement settings for student teachers. In a recent report documenting the impact of these changes (Hick et al., 2018), the 430 student teachers who participated said they feel well prepared for inclusive teaching in terms of developing appropriate values and attitudes. However, they also feel relatively under-prepared in terms of confidence in their knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices in school contexts, indicating a need for more focussed attention on these areas in the programme content.

Research carried out on the level of training in special education among SENCos provided evidence that just over half had a qualification in SEN (Layton, 2005; NUT, 2004). Layton (2005) contends that the failure of almost half of the SENCos to gain a qualification should not be attributed to a lack of commitment, but should indicate a need for an appraisal of the support mechanisms which facilitate the undertaking and completion of professional training. The majority of teachers support the view that SENCos should have training in both general and special education (Agaliotis & Kalyva, 2011; Szwed, 2007); however, the effectiveness of SENCos who have undertaken a post without being certified support

teachers is often restricted by diminished credibility and respect of colleagues (MacKenzie, 2007).

In a review of support teachers' roles in the UK, Spain, the Netherlands, and Sweden, Emanuelsson (2001) found that development of the role in order to improve inclusive education is dependent on both the teachers' own qualities and the amount of autonomy in their positions. Where special education remains based on a categorical perspective, the support teacher will remain reactive rather than proactive. Instead, this role should stress the review and development of teaching and learning rather than support for individual pupils (Emanuelsson, 2001).

Cowne's (2005) study found that thorough training for SENCos was essential, with evaluations demonstrating that SENCos were more secure and competent as a result of this training, their skills and understanding had improved, and longer-term effects were beginning to be visible in schools. Nonetheless, a need still exists for SENCos and aspiring SENCos 'to have access to an accredited national professional qualification as a matter of right . . . reflecting the importance and complexity of the role' (Cowne, 2005).

Areas identified as essential for further professional learning included identification of learning difficulties, effective teaching strategies, counselling, professional development of colleagues, and budgeting (Cowne, 2005). There are similarities in the requirements for professional development by Irish support teachers as found in O'Gorman and Drury's study (2010), since teachers prioritise IEPs, general up-skilling, information on various disabilities, and diagnosis and assessment, in that order. The emphasis on 'developing individual expertise rather than the need for distributed expertise to enkindle a culture of inclusivity among the whole school community' (O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010, p. 165) is a cause for concern. They emphasise the need for professional development to highlight

aspects such as teamwork and collaboration with colleagues, with parents and other professionals, in order to promote an inclusive system.

Crockett (2000, p. 165) has suggested the following five key elements of special education leadership preparation:

- moral leadership, involving the ethical analysis of disability-related issues;
- instructional leadership, addressing student-centred learning beyond compliance;
- organisational leadership, supporting effective programme development,
- management and evaluation related to learners with exceptionalities and their teachers;
- collaborative leadership, promoting partnerships for instruction, conflict resolution, and integrated service delivery.

These elements align well with the culture of collaboration as espoused by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018), incorporating good data, good judgement, respectful professional dialogue, thoughtful feedback, and more collective responsibility for each other's results. Professional learning in these areas would improve the confidence and professional competence of those assuming the SENCo role and allow them to participate fully in management discussions and decision-making (Szwed, 2007). Mechanisms for funding professional development and the provision of cover for dedicated study time should be explored at local and school levels (Cowne, 2005).

Recent developments in Britain have included a requirement that all new SENCos appointed since 2008 must successfully complete the National Award for SEN coordination within three years of taking up the role (Travers et al., 2010). This was a welcome development, since it signals recognition of the need for uniformity in the standard of expertise required to undertake and fulfil the duties of the role successfully.

Availability of a wide range of content in training opportunities for inclusion is vital, because if teachers can choose topics and training that suit their needs, the growth of self-confidence is supported (Pijl & Frisson, 2009). While short-term professional learning courses and seminars help SENCos learn about new developments in SEN, it does not give them the expertise and authority needed to work with and guide their colleagues (Agaliotis & Kalyva, 2011; Crowther et al., 2001).

Spanish research on teachers' interest in their ongoing professional learning indicates that up to 92% of SEN teachers have attended other courses focussed on SEN education (Arnaiz & Castejón, 2001). This concurs with research in the Irish context: Travers et al. (2010) found that the special education coordinators in all six schools surveyed were very confident, with high levels of specialist knowledge and skills. While it is not mandatory, all held postgraduate qualifications in this area and continued to engage in new learning.

Arising from this evidence, Travers et al. (2010, pp. 240–241) make the following recommendation, which reflects O'Gorman and Drudy's concerns about school culture:

> The credibility from teaching expertise can help the coordinator lead and embed changes in the culture of the school. This has implications for professional development initiatives for learning/resource and language support teachers who are likely to take up these positions. Given the critical importance of the role, holders should be obliged to avail of mandatory professional development.

In Ireland also, a large-scale study by O'Gorman and Drudy (2010) that yielded information from 816 schools recommends a requirement for training for all teachers in the pursuit of inclusion. It says there is an urgent need for specific professional learning (PL) for the key promoters of inclusion within the school in order to adapt and improve instruction and to keep abreast of policy change. This study also considered the options for the provision of SEN-related courses to teachers. It found that while block release to attend a college or university programme was most popular, teachers and principals also

emphasised the benefits of networking, collegial discussions, and practical experience as an effective way to develop teaching skills. This echoes Angelides, Georgiou, and Kyriakou (2008), who advocate the establishment of communities of practice: groups of people who share what they know, learn from each other regarding issues of their work, and provide a social context for this work. Communities of practice are organised around a certain area of knowledge and activity, giving their members a feeling of a common enterprise and identity, such that the ways that members do or approach something are common among the members to a significant degree. The members of a community of practice are virtually connected in a collaborative network where they interact, reflect, and have common experiences, aimed towards a common purpose (Angelides et al., 2008).

In-school communities of practice have the advantage of bringing teachers with different expertise together in mutually beneficial ways. Teacher groups can be created which allow colleagues to collaborate, reflect, problem-pose, and problem-solve towards a collective goal (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). SETs who have engaged with PD can share their learning by engaging collaboratively with colleagues through coaching, peer observation, mentoring, and collaborative professional inquiry (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018; King, Ní Bhroin, & Prunty, 2018).

Since the school and classroom provide rich environments for teachers to enact emerging learning in their own context (Reeves & Forde, 2004), 'professional experimentation' (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002) following collaborative engagement with colleagues raises awareness of learning actions and the consequences of initiating new practices. Making sense of practical experiences in the classroom, particularly those with positive outcomes, can lead to conceptual change and the acceptance of new theory (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002).

Collaborative meetings involving cross-school groups of special education teachers, focussing on different themes, roles, or tasks while embracing collaborative problem-solving, benefit the participants through the sharing of expertise, contributing to self-development and facilitating the sharing of resources (Creese, Norwich, & Daniels, 1998). SEN provision is enhanced; specifically, teachers' confidence can increase, the sharing of resources and expertise is improved, more successful IEPs are designed, and cohesion in schools' SEN policies and practices is created (Creese et al., 1998).

A study by Ainscow, Muijs, and West (2006), involving six case studies of school networks, found that school-to-school collaboration is a powerful means of strengthening the capacity of schools to address complex and challenging circumstances. An earlier study of collaborative school groups involving SETs in 246 schools in England found these groups useful in sustaining and increasing teacher morale and confidence, thereby contributing to a positive ethos in the school; it recommended that their wider use could be considered as a further way to improve schools' approaches to SEN (Creese et al., 1998). These findings echo Muijs (2008), who found that school-to-school collaboration improved areas such as pupil attainment, teacher motivation, and leadership capacity, when teachers in clusters of schools collaborate on professional learning and development activities (Fraser, Kennedy, Reid, & McKinney, 2007). The use of communities of practice can potentially serve to facilitate professional dialogue in an uncritical manner, and in certain conditions they can also act as powerful sites of transformation, where the sum total of individual knowledge and experience is enhanced significantly through collective endeavour (Kennedy, 2005).

Looking forward, this recommendation for professional development is reflected to a certain extent in those set out in the document published by the NCSE in Ireland, 'Delivery

for Students with Special Educational Needs: A better and more equitable way', which proposes a new system of provision for children with SEN. The document recommends:

> that any teacher assigned a support role in a school should be trained and equipped to assess and teach all students with special educational needs and to advise and assist other teachers in devising and implementing particular interventions. (NCSE, 2014, p. 77)

While the document acknowledges the necessity for support teachers to be adequately prepared, there is no suggestion in it of the designation and appointment of a single coordinator to assume responsibility for leading the provision of additional support for pupils with SEN. Instead, the expectation in the revised model is that schools will 'adopt a whole school approach' to educating children with SEN, with the recommendation that 'continuing professional development should also be specifically designed for principals who will require support in managing the process' (NCSE, 2014, p. 52).

### *2.4.2 Professional development of support staff*

In the UK, the publication of the TTA guidelines (1998) placed an added responsibility on SENCos, namely the managing and training of support staff. Most teachers have not received pre-service or subsequent professional development to work with teaching assistants (TAs) (Tissot, 2013). In a study of the management of teaching assistants by SENCos, Gerschel (2005) found that, as a consequence, this aspect of the role and the management of other adults in general was difficult for them. SENCos were found to be ineffective in monitoring the work of teaching assistants, and even when monitoring took place, useful feedback was not provided (MacKenzie, 2007). These findings reiterate those of MacBeath, Galton, Steward, MacBeath, and Page (2006), whose survey found that the role of the SENCo in giving pedagogical advice to TAs and teachers appears to have diminished as the SENCo role appears to be largely administrative, consisting of

coordinating arrangements for the deployment of staff, meeting teachers and parents, and liaising with outside agencies.

However, Gerschel (2005, p. 75) also points out the importance of the SENCo in having 'a strong voice in senior management and decision-making in order to be effective in managing teaching assistants'. It would be more effective, therefore, if the SENCo was a member of the senior management team and had input into strategic decision-making. The professional development for support staff is seen as crucial in making a difference to pupil learning, according to the 'reforming the school workforce' proposals (DfES, 2002). The opportunity to allow support staff to achieve their role potential and facilitate teachers to focus on teaching may therefore be lost (Szwed, 2007).

In Ireland, Logan's (2006) research on the role of support staff, more commonly referred to as Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), involving 68 surveys completed by SNAs working in mainstream schools, found that accredited training opportunities are very limited. This is a concern which the SNAs themselves saw as essential to address (Logan, 2006). However, the findings of a subsequent study (Rose and O'Neill, 2015) found that school-based training was provided to 62% of 82 SNAs surveyed, mostly focussed upon care activities and child safety issues. The need for PD for SNAs in managing behaviour, supporting pupils with ASD, and developing pupil independence has been highlighted by Kerins et al. (2018), reflecting the role of the SNA as defined in policy. However, other needs identified, including the modification of work for students, planning for teaching students, and supporting students with dyslexia and dyscalculia, reflect duties beyond the care role specified in DES circulars and therefore cannot feature in PD programmes designed for SNAs. These findings indicate the need for the development of a national policy on the professional development of SNAs.

The relationship between the SNA and the class teacher is central to the success of pupils' educational experience, with time to talk and plan being paramount. While teachers favour the SNAs attending in-school planning, the majority of SNAs were not involved in this process (Lawlor, 2002), a situation that still pertained in 2009, when Rose and O'Neill provided evidence that only 39% of 82 SNAs were involved in lesson planning. There is currently no training for class teachers on preparation for working with SNAs and supervising their work. Significant concerns were expressed regarding the 'lack of feedback they receive and the lack of a recognised supervisor who could support and advise them in their work' (Logan, 2006, p. 95).

A comprehensive review of the SNA scheme in Ireland was carried out by the NCSE (2018), although no data was gathered from the SNAs themselves. This review found that some SNAs have a teaching remit in schools despite this being clearly beyond their remit or qualifications – a consequence perhaps of the lack of professional development opportunities for the teachers they are supporting. As there appears to be a need for research into how schools have addressed the professional development needs of the SNAs and how the responsibility of inducting, advising, and monitoring their work has been managed by the SEN team and principal, questions on this aspect of SEN provision will be included in the interview schedule for this research.

## 2.5 Leadership in SEN Provision

Inclusive leadership consists of distinct practices, including:

> advocating for inclusion, educating participants, developing criteria consciousness, nurturing dialogue, emphasizing student learning and classroom practice, adopting inclusive decision and policy making strategies and incorporating whole school approaches. (Ryan, 2006, p. 9)

Research carried out on the importance of leadership for inclusion by Kugelmass and Ainscow (2004) involved comparisons between case studies in three schools in England, US, and Portugal. The resulting evidence points to the importance of distributed leadership and participative decision-making, while suggesting that developing 'an inclusive culture requires a shared commitment by staff to processes that produce an overall enhancement in participation among all participants' (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004, p. 140). Two aspects of inclusive culture are identified by the researchers: first, that the values and attitudes held by school staff must include acceptance and celebration of difference, with a commitment to offer educational and participation opportunities to all students; and second, the significance of collaboration between staff with different specialisations. The willingness and ability of staff to work together as cooperative teams is seen as essential for creating a community in which all individuals are valued, while staff are required to respond to pupil diversity by moving beyond established practice and learning about new practices (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004). This view reflects the description of distributive leadership advocated by Spillane (2005) as a form of collective agency, incorporating the activity of individuals in a school who work at guiding other teachers in a process of instructional change.

In the UK, the failure of the 1994 Code to refer specifically to managerial or leadership aspects of the SENCo role is viewed as a significant weakness. The revised Code of 2001 also failed to provide a firm direction to schools for the appointment of SENCos to senior leadership teams (Layton, 2005). An evaluation of the research on the leadership aspect of the role indicates that SENCos should be a member of the school management team, since this is key to fulfilling the SENCo role (Imants et al., 2001; INTO, 2003; Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004; Lindqvist, 2013; MacKenzie, 2007; Szwed, 2007). Szwed (2007) asserts that if SENCos are to be successful in the sphere of whole-school influence, they must be

enabled to undertake a management and leadership role when planning strategically for special educational needs and inclusion. In a contrasting view, Harris (2004) advocates distributed leadership as concentrating on engaging expertise wherever it exists within the organisation, in order to achieve school improvement, rather than seeking this only through formal position or role.

In a small-scale study involving SENCos from primary and secondary schools in England, Layton (2005) uncovered evidence of wide variations in the extent to which SENCos were recognised as leaders in schools. The SENCos believe that key people and agencies do not see them in a school leadership role, even though most expect them to manage SEN matters. They reported a lack of opportunity to take responsibility for such tasks as budget management and the formulation of SEN policy (Layton, 2005; MacKenzie, 2007). More recent research carried out by Tissot (2013), which involved the completion of a survey by 140 SENCos, found that the situation has not improved over time, with almost half of the SENCos not appointed to a formal leadership role. This situation precludes them from involvement in strategic school planning and decision-making that has an impact on pupils' learning, stifles the vision of the role, and constrains the good work that SENCos can do. Such a role might allow for the delegation of burdensome administrative duties to secretarial staff, thereby facilitating the SENCo to work on strategic teaching and learning matters as well as focussing on SEN team-building, staff professional development, and the training of classroom assistants (MacKenzie, 2007). According to Cole (2005), national policy should dictate that the SENCo be a member of the school senior management team, with access to and input into financial decision-making and SEN policy, a point reiterated by several other researchers (Layton, 2005; Szwed, 2007; Takala et al., 2009).

In Ireland, the Learning Support Guidelines (DES, 2000) designated the principal teacher as having 'overall responsibility for developing and implementing school policy on

learning support and special needs services'. However, they may also coordinate the provision of these services themselves or nominate another teacher on the school staff to do it, such as a learning support teacher, resource teacher, or post holder. Typically the tasks assigned to this role would include maintaining a list of pupils receiving supplementary teaching, helping to coordinate the caseloads or work schedules of the support teachers, supporting the implementation of a tracking system at whole-school level to monitor children's progress, advising parents on SEN services, liaising with external agencies, and arranging classroom accommodation and resources (DES, 2000).

These prescribed duties are similar to those assigned to SENCos in the British education system, with the exception that SENCos' responsibilities, according to the Code of Practice (1994), include contributing to the in-service training of staff. The most significant difference between the two systems is the designation of personnel to carry out these tasks. In the Irish system, deployment of teaching staff to coordinate SEN provision is at the discretion of the principal, with no specific direction provided regarding the level of qualification in special education that the designated person is required to have achieved. In contrast, the SENCo in British schools is expected to carry out all tasks related to the coordination of SEN provision, as outlined in section 2.2.1, and is now required to successfully complete the National Award for SEN coordination (Tissot, 2013).

A number of reports, including 'Supporting Special Education in the Mainstream School' (INTO, 2003), have called for the appointment of coordinators for special needs, whose role could include the development of whole-school policy on special needs, with additional responsibility for related curricular policy, staff development, and resource planning and management (INTO, 2003). This call was echoed by Travers et al. (2010, p. 9):

> schools should appoint coordinators of special educational needs . . . within the existing posts of responsibility structure and they should be part of the leadership team in the school, and be required to avail of mandatory professional development.

A study carried out on behalf of the NCSE, entitled 'Access to the curriculum for pupils with a variety of Special Educational Needs in mainstream classes' (2011), by Ware, Butler, Robertson, O'Donnell, and Gould (2011), recommends that primary schools should have a post of responsibility for the coordination of SEN provision in the school. This teacher should receive relevant PD to enable them to coordinate provision and support colleagues. In larger schools this might be the responsibility of an assistant or deputy principal. The importance of the principal or teacher who has responsibility for SEN coordination emerged as a significant factor 'in supporting teachers and pupils and in creating the environment where inclusion was seen as the norm' (Ware et al., 2011, p. 157).

The report 'Addressing the challenges and barriers to inclusion in Irish schools', by Travers et al. (2010), documented the results of case study research carried out in three primary and three post-primary schools that were endeavouring to operate as inclusively as possible. It identified the importance of the key relationship between the principal and special education needs coordinator while working together to create a force for inclusion in the school, providing the direction, vision, energy, and structure to develop and improve SEN policies and practices in the school.

Principals supported the coordinators by implementing a policy of distributive leadership. This key relationship 'helped establish expectations and a culture of differentiation across many of the schools' (Travers et al., 2010, p. 183). The coordinators, in turn, mentored staff and supported colleagues in differentiating the curriculum and in other new practices, while facilitating and engaging in discussion on initiatives. While this study only reflects

the practice existing in three primary schools, it is nonetheless a welcome finding reflecting Fullan's (2003) assertions that effective and knowledgeable school governors and head teachers must recognise the need to develop and support leadership qualities in others, to allow personal qualities and professional competencies to flourish. In order to ensure support to colleagues, a school-wide application of knowledge, skills, and understanding of best practice and initiatives in SEN is necessary, so that SENCos can lead teachers and related professionals in enhancing such knowledge, thereby ensuring and maintaining teachers' motivations to effect change for all the pupils they teach (Layton, 2005). However, the lack of time allocation and the heavy workload appear to consistently present difficulties for coordinators of special education needs in achieving that aspiration (Agaliotis & Kalyva, 2011; Arnaiz & Castejón, 2001; Cole, 2005; Forlin, 2001; Szwed, 2007). The next section will consider these aspects of SEN provision.

## 2.6 Management of SEN Provision

### *2.6.1 Time allocation*

Lack of sufficient time is one of the greatest impediments to collaboration and educational change (Hargreaves, 2019). In relation to SENCo workload, research findings have given rise to increasing concerns about the demands of the role and the effective use of SENCos' time, the limitations on their opportunities to fulfil their role, and the resulting work overload and vulnerability (Agaliotis & Kalyva, 2011; Szwed, 2007). Studies have found huge variations in allocated time, with increasing operational workloads and restricted opportunities for SENCos to undertake the role (Cowne, 2005; Crowther et al., 2001; MacKenzie, 2007). This in turn restricts the opportunities for school leaders in the area of SEN to initiate collaborative dialogue and planning with teaching colleagues in both the general and special education areas.

Although there is no mention of teaching duties in the list assigned to the role of SENCo, Szwed (2007) found that in Britain, many SENCos appeared to be full-time teachers in addition to their SENCo duties. There was wide variation in the time allowed to carry out the role, with several schools with a high proportion of children with SEN having a part-time SENCo. One day or less per week was given for the work of the SENCo in almost half of the schools surveyed (Swzed, 2007; Tissot, 2013), while in many schools, the SENCo had to combine their duties with several other whole-school responsibilities, including full-time classroom responsibilities (Cowne, 2005; Layton, 2005; NUT, 2004; Szwed, 2007; Tissot, 2013).

In the Spanish education system, where the role description of the support teacher in the LOGSE (1990) bears significant similarity to that of the SENCo in Britain, teachers spend the majority of time providing direct instruction to students and in related activities, with less than one third of them coordinating the support teachers team or helping to train other teachers (Arnaiz & Castejón, 2001). Although the official guidelines initially established a ratio of 11 or 12 pupils per support teacher, in reality each teacher has a mean of 20 pupils. This is due to the administration's non-classification of pupils who have special needs but are without an evaluation by psycho-pedagogic services. Because these pupils are attended to by support teachers in schools, the increased ratio adds significantly to their workload and can be overwhelming (Arnaiz & Castejón, 2001).

All support teachers at primary level in Spain work 30 hours per week; 25 hours are to be used to provide direct support to students with SEN, with the remaining 5 hours to be used for curricular adaptation and coordination activities, a figure considered insufficient by support teachers because of the wide variety of functions they must undertake (Arnaiz & Castejón, 2001).

In Australia, in a study involving 196 support teachers (ST(LD)s), Forlin (2001) found that they had major concerns regarding the large number of students they had to support and the limited time available to perform their duties. These findings reflect the research already highlighted regarding workload and time allocation to SENCos in British schools.

The allocation of designated non-teaching time for staff collaboration and planning has been introduced in schools in Ireland since 2010, with consultation between class teachers and the SEN team prescribed as one option for its use. However, this measure did not fully address the challenge of insufficient planning time for teachers, since this was the reason cited for the lack of progress towards adopting more inclusive team-teaching approaches in schools in recent research (Casserly & Padden, 2018. Guidelines for the recently introduced new model of SEN provision have acknowledged the need for schools 'to maintain time for coordinating, planning and reviewing activities' (DES, 2017, p. 18) – a welcome development for SEN teams, since increased preparation time enhances collaborative efforts, facilitating change in the culture of teaching (Hargreaves, 2019).

These measures of autonomy give schools an opportunity to participate actively in policy interpretation and policy construction (Vidovich, 2007). Principals now have the discretion to organise and design in-school collaborative engagement that is appropriate to the specific context of the school (Hudson, 1993), ensuring joint planning, good communication, and firm timelines (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2004), These essential elements of the process of initiating and implementing change are echoed in the views of Ekins (2015), who advocates for SEN planning meetings that facilitate the development of a clear action plan that sets out the individual responsibilities of each member and has a date for review. As yet, there is no research showing how this has impacted on the work of those whose role it is to coordinate SEN provision. Therefore, this aspect of SEN provision will be investigated in the research project to be undertaken.

### *2.6.2 IEP formulation*

An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is a written document prepared for a named pupil which specifies the specific goals to be achieved by that pupil over a set period of time, along with the teaching strategies, resources, and supports necessary to achieve these goals (NCSE, 2006). These documents are mandatory in the US and the UK (Ware et al., 2011). In the UK, the task of coordinating the design and implementation of IEPs was very time-consuming for SENCos (Cole, 2005); however, when the revised code (DfES, 2001) introduced the idea of group education plans (GEPs) for pupils with similar needs, SENCos' paperwork was significantly reduced, enabling them to spend more time consulting with colleagues and implementing curriculum interventions (Frankl, 2005). MacKenzie (2007) acknowledges that further research is needed on the impact of GEPs on the role of SENCos and their effectiveness in enabling students to achieve their targets.

The requirement for IEPs to be formulated by schools in Ireland for students with special educational needs in the low-incidence categories was included in the EPSEN (2004) Act. However, because commencement of several of this Act's provisions was suspended, schools still do not have to fulfil this requirement. Nonetheless, guidelines on the preparation of IEPs have been issued to schools, and Ware et al. (2011) found that schools have been using IEPs or similar documents for a number of years.

A quantitative study involving 83 teachers who had recently completed a postgraduate diploma in SEN was conducted to evaluate the impact of PD specifically related to the IEP process on the understanding, knowledge, and practice of teachers and on learning outcomes for their pupils with SEN, while also examining the input of students to IEPs (Ní Bhroin, King, & Prunty, 2016). Findings indicate that 45% of teachers reported that they *sometimes* provided pupils with an opportunity to express their views regarding their IEP.

However, the sample size of this survey is small and lacks generalisability. The EPSEN Act (2004) is a significant provision for children with a disability or special educational need, and provides for the children to be centrally involved in some of the critical decision-making processes that affect them. For example, the child can be directly involved in the formulation and implementation of the education plan, depending on the capability of the child and the judgements of professionals in this regard (Rose & Shevlin, 2010; Winter & O'Raw, 2010). Positive outcomes are identified when teachers encourage students with SEN, particularly social, emotional, and behavioural disorder (SEBD), through an engagement with 'voice', to demonstrate their strengths and abilities and value them in the process. Teachers respecting and acknowledging that students may know better 'how to help us help them' can promote a sense of 'ownership, responsibility and investment' in positive behaviour and learning (Flynn, 2013, p. 86).

There are still difficulties in translating this commitment into practice at the school level, since the section on IEPs in the EPSEN Act has yet to be commenced, so no legislative obligation exists (Rose & Shevlin, 2010). Until recently, no infrastructure existed to support pupil voice and the active participation of pupils with SEN in decision-making in schools. However, following the Learner Voice Research study carried out with principals, teachers, and 350 students from 20 diverse and geographically dispersed schools, a structure was proposed to facilitate the inclusion of student voice in school settings (Flynn, 2017). This model seeks to maximise the potential positive impact of learner voice engagement on student–teacher relationships and to encourage a sense of empowerment and agency by providing opportunities to check interpretation, provide feedback on the impact of student perspectives, and pursue transformation as appropriate. This model could provide opportunities for pupils and SETs to share ideas and discover common aspirations

when setting goals for learning, while allowing pupils to benefit from shared opportunities for communication, listening, and being heard (Flynn, 2017).

In the study by Ní Bhroin et al. (2016), a partnership approach was identified in the drafting of IEPs with SETs, class teachers, parents, and occasionally SNAs in a collaborative process – unlike in Sweden, where a study in three mainstream schools found evidence that several parents were not even informed that their children had an IEP (Isaksson, Lindqvist, & Bergström, 2007). Hargreaves and Lo (2000) advise that the practices and strategies involved in designing, implementing, and reviewing IEPs, while providing supports to pupils, also improve communication and strengthen links with parents, through relationships of reciprocal learning that are open, interactive, and inclusive. In practice, King et al. (2018) identified high levels of parental presence at IEP planning meetings, although practice varied regarding meaningful engagement in the process by parents, for a variety of reasons.

### *2.6.3 Opportunities for professional collaboration*

Kershner (2014, p. 853) writes that a 'crucial support for teachers' knowledge-building about SEN is the intrinsic expectation for collaborative teamwork in this field'. Dialogue, collaboration, and relationships within and beyond school are central to creating multi-professional understandings and tools for learning (Kershner, 2014). In attempting to define the future role of the SENCo, Morewood (2012, p. 74) contends that:

> an effective SENCo is a fluid, organic, and constantly evolving professional, situated within an ever-changing position in a complex mesh of specific legislation, educational structures and expectations.

Professional collaboration boosts pupil achievement and enhances the implementation of innovation and change (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018. The provision of support in schools is organised in a three-staged approach, with pupils being supported by their class

teacher at stage one, by the class teacher in consultation with the support teacher at stage two, and, when significant concerns remain, by both teachers in possible consultation with a specialist such as a psychologist at stage three (DES, 2017). This staged approach encourages the formation of special education support teams comprising support teachers who collaborate with class teachers in planning and implementing special education support programmes (Tiernan & Casserly, 2018). Ware et al. (2011) share evidence that the resource teacher can provide support and advice to the classroom teacher in addition to collaborating on learning targets and strategies. It was noticeable that the existence of a member of staff, who either formally or informally took responsibility for coordination, was a factor that contributed to a positive experience of school for the case study children. Some of the schools where case studies were carried out had a relatively well-developed system of coordination for SEN, while others had no such system. The authors concluded that 'it is apparent that collaboration is difficult to achieve both generally and in the context of SEN' (Ware et al., 2011, p. 24).

Similarly, Travers (2011), in a study of 137 support teachers providing learning support in mathematics, mostly through small-group or individual withdrawal, found that only 16% of them were satisfied with arrangements for collaborating with class teachers. While a significant finding was the range of approaches that Irish teachers used to carve out time to collaborate, nonetheless Travers concluded that the 'lack of formal mechanisms for collaboration was problematic' (2011, p. 475). The most significant barrier to successful collaboration between teachers – lack of time – has been addressed somewhat since this research was published, by the introduction in 2010 of designated non-contact time in schools specifically for collaboration and planning. However, a recent small-scale study (O'Riordan, 2017) found that the lack of time hinders teachers' ability to plan and liaise collaboratively with colleagues, parents, and outside agencies, which causes frustration and

has a knock-on effect on morale. A further finding of this study was the existence of a strong commitment across all schools to building a team approach to inclusion.

Collaborative cultures were evident in schools where class teachers and support teachers engaged in evaluating and planning (King, 2011) in preparation for team teaching, outside of pupil contact time. In order to expand such cultures to all schools, O'Gorman and Drudy (2010) contend that since each teacher has responsibility for the education of all children in their class, including those with SEN, aspects such as collaborating with colleagues, parents, and other professionals should be highlighted when preparing professional development for all teachers. If SENCos were appointed in each school, their duties could include the organisation of such professional learning, in line with the recommendation of Abbott (2007, p. 404) that training related to SEN 'should support inclusion for all serving teachers', particularly since all undergraduate teaching qualifications now include mandatory modules on SEN provision.

While the findings of Travers et al. (2010) are very affirming regarding the positive impact of SEN coordinators in schools where they have been formally designated, there has been no progress to date towards addressing and implementing the recommendations that all schools should appoint coordinators and that those appointed would be obliged to acquire a certain level of SEN qualifications. In fact, due to the significant reduction in the number of posts of responsibility in this education system, several schools that have designated post holders as SEN coordinators may have lost those positions since the moratorium on appointments to posts of responsibility was introduced in 2009. Investment by policy and system leaders in building collaborative cultures where school leaders encourage, engage, and empower teachers when embarking on the implementation of new policies and practices is therefore all the more essential in the current climate, so that these changes have a greater possibility of being embedded successfully (Hargreaves, 2019).

### *2.6.4 Working collaboratively: planning and implementation of SEN provision*

SENCos see their consultative role as central, and believe that maintaining a teaching role helps to keep credibility with colleagues and awareness of children's needs. In practice, however, the role is increasingly seen as managerial and administrative (Szwed, 2007). Schools need to provide opportunities for teachers to communicate effectively with each other in an atmosphere of trust, respect, and appreciation (Ryan, 2006). Such opportunities arise in the provision of additional support for pupils with SEN using in-class or team teaching approaches.

#### *Approaches to provision: team teaching*

Team-teaching is an aspect of co-teaching which involves two or more certified professionals who share instructional responsibility for a single group of students, an approach reflecting joint work as outlined by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018). According to Friend and Cook (2016), team teaching takes place in a single classroom or workspace for specific content or objectives with mutual ownership, pooled resources, and joint accountability. Six in-class models of support are provided by Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, and Shamberger (2010), including station teaching, which can operate with two teachers dividing the instructional content into two or more segments and presenting it at separate locations (stations) in the classroom (Cook & Friend, 1995; Gurger & Uzuner, 2011); and parallel teaching, where two co-teachers split the class into two groups, with each teaching the same content (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2006). Station teaching can facilitate a third independent station, as advocated by Friend et al. (2010, p.12), whereby pupils are 'divided into three groups, rotated from station to station, being taught by the teachers at two stations and working independently at the third'. In common with the joint work approach (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) and that advocated by Friend and Cook

(2016), class teachers and support teachers work together to plan lessons, teach, monitor pupil progress, and manage the class. This approach is advocated as an alternative to teaching supports that include small group teaching and, where necessary, individualised teaching, to address specific learning needs, outside of the classroom (Rose et al, 2015), referred to as withdrawal.

In the Irish context, Circular 0013/2017 (DES, 2017), which provides guidance on implementing the revised model of SEN provision, reminds schools that team teaching should be included in the range of teaching supports provided in SEN allocation in mainstream primary schools. Teachers are advised by the NCSE (2013) that interventions with pupils should be delivered in a manner that best meets the needs identified, supporting King's (2006) view that the emphasis in teaching should be on targeting pupils needing help. Engagement by class teachers and SETs in mutual dialogue and collaboration (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) will provide for greater familiarisation (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016) with all models of in-class support, so that the most effective approach is implemented given the needs and learning priorities of the targeted pupils.

*Planning for team teaching*

In order for team teaching to be effective, co-planning, teachers' working relationships, and classroom roles must be addressed (Friend, 2008). Principals need to facilitate teachers to be free to meet for planning of in-class support. Travers (2011) found that Irish teachers used a range of approaches to carve out time to collaborate, concluding however that the lack of formal mechanisms for collaborating was challenging (Travers, 2011). This concern was recently addressed in the guidelines for the revised model of SEN provision, with schools instructed to 'maintain time for coordinating, planning and reviewing activities to ensure effective and optimal use of supports' (DES, 2017, p. 18).

Nowadays technology can facilitate greater opportunities for collaboration between teachers. One example is documented by Egodawatte, McDougall, and Stoilescu (2011) in Canada, where a wiki allowed teacher participants to work on a project with their counterparts from other school boards by facilitating the posting of resources and tasks. Teachers have engaged with Google Docs, a word-processing tool that many schools have adopted, which allows teachers to share ideas and work on documents at the same exact time, without having to be together (Pratt, Imbody, Wolff, & Patterson, 2017). This resource enables each member of the planning group to add their own contribution to the planning documents online, since its most powerful feature is the facility to share documents with others, which opens up possibilities for real-time collaboration and feedback. The next section documents the merits and advantages of the team teaching approach.

### *Advantages of team teaching*

Team teaching as an approach offers a number of advantages, including the opportunity to get to know the children better through small groups created to facilitate the organisation of in-class support models. This allows for a more targeted and focussed approach when addressing their specific learning needs and diverse learning styles (Walsh, 2012). Team teaching facilitates a greater instructional intensity and differentiated instruction, while reducing the potential for poor behaviour (Thousand et al., 2006). A team teaching approach also avoids the possibility of stigmatisation of students receiving support (Thousand et al., 2006).

For the teachers engaging in this practice, opportunities are provided to model good practice and mentor their more inexperienced and newly qualified colleagues, through planning, teaching, and reviewing together. This is a finding of Travers et al. (2010), who

described coordinators as having high levels of specialist knowledge and skills and being willing to lead and mentor staff, support new practices, and lead reflections on initiatives. Meanwhile, Walsh (2012) found that significant value was added to the professional development offered to team teachers through coaching and collaboration in the classrooms. Recent research (Uí Chonduibh, 2017) exploring co-teaching as a pedagogy used by mentors and other experienced teachers, when supporting the induction of newly qualified teachers (NQTs), found that collaborative practices were developed and fostered across school settings when the participants engaged in co-teaching lessons and professional development meetings, which impacted on participants' professional learning.

For pupils, the opportunity to avail of more teacher time and attention and greater participation opportunities in small groups allows them to grow in confidence, especially as there is no singling out of pupils for intervention (Thousand et al., 2006). Due to the number of teachers involved in team teaching, pupils are exposed to a variety of teaching methodologies and approaches, one of which is likely to suit their particular learning style (King, 2006), since different pupils respond better to different teaching styles. King (2006) stresses, however, that 'the emphasis always has to be on targeting pupils who need help, not on teaching methods', and she argues that 'pupils with learning disabilities . . . are best served by a range of provisions to cater for their individual needs' (p. 32).

In mixed-ability groups, peer learning is inevitable, which helps build on individuals' strengths and mobilises them as active participants in the learning process (Topping, 2005) – an example of collaborating with students, one of Hargreaves and O'Connor's (2018) ten tenets of collaborative professionalism. This approach can encourage children to become more considerate of others, due to the need for quietness to allow all groups in the classroom to proceed with their assigned activities, reflecting the guidance provided in the Inclusive Education Framework: 'School rules are few and are presented in accessible

forms for pupils with special educational need' (NCSE, 2011). It is also important to acknowledge the challenges associated with team teaching which are now examined.

### *Challenges associated with team teaching*

Lack of opportunities to engage in PD regarding in-class approaches to SEN provision can be challenging for teachers, affecting their confidence, interest, and attitudes around co-teaching (Pancsofar & Petroff, 2013). Literature suggests that to support effective co-teaching practices, teachers need PD in additional skills that may not have been provided in traditional teacher preparation programmes, including approaches and methodology of co-teaching (Friend 2007). Teachers who reported more frequent opportunities to learn about co-teaching from in-service PD were more confident in their co-teaching practice and demonstrated higher levels of interest and more positive attitudes about co-teaching than did those teachers who reported less frequent professional learning on co-teaching (Pancsofar & Petroff, 2013). The lack of time for planning, consultation, and review (Layton, 2005) of the team teaching process is also a problem encountered by schools.

### *Withdrawal of pupils*

Withdrawal from class by SETs for individual or small-group support has been the dominant model of intervention in Ireland (Rose et al., 2015), although some collaborative planning between support and mainstream teachers, in addition to team teaching, are gradually emerging (Casserly & Padden, 2017). The criterion for deciding which of these approaches is implemented depends principally on effectively meeting pupils' needs (DES, 2017), but also to a lesser extent on the physical space available in classrooms and the number of classes there.

While an in-class approach to the provision of special education is advocated by the DES (2017), Casserly and Padden's study (2017) of 11 schools with multi-grade classes indicates that withdrawal of pupils for supplementary support remains the dominant approach, while team teaching is not commonly used, due to lack of planning time, teaching personalities, teaching styles, and lack of PD in this area.

*Advantages of withdrawal*

Advantages of the withdrawal approach for some pupils include the targeting of specific groups of pupils with similar or specific needs for focussed interventions and instruction. Nolan (2005) cites Lerner (2000) taking the view that many students with learning difficulties need individualised clinical teaching and explicit instruction, which is difficult to provide in regular classrooms. Travers (2011), whose study involved 137 teachers with postgraduate qualifications in SEN, reported differences in teachers' practice in small-group withdrawal situations as compared to class teaching, with teachers claiming to use more varied methodologies, to use a lot more concrete materials, and to individualise instruction.

A second advantage is the need for the provision of 'timeout' for children with diagnosis of autism and ADHD, since Hebron and Bond (2017) acknowledge that resource provision provides important factors like flexible, individualised support and quiet spaces, and also facilitated inclusion in mainstream classes. However, challenges are also identified by Bond and Hebron (2016) for SETs in having sufficient flexibility to support pupils with autism in mainstream classrooms, while also having staff available to respond to unexpected or difficult situations (e.g., incidences of challenging behaviour).

Withdrawal has proven to be a successful approach with pupils who require English language teaching, since this intervention is specific to a minority of pupils, and withdrawn

groups can be made up of pupils who are not in the same class level but do have similar levels of language proficiency. These findings emerged from a small-scale study of seven schools by Gardiner-Hyland and Burke (2018), where both class and EAL (English as an additional language) teachers felt that this approach was necessary due to the focussed attention that small groups afforded, reflecting an approach of common meaning and purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) in regard to meeting the challenge of supporting EAL pupils.

*Disadvantages of withdrawal*

The principal disadvantage identified with the withdrawal approach is the effect it can have on the children concerned, as it can lead to them being stigmatised (Rose & Shevlin, 2019). Withdrawal support can also lead to planning problems for class teachers due to the absence of pupils from the classroom at various times (Casserly & Padden, 2018). In addition, classroom teachers have limited opportunities to develop expertise in meeting the needs of pupils with diverse needs in the mainstream classroom. Furthermore, expertise in SEN may be viewed as the preserve of a limited number of teaching staff, on whom other teachers become dependent, which can lead to abdication of responsibility for pupils with SEN (Rose & Shevlin, 2019).

Casserly and Padden (2018) found that rather than choosing one approach over the other, teachers' views support a combination of withdrawal and in-class support, stressing that the choice of teaching approaches should be made depending on pupils' learning needs and that these choices should be fluid.

The teaching approaches adopted by SETs having been discussed, the next section will examine their roles and responsibilities.

### *2.6.5 Opportunities for collaboration with external agencies*

SETs have responsibility for collaborating on behalf of their pupils with external agencies. Challenges to this aspect of their role include lack of time and unwillingness on the part of professionals to engage in collaboration (Drudy & Kinsella, 2009; Hanko, 2004). Abbott (2007) describes a disappointing level of collaboration with outside agencies in Northern Ireland, while indicating that the lack of liaison between therapeutic services and schools could thwart efforts to achieve the most effective teaching and learning. Subsequently, however, evidence of good collaborative cultures was found by O'Gorman and Drudy (2010), while Billingsley (2014) stressed the importance of setting time aside for consultation.

A positive example of collaborative engagement is provided by a four-year action research study carried out by NEPS psychologists in five second-level and ten primary schools in the south-east of Ireland (Nugent, 2012). Five evidence-based interventions were delivered by specifically trained teachers to children with literacy difficulties over a three-month period. Results proved positive in this Reading Project, with gains in word reading averaging nine months, and in spelling, six months. These achievements, when scrutinised, highlighted the importance of teacher training in improving outcomes for children's reading (Nugent, 2012). This initiative is similar in approach to the model of intervention services provided by Instructional Consultation Teams in schools in the US, which also reported positive impacts on student learning outcomes (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006).

In regard to other health services, an example of the difficulty of effective liaison between schools and speech and language therapists (SLTs) was illustrated in a study by Glover, McCormack, and Smith-Tamarey (2015), carried out with 14 teachers and six SLTs in Australia. The research found that minimal collaborative practice was reportedly occurring,

while teachers and SLTs expressed a desire for increased training and knowledge. By establishing inter-professional groups to discuss and resolve current service needs, to share information or research, and to develop and share resources (Glover et al., 2015), more collaborative practice would occur, facilitating skill development and an appropriately differentiated curriculum.

If SENCos are increasingly to be expected to work collaboratively with classroom teachers and other specialists, then there is a need for reinforcement from clear collaboration policies, while the amount of dedicated time allocated for this has to increase in order for these skills to be established and developed (Forlin, 2001; Gerschel, 2005). These findings appear to support the view that the amount and allocation of working hours assigned to an SET in a formal coordinating role must be seriously considered before any consideration could be given to introducing a similar role to the Irish education system.

Irish education policy also reflects the view that collaboration with educational partners, including health professionals, is a necessary and important part of the effective provision in mainstream schools for children with SEN, particularly regarding the formulation of IEPs but also more generally. The Learning Support Guidelines (Government of Ireland, 2000a), published in Ireland to coincide with the provision of a learning support service to all primary schools in the state, advocate that:

> effective learning support requires a high level of collaboration and consultation involving the Board of Management, the principal teacher, class teachers, the learning support teacher(s), special education teachers, parents and relevant professionals. (Government of Ireland, 2000a, p. 20)

Schools and teachers are expected to meet the learning needs of all pupils, and educational policy in Ireland advises that supplementary teaching arrangements be organised as inclusively as possible (NCSE, 2013). When examining Ireland's progress towards an inclusive education system, however, Drudy and Kinsella (2009) found difficulties for

educators in coordinating and working collaboratively with different educational sectors. Their participants also cited as barriers:

> lack of opportunities for, or an unwillingness on the part of school personnel, to engage in collaborative problem-solving relating to the effective inclusion of pupils with special educational needs. (Drudy & Kinsella, 2009, p. 657)

Clearly there exists a need for stronger policies to support a more collaborative and coordinated approach to the organisation and implementation of SEN provision in mainstream schools, including effective liaison with external services. Successful schools are characterised by high levels of collegiality, communication, cooperation, and flexibility among staff working towards agreed targets and action plans (NESF, quoted in Travers et al., 2010). The next section will examine closely the roles and responsibilities of the SET.

## 2.7 Roles and Responsibilities of SET

SETs have responsibility for a wide variety of processes and procedures related to the provision of special education in mainstream schools. These include supporting pupils during transition phases from one school level to another, and carrying out assessment, which is a significant and important aspect of their work.

### *2.7.1 Supporting pupils with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties*

Under the Continuum of Support framework provided to assist schools in implementing the revised model of provision (DES, 2017), teachers are expected to identify pupils' educational needs, including social, emotional, and behavioural needs, and to respond to those needs. These needs can arise from a continuum of conditions, which include attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and neurotic, anti-social, and in a minority of situations psychotic behaviour. However, critical findings in research indicate that SENCos lack confidence in developing provision for pupils with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties, and point to confusion regarding

the responsibility for these pupils between the SENCo, the pastoral system, and the senior leadership team. Although the creation of a nurturing environment is crucial for students with behavioural, emotional, and social difficulties (Burton & Goodman, 2011), given the current focus on measurable pupil outcomes, SENCos often feel undervalued and unappreciated because the difference they make is not visible or capable of being measured (MacKenzie, 2007).

### *2.7.2 Supporting pupils during transitions*

Information-sharing between education sectors is critical in terms of continuity (O'Kane, 2016). While no formal structures exist to prescribe the transfer of information regarding pupils from pre-schools to primary, a system was established in recent years under Circular 0045/2014, which requires primary schools to complete a three-phase process, The Education Passport (NCCA, 2014), to support the transfer of pupils to second level. During this process, principals, primary teachers, parents, and pupils complete forms with relevant information, including a Special Educational Needs Summary Form, if applicable, which are then shared with the secondary school that the child has enrolled in (NCCA, 2014). This is viewed as a positive development, endorsing the recommendations of Drudy and Kinsella (2009, p. 655) that 'an inclusive education system . . . needs to ensure coordination between the different sectors in the education system, and the smooth transfer of pupils and their resource and support entitlements from one sector to another'.

#### *Transition from pre-school to primary*

Poor communication between pre-schools and primary schools is a barrier to successful transition for children both nationally and internationally (O'Kane, 2007). A longitudinal study of 1,157 pupils in Norway found that teachers who receive information about children before school starts can use this information to tailor instruction and guide their

own behaviours and interactions with the specific child. The study found that this helps children as they enter school, making them feel more comfortable and able to gain more from the academic experiences being provided in the classroom (DeMeo Cook, Dearing, & Daae Zachrisson, 2016). Internationally and nationally, local transition-to-school policies and an array of transfer documents exist and are used at a local level in an uncoordinated way, with little or no evidence of joined-up transition strategies (O'Kane, 2016). O'Kane (2016) advocates for the provision of templates which transfer information between settings in order to support connections for children, but also to facilitate supportive relationships between pre-schools and primary schools. However, it appears that communication and collaboration between pre-schools and primary schools, as envisaged by O'Kane (2016) and Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018), are still not happening in any systematic or comprehensive manner.

*Transition from primary to second level*

Securing places for pupils with special education needs in second level can prove difficult, according to Principal 2 (P2) in the present research. Recently, the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) longitudinal study of 8,000 children found that 13-year-olds with special educational needs who took part in Wave 2 of GUI were less well settled into post-primary school (80%), according to their parents, than children without special educational needs (94%). Children with SEN were also found to be coping less well than their peers without SEN in other aspects of the transition, particularly in relation to coping well with school work (93% as opposed to 70%) and involvement in extracurricular activities (81.7% as opposed to 64.7%). These findings suggest that additional support that goes beyond academic boundaries, such as collaboration with students and engaging with them with common meaning and purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), may facilitate a successful transition (NCSE, 2018).

Guidelines set out by the NCSE (2013) in its publication 'Transition from Primary to Post-Primary for Pupils with Special Educational Needs' advise principals to ensure that procedures for consultation and liaison are put in place. They are in line with the recommendations of the NCCA (2004) that structures to facilitate pre-entry contact between the post-primary school, incoming students, and their parents be created to ensure that a good information flow exists between the primary feeder school and the post-primary school in relation to students' achievements, learning strengths, and material covered at primary level (NCCA, 2004).

The process of information-sharing between primary and second-level schools during transition has improved and facilitated SETs to support students with SEN to a greater extent since the development and introduction of a formal structure, the Educational Passport (DES, 2014). However, a similar system is required at primary school entry level to allow SETs and class teachers to provide greater support to pupils, ensuring they gain more from the academic experiences being provided in the classroom (DeMeo Cook et al., 2016).

### *2.7.3 Assessment*

A wide range of approaches to assessment exist in primary schools, mainly prescribed in the Assessment Guidelines for Schools (NCCA, 2007). These include standardised and diagnostic testing, both of which are very relevant to the provision of SEN. The guidelines for Supporting Pupils with SEN in Mainstream Schools (DES, 2017) recommend that the monitoring of pupils' progress

> in relation to achieving their targets should be regularly and carefully monitored. This stage of the process is informed by effective measurement of baseline performance, including the use of criterion-referenced tests and other methods of assessment (for example, teacher-designed tests, checklists, samples of work, observation) that allow pupils to demonstrate their progress.

In primary schools in recent years, standardised testing has become more formal, and its processes have become more structured, due to the introduction of Circular 0056/2011. This requires schools to administer standardised tests at three stages during primary school years, to collate results, to share individual children's scores with parents, to share aggregate scores with the board of management, and to upload these to the DES. The tests used in Irish schools include Sigma-T (Mathematics), Micra-T (English), and Drumcondra English and Mathematics tests. While schools are administering tests and collating scores for reporting purposes, the Chief Inspector's report of School Inspections 2013–2016 (DES, 2016), found that since 2013 there had been no significant improvement in the formative use of assessment data to plan programmes of learning and to ensure that those programmes are appropriately differentiated in response to the varying needs and abilities of learners.

This supports findings from earlier studies by Schenck (1980), that instruction must be linked to assessment, and by Ní Chualain (2011), that data from testing should be used to track pupil progress and to identify those pupils at risk. In a recent large-scale study which surveyed 1,564 teachers, the majority indicated that they used standardised test results to identify pupils' strengths, weaknesses, and progress; to inform the preparation of IEPs; to group and grade pupils; to make adjustments to their planning; and to evaluate their own teaching effectiveness. However, up to a quarter of respondents said they never used standardised tests for many of these purposes, while respondents were much more likely to discuss standardised test results with other teachers or with parents than with pupils. The overwhelming majority of teachers reported that standardised tests results were used in their schools to select pupils for learning support and for broad whole-school evaluation purposes. These studies indicate a need for PD for teachers in the area of standardised tests, so that results can be used to make valid decisions about teaching and learning

(O'Leary, Lysaght, Nic Craith & Scully, 2019). Consequently, SETs can feel more competent in analysing test scores when gathering evidence on which to base the selection of educational strategies and resources.

## 2.8 Summary

In a number of systems, the responsibility for coordinating SEN provision has been devolved to the SENCo, a role that has been firmly established in Britain for two decades and for a shorter time in Greece, the Netherlands, and Sweden. In other systems, such as Australia, Finland, Spain, the US, and here in Ireland, members of the SEN team or support teachers have assumed responsibility for organising aspects of SEN provision and organisation informally in their schools. The responsibilities and expectations associated with the role have changed over that time, but nonetheless they maintain a pivotal role in facilitating change towards more inclusive practices, while assuming responsibility for the implementation of legislation and structures which support children with special educational needs.

In Ireland, despite the absence of a requirement on the part of schools to designate a teacher to undertake this role formally, there is strong evidence of Learning Support and Resource teachers undertaking duties related to the coordination of their schools' SEN provision (Kinsella, Murtagh, & Senior, 2014). In schools where boards of management have designated a teacher as SENCo, there are wide variations in the responsibilities and tasks attached to these positions, since both depend on the particular school context, with no national standards or guidelines against which to measure the effectiveness or efficiency of the role. If the role of SENCo were to be established in all schools, then it seems logical that an effective system of monitoring the implementation of national guidelines and appraisal of the role should be initiated simultaneously, to avoid the situation described by

Szwed (2007) and Pearson and Ralph (2007), where a large amount of 'local interpretation' exists at school level.

Examination of aspects of the SENCo role, such as qualifications, support of other staff, and policy formation innovation, has found evidence of positive impact and good practice in schools. Travers et al. (2010, p. 180) described coordinators as highly confident, with 'high levels of specialist knowledge and skills', 'willing to lead and mentor staff, support new practices and lead reflections on initiatives'. Examples of good practice included undertaking needs analysis of the school in relation to inclusion, tailoring professional development for staff, and establishing sophisticated systems for record-keeping, monitoring progress, and documenting support time. Coordinators were also found to play a key role in policy development, planning, and supporting inclusive practice. All of these positive developments in SEN provision were facilitated by support from principals and a system of distributed leadership in schools. The evidence also supports the view that teachers assuming the role of coordinator of SEN provision will be more likely to succeed in the role if they have engaged in professional learning (Travers et al., 2010).

A significant change has been introduced in the system of provision of resources to schools for special educational needs. Its implementation is being supported by the establishment of the NCSE Support Service, providing advice and support to schools. This service will include professional development for teachers (INTO, 2014), since the proposed changes will result in increasing autonomy being assigned to school principals in the allocation of resources to students. In order for any new system to be implemented successfully, it is essential for teachers to know that they are not on their own and that they have access to support from school governing bodies, school management and colleagues, and support staff teachers (Pijl & Frisson, 2009). Collaboration and consultation are vital aspects of the organisation of SEN provision under this model and could provide access to support for

SETs and all staff concerned with implementing the revised model. In practice, this would involve commitment to a shared vision of pupil learning and development, engagement in collaborative inquiry and problem-solving, analysis of evidence, and engagement in mutual dialogue (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

If the policy-makers in Ireland were to establish a designated post for SENCos in each of our schools, as has been recommended by a number of reports, then it would serve us well to review how this role has evolved over 20 years in Britain and in other systems, and to learn lessons from the research that has been carried out into the relative effectiveness of SENCos before envisaging a new system of SEN provision here. Research findings reviewed in this paper indicate that important considerations include levels of knowledge and expertise, assigned duties, workload, responsibilities regarding mentoring and professional development of SEN staff, and status of the role within the school.

The research proposed here regarding the benefits and effectiveness of systems of SEN provision, including the role of those support teachers who coordinate special education at school level, would provide additional data to assist policy-makers in determining whether to establish a SENCo-style role in every school, or a more collaborative team approach with all support teachers taking active responsibility for the provision of SEN. Decisions regarding the establishment of guidelines, procedures, and practices to be followed by those appointed would also be informed by such research. The appointment of SENCos to a senior leadership role in the school, facilitating their inclusion in strategic decision-making, along with the provision of mandatory professional development have emerged from the literature review as important recommendations in ensuring adherence to procedures and successful implementation of effective programmes and strategies. Policy-makers need to be mindful of the lessons learned in other systems regarding these and

other factors that make SEN provision more effective and beneficial for teachers and pupils with special needs.

## 2.9 Development of the Project

Having identified the provision of SEN as a topic for investigation and development, the following research question will be addressed: What contribution to leadership in Irish primary schools is made by the SETs who assume roles in relation to coordinating SEN provision? The key areas to be addressed in this study include the school contexts in which they work, criteria for their appointment as coordinator, level of training and experience among the participants, specific tasks and duties assigned to the role, arrangements for timetabling, organisation of resources, budgeting, liaison with parents and outside agencies, and systems in place for the screening and diagnosis of pupils with special needs.

Regarding the coordination of SEN provision undertaken by SETs in schools, areas for investigation include the opportunities for collaboration and consultation with the principal, members of the SEN team and class teachers, the process of writing IEPs, identifying targets, implementing teaching strategies and reviewing progress, requirements regarding the mentoring and support of new teachers and support staff, and the development of the overall school plan for the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs. The views of coordinators on the most significant challenges to their work will also be examined. The next chapter will provide a detailed account of the methodology and research methods to be employed in carrying out this study.

# Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter seeks to explain the methodology chosen to achieve the stated objectives of the research, as follows:

- to identify the extent to which the SETs lead and manage SEN provision in the school, while achieving a balance between supporting pupils and staff;
- to identify the contribution SETs make to leading and managing change, with a specific focus on SEN policy development and strategic planning;
- to identify the specific tasks and responsibilities assigned to their role;
- to identify the key practices and strategies that allow the SETs to fulfil their tasks and responsibilities effectively;
- to identify any barriers that prevent these teachers from successfully fulfilling their tasks and responsibilities.

Firstly, the philosophy that underpins the research approach is outlined, followed by details of the research design and methodology. The methods of data collection and analysis are clarified, and important aspects of the research are documented, including sampling, validity, reliability, positionality, and ethics.

## 3.1 Philosophical Underpinnings

The nature of knowledge and the manner in which humans interpret it are at the heart of research methodologies. A review of philosophy is a vital aspect of the research process, as it opens researchers' minds to all possibilities, which can both enrich their research skills and enhance their confidence that they are using the appropriate methodology (Holden & Lynch, 2004). Developing a philosophical perspective requires that, as a researcher, I make several core assumptions concerning the nature of science (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). This generally involves taking either a subjective or an objective approach to research, and these two major philosophical approaches are delineated by several core assumptions concerning

ontology (reality), epistemology (knowledge), human nature (predetermined or not), and methodology (Holden & Lynch, 2004).

Ontology is concerned with the nature of the social world and what can be known about it, relating to one's view of reality and being (Mack, 2010, of which there are three distinct positions: realism, materialism, and idealism. Realism claims that there is an external reality which is identifiable and measurable (Ponterotto, 2005) and exists independently of people's beliefs or understanding about it. Materialism holds that there is a real world but that only material features, such as economic relations or physical features, hold reality. Idealism asserts that reality is knowable only through socially constructed meanings (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Idealism is subjective and influenced by an individual's experience and perceptions (Ponterotto, 2005). Since this study examines the experiences and views of reality of principals and support teachers through interaction between these individuals and the researcher, the ontological approach that will underpin the research is idealism (Ponterotto, 2005).

Epistemology deals with 'the nature of knowledge, its possibility, scope and general basis' (Crotty, 1998, p. 8), providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are adequate and legitimate. It is a way of understanding and explaining how we acquire knowledge (Mack, 2010) and how we know what we know (Crotty, 1998). A range of epistemologies exists, including objectivist epistemology, which holds that there is one true and correct knowledge and that reality exists independently of human consciousness and experience (Crotty, 1998; Vrasidas, 2000). In this view, understandings and values are considered to be objectified in the people we are studying, from whom we can discover the 'objective truth' (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). This epistemological stance is underpinned by the theoretical perspective of positivism, which holds that independent scientific research can attain that objective truth and meaning (Crotty, 1998; Snape &

Spencer, 2003). Research done within this perspective is typically associated with quantitative methods. This approach would not be appropriate for my research, as it focuses on the precise objective measurement of the world and is less able to capture the thoughts, experiences, and complex lives of human beings (Ponterotto, 2005).

An alternative view is that of subjectivism, which holds that 'meaning does not come out of an inter-play between subject and object, but is imposed on the object by the subject' (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). The object makes no contribution to the generation of meaning, which is imported from somewhere else, such as dreams or religious beliefs (Crotty, 1998). This view would not be appropriate to my project, as meaning within this stance 'comes from anything but an interaction between the subject and object to which it is ascribed', with the object making no contribution to the generation of meaning (Crotty, 1998, p. 9).

The epistemology which reflects the view of human knowledge most appropriate to this research is constructionism, which holds that truth or meaning is a personal experience to be constructed through our engagement with the realities in our world in a given context (Ackermann, 2001). Since meaning in this view of knowledge is not discovered but constructed, it is evident that different people may construct meaning and understanding in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998). Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences, which may be varied and multiple, and this view aligns well with my chosen ontological view of reality, namely idealism, whereby reality is only knowable through socially constructed meanings (Snape & Spencer, 2003) and is subjective and influenced by the individual's experience and perceptions (Ponterotto, 2005). The role of the researcher in this study was therefore to look for the complexity of views and to rely as much as possible on the participant's view of the situation (Creswell, 2007). Since the researcher and the participants jointly created (co-constructed) findings from their interactive dialogue and interpretation, with the

findings representing the meanings and understanding of the participants, this view provides the primary foundation for qualitative research methods and was an appropriate approach for this study (Ponterotto, 2015). It is important for me, as researcher, to take account of my own *position* in relation to the research participants and research setting (McDowell, 1992), since bias remains a naturally occurring human characteristic (England, 1994).

## 3.2 Positionality

Positionality has been conceptualised by social scientists as a central component in qualitative data collection (Ganga & Scott, 2006). Researchers must be alert to and take account of their own position in relation to the research participants and research setting (McDowell, 1992). Positionality allows for a narrative placement for researcher objectivity and subjectivity whereby the researcher can fully self-identify their place and position in the field or discipline (England, 1994; Rose, 1997). It serves to inform a research study rather than invalidate it as biased by personal perspectives and social or political viewpoints (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

'Insider' research refers to social interviews conducted between researchers and participants who share a similar cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national, and religious heritage (Mercer, 2007). Hammersley (1993) acknowledges that there is no significant benefit to being an insider or an outsider, since each position has advantages and disadvantages, depending on the context and purposes of the research. In this study, the participating principals and SETs may have regarded me as an 'insider' because I am a member of the teaching profession and because of my previous roles as an SET and a primary principal. However, while my experience in these roles allowed me to understand the professional language and situational descriptions of the participants, I am now in a different role in

education and no longer actively work in a school setting, which permitted more objectivity in my role as investigator.

Mercer (2007) cautions interviewers very strongly against revealing any of their own thoughts. Interviewers who share experiences with informants minimise the 'bracketing' that is essential to construct the meaning of participants and reduces information shared by informants in case studies and ethnography (Creswell, 1996, p. 133). Therefore, I took great care not to convey my own views while conducting focus group and individual interviews, and not to influence the participants' contributions in any way.

Together, the above ontological and epistemological assumptions make up a paradigm (Mack, 2010), defined by Mackenzie and Knipe (2006, p. 2) as 'a loose collection of logically related assumptions, concepts or propositions that orient thinking and research'. The 'paradigm' or overall research design will now be explored.

## 3.3 Research Design

### *3.3.1 Interpretivism*

Epistemology and ontology influenced the research design and methodology for this research. In this case, the research design which most appropriately provides a context for the research process is interpretivism, taking a generally opposing view to that of positivism. The interpretive stance claims that natural science methods are inappropriate for social investigation, since the social world is not governed by regularities that hold law-like properties (Snape & Spencer, 2003). An ontological assumption of interpretivism is that social reality is seen by multiple people interpreting events differently, leaving multiple perspectives of an incident. The central endeavour in the context of the interpretive paradigm, therefore, is to understand the subjective world of human experience (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Therefore, in this study, the researcher had to explore

and research the social world through the participants and their own perspectives (Mack, 2010).

Methodology refers to the process, strategy, and procedures of the study to be undertaken (Ponterotto, 2005). This is essentially the research design, which shapes our choice and use of particular methods and links them to the desired outcomes (Crotty, 1998). This study was flexible and emergent in design, as I welcomed unanticipated information, which added to the richness of the data. This emergent approach to the research was embedded in every stage, from conceptualisation to publication, with cues being taken from the data, process, or conclusions, reflecting the varying levels of emergent characteristics in that research process (Pailthorpe, 2017).

The study was exploratory in nature, which, as the name implies, allowed exploration of the research questions without providing final and conclusive solutions to existing problems (Singh, 2007). When conducting exploratory research, I was willing to change my direction whenever new data and new insights were revealed (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012), such as the insights provided by Principal 3 (P3) and Special Education Teacher 3 (SET3) in sharing their experiences of participation in the pilot programme for the revised model of provision of SEN resources. Exploratory research initially forms the basis of more conclusive research and is effective in laying the groundwork that will lead to future studies (Singh, 2007), particularly in this case, since the study was carried out at a time of significant transition and change in the provision of special education in Ireland.

Since research methods flow from one's position on ontology, epistemology, and research design, this study took a constructivist–interpretivist approach, in which researcher–participant interaction is central, and therefore justifying the use of qualitative research methods (Ponterotto, 2005). The constructivist–interpretive approach, which claims that

truth is relative and depends on one's perspective (Baxter & Jack, 2008), is seen to reject the natural science model and to concentrate on understanding rich description and emergent concepts and theories, generated by qualitative methods.

### *3.3.2 Research methodology: Qualitative*

Qualitative research is an empirical method of investigation in which studies focus on viewing experiences from the perspectives of those involved, thereby giving participants the opportunity to relate their own experience of the world and its phenomena (Neergaard, Olesen, Andersen, & Sondergaard, 2009). Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in context-specific settings, in terms of the meanings that people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Golafshani, 2003). This research involved the study of a research problem which cannot be objectively observed from the outside, but which needed to be explored and understood by the researcher through gathering and analysing descriptive data in an attempt to see a setting or an experience from the participant's point of view (Creswell, 2007), in this case school principals and SEN coordinators. Qualitative research methods were therefore deemed the most appropriate and advantageous to this study, since qualitative research offers powerful tools with which to trace, cross-examine, and infer which conceptions have the greatest effects on the variation and phenomenon under study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2012, quoted in Cibangu & Hepworth, 2016). It was an effective tool which yielded a rich and in-depth view while addressing questions about human behaviour, motives, views, and barriers (Neergaard et al., 2009).

Mack acknowledges a number of the limitations of this approach, including the lack of verification procedures and therefore the limited capacity for generalisability. However,

the aim of this research was to create local theories for practice rather than generalisable findings (Mack, 2010).

Using qualitative research methods, this study employed a case study approach, inquiring into the meaning that the individual teachers and principals ascribed to a social and human problem. Data were collected in a local Education Centre, a natural setting familiar to the participants and sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis was inductive and established patterns or themes (Creswell, 2007).

### *3.3.3 Research approach: Case study*

Case study, deemed the most appropriate qualitative method for this research, is an umbrella term for a family of research methods having in common the decision to focus on inquiry around an instance (Adelman, Jenkins, & Kemmis, 1984). This approach facilitated exploration of a phenomenon in depth within its context using a variety of data sources. This ensured that the issue was explored not through one lens but through a variety of lenses, such as focus group discussions, responses to interview questions, and diary entries, which allowed for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Case studies are defined by Creswell (1994) as a single instance of a bounded system, such as a child, a class, a school, or a community, while Yin (2009) writes that the boundary line between the phenomenon and its context may be blurred and not so tightly bounded. According to Crowe, Cresswell, Robertson, Huby, Avery, and Sheikh (2011), case study findings can have implications for both theory development and theory testing. They may establish, strengthen, or weaken historical explanations of a case and, in certain circumstances, allow theoretical (as opposed to statistical) generalisation beyond the particular cases studied (Crowe et al., 2011).

The advantages of the case study method for this research included its strength in reality and the close collaboration between researcher and participant (Baxter & Jack, 2008); the results are more easily understood by a wide audience, provide insights into similar situations and cases, and can be undertaken by a single researcher (Cohen et al., 2011). All of these advantages applied to this study, since all research contexts are schools: I established a good rapport with the participants, the results will be available to all primary teachers and their representative bodies, and I worked alone. Disadvantages include the fact that the results may not be generalisable, data is not easily cross-checked and is prone to problems of observer bias (Cohen et al., 2011). However, internal validity and replicability were enhanced by tying the emergent theory to existing literature (Eisenhardt, 2002).

Stake (1994) identifies three main types of case study: intrinsic (undertaken to understand a particular case or phenomenon), instrumental (examining a particular case to gain insight into a particular issue or phenomenon), and collective or multiple (groups of individual case studies undertaken simultaneously to gain a fuller appreciation of a particular issue). The collective case study involves studying multiple cases to generate a broader appreciation of a particular issue, so that the context is different in each of the cases. In the present work, this was achieved by selecting diverse schools as case study sites of varying sizes, circumstances, and settings (Crowe et al., 2011). A multiple case study design was employed involving eight primary schools in total, which enabled the researcher to explore differences within and between cases. The goal was to replicate findings across cases (Crowe et al., 2011). Data was audio recorded. The major themes, as identified in the literature review, were addressed in the schedule; for the one-to-one and focus group interviews these included leadership and management, strategic planning and development, and teaching and learning.

Because comparisons were drawn, it was imperative that the cases were chosen carefully so that the researcher could predict similar results across cases, or predict contrasting results based on a theory (Yin, 2003). According to Crowe et al. (2011), the case study approach usually involves the collection of multiple sources of evidence, using a range of quantitative and more commonly qualitative techniques such as interviews, focus groups, and observations, while the use of multiple sources of data (data triangulation) has been advocated as a way of increasing the internal validity of a study. In this research, multiple case studies were required, as each school setting constituted a case. In the interpretive paradigm, case studies tend to use certain data-collection methods, such as open and semi-structured interviews, observation, narrative accounts, diaries, and tests (Cohen et al., 2011). An underlying assumption is that data collected in different ways should lead to similar conclusions, and approaching the same issue from different angles can help develop a holistic picture of the phenomenon. The research design was also influenced by the theoretical framework, which is outlined in the next section.

### 3.4 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is derived from an existing theory (or theories) in the literature that has already been tested and validated by others and is considered a generally acceptable theory in the scholarly literature (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). It is a researcher's lens or 'blueprint' with which to view the world (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The application of the theory builds an argument, establishes the context of the particular phenomenon or research problem, and explains findings (Imenda, 2014). After a substantive literature review, the data collection, data analysis, and findings of this study were considered in the theoretical framework provided by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) in their case studies of five worldwide sites of school collaboration. Their research acknowledges the benefits of collaborative professionalism in facilitating people to 'work as a profession in a more

collaborative way' and to create 'stronger and better professional practice together' (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018, p. 4). An inclusive school environment can only be created 'through the collaborative actions of every individual within the organisation' (O'Riordan, 2017, p. 52), in this case SETs and principals. Consequently, the ten tenets of collaborative professionalism described by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) are relevant to this study and provide a helpful typology in facilitating the researcher to identify the collaborative approaches and strategies that enable SETs to undertake their role in leading and managing SEN provision. These include:

- Collective Autonomy: teachers are more independent from top-down bureaucratic authority, but less independent from each other.
- Collective Efficiency: the belief that together, teachers can make a difference to the pupils they teach.
- Collaborative Inquiry: Teachers routinely explore problems, issues, or differences of practice together in order to improve or transform what they are doing.
- Collective Responsibility: People have a mutual obligation to help each other and to serve the pupils they have in common.
- Collective Initiative: Fewer initiatives, but more initiative. Communities of strong individuals are committed to helping and learning from each other.
- Mutual Dialogue: Difficult conversations can be had and are actively instigated among educators. There is genuine dialogue about valued differences of opinion about ideas, curriculum materials, or the challenging behaviours of pupils.
- Joint Work: This exists in team teaching, collaborative planning, collaborative action research, and providing structured feedback, undertaking peer reviews, and discussing examples of pupils' work.
- Common Meaning and Purpose: Collaborative professionalism aspires to, articulates, and advances a common purpose that is greater than test scores or even academic achievement. It addresses and engages with goals of education that enable and encourage young people to grow and flourish as whole human beings.
- Collaborating with Pupils: Pupils are actively engaged with their teachers in constructing change together.

In collaborative professionalism, everyone gets the big picture; they see it, live it, and create it together: Big Picture Thinking for all (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

The link between the research questions and the framework of collaborative professionalism is shown in Table 3.1, along with possible sources of evidence.

**Table 3.1 Link between theoretical framework and research questions**

| Tenets of Collaborative Professionalism | Research questions (RQ) | Sources of Evidence |
|---|---|---|
| Collective Autonomy<br>RQ 2 & 3 | Involvement in SEN policy development. Systems for review? Who is involved?<br>Criteria for deployment of the SEN team.<br>Role of SET in coordinating SEN provision. Balance between teaching and administration duties for SET.<br>Purchase of resources. | Focus groups with SETs and principals.<br>Policy regarding team responsibilities. |
| Collective Efficacy<br>RQ 1, 2, & 4 | Access to CPD? Structures to facilitate the sharing of learning.<br>Management of resources. | Discussion in focus groups. Interviews.<br>Systems for resource retrieval. |
| Collaborative Inquiry<br>RQ 3 & 4 | Administration & analysis of standardised & diagnostic tests.<br>Formulation and review of IEPs.<br>Who is involved? Systems to facilitate collaboration? | Analysis and sharing of test results, use of evidence in drafting and reviewing IEPs. |
| Collective Responsibility<br>RQ 1, 3, & 4 | Impact of the revised model of SEN provision.<br>Mentoring & induction of SNAs.<br>Record-keeping systems.<br>Transitions of pupils. | Planning for the revised model of provision.<br>Structures for supporting SNAs.<br>Methods and systems for sharing information about pupils transitioning. |
| Collective Initiative<br>RQ 1 & 2 | Models of provision of SEN: team teaching, withdrawal. | Range of models of provision. |
| Mutual Dialogue<br>RQ 1, 2, & 4 | Communication with parents, external agencies, and health services | Systems established to facilitate communication and collaboration? |
| Joint Work<br>RQ 1, 3, & 4 | Planning, collaborating, review of SEN provision. Structures to facilitate collaboration? | SEN team meetings? Decision-making processes; methods of information-sharing. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Common Meaning & Purpose<br>RQ 2, 3, & 6 | Communication with parents. Communities of practice involving SETs in each school. Role of the board of management. | Existence of forms and record-keeping templates. Structures established for effective communication. |
| Collaborating with Pupils<br>RQ 1, 3, & 4 | Pupil's involvement in IEP drafting. Transition to second level. | Structures to facilitate pupils' input. Systems to facilitate familiarisation with second-level settings. |
| Big Picture Thinking for all<br>RQ 2, 4, & 5 | Collaboration with teachers in other schools. | Involvement in support networks. |

### 3.5 Ethics

Prospective participants were fully informed on the procedures and methods involved in the research. All procedures and protocols relating to ethical conduct were submitted to the Research Ethics Committee of St. Patrick's College (now DCU) in order to seek its approval before initiation of the research.

The principal ethical issues included obtaining the informed consent of interviewees, in order to protect and respect their rights to self-determination. A second requirement was to provide information by way of a plain-language statement on the possible consequences and benefits of the research to participants (Cohen et al., 2011), copies of which are provided in Appendices E and F. Permission was also sought from the chairperson of the board of management of each school. While no personal details, school details, or identifying features were recorded in the written account of the findings, participants were informed that full anonymity could not be guaranteed, but every effort was made to keep identities confidential (Cohen et al., 2011).

Involvement in this research study was voluntary. Participants could withdraw from the study at any point. There were no penalties for withdrawing before all stages of the study were completed (Cohen et al., 2011). Participants were given opportunities to verify data through member-checking, when participants viewed transcriptions and were asked to

confirm if the overall account was realistic and accurate (Creswell and Millar, 2000). Measures were taken to prevent the researcher's own agenda and views predominating by adherence to strict protocols to ensure validity through checking of the transcripts for accuracy, allowing the participants to view their transcriptions, and being aware of her own bias. In addressing bias, the researcher sought at all times to be objective and impartial through reflexivity. Safeguards were put in place to ensure that interviews were appropriate, non-stressful, and non-threatening (Cohen et al., 2011). In advance of the interviews, the researcher emailed the prospective questions to each participant, and before beginning the interview the limitations of confidentiality were explained. Each participant was identified by a number, while a general description of their schools was used for each participant.

### 3.6 Data Collection and Management

The selected methods for this study include focus group interviews, conducted separately with principals and SETs, followed by one-to-one interviews with both groups and the maintenance of reflexive diaries by the participating SETs for one month. Following data analysis, the findings were compared and contrasted to what was found in the published literature in order to situate the new data into pre-existing data (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003).

Data was collected by tape recorder and transcribed verbatim, while the use of the data management system NVivo ensured the retrieval of all the data on a given topic, thereby enhancing an aspect of the study's trustworthiness (Cohen et al., 2011): that of confirmability, by creating an audit trail of analysis of the data, as seen in Appendix I.

### *3.6.1 Focus groups*

While group interviews or focus groups have a contested history as a method of data collection, in recent years they have become an established and accepted part of the range of methodological tools available to researchers (Parker & Tritter, 2006). Focus groups as a method were chosen because they are perceived as cost-effective and more adaptable in various research approaches and designs (Parker & Tritter, 2006). Focus groups allow for a deeper understanding of a phenomenon through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher; they quickly generate a large amount of data on attitudes, values, and opinions, while yielding a collective rather than an individual view (Breen, 2006; Cohen et al., 2011; Morgan, 1996). This is because participants query each other and explain themselves to each other, thereby providing valuable data on the extent of consensus or diversity among the participants, accentuated by the researcher's ability to seek comparisons among the participants on their experiences and views rather than aggregating individual data (Morgan, 1996).

Drawbacks include the possibility of poor participation by some members and dominance by others (Cohen et al., 2011), while the data obtained may be context-specific and therefore not generalisable (Breen, 2006). They may also be difficult to analyse and lack overall reliability (Cohen et al., 2011). Therefore, this method required a clear agenda and skilful facilitation by the researcher (Morgan, 1996). The focus group approach was introduced in the first phase of the research so that the attitudes, priorities, ideas, and experiences expressed in the group discussion (Bryman & Burgess, 1999) would inform the researcher's approach when facilitating the more in-depth individual interviews in the second phase.

The focus group interviews were conducted in separate groups with the eight principals initially, followed by the eight SETs: six to eight participants is recommended so that the group creates a good dynamic without becoming too unwieldy (Morgan, 1996). The focus of the questions for the principals included their experience of SEN teaching and aspects of the leadership of special education, including the school SEN policy, the role of the SEN coordinator, structures to facilitate collaboration, the models of SEN provision, and the support and management of school staff. Interview schedules for the SET focus groups included questions focussed on their role in coordinating SEN provision while supporting the SEN team and other staff. Questions were also posed about school structures and practices in the drafting of IEPs, models of provision, and the development of school policy. The researcher shared the interview schedules with the participants prior to the interviews to provide clarity on the agenda and focus of the discussion. As moderator, I prompted participants to voice their opinions so that no individuals dominated the discussion; I promoted thinking and reflection and guided them through the interview questions so that the discussion did not lose focus (Cohen et al., 2011).

### *3.6.2 Face-to-face interviews*

Qualitative research is concerned with the ways that people construct, interpret, and give meaning to their experience of daily life or interactions with a selected group (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002). Qualitative methodologies include several distinct approaches, including in-depth interviews. The primary objective for using this method in this study is to capture the deep meaning of experience in the principals' and teachers' own words (Marshall & Rossman, 2006. 'The interview is a flexible tool for data collection,' write Cohen et al. (2011, p. 409), since it encourages the interviewee to share rich descriptions of phenomena while leaving the interpretation or analysis to the researcher.

The potential for researcher bias while interpreting and analysing the data was reduced by actively involving the research participants in checking and confirming the results (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). The method of returning an interview transcript or analysed data to participants, known as *member checking*, *respondent validation*, or *participant validation*, was used to validate, verify, and assess the trustworthiness of the qualitative results (Birt et al., 2016; Doyle, 2007). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend member checking as a means of enhancing rigour in qualitative research, proposing that credibility is inherent in the accurate descriptions or interpretations of phenomena. This process shifted the validity procedures from the researcher to the participant and facilitated a comparison between the investigator's account and those of the research subjects, to establish the level of correspondence and credibility between the two sets (Mays & Pope, 2000). In this study, any edits to the transcripts by participants referred to factual information; for example, P8 amended the number of resource teaching hours and SNA support hours provided to the school, while SET2 corrected the number of pupils in her school.

Qualitative interviews which are categorised as unstructured, semi-structured, or structured can occur either in groups or with an individual, as was the case in this study (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Semi-structured in-depth interviews, which are the most widely used interviewing format for qualitative research, were employed, since a structure or questions that are too rigid lacked the flexibility and sensitivity to context required in order to listen to the interviewees' ways of interpreting and experiencing the social world (Mason, 2002).

The face-to-face interviews allowed respondents the flexibility to express themselves at some length but offered enough shape to prevent aimless rambling (Wragg, 1984). Individual interviews also allowed the researcher to depart from the planned itinerary

during the discussion: digressions can be very productive, as they follow the interviewee's interest and knowledge (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Interviews enabled participants to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they work and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view (Cohen et al., 2011). This form of interview consisted of open-ended questions, reflecting the predefined themes for investigation identified in the introduction. The schedule was devised with the aim of collecting relevant information, avoiding redundant items, and eliminating questioner bias, while allowing me to follow relevant trains of thought (Wragg, 1984).

Interviews were carried out with eight principals and eight SETs from the same schools, representing a purposive sample. As a follow-up to these interviews, the SETs were asked to record a reflexive diary of their activities.

### *3.6.3 Reflexive diaries*

The qualitative case study approach to research facilitates exploration of a phenomenon using a variety of data collection methods (Yin, 2009). The researcher therefore asked participants to keep diaries in order to provide first-hand accounts of situations to which the researcher did not have direct access. The data produced using this approach introduced a measure of methodological triangulation, which provided stronger substantiation of constructs to the research (Cohen et al., 2011). In this study, the use of research diaries generated further data to complement interview material and allowed for comparing data collected by the researcher and by the informants (Burgess, 1984). The benefits include developing insight into the participants' interpretations and collecting information about participants' observations, thoughts, and actions (Symon, 2004). In these circumstances, subjects of the research became 'co-researchers as they keep chronological records of their activities' (Burgess, 1994, p. 202).

Trustworthiness or rigour of a study refers to the degree of confidence in the data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of the research (Polit & Beck, 2014). The criteria that constitute trustworthiness include credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Precautions were taken to ensure that these criteria were addressed. In regard to credibility, member checking was utilised by sharing the transcript of the diary with the SET before the data analysis phase, while transferability – the degree to which findings are useful to persons in other settings – was addressed by encouraging the SETs to provide rich, detailed descriptions of their context and activities. Dependability and confirmability – the extent to which findings are consistent – were improved by conducting member-checking with study participants and by maintaining an audit trail of analysis and methodological memos of log.

Diaries were kept for a one-month period to allow a comprehensive picture of the daily activities of the SETs to emerge (Patton, 2005). Teachers were asked to record the activities in which they engage the people with whom they interact. The diaries were subdivided into chronological periods within each week in order to facilitate the recording of detailed data and provide 'insider' accounts of situations. Guidelines provided to the SETs included the need to record their daily work tasks, their interactions with school personnel (including principals, class teachers, other SETs, and SNAs), their engagement with the pupils, and any communication they had with parents, representatives of outside agencies, including health services, and other relevant persons. Meetings and other forms of collaboration on the planning, implementation, and review of SEN provision were to be recorded. The SETs were asked to reflect on their daily activities and interactions and to record their personal thoughts, reactions, views, and opinions.

A sample of pages from a completed diary is provided in Appendix P.

## 3.7 Sampling Plan

The sample in this research is non-probability and purposive, whereby participants were hand-picked by the researcher (Cohen et al., 2011) since they have in-depth knowledge about the particular issues of interest due to their professional role, expertise, or experience, thereby maximising the depth and richness of the data (Cohen et al., 2011; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Eight principals representing a wide diversity of school types were chosen – including urban and rural, large and small, DEIS and non-DEIS, mixed and single-sex – along with the same number of SETs, whose role includes coordinating SEN provision in their schools. These were invited to participate in focus group discussions followed by the interviews.

The eight SETs were identified through snowball sampling, whereby participants, in this case the principals already identified by the researcher, 'are then used as informants to identify or put the researcher in touch with others who qualify for inclusion and these, in turn, identify yet others' (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 158). The SETs were specifically identified and invited to participate due to their roles in coordinating SEN provision in their schools, in addition to their teaching role, whether through volunteerism or the holding of a formal post of responsibility, since the key research question refers to the leadership provided by SETs in the provision of SEN. The table below provides a synopsis of demographic information.

**Table 3.2 Participating principal and SET demographic information**

| Cases | Gender of Principal | Years of Teaching Experience | Years of Principal Experience | Gender of SET | Years of Teaching Experience | Management Status | SEN Qualification |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| School 1 | Female | 34 | 17 | Female | 35 | Deputy Principal | Master's Degree |
| School 2 | Male | 41 | 21 | Female | 22 | None | Diploma in SEN |
| School 3 | Male | 32 | 5 | Female | 36 | Deputy Principal | None |
| School 4 | Female | 33 | 10 | Female | 24 | None | None |
| School 5 | Female | 28 | 3 | Female | 25 | Assistant Principal | None |
| School 6 | Male | 17 | 6 | Female | 19 | Deputy Principal | None |
| School 7 | Female | 37 | 20 | Female | 3 | None | None |
| School 8 | Female | 19 | 3 | Female | 2 | None | None |

### *3.7.1 School profiles*

#### *School 1*

This co-educational school has a population of 232 pupils and is situated next to a rural village. The school has two special classes for children with autism and also an Early Intervention class for pupils with ASD. 30% of the pupils are receiving additional support in mainstream. The principal is administrative (non-teaching), and the SEN coordinator, also deputy principal, was a class teacher at the time of data gathering but has since returned to an SEN role. The school currently has an allocation of 6.66 SNAs, mostly assigned to the special classes for pupils with autism.

#### *School 2*

This co-educational school has a population of 174 pupils and is situated in a rural village. 22% of the pupils are receiving additional support in mainstream. The principal is administrative, and the SEN coordinator has in recent years completed the SEN professional diploma, provided through block release by the Department of Education and Skills. The school currently has an allocation of 2.75 SNAs.

*School 3*

This all-boys school has a population of 411 pupils and is situated in an urban city centre setting. The school is designated DEIS band 1 disadvantaged by the DES. 29% of the pupils are receiving additional support in mainstream. The principal is administrative, while the SEN coordinator is also the deputy principal. The school currently has an allocation of 5.5 SNAs.

*School 4*

This all-girls school has a population of 222 pupils and is situated in a city suburb. 35% of the pupils are receiving additional support in mainstream. The principal is administrative and shares the duties in administering special education provision with the SEN coordinator, who is not a post holder. There is a significant cohort of EAL pupils, up to 20% in some classes. The school currently has an allocation of 1.75 SNAs.

*School 5*

This all-girls school has a population of 425 pupils, is situated in an urban city setting, and is designated DEIS band 1 disadvantaged (the most disadvantaged status) by the DES. The school has two special classes for pupils with a specific speech and language disorder. 33% of the pupils are receiving additional support in mainstream. The principal, who is administrative, the deputy principal, and the SEN coordinator, also assistant principal, share the SEN administration duties. The school currently has an allocation of 6 SNAs.

*School 6*

This all-boys school has a population of 111 pupils and is situated next to a rural village. 22% of the pupils are receiving additional support in mainstream. The principal is teaching, and the SEN coordinator, also deputy principal, is a class teacher in Infants. The school currently has an allocation of 1 SNA.

*School 7*

This mixed school has a population of 76 pupils and is situated in a small town. 16% of the pupils are receiving additional support in mainstream. The principal is teaching and coordinates the SEN provision, supported by the SET, who is shared with a large nearby school. The school currently has an SNA allocation of 0.75.

*School 8*

This mixed school has a population of 24 pupils and is situated in a small rural village. 50% of the pupils are receiving additional support in mainstream. The principal is teaching and coordinates the SEN provision, supported by two SETs, who are shared with three other nearby schools. The school currently has an SNA allocation of 3.

## 3.8 Piloting

'Well-designed and well-conducted pilot studies can inform us about the best research process and occasionally about likely outcomes,' write Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2002, p. 36). Careful piloting of the interview schedules tested and improved the adequacy of the research instrumentation (Rabionet, 2011; Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). It also provided an opportunity for the researcher to train in as many elements of the research process as possible (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002) by gaining experience with subject recruitment techniques and data collection, in this case interviewing skills, such as ensuring equality of participation in focus groups and using investigative, probing questions. In this way, the pilot study enhanced the reliability of the data produced by the face-to-face interviews and the focus group discussions.

Once ethical clearance was granted, two support teachers and two principals, who were not connected to the case study schools, were invited to review the questions on the schedules for both sets of individual interview schedules, and also the diary guidelines, and to provide feedback. Suggestions included the addition of more probing questions under two

of the themes on the schedule of principals' questions regarding the formulation of IEPs and models of SEN provision, and one on the support teachers' schedule regarding administrative duties.

Pilot focus group discussions were carried out with three other principals, followed by three support teachers. Interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours and enabled the researcher to become more skilful in ensuring full and equal participation by all those present. Receiving feedback from the participants in the pilot and reading transcriptions helped in the modifying of interview questions for the main study, and this in turn served to improve the practicability of the interview protocol. In order to remove or adapt items of ambiguity or other inadequacies (Wragg, 1984), the schedules of questions for the focus groups and the one-to-one interviews were edited in light of informed comment, particularly in regard to the specific differences in the leadership roles of teaching principals compared to their administrative colleagues. After the data was gathered, data analysis commenced.

### 3.9 Data Analysis

Analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data commenced with the organisation and collation of materials, including the conversion of data to a similar format, as far as possible (Denscombe, 1998). This process included the transcription and printing of all interviews undertaken by the researcher, to facilitate closer engagement with the data (Flick, 2007). Listening to the audiotape while reading the transcripts helped ensure accuracy during interpretation of the data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Since qualitative data are unstructured and non-numerical, coding plays a crucial role in organising and making sense of such data (Basit, 2003). The next stage was the breaking down or coding of data into units, defined by Kerlinger (1970, cited in Cohen et al., 2011)

as the translation of question responses and respondent information to specific categories, for the purposes of identifying, analysing, and reporting (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The options available to the researcher regarding qualitative analytic methods include grounded theory, discourse analysis (DA), interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), content analysis (CA), and narrative analysis (NA), all of which are 'tied to or stemming from a particular theoretical or epistemological position', allowing 'relatively limited variability in how the method is applied' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 4).

Thematic analysis, a foundational method for qualitative analysis, was therefore the approach selected for this study, since, as a research tool, it provided a systematic, flexible approach to the analysis while having application across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It was compatible with the constructionist paradigm, providing a rich, detailed account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). It offered a more accessible form of analysis and was a quick method to apply, particularly for researchers early in their qualitative research career, like myself (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

'A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set,' according to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 10). While the prevalence of themes is a consideration, in terms of space within each data item and across the entire data set, researcher judgement and flexibility were nonetheless necessary in determining themes. Themes or patterns were identified by using an inductive or 'bottom-up' approach, where the analysis was data-driven and not grouped according to predefined categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton 1990).

The six-phase approach as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006) was applied as follows in the process of data analysis:

Phase 1: Familiarisation – involved reading the data, noting down initial ideas, and transcribing verbal data.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes – involved broad, participant-driven open coding of the interview transcripts recorded from the research study. Interesting features were coded in a systematic way across the entire data set, collecting data which was relevant to each code. These codes, examples of which are provided in Appendix I, were allocated clear labels and definitions to serve as rules for inclusion, such as liaising with external agencies and parental involvement in the education of children with SEN.

Phase 3: Searching for themes – involved collating codes identified in phase 2 into categories of codes by gathering all data which is relevant to each potential theme and organising them into a framework that made sense for further analysis of the data. This phase also included distilling, re-labelling, and merging common codes generated in phase 2 to ensure that the labels and definitions for inclusion accurately reflected the coded content. After this phase, 23 main codes were created, including, for example, the role and management of SNAs, with a further 41 subcategories, such as the induction of SNAs, SNA role and training, and expertise of SNAs; a full list is provided in Appendix J.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes – involved breaking down the restructured themes into further sub-themes, or 'coding on', to offer a greater understanding of the aspects under review, such as divergent views, negative cases, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours coded to these categories, and to offer clearer insights into the meanings contained therein. Examples of this process are provided in Appendix K.

Phase 5: Redefining and naming themes – involved data reduction by consolidating codes from the previous three coding cycles into more abstract, philosophical, and literature-

based codes in order to create a final framework of themes for reporting purposes as shown in Appendix L. It also involved writing analytical memos against the higher-level themes to accurately summarise the content of each category and its codes and to propose empirical findings against these categories. These memos considered five key areas:

1. The content of the cluster of codes on which it was reporting (what was said).

2. The patterns, where relevant (levels of coding, for example).

3. Consideration of background information recorded against participants and any patterns that existed in relation to participants' profiles (who said it).

4. Situating the code(s) in the storyboard – which meant considering the relatedness of codes to each other and their importance to addressing the research question, and sequencing disparate codes and clusters of codes into a story or narrative which is structured and can be expressed in the form of a coherent and cohesive chapter.

5. Consideration of primary sources in the context of relationships with the literature, as well as identifying gaps in the literature

Phase 6: Producing the report – involved testing, validating, and revising analytical memos to provide a self-audit of the proposed findings by seeking evidence in the data beyond just textual quotes to support the stated findings, and seeking to expand on deeper meanings in the data. The process also involved synthesising analytical memos into a cohesive and well-supported findings report. Finally, phase 6 resulted in report completion in the form of the findings and discussion elements of the study.

The process of thematic analysis was assisted by the computer software programme NVivo, a data management tool which assists with the organisation, retrieval, and collation of text into a framework of categories, reflecting the steps set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). Examples of all phases of data analysis are provided in Appendices I–O.

## 3.10 Quality of the Research

### *3.10.1 Validity and trustworthiness*

Validity and reliability are two factors that researchers should be concerned with when designing a study, analysing results, and judging the quality of the study (Patton, 2001). In qualitative research, however, these terms are not viewed separately as they are in quantitative paradigms, but are referred to by terms that encompass both, such as credibility, neutrality, consistency or dependability, and applicability or transferability, which are the essential criteria for quality (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). While some researchers argue that the term 'validity' is not applicable to qualitative research, many have adopted terms which they consider more appropriate, such as quality, rigour, and trustworthiness, an aspect of research that is crucial to ensure reliability (Golafshani, 2003; Hammersley, 2007; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). To improve the levels of trustworthiness and to reduce bias, the principals and SETs invited to engage in the research were from schools of various sizes and settings, with varying lengths of experience in their roles. In a further attempt to limit bias, the interview questions were formulated so that the meaning was crystal clear (Cohen et al., 2011), while the schedules were piloted by a number of respondents through similar inclusion criteria to the selected participants (Chenail, 2011), in order to gain feedback on the validity of items, format, and wording.

According to Mays and Pope (2000, p. 51), there needs to be sensitivity to the ways that the researcher and the research process shape the collected data, 'including the role of prior assumptions and experience, which can influence even the most avowedly inductive inquiries'. As referred to in section 3.2 on positionality, during the research the researcher made a conscious effort not to divulge her own views or opinions during the discussion.

Additionally, construct validity was considered in this study, where the researcher demonstrates that the categories she used are meaningful to the participants and reflect how the participants experience and construe the situations in the research (Cohen et al., 2011). Convergent and discriminant validity, two facets of construct validity, were addressed by examining whether a set of data from one method, in this case focus group interviews, accorded with the data found by another method, namely one-to-one interviews, which focussed on the same issues (Cohen et al., 2011). The use of triangulation of methods, instruments, or samples can increase construct validity. The application of triangulation is documented in the next section (Cohen et al., 2011).

### *3.10.2 Triangulation*

> Triangulation of data sources, data types or researchers is a primary strategy that can be used and would support the principle in case study research that the phenomena be viewed and explored from multiple perspectives. (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 556)

Two types of triangulation were utilised as validity procedures in this study (Creswell & Millar, 2000). The first was data sources, with two distinct groups, principals and SETs, providing different sources of information. The second, methodological triangulation, is defined as the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour, which 'attempts to map out or explain more fully the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint' (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 195). The qualitative case study is an approach to research that enables exploration of a phenomenon using a variety of data sources, which facilitates triangulation, thereby strengthening the study by combining methods and comparing the results of two or more methods of data collection, in this case focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and reflexive diaries (Golafshani, 2003). Engaging multiple

methods, in these cases interviews and recordings, led to a more valid, reliable, and diverse construction of realities (Golafshani, 2003).

Once preliminary themes and categories were established, the researcher sought patterns of convergence to develop or corroborate an overall interpretation, thereby ensuring comprehensiveness and encouraging a more reflexive analysis of the data (Mays and Pope, 2000). The researcher sifted through the data for divergent or negative evidence that disconfirmed these themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In addition, an evidence-based method of data analysis, thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed, which 'provided further support for the account's credibility' (Creswell & Millar, 2000 p. 27). The theory and method of thematic analysis were applied rigorously, with the assistance of a checklist of criteria (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

### 3.11 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the research design when undertaking this study, including the philosophical underpinnings, research methodology, methods, and overall management of the research. The epistemological and ontological positions of the research were outlined. Qualitative methods were employed, since this approach is concerned with the ways that people construct, interpret, and give meaning to their experience of daily life. The methods of data collection were outlined, including a multi-case-study approach, semi-structured interviews, and reflexive diaries, along with justifications for their use. Aspects of the research process, including the sampling plan, reliability, validity, and ethics, were explained and justified. The manner in which the data were collated and analysed was also outlined.

The data was collected in the spring of 2017, just prior to the introduction of the revised model of SEN provision in mainstream schools. While one school, S3, had participated in

the pilot programme for this model, none of the other teachers had experience of the new approach, which is a limitation in terms of their perception of its possible effects. Nonetheless, awareness of the impending new system was high, due to discussion and documentation in our educational system. The experiences of the participants in this study and their opinions regarding its potential impact on their schools, particularly those from the pilot school, are therefore valid, since they would implement the new approach within the framework of their previous experiences and the particular contexts of their schools. Further discussion on limitations of the methodology are provided in section 6.5.

The knowledge constructed from the collated data in response to the research questions – that is, the research findings – is presented in the next chapter. Discussion of the implications of this study and linkage to relevant existing research will be provided in Chapter Five, in order to ascertain its significance and importance within current educational knowledge.

# Chapter Four: Findings

## Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of the data collected from each of the eight principals and the eight SETs. It systematically sets out to answer each of the research questions as outlined below. The findings are presented under themes and sub-themes, are supported by quotations from the data, and are discussed in light of the literature review in Chapter Two.

Principal research question: How can support teachers contribute to the leadership and management of Special Educational Needs provision in mainstream schools?

**Table 4.1 Research Questions**

| | |
|---|---|
| Research question 1 | To what extent do SETs lead and manage SEN provision in the school, while achieving a balance between supporting pupils and staff? |
| Research question 2 | What contribution do SETs make to leading and managing change, with a specific focus on SEN policy development and strategic planning? |
| Research question 3 | What are the specific tasks and responsibilities assigned to the SET's role? |
| Research question 4 | What are the key practices and strategies that allow the SETs to fulfil their tasks and responsibilities effectively? |
| Research question 5 | What, if any, are the barriers that prevent these teachers from successfully fulfilling their tasks and responsibilities? |

## 4.1 Research Question 1: To what extent do the SETs lead and manage SEN provision in the school, while achieving a balance between supporting pupils and staff?

Six key themes emerged from the data analysis: planning, organisation of team teaching, implementation of the revised model of provision of SEN, management and induction of SNAs, withdrawal of pupils for additional support, and management of pupil enrolment, including transition from pre-school settings to primary and from primary to second level. These are presented in order of their number of references.

### *4.1.1 Planning*

The subject of planning is of high priority, as it is referenced 146 times in the data. Three sub-themes emerged within this theme: meetings for planning, time for administration and planning, and recording and implementing decisions made.

#### *Meetings for planning*

The policies and structures that exist in the eight schools to facilitate SETs' participation in planning meetings on the provision of SEN vary considerably, illustrating the varying autonomy that schools have in this area. All five schools with administrative principals schedule formal meetings of their SEN teams, although the frequency varies, as set out in Table 4.2 below. In one school with a teaching principal, S6, meetings are held twice yearly. In the second school with a teaching principal, S7, all meetings are convened informally as the need arises, while in the smallest school, S8, all staff meet weekly to discuss current issues, including SEN.

**Table 4.2 Planning Meetings**

| Cases | Status of Principal | Frequency of SEN team meetings | Meeting led or chaired by | Record of meetings |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| School 1 | Administrative | Monthly | Principal | Minutes taken |
| School 2 | Administrative | Twice yearly | SEN Coordinator | Notes recorded |
| School 3 | Administrative | 3–4 times a year | SEN Coordinator | Minutes taken at September meeting. Decisions noted otherwise. |
| School 4 | Administrative | Twice a term | Principal | Minutes taken |
| School 5 | Administrative | 3 times yearly | SEN Coordinator | Minutes taken |
| School 6 | Teaching | Twice a year | SEN Coordinator | Minutes taken |
| School 7 | Teaching | Informally as needed | Principal | Decisions noted regarding IEPs |
| School 8 | Teaching | Weekly | Principal | Decisions noted |

In regard to leading or chairing the SEN team meetings, of the seven schools that have formal meetings, this role is fulfilled by the principal in three schools and by the SEN coordinator in the other four. In these four schools, three of the SEN coordinators hold formal promoted posts, while the fourth acts as SEN coordinator in a voluntary capacity. This indicates that where SEN coordinators exist in schools, leading meetings of the SEN team has become part of their role in a majority of cases. This evidence of a culture of regular meetings and collaboration in regard to SEN provision highlights the importance of formal posts for leading and managing SEN and promoting a focus on common meaning and purpose.

In schools 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6, where SEN coordinators have been appointed, distributed leadership is evident, since it is these individuals who lead the setting of the agenda for the meetings of the SEN team. In school 1, the principal and deputy set the agenda together, while in school 4, the principal, who also acts as SEN coordinator, leads the agenda planning. In school 5, a SEN committee has been formulated with the deputy principal acting as chairperson and the assistant principal (both SETs) acting as secretary to the SEN team. The value of regular formal planning meetings for staff collaboration is explained by SET5:

> *I would think that those regular meetings and having that committee itself has been fantastic. We are all there. If a child comes to our attention, there's less chance of her falling through the cracks. It allows for deciding on things like Literacy Lift-Off, allows for drawing up of timetables, and there's a nice sense of collaboration. You can ask for ideas from others from their own practice, and there's a written record of the meetings – if there's ever a query about a child, we can go back to our minutes and it makes it very official. I think it's better rather than everyone ploughing their own furrow.* (SET5)

The collaboration described here reflects several aspects of collaborative professionalism, including collective efficacy and responsibility, joint work, and common meaning and

purpose, while leadership is demonstrated by the SEN coordinator in taking responsibility for establishing inclusive learning environments in their school. Assigning the roles of chairperson and secretary in the SEN team has facilitated the organisation of team meetings and the subsequent sharing of information through the circulation of minutes and the following up on decisions made by the team, again highlighting collaborative professionalism, in particular collective autonomy and initiative.

Topics discussed and planned at SEN team meetings include establishing priorities for the SEN team, reviewing pupil progress and needs (through analysis of standardised and diagnostic tests and teacher reports), allocating caseloads, timetabling, sharing concerns, sharing information with new members of the team, and planning for new initiatives, demonstrating a culture of mutual dialogue and common meaning and purpose. While SEN team meetings focus on planning for SEN provision at a whole-school level, planning to meet the specific needs of individual pupils takes place at smaller and more informal meetings between the SETs and the class teachers. In this way, SETs attempt to achieve a balance between providing support to their teaching colleagues and to the pupils that need support.

*Time for administration and planning*

With 56 references to this topic in the data, it is obvious that there is a high level of concern among school principals and SETs regarding the matter of time for the planning of SEN provision. This is evidenced by P2 and SET6, who expressed the need for the DES to formally allocate time in the school timetable for team planning:

> *There's nothing built in, and there should be for the SEN teacher, where the Department will certainly allow them, like the principals of small schools – an admin day! I believe we are coming around to that, where if people take on this role that they will see it is needed! You cannot stretch yourself to do it all. There should be designated time for a coordinator to do admin on top of the time*

> *dedicated to the child, whether it is allocated as a few hours every Friday or whatever. If I was able to say to them, You have two hours every Friday and that's when those meetings are to take place. If there was some flexibility, and it's another example of why these two hours should be allowable within schools that have special needs children for note-taking, for planning, for meeting people – it's badly wanted.* (P2)

While P2 suggests that there should be specific direction to schools from policy level on the allocation of designated time for planning and collaboration, other principals, including P1, P4, P5, and P6, demonstrated a more flexible approach and collective initiative by facilitating the allocation of planning time. P1 indicated that the SEN coordinator 'gets about an hour a week, but could do with more' while there is an allocation of 'about half an hour on everyone's timetable in the week, to allow class teachers to get together with the SETs' (P1). In school 5, the SEN coordinator has 'an allocated time . . . on a Friday evening', while in school 7, class teachers are released weekly 'to do planning for half an hour' (SET7).

All schools stated that they use the allocated extra time that teachers work outside of actual teaching, known as 'Croke Park' hours, for the purpose of planning for SEN provision. A variety of creative solutions, demonstrating further examples of collective initiative, are also evident, providing SETs and class teachers with opportunities to meet, consult, and plan the various aspects of SEN provision, particularly at the start of each school year. Two schools use Croke Park hours after school, as an opportunity to collaborate. In the case of two other schools (S2 and S6), the principals demonstrate how highly they value collaborative practice by taking the class while the class teacher meets the SET, thereby providing support for teachers to have time to collaborate, plan, and evaluate. P6, a teaching principal, takes an administrative day, during which a substitute teacher is provided for the principal's class by the DES, in order to be available for this task:

> *People get a chance to meet and plan; there's a sense of urgency about it. The sub releases the class teachers, because the resource teachers might need to meet with four or five of them.* (P6)

P6 and P8 are the only principals among the participants who have experience of teaching in an SEN setting in mainstream, and this may influence their willingness to facilitate regular collaboration, as described above in the case of P6 and as demonstrated by weekly meetings in school 8. This may support an argument for principals to have experience of working with children with SEN or additional qualifications in SEN prior to engaging in their role as principal. In two other schools, S1 and S4, the SETs do not teach pupils for the first week of the school year but spend their time meeting other teachers and planning, while in the two cases where the SETs are shared within clusters, SET7 and SET8, meetings take place before school or during breaks. This evidence of the high priority given to the provision of planning and consultation opportunities between teachers by some principals highlights the importance they place on effective communication and collaboration.

Concerns around planning time are also acknowledged at policy level, in the new Guidelines for Primary Schools: Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools, as follows:

> When deploying teaching resources, schools need to maintain time for co-ordinating, planning and reviewing activities to ensure effective and optimal use of supports. Co-ordination time should, however, be kept to a minimum in order to ensure that teaching time is maximised. (DES, 2017, p. 18)

Since no specific amount of time allocation is indicated for this coordination and planning, it appears to be at the discretion of the principal. Those principals who acknowledge constraints, but balance this by utilising their agency and discretion as policy participants, are implementing and bringing the policy of time for planning and collaboration to reality in the specific context of their own schools.

*Recording and implementing decisions made at meetings*

In all schools, records of meetings are maintained, with meetings in half of the schools being formally minuted; in the other four, decisions made are noted. In one of the larger schools, S5, the principal, during the face-to-face interview, mentioned being able to 'refer back to collaborative decisions made in order to track progress and for 'constant review and flexibility'. The data indicates that a significant amount of teacher collaboration in schools is concerned with the planning and implementation of team teaching, which is addressed in the next section.

### *4.1.2 The organisation of team teaching*

The two themes of team teaching and withdrawal are prominent in the data, under the heading of the leading and management of SEN provision. Team teaching is the second most prevalent theme, with its sub-themes of the existing systems and structures within the schools for in-class support, planning, and the advantages and challenges of this approach. The data provides evidence that practice in the schools is in line with Circular 0013/2017 (DES, 2017), which states that team teaching should be included in the range of teaching supports provided in SEN allocation in mainstream primary schools. Team teaching is an aspect of co-teaching which involves two or more certified professionals who share instructional responsibility for a single group of students. There is evidence of team teaching taking place in a single classroom or workspace for specific content or objectives with mutual ownership, pooled resources, and joint accountability. In a joint work approach, class teachers and SETs work together to plan lessons, teach, monitor pupil progress, and manage the class. Also evident are teaching supports that include small group teaching and, where necessary, individualised teaching to address specific learning needs and the needs of those learning English as an additional language (EAL). Providing

support for pupils in these two areas of special education needs was found to involve the withdrawal of the pupils to the SET's classroom (SET4). The next section examines the provision of support through an in-class model, while the withdrawal approach will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

*The existing systems and structures within the schools for in-class support*

All principals and SETs attest to the growth in the use of team teaching in their schools, an approach reflecting collective inquiry and responsibility, mutual dialogue, joint work, and common purpose, with a consequent reduction in small group and individual support (P2, P4, P8). All principals demonstrated strong support for the team teaching approach in the provision of additional support, as indicated by P1:

> *I think it's very beneficial. Everyone knows the children better; you have a better idea of their levels. They're getting more attention, opportunities to speak more. You've got a bit of brainstorming going on between teachers about how to approach problems that come up. . . . There has to be a lot of planning, and that benefits everybody.* (P1)

The models of in-class support being implemented throughout the eight schools in a variety of curricular areas are set out in Table 4.3 below.

**Table 4.3 Models of in-class support**

| Cases | Curricular area | Approach used | Adults involved |
|---|---|---|---|
| School 1 | Literacy<br>Aistear | Literacy Stations<br>Literacy Lift-Off | SET<br>Class teacher<br>SNAs |
| School 2 | Literacy<br>Aistear | Literacy Stations | SET<br>Class teacher |
| School 3 | Literacy<br>Maths | Maths Recovery<br>Maths games | SEN coordinator<br>Class teacher<br>SNA |
| School 4 | Literacy<br>Maths<br>Aistear | Reading Recovery<br>Guided Reading<br>Maths Recovery | Class teacher<br>TUS trainee on work experience.<br>SNAs |
| School 5 | Literacy<br>Maths<br>Aistear | Literacy Lift-Off<br>Maths for Fun | Class teacher, SNAs<br>SET<br>Parents, Volunteers |
| School 6 | Literacy<br>Maths<br>Aistear | Maths Stations<br>Literacy Stations | Class teacher<br>SET<br>SNA |
| School 7 | Maths<br>Aistear<br>Social Skills | Maths Stations<br>Weaving Wellbeing | Class teacher<br>SET<br>SNA |
| School 8 | Literacy<br>Maths<br>Aistear | Literacy Lift-Off<br>Station Teaching | Class teacher<br>SET<br>SNA |

Schools have scheduled team teaching in their timetables so that this approach is used at designated times across schools on a daily or weekly basis (P2, P8, P6), with SET8 indicating that 75% of her day is spent providing in-class support. However, while the implementation of team teaching approaches in classrooms is welcome, Table 4.3 displays a strong adherence to one model – station teaching – or variations thereof, with commercial programmes dominating the curriculum approaches in use in most cases. This practice appears to be in conflict with advice from the NCSE (2011) that interventions with pupils should be delivered in a manner that best meets the needs identified, and not driven by teaching programmes. A need for mutual dialogue and professional learning is indicated to provide greater familiarisation for SETs and class teachers with other models of in-class support that may prove equally effective as station teaching but require less personnel to

implement, a concern expressed by both P5 and SET3 in the data. In the next section, the structures found in schools to facilitate planning for team teaching are reviewed.

*Planning for team teaching*

The process of planning for team teaching is well developed in all schools in this study. A combination of scheduled formal meetings involving SETs and class teachers, and informal, impromptu meetings, is evident. In the larger schools (S2, S4, S5), a number of school days at the beginning and end of the school year are set aside for the SEN team to meet with class teachers and plan their programme of in-class support, facilitating co-planning, building working relationships, and addressing classroom roles. As P2 points out, schools have established practices for facilitating teachers to plan collaboratively for the provision of in-class support:

> *It has to be very well planned. For the first week of the school year, the SEN team don't do any teaching. It's all planning and timetabling, meeting with the teachers, and deciding what are the needs.* (P2)

Various solutions to the problem of facilitating teachers to be free to meet for planning of in-class support are evident, facilitated by school leaders. These range from infant teachers meeting during the hour when their classes have gone home, and also supervising other classes to release teachers during that hour (P3), to meetings before and after school or during breaks (P7, P8, SET4), to the use of Croke Park hours for planning (P2).

Nowadays, technology can facilitate greater opportunities for collaboration between teachers. In school 1, the staff have begun to explore sharing information through Google Docs, a word processing tool that many schools have adopted, which allows instructors to know what each other is thinking without having to be together, or to work on it at the same exact time. This resource allows each member of the planning group to add their own contribution to the planning documents online, while in schools 2 and 3, template forms

have been developed to facilitate easier planning by the group. In the next section the merits and advantages of the team teaching approach are documented.

*Advantages of team teaching*

Team teaching as an approach offers a number of advantages. The data indicates that for SETs, these include the opportunity to get to know the children better through small groups created to facilitate the organisation of station teaching. This further allows for a more targeted and focussed approach when addressing their specific learning needs and diverse learning styles, facilitating greater instructional intensity and differentiated instruction and reducing the potential for poor behaviour. According to SET6, there are a number of advantages to this approach, as distinct from whole-class teaching or withdrawal of pupils:

> *For teachers, you can focus on smaller tasks with a small group, so they are easier to manage. There is also a sharing of ideas by teachers through planning together in advance of teaching.* (SET6)

Teachers also model good practice and mentor their more inexperienced and newly qualified colleagues, through planning, teaching, and reviewing together, as emphasised by P4: *'With the support teacher going into the classroom, there's a huge amount of modelling informally and sharing information. . . . That's one of the advantages of an in-class model.'* Again, in relation to research question 1, this experience provides an example of SETs delivering support to class teaching colleagues while balancing that support with the provision of small group tuition to pupils.

For pupils, availing of more teacher time and attention and greater participation opportunities in small groups allows them to grow in confidence, especially as there is no singling out of pupils for intervention (P2, P7), while no child misses out on any class activities as they would if withdrawn (P2, P3). Principal 2 pointed out:

> *The children with special needs don't realise that you're targeting them, and it takes the stigma away; they all buy into it, socially it is very good.* (P2)

Due to the number of teachers and SNAs involved in team teaching, pupils are exposed to a variety of teaching styles, methodologies, and approaches, one of which is likely to suit their particular learning style (SET1). In mixed-ability groups, peer learning is inevitable (SET6), which helps build on individuals' strengths and mobilises them as active participants in the learning process. According to Principal 2, children tend to become more considerate of others, due to the need for quietness to allow all groups in the classroom to proceed with their assigned activities, reflecting the guidance provided in the Inclusive Education Framework: 'School rules are few and are presented in accessible forms for pupils with special educational need' (NCSE, 2011). A limitation exists in regard to this evidence, however, as the researcher did not speak directly with pupils. It is also important to acknowledge the challenges associated with team teaching.

*Challenges associated with team teaching*

Circular 0013/2017 (DES, 2017), which provides direction and guidance to schools on the implementation of the revised model of provision of SEN, states that team teaching should be included in the range of teaching supports provided in SEN allocation in mainstream primary schools. While it is evident that schools are implementing this approach, a number of areas that present challenges for schools were highlighted. Physical space was identified as a problem when there are up to five adults in a classroom, especially in schools 4 and 5, as the school buildings are old and therefore have smaller classrooms. However, several models of co-teaching, such as parallel teaching or alternative teaching, could be adopted that would require only two teachers working together, thereby adapting this approach to suit the particular context of the school.

The lack of personnel is viewed as a problem, with Principal 5 reporting that because three to four teachers are required to implement station teaching, the school had to reduce the number of classes accessing Literacy Lift-Off. However, Principal 5 appeared to use her own agency to solve this issue for additional help by deploying SNAs to assist, and also with the support of volunteers from the local School Completion programme, which they have access to, due to being designated as a DEIS school. However, the role of the SNAs as espoused in Circular 0030/2014 does not include teaching duties and thus may present a challenge in some instances. Another challenge posed in the data was that if a teacher assigned to a class for station teaching is absent, it can be difficult for that intervention to proceed.

The lack of time for planning, consultation, and review of the team teaching process is a problem encountered by half of the schools, with SET4 pointing out:

> *If you had even one day a term as a SET to meet with the class teachers and plan our team teaching.* (SET4)

In the smaller schools, 6, 7, and 8, where SET teachers are shared with other schools, it can be difficult to get all those involved in team teaching together at the same time, as they travel regularly between schools.

While the attitude of teachers towards team teaching wasn't always positive in the past, all schools reported that this has changed in recent years. SET5 described this development in her own school:

> *There are some teachers that I would say were a bit iffy and needed a bit of gentle prodding and encouragement and would have preferred if children were withdrawn, but I think that's changed, I think it's an accepted part of our practice at this stage.* (SET5)

Managing noise levels in a classroom, especially with station teaching being implemented, can also be a challenge, as identified by SET1. Having discussed team teaching, the next

section will examine the alternative approach to support provision, that of the withdrawal of pupils.

### *4.1.3 Withdrawal of pupils*

Even though withdrawal of pupils is ranked fifth in the list of prioritised sub-themes under the heading of the management of SEN provision, the findings related to it are presented here, as the subject is similar to the previous sub-theme of team teaching. The lack of dominance of withdrawal as a sub-theme under this heading may reflect a reduction in some schools of the use of this model of support in recent years.

All schools report on the provision of a combination of in-class support or team teaching and withdrawal of pupils. The criterion for deciding on which of these approaches is implemented depends principally on effectively meeting pupils' needs (DES, 2017), but also to a lesser extent on the physical space available in classrooms and the number of classes there. As Principal 5 indicated:

> *It really depends on the child and their needs. You might have a child who needs less distraction and a smaller environment on their own, so it really depends on what you're doing and on 'case by case'. I think that 'one size fits all' is not right.* (P5)

As indicated by P8,

> *The majority of SEN is through in-class support, but there is a need of withdrawal as well, but much more in-class support.* (P8)

Withdrawing of pupils from their normal classroom setting, either in small groups or individually for instruction, is reported to have diminished significantly in all schools recently (P3, P5, P8).

> *Advantages of withdrawal*

Despite the reduction in use of the withdrawal model of provision, the advantages of this approach for some pupils was acknowledged. These include the targeting of specific groups of pupils with similar needs for focussed interventions, as indicated by P6:

> *There are small groups going out that require specific interventions, particularly in first or second class on the basis of the Quest test that we do at the start of the year. So we bring them out in groups based on what their area of difficulty is, but that might be only for a short time.* (P6)

Targeting pupils with specific needs or those requiring instruction, where the SET *'can go through the steps fully at their pace'* (P7), is also offered as an advantage of this approach.

A second advantage is the need for providing *'timeout . . . for children with autism and ADHD; it doesn't work for them to be in the class when there's so much more going on'* (SET7). However, this observation reflects the challenges for SETs in having sufficient flexibility to support pupils with autism in mainstream classrooms, while also having staff available to respond to unexpected or difficult situations (e.g., incidences of challenging behaviour). This challenge again illustrates the difficulties encountered by SETs in balancing the support they provide to colleagues and to pupils with SEN.

Withdrawal has also proven to be a successful approach with pupils who require English language teaching, since this intervention is specific to a minority of pupils (P8), and withdrawn groups can be made up of pupils who are not in the same class level but do have similar levels of language proficiency (P5).

*Disadvantages of withdrawal*

The principal disadvantage identified with the withdrawal approach is the effect it can have on the children concerned, as it can lead to them being stigmatised. As Principal 2 describes:

> *We have gone from total withdrawal of children because we felt it stigmatised them as they got older; they felt uncomfortable with it.* (P2)

The biggest challenge of inclusion, according to Principal 5, was *'moving away from the withdrawal model to a combined model where a lot of our support now is in-class support'*. This more flexible approach to the provision of support to pupils with SEN is reflective of the ethos of the revised model of SEN provision, which is discussed in the next section.

### *4.1.4 Implementing the revised model of SEN provision*

Circular 0013/2017, and the Guidelines for Primary Schools: Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools, which provided information on the implementation of the revised model of SEN provision from 1 September 2017, were issued to schools shortly after the data was gathered for this research. School 3 had been part of the pilot programme for the revised model, and therefore Principal 3 and SET3 had deeper insight than other participants into how the proposed revised model would work in practice. The research here focussed on what the principals and special education teachers view to be the important aspects of implementing the new system, as well as the main advantages and disadvantages inherent in this new approach to the provision of support to pupils with SEN.

#### *Advantages of revised model*

The allocation of teaching posts for special education provision for a period of two years is seen as an advantage of the new system (SET1, SET3, P3, P8), since schools will know their two-year allocation in advance and can plan accordingly. A step welcomed by SET4 and P3 is the removal of the requirements for schools to secure professional reports documenting children's needs and abilities, and to submit that report to the NCSE by a

specific deadline in order to secure SEN teaching resources, as it will reduce administrative pressure on schools. This measure will also mean less labelling of children according to their specific needs (SET1, SET5, P5): *'Resource teaching hours were based on a label rather than on needs'* (SET5). Most principals (P3, P4, P5, P6, P8) perceive that there would be more collective autonomy and freedom for schools under the new system to allocate resources where the greatest needs are identified:

> *It's taken a long time for schools to be allowed the authority to make the decisions. After all, we're at the coalface five days a week.* (P3)
>
> *It gives schools greater flexibility in terms of how they use their support.* (P4)

Concerns about the collective responsibility inherent in the autonomy granted to schools in the decision-making about allocation of resources were expressed by P5:

> *With the new model, there's going to be more accountability. It's new. People are going to be watching and checking how it's working. For me, I need to ensure that the resource children are still getting their allocated time.*

This view, however, reflects a continuing adherence to the structures that prevailed in the old allocation model of SEN teaching resources, which no longer pertains. The new guidelines dictate that 'teaching supports are deployed according to individual needs, rather than being based on a diagnosis of disability' (DES, 2017, p. 18). Previously a diagnosis of disability carried a corresponding allocation of prescribed resource teaching hours to be provided by the SEN team in the school.

P6, SET4, and SET7 were also concerned about the problems and consequences that may lie ahead for schools:

> *There could be legal challenges depending on how much guidance we get and in terms of who we give the allocation to.* (P6)

P6 hoped that some protection could be given to schools through their policy on SEN, suggesting that DES should provide schools with a standard template for such a policy:

> *SEN policies are really going to have to be overhauled; they'll need to be very tight. Realistically the Department should come out with a standard model of guidance for it. I don't feel it'll be uniform – one school might be giving learning support to a certain amount and another school is not. . . . It should act as an indemnifier for the school in the long term, because in twenty years' time, someone can come back and say, I've been diagnosed with such and such and why didn't you give me help when I needed it?* (P6)

These suggestions of the requirement for tight SEN policies to mitigate the challenges of parental demands and expectations reflect a lack of confidence, while suggesting a fear in principals of making evidence-based autonomous decisions when assuming responsibility for identifying the level of support required to meet the needs of those pupils identified with SEN.

The abolition of the roles of learning support (LS) and resource teacher (RT) and the creation of a single special education teacher (SET) role will facilitate less clustering of teaching hours between schools to create posts and instead will contribute to the creation of permanent SEN teaching posts (SET1, SET2, SET3, P8). This in turn will provide more stability and consistency for schools, with teachers spending more time in one school and being available to plan collaboratively with their colleagues, *'rather than passing each other in the corridor; one leaving and one coming in'* (P5). Time wasted travelling between schools should be reduced, and the lack of teacher continuity – which affected smaller schools to a greater extent – should also decrease.

*Disadvantages of the revised model*

One of the guiding principles of implementing the revised model of provision is that all members of the core team of SETs have 'access to continuing professional development to support the diverse needs of pupils with special educational needs' (DES, 2017, p. 5). Concerns were expressed about the lack of professional learning opportunities for SEN

teams in implementing the new system, since only principals were invited to DES information seminars, with no specific CPD being provided to SEN teams (SET4, P5). On the other hand, teachers who have engaged in formal education in SEN provision reported that their knowledge, skills, and practice in the planning and preparation of IEPs for pupils with SEN have improved (SET1, SET2). Specifically, SET2, who completed a postgraduate diploma in SEN, felt that the course helped her with structure while giving her *'clarity in relation to IEPs and other areas'*.

For growing schools, the two-to-three-year allocation may present a problem if a large cohort of pupils with special education needs are enrolled (P8). The enrolment of a pupil or pupils with significant behavioural issues could cause serious disruption, with P3 casting doubt on how quickly the response to a school's request for extra resources in that case would be. However, Circular 0013/2017 confirms that 'the baseline allocation will also ensure that schools can continue to enrol and support pupils with additional needs over the course of time that the profile remains in place and pending any review of the schools profile' (DES, 2017, p. 7).

*Implementing the new system*

A number of measures were suggested to ensure the effective and efficient implementation of the new system, including the provision of a template by NCSE or DES with which schools could update and renew their SEN policies, as schools will need to have a uniform approach to allocating resources to children with similar needs (P6). The provision of a separate, data-storing software package to schools would be invaluable, since much of the data concerned with SEN is sensitive (P4). It is vital to recognise the need for designated release time for SEN teams to plan and review progress (P2, SET4).

The role of parents was recognised as hugely important in supporting pupils with SEN to progress at a satisfactory rate in school. Since the allocation of teaching time to pupils with complex needs, such as significant learning, behavioural, emotional, physical, and sensory needs (DES, 2017), will not be prescribed by the NCSE, the need to inform parents fully of the impending changes was strongly stressed (P6), while SET4 saw a need for *'explaining to parents that the process of the allocation of hours has changed . . . Since some parents can be very pushy, demanding to get what they want'*, for example *'a leaflet in bullet point form'* (SET4).

P3, whose school was a pilot school for the revised model of provision, describes how the SEN team have implemented strategies in consulting with parents and reducing the risk of misunderstanding regarding provision:

> *We have a permission slip for support at the start, we involve them in the meeting, we get them to sign copies of the profile, and there's a follow-up meeting in March or April where the parents are consulted again . . . and they discuss the targets as regards whether they have been achieved or not.* (P3)

This example of active engagement of parents in the developing and reviewing IEPs is welcome, since pupils ultimately benefit from improved IEP formulation, thereby allowing SETs to balance the support they provide to both partners in the process. The next section will examine how SETs contribute to the management and support of SNAs.

### *4.1.5 The management and induction of SNAs*

The fourth theme is the management and induction of SNAs, highlighting the sub-themes of the SNA role, the induction of those in this role, and the ongoing education of SNAs. All schools in this study have SNA support as outlined in Chapter Three.

#### *Induction of SNAs*

The data in this study reveals that professional development for SNAs is mostly provided at school level, focussing mainly upon care activities and child safety issues, while the induction of SNAs is generally informal and provided by the principal (P1, P3, P4, P5, P8), with the class teachers and SETs providing more pupil-specific education and information (P1, P3, P4, SET3, SET6). Parents may also be involved in the education of SNAs when pupils care needs include toileting (P7) or complex procedures such as catheterisation (P5).

> *The parent of the child with special needs was very much involved as well, because it's a physical need, it's not a learning need, and she was involved in training the SNA.* (P7)

Procedures are clearly indicated to SNAs at induction, particularly on their roles, duties, and responsibilities in relation to pupils, communication with parents, and relationship with class teachers and SETs (P2, P3, P4).

*Expertise of SNAs*

A wide variation in the levels of expertise and professional qualifications is evident among the SNAs in the schools studied. In school 1, for example, three have degrees while four have level 5 or 6 FETAC training (P1). According to P7, SNAs are more competent now:

> *SNAs have more training now, they are up-skilling, they're availing of training opportunities, but there mightn't be that many training opportunities for them.*

There is no systematic induction or education programme for SNAs. In this regard, P2 feels that training could have been provided to SNAs on days when schools were closed, to allow teaching staff to attend training at local Education Centres for the new Primary Language Curriculum (PLC):

> *A golden opportunity was missed on the language curriculum training days, when there should have been updating for SNAs, whether it's manual handling or lifting or whatever.* (P2)

While the need for professional development for SNAs is acknowledged, no funding is currently made available to Education Centres by the DES for such provision.

*Role of SNAs*

While the system for allocating teachers for special education is changing, the same application system for appointing SNAs to support pupils in mainstream classes remains, involving submitting professional reports with a clear diagnosis of children's needs and outlining the support that an SNA must provide. According to P4:

> *The SNA is there to help the child to participate and to access the curriculum to the best of their ability, so the challenge is getting the right person . . . who understands the role and who is flexible.* (P4)

SET6 points out:

> *The role of the SNAs is important because they observe and record the experiences of the children they work with.* (SET6)

The data reveals evidence of SNA involvement in the provision of co-teaching activities in half of the schools studied, through assisting with station supervision (SET3, P7, P8). However, there is little evidence of pedagogical advice to SNAs by SETs despite this role, suggesting that the opportunity to allow support staff to achieve their role potential and facilitate teachers to focus on teaching is being lost.

It is noteworthy that parents can *'see the SNA as almost the child's assistant, and if you make any change or swap people around, they don't like it'* (P4). To avoid this, school 3 has a policy of assigning an SNA to a child for a maximum period of two years. Communication and sharing of this school policy with parents has helped prevent dissatisfaction arising.

Since the role of the SNA is to support the child to become more independent, the SNA may ultimately become redundant, especially as their role officially *'is very much focussed*

*on care needs'* (P4). Some principals (P2, P4, P6) feel this is not realistic, since some pupils may not have high care needs:

> *But they do need someone there to support them or they wouldn't be able to manage in a mainstream setting.* (P4)

The data indicates that SETs, in conjunction with principals, provide induction and mentoring to SNAs and that they facilitate their involvement in the education and care of pupils with SEN through collaboration on the planning of IEPs and interventions.

The next section documents the findings in an area providing significant challenge to pupils with SEN: transitioning from one school sector to another.

### *4.1.6 Transitions*

The sixth theme under the management of SEN provision is transitions, including enrolment of pupils and transition to second level. As documented in Chapter Two, under anti-discrimination legislation, schools cannot refuse to enrol a child who has been identified as having SEN. While no formal structures exist, as yet, to prescribe the transfer of information on pupils from pre-schools to primary, a system was established in recent years which requires primary schools to complete a three-phase process, The Education Passport (NCCA, 2014), to support the transfer of pupils to second level.

#### *Transition from pre-school to primary*

Some schools develop a reputation for coping well with pupils with SEN and receive more applications for enrolment than expected (P7, P8), considering their catchment area. School 1 has special classes for autism attached, and therefore pupils with autism from outside their area are likely to enrol, especially since school transportation by bus, with bus escorts, is provided.

While poor communication between pre-schools and primary schools is a barrier to successful transition for children, principals and SETs have developed a number of strategies for gathering information regarding new pupils enrolling in Junior Infants. These include detailed enrolment forms (P7), open days (P8), consultation with pre-school personnel (P1, P2, P3, P5, P7), access to professional reports documenting the new pupils' needs (P2, P5), and interviews with parents (P3, P5). This demonstration of innovative leadership and collective inquiry (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) by principals is positive and indicates a willingness on their part to collaborate with other sectors to facilitate preparation and planning for pupils with SEN about to enter their schools.

In a number of cases, direct contact was made with the pre-school from which the prospective pupil was enrolling, either by the principal themselves visiting (P1, P7) or by facilitating Infant class teachers to visit (P5). This array of approaches and strategies employed by schools to gather information on new pupils' abilities and needs indicates that local transition-to-school policies and an array of transfer documents exist and are used at a local level in an uncoordinated way, with little or no evidence of joined-up transition strategies.

P1 and P5 advocated *'a more formal sharing of information'* and a *'more detailed . . . form filled in by the pre-school'* (P5) to facilitate the transition of pupils from pre-school to primary. P7 feels that *'we should have a Passport coming with these children'*, since *'sometimes they give reports to parents, but they're very non-committal'*.

Under the old model of provision, resource hours did not automatically transfer with pupils coming from another school, with the new school being required to make a new application, which proved very challenging (P2).

> *We had a child transferred from another county, and he had autism and the hours didn't follow. By the time we got all the reports and everything organised, six months had gone. We had to cater from within our own resources and we're constantly doing that.* (P2)

P2 indicates here that despite not having an allocation of resource hours for certain pupils, nonetheless the school made provision to cater for their needs, once these had been identified by the teachers through collaborative inquiry, using the resulting evidence to make plans and implement them. Under the new system, however, it is envisaged that schools will have a portion of their allocation available for new or unexpected enrolments with special needs. As indicated in Circular 0013/2017, 'the baseline allocation will ensure that schools can continue to enrol and support pupils with additional needs over the course of time that the profile remains in place and pending any review of the schools profile' (DES, 2017, p. 7).

The second transition in pupils' lives, moving to second level schools, is now examined.

*Transition to second level*

There are evident attempts by the schools in this study to offer support beyond academic boundaries, such as collaboration and engagement with pupils, to facilitate successful transitioning to second level. P7 describes a process whereby a pupil with SEN was facilitated to visit their future secondary school in advance, accompanied by the resource teacher, while SET5 describes a meeting with parents, the NEPS psychologist, the SET, and the class teacher to discuss transition strategies for a pupil. Resource teachers from secondary schools also visit local primary schools to meet SETs and their pupils with SEN who have enrolled (P7). These processes, facilitated by SETs, are very positive and follow the guidelines set out by the NCSE in its publication 'Transition from Primary to Post-Primary for Pupils with Special Educational Needs', which advises principals to ensure that procedures for consultation and liaison are put in place.

In summary, while informal information-gathering strategies have been developed by principals and SETs in order to learn of the abilities and needs of incoming pupils from pre-schools, there is a need for a more formal, uniform approach to information-sharing across the education system that would help schools put appropriate resources in place to meet those needs. The process of information-sharing between primary and second-level schools during transition has improved since the development and introduction of a formal structure, the Educational Passport (NCCA, 2014), while it is evident that schools have implemented a number of practical familiarisation strategies to support the transition of pupils with SEN to second level, many of which could be implemented system-wide. It is evident that SETs are implementing strategies aimed at supporting pupils with SEN during transition phases, while balancing that support also by providing information to the parents and their colleagues who are teaching reception classes.

### *4.1.7 Conclusion*

In addressing research question 1, it is clear that SETs contribute to the management of SEN provision in their schools in the areas of planning, the organisation of support provision, the implementation of the revised model of provision, the management of SNAs, and the transition of pupils, albeit to varying degrees. The level of responsibility and autonomy afforded to SETs in providing leadership in these areas appears to depend on whether they hold a formal post in the school or have particular qualifications in SEN, with the SETs in the larger schools having the highest level of responsibility and collective autonomy (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Effective structures for the organisation of SEN team meetings and planning for SEN provision, including team teaching, are evidenced in all of the schools, although these structures tend to be more formal in the larger schools. Meetings to plan SEN provision in S7 and S8 tend to involve all of the staff due to the small number of teachers, with the leading role being taken by the principals.

SETs in smaller schools or in a position shared between schools have fewer opportunities for leading aspects of SEN provision.

The second part of the question discussed in this section refers to whether SETs achieve a balance in supporting staff and pupils with SEN. In regard to staff, the collaboration, mutual dialogue, and joint work (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) that take place when SEN teams meet to plan resource provision, organise programmes of work, and review progress provide opportunities for inducting, mentoring, and sustaining new or inexperienced members of the SEN team in all schools. Similarly, newly appointed or inexperienced class teachers are supported by SETs through collaborative inquiry and joint work (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). These processes include reviewing and reflecting on pupil progress; planning interventions, including in-class support, as advocated in the guidelines for the revised model of provision (DES, 2017); and providing feedback to parents. Evidence is provided that SNAs are inducted and mentored by SETs, although it is acknowledged that neither class teachers nor SETs are qualified to provide such support. SNAs are included in the planning and implementation of in-class models of support in some schools, a recent development and one not strictly adhering to the guidelines provided in Circular 30/0014 (DES, 2014). However, the recent review of the SNA scheme (NCSE, 2018), which identified this anomaly, proposes a new model of support for pupils with SNA, which is to be piloted in the school year 2020/2021.

Support is indirectly provided to pupils through the review of progress and the planning of interventions and strategies at SEN team meetings, and also during planning meetings with class teachers and parents. Direct support is provided through a mixture of models, including in-class support and the withdrawal of small groups and individuals, depending on the needs of the pupils, but particularly those with emotional disturbance or pupils requiring support in learning English. Station teaching, in some cases based on a

commercial programme, appears to be the predominant model of in-class support, however, with limited use of other models that may be more suited to the needs of the pupils and to the particular school context. This indicates a need for more professional development for teachers with alternative models. During transitions, SETs also provide direct support to pupils through formal information-sharing with second-level schools and by implementing practical strategies to facilitate a smoother transfer to second level. Similar formal information-sharing structures are needed at the stage of transition from pre-school to primary.

In recent years, significant changes in SEN provision have been introduced through top-down policy changes, with schools required to reflect these changes in their SEN policies and planning. The next section discusses the contribution made to this SEN policy development and strategic planning.

## 4.2 Research Question 2: What contribution do SETs make to leading and managing change, with a specific focus on SEN policy development and strategic planning?

The second research question focuses on any contribution made by special education teachers to the leading and management of policy development and strategic planning. Under this theme, two key areas emanated from the data: the structures which facilitate the involvement and contribution of the board of management and staff; and the school's policy and procedures for the identification and selection of pupils requiring support.

### *4.2.1 Policy development and strategic planning*

In line with the Learning Support Guidelines (DES, 2000) and the Guidelines for Primary Schools (DES, 2017), all schools participating in the study have whole-school SEN policies, prescribing the school procedures for areas such as testing, SEN team allocation, resource management, and processes such as *'the stages of support'* (SET5). While the

Learning Support Guidelines and the guidelines for SEN provision (DES, 2017) recommend a whole-school, collaborative approach to planning, requiring common meaning and purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), systems for reviewing and updating the policy vary, depending on school size. In the bigger schools, schools 1, 3, and 4, the SEN coordinators in conjunction with the SEN team are responsible for initiating the review of that policy, as indicated by P3 (*'the coordinator updates as necessary as part of her duties'*), before sharing the proposed amendments with the SEN team and later the whole staff. In school 5, the biggest school, the post-holders, including the SEN coordinator, take on this task:

> *On policy, our post-holders each have about two areas, and they lead policy review. Even though we bring it back to the staff, you'd never get anything done if you were waiting for a whole staff, so we come together in our post-holders meeting, we decide what is going to be reviewed, then go ahead and do the donkey work and they come back then with a completed update and then that draft is put to our staff. It's very inefficient otherwise with so many people.* (P5)

The SET in the same school concurred when she described the process:

> *We generally present a document and . . . let them know what's changed. The staff responds then, or alternatively it can be circulated via Aladdin* [education software] *before the meeting for people to read, not to be wasting time and they can express their thoughts.* (SET5)

In all four larger schools, a draft of the policy with the proposed edits is presented to the staff, for further discussion and agreement, before *'being ratified by the staff and in the final stage by the board'* (P5). This process indicates collective autonomy (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) and distributed leadership, with teachers sharing good practice and learning together to increase the possibility of securing better-quality teaching.

In the smaller schools, schools 2 and 6, the whole staff approaches the review of policy as a group, since the smaller number of staff makes whole-school collaboration and decision-

making on policy changes easier to organise. Parents' representatives are also included in a consultative process, described by P6:

> *Generally, what we do, we email the policy and say, we're going to be reviewing this at our next Croke Park meeting, have a read of it and come back with any suggestions. Then at the meeting we discuss it and it goes to the Parents Association, as do most organisational policies.* (P6)

In schools 7 and 8, two-teacher schools, the principals assume responsibility for keeping the policy updated, indicating limited opportunities for collaborative inquiry and mutual dialogue (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) for SETs on policy development, since these teachers are shared with other schools and are physically present in the schools on a very limited basis. Policies are shared with the schools' boards of management and *'finally ratified by the board'* (P6), indicating acceptance of the policy by the board without significant adaptation or change.

While the Education Act (1998) requires boards to ratify school policies, practice in the schools in this study is not fully reflective of the important role of the boards of management, as prescribed in the Learning Support Guidelines (DES, 2000), in developing, implementing, supporting, and reviewing school policy on SEN services in general, since there appears to be an absence of mutual dialogue and collaborative inquiry (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Boards of management of Irish schools are voluntary in composition, comprising mainly parent and community representatives, and these members may lack knowledge in the area of special education; this creates a difficulty for them in engaging meaningfully in dialogue on policy and provision. Since the board is responsible for all policy implementation in conjunction with the staff, more proactive engagement in the school's SEN provision by board members would support the principal and SEN teams in planning strategies for SEN policy implementation. This approach

would facilitate greater ownership of the process, since it is difficult to feel ownership of a process if you are not engaged in any practical aspect of it.

The next section will discuss the findings on school policy and procedures for the identification and selection of pupils requiring support.

### *4.2.2 School policy and procedures for the identification and selection of pupils requiring support*

Up to September 2017, under Special Education Circular 02/05 (DES, 2005), schools have operated a dual system of SEN provision. Pupils who have been identified with special education needs in a low-incidence category were prioritised and assigned teaching hours with the resource teacher (RT), while pupils with SEN in a high-incidence category were catered for under the General Allocation model, and assigned by the principal, in collaboration with the special education teams, to the learning support (LS) teachers (DES, 2005). In future, under the revised model of provision, all pupil allocations will be assigned by the principal and SEN team (DES, 2017).

According to the data, the criteria for identifying and selecting pupils include examination of the scores achieved in standardised tests and the class teacher's opinion:

> *We would be looking at the tenth percentile or lower as a priority in English, and . . . at children between the tenth and twentieth percentile, and depending on the classroom teacher's views, we would prioritise pupils. In Maths then we look at scores below the tenth percentile.* (P4)

A flexible approach to provision is evident in schools, recognising that a significant number of pupils are likely to need additional support only at specific times or for specific circumstances, as outlined by P5 and SET7:

> *As needs arise, we meet them and we move more pupils in and out as needed . . . there's flexibility within, the resource teacher could be tasking, for instance, the middle group, while the class teacher takes the weaker pupils, and that the type or profile of a child that is supported is flexible.* (P5)

The level of support required by pupils is not constant and may be influenced by factors related to key times in the pupil's life, such as periods of transition, as evidenced in the data:

> *For children who struggle, a long period of intervention is best, but a short period is best for early intervention for children who are . . . struggling to read, like in Senior Infants or First class I think a short, intense programme can work very well.* (SET7)

This approach will be easily applicable when implementing the revised model of provision in schools, since the Continuum of Support framework provided by DES to assist schools in identifying and responding to pupils' needs states that:

> This framework recognises that special educational needs occur along a continuum, ranging from mild to severe, and from transient to long term, and that pupils require different levels of support depending on their identified educational needs. Using this framework helps to ensure that interventions are incremental, moving from class-based interventions to more intensive and individualised support. (DES, 2017, p. 6)

In summary, while there is evidence of collaboration between school staff and with parents in regard to policy development in the area of SEN, the inclusion of board of management members in this dialogue would make it more collaborative. A collaborative process demonstrating collective autonomy, involving principals, SETs, and class teachers, is evident in the procedures governing the identification and selection of pupils for support, a process that will require collective inquiry and common purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) going forward, with the implementation of the revised model of provision. In this regard, the next section examines the specific responsibilities and tasks assigned to the role of the SET.

### 4.3 Research Question 3: What are the specific tasks and responsibilities assigned to the SET's role?

This section aims to identify responsibilities assigned to SETs and to consider the extent to which the undertaking of these responsibilities and tasks provides leadership in the area of

SEN provision in the schools and supports the principal in leading the school. The six sub-themes emerging within this theme, in order of reference, are: liaising with government agencies and other external agencies; purchasing and managing specific resources for SEN; timetabling; record-keeping; mentoring and induction of newly qualified teachers and new appointees to the SEN team; and the pastoral care of pupils.

### *4.3.1 Liaising with government agencies and other external agencies*

The data collected from the reflexive diaries maintained by the SETs for a period of one month contains numerous references to communication through meetings, phone calls, and emails with government and external agencies, indicating a high level of responsibility in this regard on behalf of SETs. These agencies include the school's special educational needs organiser (SENO), NEPS psychologists, speech and language therapists, and representatives of the HSE in regard to pupils in their care (SET1, SET2, SET3, SET4, SET7). It is clear that this task is significant in the SET's role. This responsibility has now been acknowledged and supported in the revised model of provision, as stated in the Guidelines for Primary Schools: Supporting Pupils with SEN in Mainstream Schools:

> Support and guidance is available to teachers from external professionals such as NEPS Psychologists, Special Education Needs Organisers (SENO), the NCSE Support Service, the Inspectorate, and allied health professionals. It is important that schools have established procedures / protocols for liaising with these services and bodies in order to optimise the quality of provision for pupils with special educational needs at the individual, group or whole-school level. This is especially important for those pupils with more significant and enduring needs who benefit from a multi-disciplinary approach to identification of need and the development of interventions. (DES, 2017, p. 25)

P4 describes how relationships between the school and health services have developed and improved, with *'all those services being a lot more open to dealing with schools'*. However, P5 highlights the need for further protocols on coordination with health services, since the school can receive a child's programme of work from speech and language

therapists or occupational therapists (OTs) that the SET feels incompetent to work in effectively. A more collaborative approach is needed, involving mutual dialogue and common purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) between schools and health services. The next sections will explore the data in more detail regarding current links between schools and health services.

*Liaising with NEPS*

The majority of references to NEPS in the data collated from SETs' diaries refer to the arrangement of meetings, discussion of requests for psychological assessments, or results of assessments (SET2, SET3, SET7). There were also requests for advice on the specific needs of pupils (SET2). This evidence supports the statements in the DES guidelines that:

> the needs of many pupils span both health and education services. Health services (HSE and HSE-funded services) will continue to play an important role in early identification, assessment and diagnosis, intervention and review for pupils with special educational needs. (DES, 2017, p. 25)

P3 welcomes the revised model of provision, since the requirement for a professional report on pupils needs has been abolished, with the focus no longer on assessing difficulties or deficits but on what is needed to enable improved learning and development, including teaching, facilities, materials, and support. In this new era, schools will be allowed to exercise their own judgement on the allocation of human resources within the SEN team as outlined in the guidelines (DES 2017).

The work of NEPS will focus on supporting and advising parents and schools on how best to support the child's development and learning, and this form of interaction between NEPS psychologists and schools is evident in the data. Cluster meetings are organised and facilitated by NEPS psychologists to provide information to local schools annually (P1), while support is also available from psychologists through consultations with teachers or

parents (P3), and schools avail of after-school planning and information sessions with the psychologist (SET3), all reflecting an approach of collaborative inquiry and common meaning and purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

Meetings with the local NEPS psychologists, who visit schools to discuss requests for assessments of pupils or the review of cases that are already receiving intervention, are generally led by the SET (SET1, SET2, SET3). The meetings address the requests for assessments, discuss and provide *'recommendations regarding individual children's needs'* (SET3), and provide advice (SET1, SET2, SET3, SET7, SET8). When assessment reports are completed, the NEPS psychologist returns to present the findings to the relevant staff and *'to discuss what the priorities would be'* (SET5) and *'explain the implications of what they have found in the assessment'* (P1).

Parents are also invited to hear feedback following assessments, and *'if parents have questions, they can ask them'* (P4). SET7 welcomed the template for IEPs as provided in the NEPs Student Support File, particularly since, as a shared SET in a cluster of schools, she was compiling IEPs using different templates in each school. Some of the schools she teaches in were not aware of this resource, signalling a need for more information-sharing on NEPS resources. The lack of opportunities for her to discuss the introduction of NEPS resources in all of the schools she serves may be indicative of the lack of time available for vital collaboration in planning and intervention at whole-school and department level due to the travel. She believes that the promised reduction in clusters for SEN provision under the revised model may address the matter and provide greater opportunities for advancing common purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) in the future.

Cluster meetings to provide information for schools, hosted by NEPS annually, are highly valued by schools (P1, P2, P6, SET4):

> *It's nearly like teachers helping themselves in a group. I think it's a good model to put five or six schools in a cluster group together, because if you have a child that's causing a concern to you, you can bring it to a group, explain what you've tried . . . it's being facilitated by NEPS.* (P6)

Although cluster meetings are valued, SET5 feels there should be more guidance from NEPS psychologists on planning for pupil interventions, since *'they are the ones who diagnosed, so they are the ones who should be guiding us . . . they're the ones with the training'* (SET5). This view indicates a lack of teacher confidence, requiring further professional learning in monitoring pupil progress, and identifying a desire for collective efficacy (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

*Liaising with speech and language therapists*

The data signals a very positive relationship between speech and language therapists (SLTs) and SEN teams, with each supporting the other's work:

> *There's been a change over time, and I think speech and language therapists and all those services are a lot more open to dealing with schools.* (P4)

This is achieved by, for example, sharing the Aistear themes being covered in school so that *'the speech and language therapist . . . knows what type of vocabulary and language is being used in the classroom'* (P4) and the child can learn the vocabulary in advance. The SLTs *'send out programmes for speech and language for specific children, and they give us a ring to tell us where their needs are'* (SET8).

However, a note of caution is sounded by P4, expressing a lack of competence and indicating an unequal professional relationship:

> *It's like, give this in to schools and let them work away with it. We haven't had proper training, it's specialised training, but we are teachers, and these specialised areas we need extra help with.*

SET8 agrees that some parents pass the speech and language *'over to us'*, and says this is a *'huge challenge'* because all the pupils

> *have individual needs with different sounds or with listening . . . for the speech and language therapist in their files, but to try and get their academic programmes done, there isn't enough time to reach on it.* (SET8)

An added concern is the number of speech and language therapists involved with pupils in one school:

> *We probably have four different S and L therapists involved in our school. If we had only one, maybe they could develop a programme.* (P8)

Thus indicating a need for a more coordinated approach to the provision of therapy.

*Liaising with Special Educational Needs Organiser*

The data indicates that in general it is the principal who liaises with the NCSE representative, the special educational needs organiser (SENO), especially since their decisions can impact on the level of human resources in a school and influence the potential employment of SETs and SNAs (P2, P5, SET1). P2 verifies that *'the SENO, I generally meet with, because the SENO is jobs'*. However, P5 and SET8 report approaching the SENO for advice, and the response was very prompt and helpful. Under the old system of provision, the role of the SENO, as prescribed in the EPSEN Act (2004), is to allocate resource teaching hours, SNA support, assistive technology, and school transport to pupils with SEN, having reviewed applications from schools supported by psychological assessment and other professional reports.

Under the revised model, reports are no longer mandatory – a welcome development for schools. Since the SENO will no longer process applications for RT hours, it is possible that they will be more available to support schools, since under the EPSEN Act (2004) a SENO can advise schools and parents on the facilities, services, and resources available to

assist children with SEN. This is a service that P5 and SET8 said they have found very helpful in the past, as indicated here by P5, who requested guidance for an SNA role:

> *The SENO has been great for advice. When we needed a pupil care plan, he came back to me with that.* (P5)

The next area of responsibility of SETs for examination is the purchase and management of specific resources for SEN provision.

### *4.3.2 Purchasing and managing specific resources for SEN*

Regarding the provision of adequate resources at class and whole-school level, there is evidence in the data of three sources of funding for the supply of resources required for pupils with SEN. These include direct funding from the Department of Education and Skills Special Education section, for specialist equipment; the board of management for regular supplies; and the Parents Association fundraising committee for additional items.

Sourcing specialist equipment for pupils with SEN is frustrating, according to P3 and P8. The large amount of paperwork required in order to receive a refund from DES for equipment bought is *'an absolute nightmare . . . there's too much bureaucracy'* (P3), while *'there's no direction either on where to find equipment; you have to go out and find it yourself'* (P8). Some items have to be sourced outside of Ireland, so P3 and P8 advocate a centralised system: *'rather than individual schools trying to source items in England, I would advise a centralised system for resources, for ordering supplies and financing, it's essential'* (P3). However, one could argue that directing schools to purchase resources from one central supplier would reduce school autonomy, and that due to the lack of tendering, the items purchased could ultimately be more expensive.

All participants indicate that their boards of management and Parents Associations (PAs) are very generous in providing funding for resources, such as Maths resources and games,

Aistear equipment, sets of books needed for pupils with SEN (SET3), and IT equipment (P2, SET6), with requests for funding from SETs being considered by the principal or SEN coordinator in conjunction with these groups (P2, P4, SET3, SET5, SET6), reflecting collective autonomy and common meaning and purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). P7 reports that the DES provided funding for upgraded toilet facilities for a child with SEN, but the PA funded a sensory room – a demonstration of collective initiative in providing a resource that could be beneficial for all pupils. Fundraising such as this is not an official function of PAs under the Education Act 1998, although in practice many PAs take on this role.

P2 feels that there needs to be a grant for SEN, separate from the capitation grant. He also feels that all schools should receive *'the same level of funding'* for pupils with SEN, since only special schools and mainstream schools with special classes receive a high level of capitation, up to €840 compared to €170 in mainstream schools without a special class. Such increased funding could then help schools in using collective autonomy and big-picture thinking to provide better services and more expert advice for teachers and pupils.

An additional area of responsibility for SETs is timetabling, which is examined in the next section.

### *4.3.3 Timetabling*

Organising timetables to make provision for interventions with pupils with SEN can prove difficult in schools, but it is evident from the data that this area has now become an integral part of the overall planning of SEN provision in the school. In most cases, setting up timetables is a collaborative exercise involving joint work (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) between the members of the SEN team, led mainly by the SEN coordinator (SET1, SET2, SET4, SET5, SET6).

> *We used to organise the timetable individually, but we found that wasn't successful, but now we sit down as a staff and decide whether pupils need to be in a group or taken individually.* (SET6)

This approach, demonstrating collective autonomy and common purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), is in line with the guidelines for the revised model of provision (DES, 2017), which advocates deploying SETs in a variety of ways to effectively meet pupils' needs and to accommodate their learning styles.

In the two smallest schools, where the SETs are only part-time, the principal organises the timetable. P2 expressed concerns about the possibility of pupils who are withdrawn for support missing out on subjects such as PE and Art; to avoid this, classes only do these subjects on Thursdays and Fridays, when withdrawal does not take place. This practice is in keeping with the principles outlined in the Learning Support Guidelines 'that pupils should not miss out on the same curricular area each time they receive supplementary teaching' (DES, 2000, p. 28). Taking into account the rights of pupils to access the full curriculum, the guidelines recommended a flexible approach to timetabling and placed considerable emphasis on the central importance of appropriate class-based intervention, through team teaching approaches.

The next section will consider the responsibilities of SETs in keeping records of progress made by pupils with SEN.

### *4.3.4 Record-keeping*

The high importance placed on keeping records of the progress of pupils with SEN is evident in the data. This finding is positive, in light of the importance placed in the DES guidelines on 'a whole-school approach to monitoring and recording of progress' (DES 2017, p. 17), highlighting the necessity for regular monitoring of pupils' progress towards achieving their targets.

In recent years, NEPS has provided schools with a number of templates, such as the Student Support File and the Log of Actions, for more efficient tracking of pupils and recording of actions:

> *We would start a student support file for any student we have had concerns about. We keep the NEPS's log of meetings as well.* (P1)

These templates have proven to be effective resources for record-keeping:

> *The Log of Actions is very interesting regarding meeting with OTs or professionals, consultations with resource teams. Actions are noted and dated, so over time you do get a picture of what has happened with a particular pupil. Year on year you build on what's already there. The profile expands over time.* (P2)

Principals have begun to develop *'an individual file on each child'*, as *'it's important to have a record'* (P5) in which all information on the support they receive and their progress is recorded (P1, P3, P5). The SEN team in school 3, which participated in the pilot for the revised allocation model, have benefited from this experience and have developed a highly organised system of individual record-keeping. P3 documents how children's pupil profiles, containing work samples and IEPs, are shared with parents, forming the basis of consultation at review meetings held twice each year.

#### *4.3.5 Mentoring and induction of newly qualified teachers and new appointees to the SEN team*

Mentoring and induction are provided by principals and to a greater extent by SETs to a number of groups, including NQTs, new appointees to the SEN team, teachers transferring positions from other schools, class teachers with a new, unfamiliar class, and student teachers on placement in the school (P1, P2, P3, P4, SET1). This support is more prevalent in schools 6, 7, and 8, which are smaller and tend to have different SETs each year, due to the yearly review and re-organisation of clusters. Under the revised model of provision it is

envisaged that this constant staff turnover will feature less in schools, due to the longer two-year gap between review dates for the allocation of resources to schools (DES, 2017).

Evidence of mentoring in regard to special education is provided by P4:

> *The support staff would be very good with the NQTs and making suggestions and talking to them and helping them out.* (P4)

The SEN coordinator provides practical support on SEN planning and provision:

> *I would get any new teachers together and go through the IEPs and how they are laid out, because we have had new staff every year – so they need to know how to organise an IEP. Also the class teachers who have a new class coming in, because I feel it's my role to make sure that all information is passed on.* (SET6)

Of the eight SETs interviewed, only two have postgraduate qualifications in special education. However, the data indicates that the lack of qualifications may indicate not a lack of commitment but a need to appraise the structures and support mechanisms which facilitate professional learning and development. In this regard, while there are online learning opportunities, there are currently no accredited postgraduate courses in special education available within 130 km of the area where this research was carried out. An additional measure that perhaps impacts on the motivation of teachers to engage in a course quite a distance away is the removal in 2009 of the teacher's allowance paid to those who successfully complete the postgraduate diploma in special education due to the economic recession.

Since the pre-service training for primary teachers was extended to four years, students are obliged to complete a module on SEN. The SEN teams provide opportunities for student teachers to observe and engage in activities and processes related to SEN while on placement, as outlined by P2, while also acknowledging that the learning goes both ways:

> *Each student spends a week with someone from the SEN team. They're with them if they're in class; they're seeing any testing that's being done. The students help with*

> *the station teachings, they help out with Aistear, and we learn a lot from the new methods that they would have.* (P2)

### *4.3.6 The pastoral care of pupils*

Data collected from reflexive diaries kept by SETs over a period of one month reveal that, in this context, their role also includes an aspect of providing nurturing and pastoral care to students. This occurs when students are emotionally upset and a flexible approach is adopted, as outlined by SET4:

> *The form was bad, and the learning for today had to take a back seat; she wanted just to talk, so a pastoral role was adopted. If the child is upset in herself, me pushing my plan for her lesson is pointless.* (SET4)

Incidences of an SET having to change pupils following toileting accidents are described in one diary: the assigned SNA was assisting another pupil and was unavailable.

### *4.3.7 Summary*

Evidence in the data indicates that in relation to research question 3, the roles and responsibilities undertaken by SETs in Irish primary schools involve a heavy administrative workload. These responsibilities and tasks provide leadership and support the principal in SEN provision in the schools. They include liaising with government and other external agencies, such as NEPS, SLTs, and SENOs. In this era of the revised model of SEN provision, schools will have more autonomy in the allocation of resources to pupils with SEN, but they will need to engage more collaboratively with these agencies and with each other through professional networks, in order to share the expertise and professional advice necessary to support and improve confidence and collective efficacy during decision-making (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

In regard to administrative tasks related to the purchase and management of specific resources for SEN, timetabling, and record-keeping, there is evidence of a collaborative

approach, involving joint work and mutual dialogue (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) with the relevant partners, including the Parents Association, parents of pupils with SEN, and colleagues in the school. The regular use of resources for record-keeping designed by NEPS has facilitated greater clarity and transparency on pupil progress and has improved the collective efficacy of the SEN team. The need for mentoring and induction of newly qualified teachers and new appointees to the SEN team is a constant demand for SETs, most of whom have no formal qualifications in SEN themselves. However, by engaging in collective initiative (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) and establishing in-school communities of practice, on-site professional learning and sharing of experience and expertise can be facilitated to improve collective efficacy.

## 4.4 Research Question 4: What are the key practices and strategies that allow the SETs to fulfil their tasks and responsibilities effectively?

Six key themes were identified in examining the key practices and strategies that facilitate SETs in fulfilling their duties effectively: designing of Individual Education Plans, administration, links with parents, communication procedures, assessment strategies, and providing for pupils who learn English as an additional language. Since the majority of these themes require a collaborative approach, they align well with the concept of collaborative professionalism and will be discussed within that theoretical framework.

### *4.4.1 Individual Education Plans (IEPs)*

It is clear from the data that all schools have established and maintain a practice of designing IEPs, particularly for pupils who have been assigned resource teaching hours. Pupils assigned to learning support teachers also have IEPs in some instances, particularly those *'children who are taken individually, also our children with dyslexia or children with specific needs like dyspraxia'* (SET2). Procedures that indicate the existence of collective responsibility and mutual dialogue (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) are in place in all

schools, such as planning and consultation meetings to facilitate the writing up of these documents. In a demonstration of partnership, the practice in all of the schools is for the SET and class teacher to draft the initial IEP, with input from an SNA if one has been appointed to support the child (P4, P5, SET7). All eight schools report involving parents in the drafting of IEPs, as confirmed by P6: *'We formulate the IEP, and the parents are brought in at the end of that to input into the document'* – although inputting parents' contribution at the end of the process indicates that parental engagement is somewhat limited. Further evidence of limited parental involvement is provided by P4:

> *The SEN teachers, the class teachers, and the SNA (if involved) draft up the IEP and then meet the parents to discuss it and if they have anything they want to include. Parents would get a copy of that to sign, and we keep a signed copy in the school.* (P4)

Strategies that will be undertaken in school with the child are shared with parents, along with activities that can be done at home by the parents (SET3, SET8).

On a less positive note, there is no evidence of collaboration with pupils in drafting the IEP. The lack of opportunities for pupils to input to IEPs conflicts with the EPSEN Act (2004), which provides for children to be centrally involved in some of the critical decision-making processes that affect them, depending on their capability and the judgements of professionals in this regard. However, since the section on IEPs in this Act has yet to be commenced in legislation, there are difficulties in translating this commitment to the active participation of pupils with SEN in decision-making into practice at the school level.

Advice is sought from the school's NEPS psychologist in some cases, where teachers feel specialist expertise is needed or *'if there is a challenge in the child's case'* (SET2). SEN coordinators take an active role in drafting IEPs and setting targets, as described by SET6:

*'I go through all the IEPs and make sure they all have SMART targets.'* The IEP includes the following areas: child's profile, test results, priority learning needs, targets long- and short-term, strategies that are in place, SNA timetable (if applicable), and a list of all the people involved (P5, P6, SET7). The guidelines regarding the revised model of SEN provision outline a similar process – the development of a Student Support File – in regard to individual planning, including identifying needs, planning, target-setting, and monitoring outcomes which facilitate integrated and collaborative problem-solving (DES, 2017). Since the data indicates that these schools have already embraced this process, their practice will facilitate an easy transition to the revised model of provision.

Mutual dialogue and common purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) are indicated, since all schools report that regular review of the IEP takes place involving the parents. SETs and class teachers in schools 6 and 8 hold meetings to review progress once a term, while all other schools review their IEPs twice a year:

> *I meet the parents with the class teacher once a term at the beginning to go through the IEP, and explain which targets have been met or have to be carried forward. That's a standard practice, as we update the IEPs every term.* (P8)

The process of developing, coordinating, and implementing IEPs is very time-consuming, as evidenced by P4:

> *It's time-consuming, it's hugely so, because by the time you talk to everyone – there's the class teacher, the SEN teacher, myself, perhaps an SNA – you have all the reports from the different agencies and the parents. By the time all of those people have had their input and you've pulled it all together and you've drawn up your target, there's a huge amount of time gone into that.* (P4)

This view of the challenge of coordinating the process involved in drafting IEPs is reiterated by SET3:

> *It's not easy to get time to meet teachers, parents, and other SEN teachers. It's a big challenge, because the day is hectic.* (SET3)

The data indicates that they are an invaluable resource nonetheless and are a significant element of the components of SEN planning and provision.

### *4.4.2 Administration*

Findings in this study demonstrate that increasing operational and administrative workloads undertaken by SETs includes tasks related to the areas of assessment, planning, communication, and policy. These responsibilities, combined with teaching duties, restrict opportunities for undertaking the leadership aspects of the SEN coordinator's role.

In planning, the SETs set timetables in conjunction with other SETs and class teachers (SET2, SET5, SET6), draw up pupil profiles and compile IEPs (SET2, SET4, SET8), and type up notes and minutes of meetings (SET2, SET3, SET5). In the area of communication, all SETs report meeting with other professionals who are engaging with pupils with SEN, including psychologists, occupational therapists, and speech and language therapists. They also meet parents for planning and review purposes and provide guidance to SNAs to assist them in supporting pupils who are struggling (SET3).

SETs review school policy on SEN and lead the process of updating procedures and practices (SET1, SET3, SET5). All of these duties are included in the list of tasks set out in the Learning Support Guidelines (Government of Ireland, 2000a), typically assigned to the teacher coordinating the provision of SEN services in a school, who may be the principal or a teacher nominated by the principal. Finding sufficient time to complete all administrative tasks is challenging (SET4, SET5, SET6, SET8):

> *It's certainly a difficulty that there is no planning time to allow for coordination between teachers. You need time for Learning Support teachers to coordinate with the class teachers. At the moment this all has to be done in break times.* (SET6)

As noted earlier in this chapter, there is provision for the allocation of time for collaboration and planning in the guidelines for the implementation of the revised model of

provision, which should address this teacher's concerns. However, this administrative workload is in addition to the SETs' own teaching role and the planning and record-keeping that are involved in that role.

> *A lot of time goes on keeping my notes in order. If I take work home, I'm finishing IEPs, doing monthly reports, keeping notes in order.* (SET2)

Four of the SETs are post-holders and receive an allowance for their work in coordinating special education in the school, thereby creating a responsibility on their behalf to carry out the specific tasks and duties prescribed by the board of management for the role. The other four SETs undertake administrative tasks in a voluntary and often part-time capacity (P2, SET2, SET7, SET8), thus placing additional responsibility on their principals and providing an argument for the appointment of a person to fulfil the role of SEN coordinator in every school.

### *4.4.3 Assessment*

In primary schools, standardised testing has become more formal and its processes have become more structured in recent years due to the introduction of Circular 0056/2011. This requires schools to administer standardised tests at three stages during primary school years: to collate results, to share individual children's scores with parents, and to share aggregate scores with the board of management and to upload these to the DES. The tests used in Irish schools include Sigma-T (Mathematics), Micra-T (English), and Drumcondra English and Mathematics tests. In assessment, the SET's tasks include ordering tests (P2, SET1), administering screening and diagnostic tests (SET2, SET4, SET5), collating test scores (SET1, SET4), inputting those scores into the school's IT system, and uploading them to the DES (SET5, SET8). All participating SETs have a role in assessing pupils, using both standardised and diagnostic tests. The guidelines for the revised model of provision recommend that monitoring pupil progress

> in relation to achieving their targets should be regularly and carefully monitored. This stage of the process is informed by effective measurement of baseline performance, including the use of criterion-referenced tests and other methods of assessment (for example, teacher-designed tests, checklists, samples of work, observation) that allow pupils to demonstrate their progress. (DES, 2017, p.18)

*Standardised testing*

It is evident that SETs take an active role in this process, undertaking many of the tasks associated with it. These include ordering tests (SET1, SET2, SET7), administering tests to classes (SET4), collating test results (SET1, SET2, SET4, SET5), analysing test results using technology, sharing and discussing individual and collated results with the principal and other staff (SET1, SET2, SET6), and uploading aggregated results to DES:

> *I would take the results at the end of the year and go through them with the principal, highlighting children causing concern, and because we have small classes, we can identify individual pupils if they are going up or down.* (SET5)

*Diagnostic testing*

It is evident from the data that diagnostic testing is a strong feature of the work carried out by SETs (SET5, SET6), generally as a follow-up to standardised tests where pupils have been identified as having difficulties or at risk of low achievement levels in standardised tests.

The data shows consultation on analysis of results between SET7, who carried out diagnostic testing with a pupil, and the class teacher concerned. P3 attests to administering diagnostic testing in order to group pupils based on the analysis of results, for specific targeted support, in the belief that instruction must be linked to assessment.

### *4.4.4 Communication strategies and links with parents*

There is strong evidence in the data, both in interviews and in SETs' diary entries, of schools forging communication links with the parents of pupils with SEN. Participants

reported that parents, because of their unique insight into the needs of the child, are involved in the consultative process of developing the pupil's IEP, including the planning and implementation of strategies followed by regular review of pupil progress (P2, P3, P4, SET2, SET6, SET7, SET8), all of which are provided for in the EPSEN Act (2004). School policy and procedures outlined in the data reflect this provision, prevalent in school 4, where *'the SEN teachers, the class teachers, and the SNA draft up the IEP and then meet the parents to discuss it'* (P4). Since parents were not interviewed as part of this study, a limitation exists regarding evidence of their involvement in special education planning, as this was provided by the principals and SETs in the schools where their children are enrolled.

The data confirms that engagement through gathering information from parents is achieved orally at consultation meetings or, in some cases, through the use of an information form to be completed by parents (P6, SET2):

> *We have a form from the NEPS website that we use to collect information from parents regarding children who are new in our case load.* (SET2)

Regular review of the progress achieved by pupils receiving support is facilitated by SETs and class teachers in collaboration with parents, as described by P3: *'we now have templates for the approach we use for this . . . the support team will meet to prepare for parents review meetings'*. These templates include the Student Support File, incorporating the Log of Actions, which provide evidence on which the consultation and dialogue with parents (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) on pupil progress can be based. School 3, which had participated in the pilot programme for the revised model of SEN provision, demonstrated a high level of engagement with parents through the widespread use of NEPS record-keeping documents and organisation of the regular, formal scheduled

meetings with parents to review and discuss pupil progress. Examples of strategies for engaging parents in planning and review are provided in the data:

> *We do termly meetings; parents are met in September, and again after Christmas. Class and SEN teacher would do them together.* (P8)

> *We have a permission slip for support at the start, we involve them in the meeting, we get signed copies of the profile, and there's a follow-up meeting in March or April where the parents are consulted again.* (P3)

Overall, there is strong evidence of attempts by schools to develop meaningful collaborative relationships with parents of pupils with SEN. The provision of templates for gathering and recording important information on pupil progress has enabled schools to initiate productive discourse and formed a basis to engage in collaborative inquiry and mutual dialogue with parents (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

### *4.4.5 Summary*

SETs engage a range of practices and strategies that help them carry out their duties and responsibilities. Collaborative processes between class teachers, SETs, parents, and SNAs are evident in designing IEPs, although there is no evidence of pupil engagement in decision-making processes that profoundly affect their lives. Collaboration and communication with parents is somewhat evident, while the use of forms, templates, and technical resources from SESS and NEPS has enabled more efficient record-keeping systems to facilitate this communication, while reducing the amount of paperwork involved in the administrative tasks regularly undertaken by SETs. Assessment procedures are undertaken to identify pupil needs and to devise appropriate strategies to address those needs; however, it is vital that the analysed data from assessment accurately informs the setting of learning targets and the selection of strategies. Administrative duties are extremely time-consuming, and while there is now some flexibility in the allocation of

time for planning and review, SETs in smaller schools in particular or those shared between schools still find it challenging to complete all tasks efficiently.

This raises the question of whether each school should have access to a formally appointed SEN coordinator, including the smaller schools, where a shared coordinator could be appointed, whose responsibilities could include many of the duties and tasks documented in the data presented here, to lead and manage SEN provision in a meaningful way. In the next section, the barriers that prevent these teachers from successfully fulfilling their tasks and responsibilities will be discussed.

### 4.5 Research Question 5: What, if any, are the barriers that prevent these teachers from successfully fulfilling their tasks and responsibilities?

As documented already, a range of areas provide challenges in the provision of special education in mainstream schools. The themes emerging include the lack of professional learning opportunities for SETs and indeed class teachers, lack of time for collaboration in planning for in-class models of provision and writing IEPs for pupils, and the absence of formal communication and information-sharing structures on the transition of pupils from pre-school to primary. A fourth theme is the lack of coordination between schools and the health services, such as psychology, speech and language therapy, and occupational therapy, presenting a challenge to SEN teams in supporting pupils in receipt of these services, due to the lack of knowledge regarding approaches and strategies being employed by the health professionals. A fifth challenge under this theme is the expectation from parents that schools will implement strategies and programmes that have been provided by health professionals with pupils in schools; this presents a challenge to SETs and class teachers due to the lack of expertise and training in these areas. Areas that would have been expected to be prominent among these challenges include the lack of time to

collaborate more with parents and pupils, and the absence of opportunities for formal PD in SEN.

Some schools have developed efficient systems of record-keeping on the assessment, planning, and progress of pupils with SEN, in particular school 3, whose SEN team, according to their principal, had benefitted from participation in the pilot programme for the revised model of SEN provision, by becoming familiar with the use of NEPS record-keeping templates and planning resources. Other schools are only in the early stages of putting such systems in place but acknowledged that the recent publication of templates by NEPS is helping their teachers with record-keeping. All of the above have been presented as challenges for schools in the provision of special education in previous sections of this chapter, with the exception of the professional learning opportunities available to SETs and indeed class teachers, which is examined next.

### *4.5.1 Continued professional development opportunities*

In Ireland there is no formal qualification for the coordination of SEN provision. Professional learning for teachers in SEN is reliant on initial teacher education, along with limited access to postgraduate courses. Wide variations in the level of training and expertise in SEN exist across the schools participating in this study. A lack of experience and formal qualifications in SEN is strongly evident in the leadership of the schools overall: among the eight principals who participated, only two, P6 and P8, have previously taught in a special education needs setting, for periods of one and two years respectively, while another principal, P5, had some administrative duties related to SEN while in a deputy principal's role. None of the principals hold any formal qualifications in special education. Nonetheless, principals (P2, P4) indicated their appreciation of the need for

SETs to continue to engage in opportunities to up-skill and improve their knowledge in SEN.

Among the SETs, two have formal qualifications in special education: SET1 has achieved a master's degree in special education, and SET2 has completed a postgraduate diploma in special education. SET2 acknowledged the advantages of this formal professional learning in developing big-picture thinking (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018):

> *It gives you a much broader view and also people to contact. It also helps you deal with the system better. You get a lot of what's the current thinking in the area [and] who are the experts in different areas.* (SET1)

The practical application of the professional learning from formal courses is acknowledged by SET2:

> *I did the diploma course. . . . It was brilliant, it helped me with structure. Up to then, I didn't know if what I was doing was right. Having done this course, it gave me clarity in relation to IEPs and other areas. It gave you ideas, strategies, approaches and it just gave me more knowledge in the different areas of SEN.* (SET2)

Principals and SETs referred to the difficulty of accessing formal qualifications in SEN, due to the geographical spread of postgraduate and master's-level courses, with the closest courses being provided in Cork, Limerick, or Dublin.

> *We have spent two or three years trying to access some staff training, but under no circumstances will I ask someone to go to Cork, Limerick, et cetera for training.* (P3)

Similarly, the challenges in attending a formal course are described by SET4:

> *If I wanted to do something in special ed, it would be either UCC or Limerick I'd have to go to, and that distance would be a challenge.* (SET4)

While the opportunities to travel considerable distances to PD courses may be limited, there are online options for learning – but only one of the SETs in this study has accessed

this opportunity: *'We did some online courses on team teaching, autism, and learning support'* (SET7).

Principals described how *'teachers themselves would look out for conferences or seminars or whatever might be available'* (P3), while SETs reported accessing short face-to-face courses on specific topics of relevance to their context or to particular pupils' needs.

> *There's no recognition anymore for doing a formal course. I think it's more useful to do the shorter, more specific courses, more practical. I've done courses on autism and on dyspraxia and also courses that tell you about all the resources that there are.*
>
> *SESS are great because they have really practical courses. . . . They help you, as they stop you getting bogged down with paperwork.* (SET6)

The priority for the SETs when accessing PD appears to be determined by their individual efficacy in terms of the specific needs of the pupils they are currently teaching, rather than developing their capacities in researching, implementing, and evaluating effective teaching and learning strategies for the broader diversity of students:

> *I have done smaller courses. I've done some of the SESS ones, and I found the one here for planning really good. . . . I did courses that were relevant to me, for example dyslexia, when I had a child with dyslexia.* (SET4)

School-based PD is also evidenced in the data, mainly at the request or instigation of the SEN team: *'We had someone in about team teaching not too long ago, and that was a request from the SEN team'* (P1).

> *We've had training initiated by the SEN team themselves. It all depends on the difficulties we have in the school at a time. We did training on manual handling and autism, both of which were needs-identified by the SEN team. Our deputy [principal] organised someone to come in about team teaching. We have brought in people for various subjects, during Croke Park (CP) hours, mainly to do with literacy.* (P2)
>
> *There were times when I have organised a speaker to come in.* (SET2)

Evidence is provided of in-school sharing of information and experience through face-to-face meetings and also through using ICT resources like Google Docs (P1):

> *We do a lot of in-house, informal sharing of ideas at our staff meetings, also sharing of experience and knowledge.* (P4)

This approach, promoting collective efficacy (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018), reflects the creation of in-school communities of practice where colleagues collaborate, reflect, and problem-solve together towards a collective goal. P2 advocates for an extension of this approach to the wider school community, since *'groups of teachers meeting up that have the same interests, or at the same level . . . learn from each other'* (P2).

In regard to class teachers' responsibilities to provide for their pupils with SEN, P4 highlights the lack of training opportunities for class teachers, particularly in regard to the introduction to the revised model of SEN provision:

> *There is a huge responsibility now on the class teacher, who is responsible for every child in his or her class, so that needs to be very clearly explained. They need CPD to act on that – how do you go about drawing up a support plan? It's very much evidence-based now, and we're going to have to keep a very strong paper trail on children.* (P4)

SETs are in constant demand to mentor, support, and provide advice to their fellow teachers, both class teachers and new SETs, regarding special education. This arises due to new teacher appointments to the SEN team, the appointment of newly qualified teachers in the school, and the transition of pupils upwards through the school. The provision of mentoring and support is more evident in the larger schools, where the SETs hold formal posts and are constantly on site. The support provided to class teachers by SET3 is described; as deputy principal she has a formal leadership role in the school while also being SEN coordinator:

> *They would ask for advice about a specific difficulty that a child is having or to recommend a resource. I have done some training with the staff during CP hours in problem solving. . . . Any resources I would have, or any website I would know of, I would share with them. We would meet as a team before we go in-class, and I would explain the skills and that this is what we are going to do.* (SET3)

The demand for mentoring and support is stronger in smaller schools, where the majority of SETs are shared with other schools and teachers tend to change on a yearly basis. Principals in these schools highlighted the problem of the rapid turnover of SETs: *'We have had different SEN teachers each year'* (P8), due to their schools being part of SEN clusters with shared SETs:

> *Year on year, you might be training somebody up; the following year they're not in your staff, so you end up doing it all over again.* (P6)

The need for collaborative inquiry and the sharing of expertise in order to develop collective efficacy (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) is raised again, since newly appointed SETs have generally not had an opportunity to engage in PD regarding SEN.

> *A lot of small schools have the problem that people are not trained, we're getting a different person every year, and they haven't any specific SEN training.* (P7)

While newly appointed SETs are appreciative of the support provided by their colleagues, nonetheless it fulfils only part of their needs:

> *Since doing learning support, I feel I would like to do training in how to help and assist children with dyslexia and dyspraxia – obviously I got help and advice from the teachers who are more experienced, but I would like more concrete experience of strategies and resources that work with those children.* (SET8)

One of the expectations of the revised model of provision being implemented is a reduction in the number of SEN clusters and more stability for schools in regard to SEN staffing, due to the two or three-year gap between the review of school needs and the allocation of teachers. It remains to be seen if this prediction actually occurs in practice.

### 4.6 Summary

It is evident from the data that the percentage of SETs participating in this study who have formal qualifications in SEN is quite low. While online options are available for accessing CPD in the area of special education, nonetheless the SETs in this study feel they are at a

disadvantage geographically in the availability of formal award-bearing SEN courses. The need to develop system capacity in the school is therefore crucial to inclusive education. In the absence of such formal external CPD opportunities, it is evident that some principals provide leadership in supporting and leading collaborative dialogue, so that those SETs who have expertise and qualifications in SEN are encouraged to share their knowledge and skills with colleagues who require induction and mentoring in specific SEN areas. By embracing such collective initiative and big-picture thinking (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), teachers could incorporate a proactive dimension to their learning.

## 4.7 Conclusion

Data analysed from interviews with eight principals and the SETs in their schools illustrates the wide variety of roles, responsibilities, and tasks undertaken by SETs in leading and managing SEN provision. While commonalities exist in participant contexts and practice across sites, findings also present many variations in how the SET role has evolved, particularly in the level of autonomy they enjoy in their roles. Chapter Five will examine the key findings from the overall study.

# Chapter Five: Discussion

## 5.1 Introduction

This thesis explores how SETs can contribute to the leadership and management of special educational needs provision in mainstream schools through the lens of collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). A focus is placed on 'leadership as practice', in which leadership is enacted in practice, bringing people together in collaborative dialogue (MacBeath, Dempster, Frost, Johnson, & Swaffield, 2018, p. 88). Having analysed and synthesised the data, this chapter will

- critique the concept of leadership and management of SEN, with a focus on the importance of collective leadership or shared leadership;
- discuss the importance of professional learning for all staff involved in the provision of SEN;
- argue for the importance of individual and collective autonomy in the leadership and management of SEN.

## 5.2 Setting the Context

The past two decades have seen significant policy shift in special education in Ireland. Previously, separate systems of special and mainstream education existed in parallel, but policy and legislative changes have converged to create an expectation of the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools by parents, teachers, and the educational community in general. While a culture of individualism pertained in schools in the past, schools are now encouraged in policy documents to engage in 'an integrated and collaborative problem-solving process' (DES, 2017). Research indicates that 'the consequences of this for student achievement and teacher motivation and engagement are generally positive' (Hargreaves, 2019, p. 15).

In practice, this new era signals a move away from the previous deficit or medical model of SEN education, in which educational difficulties are viewed in terms of a child's deficits (Ainscow, 2007), towards a more social model, where the emphasis is on supporting the child's assessed needs (Logan, 2017). The introduction of the revised model of provision, a 'more equitable resource allocation system' (Byrne, 2017, p. 81) replacing the previous category-based general allocation model, provides more flexibility and autonomy for schools. Teachers' professional judgement can now be taken into account in the allocation of teaching resources to pupils (Byrne, 2017). This additional autonomy brings extra responsibility, since schools are expected to adopt a collaborative, 'whole-school approach to programme planning' (DES, 2017, p. 22) while also consulting with parents and pupils. For effective collaboration to occur, the role of school leaders is critical 'to encourage, engage and empower teachers in the collaborative quest' (Hargreaves, 2019, p. 16).

The role of teachers is also critical to establishing inclusive learning environments, and research has shown that Irish teachers are willing to respond to the challenge of diversity in schools (Shevlin, Winter, & Flynn, 2012). Evidence points to the importance of distributed leadership and participative decision-making when developing an inclusive culture (Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004), which is crucial in the successful implementation of the revised model of SEN provision. This study places a focus on the role of the SET in supporting the provision of SEN in Irish mainstream schools, employing methods that involved gathering qualitative data from SETs and their principals, both of whom are critical to the creation of inclusive environments in schools.

Collaborative professionalism helps develop relationships of trust, support, and solidarity, while facilitating professional dialogue, thoughtful feedback, and collective responsibility (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), all significant elements in establishing a culture of collaboration. In this context, policies such as the revised model of SEN provision 'will

have greater chances of being implemented successfully over time' (Hargreaves, 2019, p. 16). Discussion of the findings of this study will therefore be considered within the theoretical framework provided by Hargreaves and O'Connor's (2018) research on collaborative professionalism. The first area to be discussed regarding the SET role in the provision of SEN is shared or collective leadership.

### 5.3 Developing Shared Leadership between Principals and SETs

The study found that school context is a fundamental factor in facilitating or hindering the special education teacher (SET) to engage in leadership of SEN. The findings indicate that larger schools led by administrative principals tend to provide scope and opportunities for the SETs to have a more active role in leading, organising, and managing the provision of special education, compared with smaller schools, where SETs are shared between schools and where the principals and deputy principals lead and organise provision.

There is also evidence that the principal is central to facilitating the creation of a school culture that is collaborative, flexible, supportive, and most importantly inclusive (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004). The data shows principals' strong commitment to building and strengthening an inclusive school culture. Their visions of inclusion vary from including all children in all school activities (P1) to meeting the individual needs of each child, since some children need more support than others in order to have the same experience.

These descriptions echo the definition of inclusion provided in Chapter One as the manner in which a local school facilitates access to and participation in the curriculum and school cultures, along with the restructuring of policies and practices in schools so that they respond to the diversity of pupils with SEN, through provision of appropriate educational resources and teaching methodologies (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). They also reflect

collective efficacy and collective responsibility as espoused by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018).

Despite the positive statements above, there is also acknowledgement of the challenges faced by schools in achieving the targets inherent in the visions expressed, all of which are discussed later in this chapter. These include school culture and the whole idea of moving from the withdrawal model to a combined model, where a large proportion of SEN provision is now in-class support (as outlined by P4), providing a flexible approach so that as needs arise, schools meet them, and more pupils are moved in and out flexibly as needed (according to P5), and the need for schools to be properly resourced (as highlighted by P8).

Research on leadership for inclusion points to the importance of distributed leadership and participative decision-making, while suggesting that developing 'an inclusive culture requires a shared commitment by staff to processes that produce an overall enhancement in participation among all participants' (Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004, p. 140). In the Irish context, Ryan (2006, p. 9) suggests that inclusive leadership consists of distinct practices, including 'nurturing dialogue, emphasizing pupil learning and classroom practice, adopting inclusive decision and policy making strategies and incorporating whole school approaches'.

When applied to the data gathered in this study on leadership and management of pupils with SEN, the following findings will be discussed: identification of pupils needing support; collaborative planning and decision-making; models of support provision; assessment; development and maintenance of open communication with parents, including the drafting, implementation, and review of IEPs; support of pupils during transitions; and liaising with outside agencies. In regard to the role of SETs in supporting staff, the major

points for discussion include the mentoring and induction of teaching colleagues in SEN provision, and the management and support of SNAs.

### *5.3.1 Identifying pupils needing support*

According to Rose (2017, p. 86) 'a significant number of pupils are likely to need additional support only at specific times or for specific circumstances'. In line with this view, there is evidence that SETs lead a flexible approach to the provision of support to pupils with SEN in schools. A variety of sources are used by the SEN coordinators and SEN teams to identify under-performing students or those at risk, including standardised tests and diagnostic tests, information gathered and collated from class teachers and parents, and professional assessments. This is the approach advocated in the Continuum of Support framework provided by the DES (2017, p. 6) to assist schools in identifying and responding to pupils' needs within the revised model of provision, since 'using this framework helps to ensure that interventions are incremental, moving from class-based interventions to more intensive and individualised support'.

#### *Planning for SEN provision*

Being a member of the school management team has been found to be a key factor in fulfilling the SEN coordinator's role and being successful in the sphere of whole-school influence (Imants et al., 2001; INTO, 2003; Kugelmass & Ainscow 2004; Lindqvist, 2013; MacKenzie, 2007; Szwed 2007). Half of the SETs studied (1, 3, 4, and 6) hold formal posts in their in-school management teams, as indicated in Table 3.2. SET2 holds no formal post but acts as SEN coordinator voluntarily. Nonetheless she is undoubtedly viewed as a leader of SEN in her school, due to what could be considered *professional capital* (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012), of which there are three components: human capital (the talent of individuals), social capital (the collaborative power of the group), and

decisional capital (the wisdom and expertise to make sound judgements about learners that are cultivated over many years). SET2 holds human capital, due to her 'qualifications and competencies on paper' (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013, p. 37), having completed the professional diploma in SEN, indicating that even without a formal role, other factors such as qualifications can distinguish SETs as leaders.

Decisional and social capital are evident in the approach involving collaborative inquiry adopted by SEN teams when collectively using their experience and judgement to analyse pupils' needs and devise appropriate intervention strategies, in a process of common meaning and purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). The potential of professional capital to impact on the quality of SEN provision in schools is significant, but it requires a collaborative approach to allow those with qualifications in SEN and those with experience and sound professional judgement to consult and provide feedback in a spirit of mutual support, trust, and shared learning, thereby adding value to the individual human capital in the group (Hargreaves, 2019).

These five SETs display leadership as practice by bringing people together in collaborative dialogue (MacBeath et al., 2018), while engaging in planning, and are supported by their principals such that distributed leadership incorporating participative decision-making are evident (Fullan, 2003; Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004; Travers et al., 2010). These activities consist of organising planning meetings, including setting the agenda; drawing up SEN team timetables to deploy teachers efficiently; and taking responsibility for the administration, collation, and analysis of standardised tests – all evidence of individual and collective autonomy, initiative, and joint work (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

Those without posts or formal qualifications in SEN (SETs 4, 7, and 8) do not engage at the same level of leading the organisations' SEN provision and therefore do not have the

same impact on the planning of SEN provision. This may be because none of these three SETs hold a formal post and also because SETs 7 and 8 are shared with other schools and are only on site for quite a short time each day. In these three schools, the principals, although lacking formal qualifications in SEN, undertake responsibility for planning, confirming the importance of the principal or the teacher who has responsibility for SEN coordination, which emerged as a significant factor 'in supporting teachers and pupils and in creating the environment where inclusion was seen as the norm' (Ware et al., 2011, p. 157). While there is evidence in these schools of a commitment to collaborative planning, SEN is just one of a wide range of matters that would be introduced by the principal for discussion at weekly staff meetings, particularly in the smaller schools; and since the staffs are so small, the possibilities of carrying out tasks in order to implement innovative change are limited. A designated SEN coordinator in each school would have much more scope for initiative, for instigating discussion on SEN-related matters, and for leading collaborative inquiry and joint work (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) designed to create a more inclusive learning environment.

In S5, the assistant principal is the SEN coordinator, while the deputy principal is also a member of the SEN team. Collective initiative and joint work (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) are demonstrated here in an innovative approach to effective planning, through the assigning of the roles of chairperson to the deputy principal and of secretary to the deputy principal and SEN coordinator in the SEN team. This development, commenced some years ago by the former principal, has facilitated the organisation of team meetings and the subsequent sharing of information by circulating minutes and following up on decisions made by the team. Although schools organise team meetings for SETs infrequently, with S2, S4, and S6 meeting formally only twice a year, schools record decisions made at SEN

team meetings and review progress on actions taken in a participatory and collaborative approach (Kugelmass and Ainscow 2004).

Concerns identified regarding the necessity of common planning time for co-teachers in this research have also been found in other studies (Kohler-Evans, 2006; Murray, 2004). While time is essential for effective collaboration, significant variations exist in allocated time, with increasing operational workloads and restricted opportunities for SETs to undertake their role (Cowne, 2005; Crowther et al., 2001; MacKenzie, 2007). In the British context, SENCos have to combine their duties with several other whole-school responsibilities, including full-time classroom responsibilities (Cowne, 2005; Layton, 2005; NUT, 2004; Szwed, 2007, Tissot, 2013). A similar picture emerges from this study, with variations in the amount of release time being provided at the discretion of the principal for SETs to engage in planning and coordination of SEN provision. A variety of creative solutions, suggesting collective initiative and big-picture thinking (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), are employed by principals to facilitate the release of class teachers to meet with SETs to plan various aspects of provision, such as reviewing test results, identifying needs, drafting IEPs, drawing up timetables, and designing classroom strategies.

The issue of time for planning has been acknowledged and addressed in the guidelines provided to coincide with the launch for the revised model of SEN provision (DES, 2017). As indicated in the last chapter, the guidelines state that 'schools need to maintain time for co-ordinating, planning and reviewing activities to ensure effective and optimal use of supports' (DES, 2017, p. 18). This acknowledgement of the importance of planning time should alleviate the concerns of principals and teachers as expressed in the data, since lack of time is an impediment to collaboration and educational change (Hargreaves, 2019). However, it is important that principals value and embrace the autonomy afforded to

schools in this provision to engage and empower teachers (Hargreaves, 2019) towards collaborative decision-making on the most appropriate use of additional resources, on decisions that are 'most effectively made at school level by those professionals who best know the individuals involved' (Rose, 2017, p. 86).

### *5.3.2 Models of provision*

A significant trend that emerged from the data is the development of shared leadership through the implementation in all schools of an in-class or co-teaching model of provision of special education, reflecting the transition from a dual, segregated system of education to a more blended and contemporary educational practice (Friend et al., 2010; Rose and Shevlin, 2019). This contrasts with the practice found in other countries, such as Australia (Konza, 2008), Finland (Takala et al., 2009), Spain (Arnaiz and Castejón, 2011), Greece (Agaliotis & Kalyva, 2011, and Sweden (Lindqvist & Nilholm, 2011), where most support and supplementary teaching is still provided in separate settings.

The most prevalent model in the participating schools is identified as team teaching or station teaching. Demonstrating leadership as practice, the SETs, through dialogue and collaboration (MacBeath et al., 2018), coordinate this approach with class teachers in the various schools to plan lessons, teach, monitor pupil progress, and manage the class (Friend & Cook, 2016), displaying collective responsibility (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). The principals, supported by the SETs, indicated strong support for the development of in-class models, an approach strongly recommended in the guidelines for the revised model of provision (DES, 2017). They display leadership by facilitating a variety of strategies to allow SETs and class teachers opportunities to meet for consultation and collaboration, reflecting Cook and Friend's (1995) assertion that co-teaching should include collaborative assessment, planning, teaching, and evaluation.

At each step of the co-planning, co-teachers should be equally involved in determining how to make instruction effective for pupil learning, beginning with determining the long-term course goals and objectives, turning to twice weekly planning, and frequently adjusting instruction through daily preparation and communication (Pratt et al., 2016). Elements of collaborative professionalism are again evident here during SEN team planning meetings and consultation between SETs and class teachers, in terms of collective inquiry, responsibility and initiative, mutual dialogue, joint work, and common purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

However, the data indicates that schools are predominantly adhering to station teaching, with little evidence of the implementation of any of the other four models of in-class support that are less heavily dependent on personnel, requiring only two teachers to implement. SETs have an opportunity to lead the planning and implementation of a variety of more flexible models of in-class support to benefit the range of learning styles and needs of all the pupils (O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010.

In the smaller schools, S7 and particularly S8, where multi-classes exist, regular planning meetings take place outside of class time in preparation for in-class interventions, since SETs are present for only a short portion of the day. The findings contrast with those of Casserly and Padden (2018 p. 569), whose study of 11 schools found that 'withdrawal of pupils remains the dominant practice' in multi-class settings, while this study, though small in scale, found that in-class support is the more preferred model of provision. This transition towards in-class support (Rose & Shevlin, 2019) has seen a gradual reduction in the alternative model of withdrawal of individual pupils or small groups for specific instruction in the SET's classroom, previously the dominant model of intervention in Ireland (Rose et al., 2015).

All schools demonstrate examples of both models of provision, which are discussed and decided upon at meetings during specific planning time in the larger schools, for example whole-day planning each June in S3. In the smaller schools S7 and S8, decision-making takes place at staff meetings. The choice of provision model depends on each child's needs, with judgements being made on a case-by-case basis, according to P5. This belief reflects King's (2006) assertion that the emphasis should be on targeting pupils needing help, not on teaching methods. Advice from the NCSE (2013) also stresses that interventions with pupils should be delivered in a manner that best meets the needs identified, which may be through group or individual teaching. Schools in this study, such as S3 and S4, were found to follow that advice, using the approaches of withdrawal of small groups and individualised teaching to address specific learning needs and the needs of pupils learning English as a new language. The principals and SETs support the combination of withdrawal and in-class support, as opposed to choosing one approach over the other, and similarly to Casserly and Padden (2017) they believe that these choices should be fluid to ensure well-informed decisions on the appropriateness of supplementary support.

The advantages and disadvantages associated with both approaches are identified in the data. In-class support is advantageous, since it facilitates a lower pupil–teacher ratio, allowing the teacher to know the pupils better, allows for more of the curriculum to be covered, and reduces the potential for poor behaviour – findings that match those of Casserly and Padden (2018) and Friend (2008) and demonstrate a measure of collective efficacy (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). In coordinating the implementation of this more inclusive approach to SEN provision, SETs and principals displayed shared leadership. Participants reported that pupils benefit from small groups, which provide greater opportunities for participation, allowing them to grow in confidence, while they are

exposed to a variety of teaching styles and methodologies. This is in line with Pratt et al. (2017), who agree that differences in teaching styles and approaches should complement each other and benefit pupil learning.

The challenges identified include a lack of physical space, lack of teachers to facilitate in-class models of support such as station teaching, and inadequate time available for planning, consultation, and review of the process. While the first challenge is not easily overcome, principals and SETs have shown leadership and collective initiative in addressing the second challenge by deploying SNAs and volunteers from the local School Completion Programme to provide support, although research has indicated that two teachers can adequately operate station teaching (Cook & Friend, 1995; Friend et al., 2010; Gurger & Uzuner, 2011).

Withdrawing of pupils individually or in small groups for specific instruction still features as a model of provision in all schools studied, although all of those interviewed confirm a significant reduction in its use in recent years. This approach was found by SETs to facilitate the individualised clinical teaching and specific instruction (Nolan, 2005, citing Lerner, 2000), and to provide flexible, individualised support (Travers, 2011) and quiet spaces when required, particularly for those pupils with autism or ADHD (Bond & Hebron, 2016; Hebron & Bond, 2017). This approach has also been found to be more appropriate for pupils requiring English language teaching, supporting the findings of Gardiner-Hyland and Burke (2018). The negative aspect of the withdrawal model focuses on the detrimental effect it can have on the self-esteem of the pupils concerned, particularly as they get older, as suggested by P4 in the data.

There is also a danger of impeding inclusive practice if class teachers abdicate the responsibility for certain aspects of the curriculum to ‘expert’ colleagues, since it may

lessen the need for differentiated instruction in class and limit the urgency of teachers to develop skills and strategies in these particular areas (Rose & Shevlin, 2019). Principals and SETs could lead a more inclusive approach by suggesting and planning for in-class approaches in these cases, thereby providing an opportunity for class teachers to observe and learn from their SET colleagues, allowing them to improve their understanding and knowledge of effective SEN strategies (Uí Chonduibh, 2017). Even if withdrawal is ultimately the choice of approach, collective responsibility (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) demands effective communication between specialist and class teachers to ensure consistency of approach and the full coverage of curriculum (Rose & Shevlin, 2019), a concern highlighted by P2 in the data.

Recent studies have indicated that withdrawal remains the dominant model of provision (Casserly & Padden, 2017); nonetheless, it does appear that provision is currently transitioning to more inclusive approaches (Rose & Shevlin, 2019). Although this is a small-scale study, it is encouraging to note that all participating SETs are engaging regularly in models of in-class support. This finding indicates an improvement in the prevalence of this approach, since Travers (2011) found that only 41% of 137 SETs were adopting this model. It also provides evidence of collective initiative and common purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

### *5.3.3 Assessment*

An important aspect of the SETs' leadership role in the provision of support to pupils in Irish primary schools is assessment, since it is vital to provide information to learners, teachers, and parents so that next steps can be determined and progression in learning can be facilitated (Hall & Kavanagh, 2002). These include standardised testing, now administered to provide parents, boards of management, and the DES with evidence of

standards achieved at certain points in the learners' schooling (Hall & Kavanagh 2002), and diagnostic testing, both of which are very relevant to the provision of SEN. The data indicates that SETs are heavily involved in the standardised testing of all pupils, and in a number of cases they attest to spending many hours correcting, collating, and analysing results. This is a task that could be shared by class teachers, since all teachers concerned share a collective responsibility (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) in pupil assessment. The SETs also believe that in some cases, teachers do not fully utilise the analysed results to make judgements regarding pupils or, as indicated in the Guidelines for Schools on Assessment (NCCA, 2007, p. 66), 'to use the information to adapt his/her teaching methods, differentiation strategies, content of the learning experiences, and so on to meet the children's learning needs more effectively'. Through an approach demonstrating shared leadership, principals and SETs could place stronger emphasis on assessment for learning, focussing on collective responsibility and collaboration with students (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

### *5.3.4 Developing and maintaining open communication with parents*

Developing shared leadership with parents is also important, as reflected by O'Connor (2008), who highlighted the importance of developing partnerships between schools and the parents of pupils with SEN. There is strong evidence in this study of 'leadership as practice' as espoused by MacBeath et al. (2018, p. 88), due to regular communication through mutual dialogue and collaborative inquiry (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) involving principals, SETs, and parents. This includes the sharing of information, for which some schools have developed appropriate templates, communication through scheduled meetings and phone calls, collaboration when drafting IEPs, and reviewing progress on a regular basis. Parents are viewed by teachers as important allies (Hargreaves & Lo, 2000) and are regularly involved in the stages and processes of intervention.

In some cases, however, parental involvement is limited to the provision of information when the document has already been formulated, a practice that does not reflect a collaborative process or the promotion of common purpose and meaning (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Parental engagement in this process should reflect the advice provided in the Learning Support Guidelines (DES, 2000) and the guidelines for implementing the revised model of provision (DES, 2017) to consult with parents on children's strengths and needs, and on supports and strategies to support their children, and to seek opportunities for parents to work collaboratively with the school (DES, 2017). The practices and strategies identified in schools in the study involve designing, implementing, and reviewing IEPs, helping to improve communication and strengthening links with parents, through relationships of reciprocal learning that are open, interactive, and inclusive (Hargreaves & Lo, 2000). However, since parents were not interviewed for this study, evidence regarding their role in IEP design is limited.

### *5.3.5 Developing and implementing IEPs*

All schools have well-established practices of designing IEPs for pupils formerly in SEN categories that were granted resource teaching hours (low-incidence), but also for those who were included in the high-incidence group with specific learning difficulties like dyslexia and dyspraxia (Ware et al., 2011). IEPs are drafted through collaborative inquiry and joint work (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) between SETs, class teachers, and on occasion SNAs, with expert advice being sought from outside agencies such as NEPS in some cases. This reflects the advice provided in the new guidelines for SEN provision that individual planning should be an integrated, collaborative problem-solving process (DES, 2017). It is noteworthy that parents and pupils are absent from this list.

The SETs are proactive in supporting the drafting of IEPs and collaborating with class teachers on the use of smart targets (S6) and the selection of strategies, a process involving collaborative inquiry and collective responsibility (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). The IEP generally includes a profile of the child, test results, priority learning needs, targets to be achieved, strategies to be employed, the SNA timetable (if applicable), and a list of all those involved in the child's education.

Parents are consulted by SETs in all schools on IEP development, with strategies identified that parents can engage with at home. However, a deeper level of parental involvement – collaboration rather than consultation, incorporating the questioning of practice, deep dialogue, and joint judgement-making – would facilitate greater awareness of collective responsibility and common purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). The level of collaboration required may cause the process to be time-consuming (Cole, 2005), a challenge acknowledged by the principals and SETs, but deeper parental engagement could ultimately provide for better outcomes for pupils.

The disappointing lack of collaboration with pupils in drafting IEPs reflects the low levels of pupil engagement and participation found in other studies (King et al., 2018; Rose et al., 2015). Accessing student voice in all aspects of the IEP process (King et al., 2018) by adopting the model developed through the Learner Voice Research study, allowing pupils to benefit from shared opportunities for communication, listening, and being heard (Flynn, 2017), could facilitate engagement with pupils and ultimately promote positive behaviour and learning (Flynn, 2013).

Further meetings are required throughout the year in order to review progress and make plans for future interventions, so the acknowledgement of the need for planning time in the new guidelines is very welcome. Templates and examples of planning and record-keeping

documents such as the Student Support File and the Log of Actions, included in the guidelines for the revised model of support provision (DES, 2017), provide templates for individual planning which may replace IEPs in the era of the revised model of provision.

### *5.3.6 Transitions*

According to Drudy and Kinsella (2009, p. 655), 'an inclusive education system . . . needs to ensure coordination between the different sectors in the education system, and the smooth transfer of pupils and their resource and support entitlements from one sector to another'. In line with this recommendation, a system was established in recent years which requires primary schools to complete a three-phase process, The Education Passport, to support the transfer of pupils to second level. However, no formal structures exist to prescribe the transfer of information on pupils from pre-schools to primary, with poor communication creating a barrier to successful transition (O'Kane, 2007).

Nonetheless, in a demonstration of shared leadership, principals and SETs have developed a number of approaches and strategies for gathering information on the abilities and needs of new pupils enrolling in Junior Infants, reflecting the findings of O'Kane (2016). A recommendation emerging from the data for the provision of a detailed form to be filled in by the pre-school, to facilitate the transition of pupils from pre-school to primary, is reflective of O'Kane's view (2016, p. 76) that 'information sharing between settings . . . facilitate supportive relationships between pre-schools and primary schools to develop which are critical in terms of continuity'.

Structures to facilitate the sharing of pupil information between primary and post primary schools are now well established. In demonstrations of leadership and collective initiative (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), SETs in this study document a number of creative strategies they have employed to support and facilitate the smooth transition of pupils with

SEN to secondary schools, in line with the recommendations of the NCCA (2004), to create structures to facilitate pre-entry contact between the post-primary school, incoming students, and their parents. A good information flow is evident between the primary feeder schools and the post-primary schools on the students' achievements, learning strengths, and material covered at primary level (NCCA, 2004), indicating that SETs show initiative and 'leadership as practice' (MacBeath et al., 2018, p. 88) by engaging in cross-sectoral dialogue to facilitate this important aspect of pupil support.

### *5.3.7 Liaising with outside agencies*

In supporting pupils with SEN, the task of liaising with outside agencies is of significant importance (Abbott, 2007) and indicative of shared leadership, since 'an inclusive education system requires adequate, timely and coordinated support services from health and other professionals for these pupils' (Drudy & Kinsella, 2009, p. 655). In this study, the principal agencies linking with schools in regard to pupils with SEN include NEPS, OT services, speech and language therapy, and the NCSE, represented at local level by the SENO.

Meetings with the local psychologist are required in order to arrange assessments, to review cases already receiving intervention, or to provide advice to teachers on the diagnosis of pupils' needs, the design of strategies, and the choosing of appropriate resources. These meetings are organised and led by the SETs, who welcomed the resources (including templates) provided by NEPS, which support planning and record-keeping. They are most appreciative of the PD provided by NEPS, in the form of cluster meetings to provide information for schools, hosted annually at local level. Since the pressure to meet the requirement for a psychological report in order to access resource teaching hours has been removed, the SETs hope that the advisory role of NEPS will be more in evidence,

particularly in S3, S4, and S5, the larger schools, where the range of SEN difficulties in SETs' caseloads is extensive. It is anticipated that schools will have more opportunities to participate in similar collaborative meetings, which will benefit teachers through the accessing of expert guidance and the subsequent sharing of information and experiences with other SET colleagues. Further collaborative projects with NEPS psychologists, such as the Reading Project (Nugent, 2012) outlined in Chapter Two, currently limited to the south-east, could benefit both teachers and pupils by providing a pathway to increasing professional expertise and raising reading standards in our schools.

Despite the reporting of good relationships between SEN teams and speech and language therapists, minimal collaborative practice actually occurs, supporting the research of Glover et al. (2015) into collaboration between SLTs and teachers. SETs describe parents' expectation that programmes designed by SLTs for their children will be implemented in schools as unrealistic, since they do not have the required training or expertise, while collaboration is difficult due to the number of SLTs involved in one school. Improved collaboration and greater levels of mutual dialogue (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) could be facilitated by establishing inter-professional groups to discuss or resolve current service needs, to share information or research, and to develop and share resources (Glover et al., 2016).

The data indicates that in general it is the principal who liaises with the SENO, with contact mainly concerned with processing applications for extra resources for pupils with SEN. In the future, however, since schools will already have resources assigned under the revised model of provision, it is hoped that SENOs will be more available to consult with SETs. This will provide an opportunity for the SETs to lead collaborative engagement with the SENO to ultimately support SEN teams by providing advice and guidance (Walshe, 2017), as is their remit under the EPSEN Act (2004).

### *5.3.8 Management of support staff*

Due to the lack of systematic induction or training programme for SNAs in Ireland, the principals and SETs in this study display shared leadership or 'leadership as practice' (MacBeath et al., 2018, p. 88) by engaging in collaborative dialogue to facilitate the induction and mentoring of SNAs, in spite of not receiving pre-service or subsequent professional development to work with teaching assistants. The principals provide initial education or induction of SNAs, while the class teachers and SETs provide more pupil-specific training and information, a task which can prove difficult (Gerschel, 2005). The ongoing lack of accredited training opportunities for SNAs is a concern and has resulted in wide variation in the levels of expertise among SNAs in our schools, ranging from FETAC level 5 (equivalent to Leaving Certificate) to level 8 (degree level) (Logan, 2006; Rose & O'Neill, 2009).

In contrast to the findings of Lawlor (2002) and Logan (2006), a culture of consultation and collective responsibility is now evident, with SNAs being included in planning meetings when developing IEPs in some cases, and also providing support for the provision of co-teaching activities in half of the schools through assisting with station supervision. Despite this role, however, the findings show little evidence of pedagogical advice to SNAs by SETs, reflecting research in Britain (MacBeath et al., 2006; MacKenzie, 2007; Szwed, 2007). The need for CPD for SNAs identified by Kerins et al. (2018), including the modification of work for students, planning for teaching students, and supporting students with dyslexia and dyscalculia, reflect duties beyond the SNA care role as defined in policy and specified in DES circulars, and therefore cannot feature in CPD programmes designed for SNAs.

While the official role of SNAs is very much focussed on care needs, principals and SETs in this study feel that this focus is too narrow, since some pupils do not have high care needs but may require support with other difficult challenges, without which they could not manage in a mainstream setting, as highlighted by P4. A broader view at policy level of the SNA role, reflecting collective responsibility and big-picture thinking (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), may be more reflective of the reality of SNA support in classrooms. Opportunities for professional learning for principals and SETs in the management of SNAs would be beneficial, while Gerschel (2005) stresses the importance of the SEN coordinator being a member of the senior management team and having input into strategic decision-making in order to be effective in the management of teaching assistants.

## 5.4 Summary

This study provides evidence of varying levels of shared leadership for inclusion, including distributed leadership and decision-making (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004), in all of the aspects of SEN provision documented above, demonstrating a view of 'leadership as practice', in which leadership is manifest in collaborative dialogue (MacBeath et al., 2018, p. 88). At the centre of leadership as practice is the spontaneous pursuit of pedagogical activity, focussed primarily on pupil needs. Findings from this study align with this view of leadership (MacBeath et al., 2018) in the planning of SEN provision, including the assessment and identification of pupils with SEN, the preparation of IEPs, the selection of intervention strategies and resources, the support of pupils during transitions, and the communication of information to parents, activities which are initiated and led by SETs.

It is also clear from the data, however, that those SETs who hold a management role in their schools or who hold a formal SEN qualification engage at a deeper level of leading the organisations' SEN provision. Therefore, they have a stronger impact and greater

influence on the planning of SEN provision (MacKenzie, 2007; Szwed, 2007) than those who do not hold formal posts (SET4) or are shared with other schools (SET7, SET8). This evidence indicates that national policy should dictate that each school appoint a coordinator of SEN provision who is also a member of the senior management team (Cole, 2005; Tissot, 2013; Travers et al., 2010), so that they have a role in decision-making on national policy interpretation at school level in tandem with school-based policy development and implementation. In smaller schools, a coordinator with responsibility for a number of schools could provide an option for leading SEN provision, including strategic planning and decision-making. Such a model of distributed leadership should be considered to facilitate opportunities to develop a shared vision of SEN provision and to promote more inclusive practices. In this way, teachers could foster a culture of collective responsibility, providing immense support to teaching principals in smaller schools, such as P7 and P8, who already have a heavy burden of teaching and administrative duties.

An important aspect of leadership for inclusion identified by Kugelmass and Ainscow (2004) is collaboration between staff with different specialisations, with staff willing and able to work together as cooperative teams, thereby creating a community where all individuals are valued. Collaborative inquiry and engagement are evident in the identification of pupils' needs, assessment, the drafting of IEPs, models of provision, and liaising with parents and with relevant external agencies. Structures and practices regarding the planning of meetings, recording of minutes or notes, and implementation of decisions are well developed in all schools. One school demonstrates a high level of collaboration and collective initiative (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) through the assigning of the chairperson and secretary roles in the SEN team, a practice that would benefit all SEN teams by facilitating more participative decision-making and shared commitment (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004). The nurturing of such collaborative school groups has

proven useful in sustaining and increasing teacher morale and confidence and beneficial as a further way to contribute to a positive school ethos, while improving schools' approaches to SEN (Creese et al., 1998).

## 5.5 Professional Learning

Evidence from this study shows that the leadership and management of SEN requires a focus on professional learning for all SETs and a focus on SETs mentoring other staff in the school.

### *5.5.1 Qualifications, expertise, and the availability of professional learning opportunities to SETs*

In Ireland there is no mandatory requirement for teachers appointed to a position involving special education to hold an SEN qualification, although improving access to professional development for teachers prior to taking up positions in SEN is advocated (O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010). Arguably all teachers require professional learning in SEN, since all classes have diverse learners; however, this has only recently become available at pre-service level, with mandatory SEN modules being provided in ITEs.

Wide variations in the level of learning and expertise in SEN exist across the schools participating in this study. The lack of formal postgraduate qualifications in SEN among the SETs (two out of eight hold level 9 qualifications in SEN) reflects the need to appraise the support mechanisms which facilitate professional learning (Layton, 2005). Both principals and SETs in this study indicate that the lack of formal qualifications is attributable in part to the absence of a fully accredited face-to-face course in SEN education in the south-east of Ireland, a need that should be addressed at a macro policy level.

However, other options do exist, including accredited online diploma and certificate courses that can be accessed from any location. Indeed, evidence shows that formal courses, including award-bearing models of PD, are much less transformative than other models such as communities of practice and collaborative inquiry (Kennedy, 2005) and therefore would be more beneficial to the collective efficacy (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) of whole SEN team.

In the absence of the availability of formal professional learning opportunities, cluster meetings organised locally by NEPS psychologists provide opportunities for SETs to network and engage in professional dialogue. This reflects work by O'Gorman and Drudy (2010), who called for professional learning for all teachers in the pursuit of inclusion and emphasised the benefits of networking, collegial discussion, and practical experience. However, these meetings occur only once a year. In line with the small-scale study of teacher collaboration in Cyprus by Angelides et al. (2008), a more structured network would be more effective that would meet at regular intervals and provide SETs with opportunities to share experiences, expertise, and resources. This would allow ideas to be generated, activities implemented, learning documented, and new ideas shared.

In the Irish context, Banks et al. (2016), in a study of special classes, found that CPD and increased communication or networks with teachers in similar positions in other schools are likely to greatly enhance teacher confidence and ability to differentiate. This approach reflects the 'bottom-across' approach whereby teachers in clusters of schools may collaborate on professional learning and development activities (Fraser et al., 2007). Such networks, if established, could provide opportunities for developing collective efficacy and responsibility through mutual dialogue (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), since school-to-school collaboration strengthens the capacities of teachers to address complex and challenging circumstances (Ainscow et al., 2006). The Education Centre network could

facilitate such collaboration through the establishment of SET network groups, providing venues, catering, and administrative support using funding provided by DES to support local Teacher Professional Networks (TPNs).

Implementing in-class models of provision gives opportunities to SETs to model good practice, share knowledge, and mentor less experienced or newly qualified colleagues, during planning, teaching, and reviewing processes. Such engagement displays collective inquiry, responsibility, and initiative (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) and supports findings that significant professional development is facilitated through coaching and collaboration in the classroom (Travers, 2010; Uí Chonduibh, 2017; Walsh, 2012). Further professional development opportunities for both SETs and class teachers to provide greater familiarisation with the range of co-teaching models (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016) would be beneficial. Teachers' capabilities in researching, implementing, and evaluating effective teaching and learning strategies for the diversity of students they encounter would be greatly enhanced in this way (O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010).

### *5.5.2 Specific areas for professional development*

Areas identified in research as essential for professional learning in SEN include the identification of learning difficulties, effective teaching strategies, counselling, the professional development of colleagues, and budgeting (Cowne, 2005). Crockett (2000) has suggested the following five key elements of special education leadership preparation: moral leadership, instructional leadership, organisational leadership, management and evaluation related to learners with exceptionalities, and collaborative leadership, promoting partnerships for instruction. These specific aspects of professional learning, which include collaborative professionalism, would also be appropriate for PD in SEN for principals.

As is evident in this study, professional learning needs to highlight aspects such as teamwork and collaboration with colleagues, parents, and other professionals in order to promote an inclusive system, with an emphasis on IEPs, general up-skilling, information on various disabilities, and diagnosis and assessment (O'Gorman and Drury, 2010). The development of 'distributed expertise' over 'individual expertise' needs to be to the forefront of PD programmes (O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010, p. 165). The data provides evidence of existing formal structures and inclusive practices in schools to facilitate collaborative information-sharing and mentoring, reflecting the view that teacher development is often best promoted in the context of school development, with more and more schools being encouraged to engage in collaborative development planning (Fraser et al., 2007). The next section will discuss these in more detail.

### *5.5.3 Provision of mentoring*

In a positive development, the data indicates that mentoring and induction are provided by principals and SETs to colleagues, including newly qualified teachers, new SETs, class teachers, and student teachers. This is facilitated through the organisation of in-school professional learning (PL) in specific areas identified as necessary by the staff, and through the sharing of experiences and expertise among SETs in schools. However, while collaborative learning is evident among SETs, some need further support on collaboration and coordination with class teachers, to avoid working in a vacuum, on areas such as IEP targets, as is provided in S2 (King et al., 2018; Ní Bhroin et al., 2016). Improved coordination will require shared leadership from principals and SETs, while collective responsibility and initiative are demanded of all teachers. The practice required reflects the creation of in-school communities of practice where colleagues collaborate, reflect, problem-solve, and problem-pose together towards a collective goal (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010).

This mentoring and induction are essential, particularly in the smaller schools in this study, where different SETs are appointed each year due to the re-organisation of clusters. This task may be reduced somewhat under the revised model of provision, since this system provides for one SEN teaching role in schools. The measure was welcomed by all participants, as it is envisaged that there will be less part-time clustering, especially in smaller schools, with SEN teaching resources being stable for a period of three years (DES, 2017). This change should also create more permanent posts and reduce the need for constant induction and mentoring of new members of the SEN team (Devine, 2017), while cutting down on the time that SETs spend travelling between schools, as evidenced in this study. This envisaged new stability in staffing could provide the time and opportunity required for deeper engagement between SETs and class teachers through collaborative inquiry and the joint work in SEN provision.

Co-teaching as a potential model of PL has been identified as an effective strategy in supporting the induction of NQTs due to the collaboration and joint work (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) involved in planning and teaching that facilitates professional learning (Uí Chondhuibh, 2017), the development of professional responsibility (Walsh, 2012) and reflection on practice (Travers et al., 2010). The benefits of teachers collaborating and working together is also emphasised by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), in their call for a focus on professional capital, comprising the development of teachers' knowledge and skills in teaching (human capital), working collaboratively (social capital), and the development of teachers' decision-making and judgements (decisional capital) (King, 2014). In-class support in S1, S3, S4, and S8 provides examples of experienced SETs, through collective initiative (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), inducting, mentoring, and supporting newly qualified class teachers (Travers et al., 2010), with professional

development being offered through informal modelling, coaching, collaborative planning, co-teaching, and reflective practice (Uí Chonduibh, 2017; Walsh, 2012).

## 5.6 Summary

Although formal professional learning opportunities in SEN are rare in the area where this study took place, evidence emerges of creative professional development initiatives (O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010) engaged in by SETs to improve their knowledge and competence. Mentoring and induction are demonstrated using collaborative approaches such as coaching (Walsh, 2012), networking, and collegial discussion (O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010), which also facilitate the sharing of professional expertise and experience (Travers et al., 2010).

Evidence in the data of the growth of in-class models of provision supports the induction of NQTs and newly appointed SETs (Uí Chonduibh, 2017), through the collaborative planning and joint work (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) involved in co-teaching lessons. A third initiative to support the professional learning of SEN teams, and reflective of an approach of collaborative inquiry (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), is evident in SETs' engagement in local cluster group information meetings organised and facilitated by NEPS psychologists. This example of school-to-school collaboration, while limited, strengthens the capacity of teachers to address challenging circumstances (Ainscow et al., 2006) and has strong potential to increase teachers' confidence when making judgements about the allocation of additional resources to facilitate learning (Rix et al., 2013), as is now required in the revised model of SEN provision. These local clusters of SETs, if supported by NEPS, the NCSE Support Service, and the nationwide Education Centre network, have the potential to develop and provide a regular forum for collaborative inquiry, mutual dialogue (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018, and most importantly, professional learning.

Evidence of the development of relationships between schools and health professionals such as NEPS psychologists and SLTs is positive and provides opportunities for teachers to benefit from their expertise; nonetheless, it is clear that minimal collaborative practice (Glover et al., 2015) is occurring. A possible solution lies in the establishment of inter-professional groups (Glover et al., 2015) to facilitate collaborative inquiry and mutual dialogue (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), thereby allowing mutual professional learning to occur. Again the Education Centre network could play a role in the organisation and hosting of meetings to facilitate such collaboration.

All of the aforementioned approaches to professional learning are democratic models of CPD which foster teacher self-efficacy through critical collaboration (Fraser et al., 2007). These approaches, based on collaborative inquiry, support teachers in reconstructing their own knowledge and are therefore more likely than transmissive approaches, such as externally delivered 'expert' tuition, to lead to transformative change (Fraser et al., 2007, p. 159). A socio-cultural interpretation of teacher learning and change is now a real alternative to traditional top-down approaches, one that relies upon the assumption of individual teacher autonomy in an environment characterised by collaborative, collective decision-making (Fraser et al., 2007). There is increasing capacity for teacher autonomy as one moves from transmission through transitional to transformative categories. However, while the capacity for professional autonomy is greater in transformative models, this does not in itself imply that the capacity will necessarily be fulfilled (Kennedy, 2005). In the next section, teacher autonomy is discussed more fully.

## 5.7 Teacher Autonomy

Teacher autonomy has been defined as the perception that teachers have regarding whether they control their own decision-making and their work environment (Pearson & Hall,

1993). In the Irish context, Skerritt (2019) believes that autonomy over what is taught in schools can enable autonomous teachers to better support particular students by offering them a curriculum that is better tailored to their needs. An American study by Pearson and Moomaw (2005b), involving 171 teachers across all levels, found that when teacher autonomy was increased, so did empowerment and professionalism. They suggested that autonomy appeared to be emerging as a key variable when examining educational reform initiatives, with some teachers arguing that granting autonomy and empowering teachers is an appropriate place to begin solving the problems of today's schools. They also found that the teaching autonomy factor is logically consistent with the need for teachers to have control over their work environment and to have personal on-the-job decision-making authority. These arguments could be applied to the data in this study, since teacher autonomy emerged as a key finding, particularly on the implementation of the revised model of SEN provision, the drafting, implementation, and review of school policy on SEN, and the carrying out of duties and tasks specific to the role of the SET. These three areas of teacher autonomy are now discussed.

### *5.7.1 Implementing the revised model of provision*

Implementation of the revised model of SEN provision began in schools on 1 September 2017, signalling a break of the link between the need for an assessment and the provision of resource hours and SNA support (NCSE, 2014). Instead of the use of categories of disability, students are now identified through a range of descriptors to ensure they are included on the basis of need, thereby facilitating a move away from labelling and stigmatising pupils (Banks et al., 2015).

Removal of the requirement for professional reports to access resource teaching hours is viewed positively by the principals and teachers in this study, due to the consequential

increase in collective autonomy (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) for schools in the deployment of resources for pupils with SEN. Their positive views on the shift in emphasis away from categories of disability concur with recent research, since the over-emphasis on deficit labels such as 'SEN' or 'disabilities' extends largely to exclusionary practices, stigmatisation, and discriminatory activities towards people who are being labelled (Algraigray & Boyle, 2017; Rose, 2017).

While this increased autonomy is welcomed, a cautionary note is sounded in the data regarding schools' legal and moral responsibilities to provide adequately for pupils' needs. There were calls for support to be provided by DES to school management bodies to develop and implement strong policies on all aspects of SEN provision at local level, echoing Dillon (2017) and Pijl and Frisson (2009), who point out the necessity for teachers to know that they are not on their own and that they have access to support from school governing bodies and school management.

At school level, practitioners have been translating the policy documents into practice since September 2017 in their specific local context, or, as Vidovich (2007) describes, in the 'context of practices/effects', where policy is subject to multiple interpretations and recreations. Schools have been given collective autonomy (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) in the allocation of resources to pupils with SEN, with principals and SETs becoming, in the words of Hudson (1993), 'street level bureaucrats' using discretion in the interpretation of the new policy at street level, given the influence of the specific circumstances of their school context and level of pupil needs. There are unavoidable implications, therefore, for the levels of success that may be achieved by different schools in implementing the policy. The gap between the stated intent of the macro-level policy text and actual practices at micro level in schools may be significant (Hudson, 1993), unless principals and teachers focus on collective responsibility and initiative and strive with common meaning and

purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) to achieve their stated objectives for pupils with SEN.

In this regard, the challenges identified by participants with the introduction of the revised model of support provision include the absence of professional learning opportunities for SEN teams. This evidence reflects concerns expressed in the review of the pilot programme for the revised model, about the need for further professional learning in differentiation, target setting, and monitoring of pupil progress (Byrne, 2017). Similar concerns as those expressed in this study have already been highlighted by O'Gorman and Drudy (2010), who recommended a requirement for CPD for all teachers in the pursuit of inclusion and an urgent need for specific professional learning for the key promoters of inclusion in the school in order to adapt and improve instruction and to keep abreast of policy change.

With autonomy comes collective responsibility (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) for the implementation of the new policy. Suggestions emerging from the study to facilitate the smoother and more efficient implementation of the new system by principals and SETs include the provision of additional templates for drafting revised SEN policies, the development of a software package to facilitate easier organisation and security of records, and the development of an explanatory leaflet for parents. Findings are limited, however, since this policy is in the early stages of implementation, with only one of the schools having had an opportunity to experience the new system at first hand through participation in the pilot scheme. But there is significant potential for further investigation in the future.

### *5.7.2 Developing and implementing school policy on SEN*

Teachers feel empowered when they perceive that the school principal considers their opinions on matters that directly affect them. This includes involving them through mutual

dialogue in the common purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) of developing school policies that affect their work, and ensuring that their concerns were taken into account in administrative decisions. Collaborative autonomy exists in schools where teachers have the opportunity to work with principals in making decisions about curriculum, instruction, and scheduling (Willner, 1990). All schools in this study have policies on SEN provision, covering such areas as testing, SEN team allocation, timetabling, resource management, and the organisation of staged provision. The data indicates that in certain cases SETs retain significant autonomy in the drafting, implementation, and review of these policies. Responsibilities for the drafting and development of SEN policy vary depending on school size. In the bigger schools, S1, S3, S4 and S5, in a demonstration of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2005), the SEN coordinators are responsible for initiating the review of policy. In a process of mutual dialogue and common purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), with the other post-holders they draft the changes and present these to the rest of staff for consideration before ratification by the board. In two smaller schools, S2 and S6, collaborative autonomy is evident with the whole staff reviewing policy and sharing it with the parents' representatives before completion. In the smallest schools, S7 and S8, where SETs are shared with other schools and only on-site for limited hours, the principals assume responsibility for keeping policies updated, demonstrating reduced opportunities for the enactment of collective teacher autonomy.

### *5.7.3 The specific responsibilities and tasks assigned to the SET's role*

The third area in the sphere of teacher autonomy arising from the data is the specific responsibilities and tasks of SETs. Teaching autonomy is logically consistent with the need for teachers to have control over their work environment and to have personal on-the-job decision-making authority (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005a). The specific tasks carried out by SETs in this study include: liaising with government agencies and other external agencies,

purchasing and managing specific resources for SEN, timetabling, record-keeping, mentoring and inducting NQTs and new appointees to the SEN team, and pastoral care of pupils. These correspond quite closely with the tasks prescribed for the teacher tasked with coordinating the provision of support to pupils with SEN as set out in the Learning Support Guidelines (DES, 2000). These include maintaining a list of pupils receiving supplementary teaching, helping to coordinate the caseloads and work schedules of the support teachers, supporting the implementation of a tracking system at whole-school level to monitor children's progress, advising parents on SEN services, liaising with external agencies, and arranging classroom accommodation and resources (DES, 2000). The responsibilities for liaising with government and other external agencies and the mentoring and induction of NQTs and newly appointed SETs have been discussed in previous sections. Other tasks, including the purchase and management of specific resources for SEN, timetabling, and record-keeping, will be dealt with now.

### *5.7.4 The purchase and management of specific resources, timetabling, and record-keeping for SEN*

The provision of adequate resources for SEN interventions at class and whole-school level is essential, with schools accessing funds from the DES through specific grants, the board of management funded by capitation payments, and Parents Associations funded through various fundraising initiatives. The level of autonomy given to teachers for the selection and management of these resources appears to be quite high, restricted mainly by the limitations on funding. Principals called for a more equitable system of providing capitation for pupils with SEN in mainstream, comparable to that provided to pupils with SEN in special schools and special classes. Additional funding accessed in this way could allow schools to provide more resources and services for pupils.

Timetabling is the responsibility of the SEN coordinator in all schools, demonstrating a high level of autonomy, except again in the cases of the two shared SETs, where the principal takes that responsibility. The SETs in the other schools lead a collaborative process, which prioritises flexibility so that pupils do not miss the same curricular area if withdrawn for supplementary teaching as recommended in the Learning Support Guidelines (DES, 2000). This concern should be lessened going forward, with the increase in the use of in-class approaches to provision.

As found in other research (Travers et al., 2010), this study identified sophisticated systems for record-keeping, monitoring of progress towards targets, and documenting support time to pupils with SEN, which have been well established in schools in advance of the publication of the guidelines on the revised model of provision (DES, 2017), once more demonstrating collective autonomy and initiative (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Individual files are maintained, based on templates provided by NEPS, in order to track each pupil, which then forms the basis of review and consultation meetings with parents.

### *5.7.5 Pastoral role of SET*

SETs provide nurturing and pastoral care to students, particularly those who become emotionally upset. This aspect of the SET's role is crucial for students with behavioural, emotional, and social difficulties (Burton & Goodman, 2011). Despite the lack of specific reference to the provision of such support in the DES guidelines (DES, 2017), it is evident that SETs, such as SET4, feel compelled to provide pastoral care to pupils when they perceive it is required – a demonstration of professional autonomy.

## 5.8 Summary

Teacher autonomy allows educators more independence from top-down bureaucratic authority, while valuing teachers' professional judgement that is informed by a range of

evidence (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). The data emerging from this study has acknowledged the increased individual and collective teacher autonomy in the Irish education system. This is attributable primarily to the implementation of the revised model of provision of SEN, which provides more autonomy to schools in deploying additional teaching resources to pupils. This necessitates the organisation of school schedules that facilitate planning and consultation opportunities for all those concerned with SEN matters, and requires staffs to develop school policies in SEN provision that acknowledge and support the particular context of the school.

While participants welcome the increased autonomy, there is an evident lack of confidence in schools' ability to assume the additional responsibility provided under the revised model, in the calls for additional professional learning opportunities to be provided to principals and teachers by the support services and NEPS, and in the demands for templates to be provided to help schools develop school policies in SEN.

Decisions on the allocation of additional teaching resources to pupils previously assigned to resource teachers are now taken at school level, instead of being prescribed by NCSE. This change has caused concerns for principals and SEN teams. However, these are the professionals who best know the children involved and are therefore well placed to make judgements on resource allocation (Rose, 2017). Also, the recently established NCSE support service is intended to focus on building professional capacity in schools and to support schools to respond to pupils' needs (Byrne, 2017). Ultimately, decisions about school policy on such areas as timetabling, record-keeping, resource management, and the pastoral care of pupils need to be taken at school level (Rix et al., 2013), although professional advice may be sought from the educational support and health services.

Decision-making must reflect collective responsibility (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) and be collaborative and inclusive of all stakeholders. The suggestions of in-school collaborative inquiry and school-to-school networks focussed on SEN matters, made earlier in this chapter, could alleviate teachers' concerns and provide support and opportunities for mutual dialogue and collective initiatives (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Moving forward, Rose (2017) recommends that the professionalism of teachers and principals in decision-making needs to be respected in order to create inclusive classrooms to benefit all learners.

The final chapter will present the conclusions evident in the study. Many challenges also exist in leading and managing SEN provision, so recommendations based on the evidence in Chapter Four will also be presented in the next chapter.

# Chapter Six: Conclusions

## 6.1 Introduction

This final chapter summarises the study and indicates how the findings contribute to or extend existing knowledge (Wisker, 2012), while also outlining limitations of the research. It presents an overview of the research approach taken in the study, followed by a synthesis of the key research findings. The implications of the research for policy formulation and professional practice in the future are documented, while suggestions for further research are also presented.

Firstly, this study contributes to our knowledge of how principals and SEN coordinators, through embracing shared leadership, facilitate school SEN teams to engage collaboratively in planning, implementing, and reviewing SEN provision. In doing so it identifies the structures they have established to facilitate this process and the challenges they encounter.

Secondly, this study adds to our understanding of existing structures and processes to facilitate professional learning related to SEN, including the sharing of experience, knowledge, and expertise in schools. This is very relevant given the identified gaps in access to meaningful professional learning on inclusion and SEN (Crockett, 2000; O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010; Travers et al., 2010; Ware et al., 2011), the absence of mandatory professional learning for existing teachers, and the importance of collaborative practice for meeting the needs of students with SEN (Hargreaves, 2019; Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004). It argues for the development and expansion of collaborative, in-school communities of practice to address this need, particularly relating to the potential to improve professional practice in SEN provision.

Thirdly, this study provides important insights into the lack of confidence experienced by principals and SETs in embracing the autonomy given to them when making meaning of SEN policy and practice. This is particularly important given the increased autonomy of schools under the revised model of SEN provision (DES, 2017). A proposal is provided for the establishment and nurturing of school-to-school networks that facilitate collaborative engagement on SEN matters, thereby enabling improved professional confidence. Such networks could alleviate teachers' concerns and build professional competence, while providing support and opportunities for mutual dialogue and collective initiatives. Support for principals at policy level, by providing them with professional development to enhance their collaborative practice and encourage further experimentation, would be beneficial.

These proposals may be useful to schools implementing and embedding the policies and practice inherent in the revised model of SEN provision (DES, 2017). They may also give direction to facilitators of PD in SEN, such as PDST, NCSE, NEPS, and the Education Centre network, in providing the type of support that would be relevant and of practical value throughout that implementation. These new contributions to knowledge will be further elaborated on in the Synthesis of Findings section below.

## 6.2 Summary of the Research Approach

This study used a qualitative approach to investigate the leadership and management provided by SETs in the provision of special education in eight mainstream primary schools. It focussed on contextually based approaches to shared leadership, collaborative practices, and professional learning from the perspective of SETs and their principals.

The ten tenets of collaborative professionalism, described by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) in their case studies of school collaboration, are relevant to this study, providing a helpful typology in identifying the collaborative approaches and strategies that enable

SETs to undertake their role in leading and managing SEN provision. The data collection, analysis, and findings of this study were therefore considered within the theoretical framework provided by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018). The research comprised a multiple case study approach which allowed a phenomenon to be explored in its context, using qualitative methods and a variety of data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008), including focus group interviews, one-to-one interviews, and participant reflexive diaries. Analysis of the data provided by the interviews and reflexive diaries comprised a six-step flexible approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### 6.3 Research Questions

New directions in Irish national policy, legislative changes, and successful litigation have converged to promote significant growth in the number of pupils with SEN attending mainstream primary schools in the last two decades, reflecting the international trend towards greater inclusion of pupils with SEN (Tiernan et al., 2018). Implementing successful SEN coordination and establishing the structures and strategies that facilitate the effective management of inclusion, however, has provided challenges to principals and teachers in this area (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004). This study explored these challenges while also seeking to identify examples of effective practice resulting in successful inclusion. The research examined the contribution of support teachers to the leadership and management of SEN provision in mainstream schools. This included focussing on the identification of the tasks they are responsible for, the duties they undertake in their schools, and the impact of their role in the coordination of SEN provision at school level within the theoretical framework of collaborative professionalism provided by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018).

The principal research question underpinning this research was: 'How can support teachers contribute to the leadership and management of Special Education Needs provision in mainstream schools?' This question was broken down into five sub-questions as set out in Table 6.1, derived from the most significant themes emerging from the literature review and informed by the theoretical framework of collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

**Table 6.1 Research Questions**

| | |
|---|---|
| Research question 1 | To what extent do SETs lead and manage SEN provision in the school, while achieving a balance between supporting pupils and staff? |
| Research question 2 | What contribution do SETs make to leading and managing change, with a specific focus on SEN policy development and strategic planning? |
| Research question 3 | What are the specific tasks and responsibilities assigned to the SET's role? |
| Research question 4 | What are the key practices and strategies that allow the SETs to fulfil their tasks and responsibilities effectively? |
| Research question 5 | What, if any, are the barriers that prevent these teachers from successfully fulfilling their tasks and responsibilities? |

## 6.4 Synthesis of the Findings

This study explores how SETs can contribute to the leadership and management of Special Educational Needs provision in mainstream schools through the lens of collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). When analysing the findings within this theoretical framework, three significant themes emerged: shared leadership, professional learning, and school autonomy.

### *6.4.1 Shared leadership*

This study provides evidence of varying levels of shared leadership for inclusion, including distributed leadership and decision-making (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004) involving

principals and SETs, aligning with the view of ‘leadership as practice’ (MacBeath et al., 2018, p. 88), which advocates for collaborative dialogue in the planning and provision of SEN.

*Role of the SET in coordinating SEN*

While the centrality and commitment of the principals is evident in facilitating the creation of a school culture that is collaborative, flexible, supportive, and most importantly inclusive (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004), many activities related to the planning and provision of SEN are initiated and led by SETs. These include organising planning meetings, setting agendas, communicating decisions made, and reviewing the implementation of practices and strategies.

However, a significant finding indicates that those SETs who hold a management role in their schools, or who hold a formal SEN qualification, engage at a deeper level of leading the organisations’ SEN provision and have a stronger impact and influence on the planning of provision (MacKenzie, 2007; Szwed, 2007) than those who do not hold formal posts or are shared with other schools.

This evidence strengthens the argument that national policy should dictate the appointment of a coordinator of SEN provision in every school who is also a member of the school senior management team (Cole, 2005; Tissot, 2013; Travers et al., 2010). This policy should also apply to smaller schools, since evidence from this study indicates that teaching principals, who already carry a significant combined teaching and administrative workload, shoulder most of the managerial burden related to SEN provision. This is mainly due to the limited time spent in each school by SETs, whose allocated time is generally shared among schools. The role could be allocated on a shared basis to a SET who coordinates SEN in a number of schools.

The formal designation in policy of a coordinator could further influence school development through engagement in strategic decision-making and planning on national policy interpretation at school level, in tandem with school-based policy development and implementation. In this way, teachers could foster a culture of collective responsibility (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) in initiating and sustaining inclusive practices, providing significant support to teaching principals in smaller schools. In addition, PD specific to the leadership and management of SEN provision would be essential for those assuming coordinator roles (Crockett, 2000; Travers et al., 2010).

*Leading school collaboration in SEN*

An important aspect of leadership for inclusion identified by Kugelmass and Ainscow (2004) is collaboration between staff with different specialisations, with staff willing and able to work together as cooperative teams, thereby creating a community where all individual expertise and experience are valued. The nurturing by leaders of such collaborative school groups could sustain and increase teacher morale and confidence (Creese et al., 1998). The majority of schools in this study provide evidence of such collaborative inquiry (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

Collective engagement is evident in the identification of pupils' needs, assessment, the drafting of IEPs, and the selection of models of provision, particularly in the larger schools. Since schools now enjoy enhanced autonomy on SEN provision, these in-school collaborative structures have potential for further development to promote enhanced professional practice, shared learning, and deeper engagement in collaborative decision-making, if nurtured and supported in a combined approach by the SEN coordinator and principal. However, the success of such engagement depends on investment by all participants in professional capital, allowing individual knowledge and qualifications – in tandem with teachers' professional judgement in a setting of mutual support and trust – to

facilitate inquiry and joint action, in a process of collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves, 2019).

Structures for regular liaison with parents are in place in all schools, facilitated by school-based policies and practices. Nonetheless, in regard to the formulation of IEPs in particular, deeper collaboration through more extensive information-sharing, participative decision-making, and shared commitment to implementing strategies to achieve pupil learning targets (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004), led by the SEN coordinator, would facilitate a greater contribution from these educational partners. Similarly, in regard to relevant external agencies, limited engagement is evident between SETs and health professionals, but increased opportunities for sharing information and expertise between schools and health professionals, in addition to collaborative decision-making, could enable greater support to parents and schools on how best to support children's development and learning.

*Models of provision*

A combination of in-class and withdrawal models of provision is evident in schools (Casserly & Padden, 2018), with a predominance of team teaching approaches indicated – a positive development. This transition, led by SETs and facilitated by principals, adds to our understanding of how schools are attempting to embrace more inclusive approaches when designing interventions to support pupils with SEN. However, evidence of over-reliance on one approach, station teaching, indicates a need for PD on other models for both class teachers and SETs. Alternate models of provision require fewer teachers to operate successfully: a relevant concern, since this study indicates that the lack of teachers to implement co-teaching approaches is a challenge. Furthermore, the implementation of a variety of approaches is more likely to meet the wide diversity of individual needs in

classes (NCSE, 2011) and to facilitate improved social engagement while learning, given the particular class context, thereby facilitating improved professional practice.

While participants justified withdrawal approaches when supporting pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties or those learning English for the first time, there are concerns that this approach impedes inclusion (Rose & Shevlin, 2019). These concerns include the lessening of the need for class teachers to acquire expertise in differentiation strategies, the possible isolation of pupils, and their inability to access a full curriculum (Rose & Shevlin, 2019). Support in terms of relevant PD, the provision of SNAs, and the expansion of the recently established School Inclusion Model of support – which includes in-school provision of behavioural practitioners, psychologists, and regional support teams – would greatly assist schools in ensuring that all pupils do not experience isolation and have access to the full curriculum, regardless of their specific needs.

### *Assessment and IEP formulation*

The leadership provided by SETs in the areas of assessment and IEP design is evident in this study, with collaborative approaches to the fore in drafting targets and strategies to meet pupils' needs. Nonetheless, deeper parental engagement (King et al., 2018) and the introduction of student voice to IEP drafting, through the use of a model such as that recently proposed to facilitate the inclusion of student voice in school settings (Flynn, 2017), would greatly enhance the process and enable the constructing of change together (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Regarding assessment, while significant effort is invested by SETs in collating and analysing standardised test results, these are not utilised to the greatest extent possible by class teachers to inform decisions on the selection of strategies and resources (O'Leary et al., 2019). Again, this finding indicates that specific PD is required on the potential of these results to inform decision-making about teaching and

learning, thus leading to an improvement in professional practice (Ní Chualain, 2011; O'Leary et al., 2019). The development and implementation of innovative strategies to support pupils at transition stages are welcome, adding to our knowledge of the various methods used by SETs to access relevant information in order to facilitate smoother transitions. However, a more formal process of information-sharing between pre-schools and primary schools is urgently needed.

Liaising with outside agencies is challenging for principals and SETs, mainly due to time constraints, although school cluster group meetings facilitated by NEPS psychologists to provide information are welcomed, as is the provision of templates to support school planning and record-keeping. Participants indicate that parental expectations regarding the implementation of programmes designed for pupils by SLTs are unrealistic, given the lack of expertise among teachers in this regard. Establishing collaborative inter-professional groups to share expertise, experience, information, and resources may improve professional practice, while in turn developing common meaning and purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

Shared leadership is demonstrated by principals and SETs in the induction and mentoring of SNAs, although no formal programme of PD for SNAs has been provided at policy level, despite wide variation in their levels of qualifications (Logan, 2006; Rose & O'Neill, 2009). Although SNAs' official remit is confined to the care needs of pupils, in reality this focus is too narrow, since SNAs support pupils in accessing the curriculum, for example during station teaching. A broader view at policy level may be more realistic, while the development of a national policy on PD for SNAs would greatly benefit all pupils accessing this support.

### *6.4.2 Professional learning*

There is no mandatory requirement for teachers in Irish schools, appointed to a position involving special education, to hold an SEN qualification, although a necessity exists for in-career professional development commensurate with their additional responsibilities (O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010). Irish legislation and guidelines categorically state that each teacher has responsibility for the education of all the children in their class, including those with SEN; therefore, all teachers require professional learning in SEN, since all classes have diverse learners. However, this has only recently become available at pre-service level, with mandatory SEN modules incorporating differentiation content being provided in ITEs, along with SEN placement settings for student teachers (Hick et al., 2018). Student teachers have indicated that they feel well prepared for inclusive teaching in terms of developing appropriate values and attitudes. However, they also feel relatively under-prepared in terms of confidence in their knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices in school contexts. This indicates a need for more focussed attention on these areas in the programme content (Hick et al., 2018).

Wide variations in the level of professional qualifications and expertise in SEN exist across the participating schools. There are online options for PD in SEN, and short courses are provided by PDST, NCSE, and the Education Centre network; nonetheless, accredited, face-to-face PD opportunities in SEN are rare in the area where this study took place – a reason proffered by participants for the low number of SETs with professional SEN qualifications.

This finding, while important, is a concern that can be addressed at policy level only. This study's identification of existing structures and processes to facilitate professional learning related to SEN – including the sharing of experience, knowledge, and expertise in schools – is important, given the identified gaps in access to meaningful professional learning on

inclusion and SEN (Crockett, 2000; O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010; Travers et al., 2010; Ware et al., 2011), the absence of mandatory professional learning for existing teachers, and the importance of collaborative practice for addressing the needs of students with SEN (Hargreaves, 2019; Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004). Evidence emerges of creative PD initiatives (O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010) engaged in by SETs to expand their own and their colleagues' knowledge and competence. Mentoring and induction (Uí Chonduibh, 2017) using collaborative approaches such as coaching (Walsh, 2012), networking, and collegial discussion (O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010) are demonstrated, as well as sharing professional expertise and experience (Travers et al., 2010) that are available within the staff. This adds to our knowledge of how SETs support their less-experienced colleagues by sharing knowledge.

Schools are potential communities of practice for teachers, where opportunities exist for collaboration with colleagues and where interpreting information and making meaning can result in the mediation of new knowledge in the community (Fraser et al., 2007). Socially mediated learning occurs with other people perceived to be knowledgeable, for example facilitators or more experienced colleagues, such as some of the SETs in this study, who hold professional capital because of their experience, expertise, and qualifications (Hargreaves, 2019). In order to nurture and develop these forms of in-school collaboration, it is vital not only that support is forthcoming from colleagues, but also that leadership is demonstrated by school management, particularly principals, to encourage teachers to be open to question their practices and indeed the assumptions behind these practices.

The school and classroom provide rich environments for teachers to enact emerging learning in their own context (Reeves & Forde, 2004). Engagement with new learning may be prompted by a PD intervention, or by organisational restructuring – as is inevitable for the participating schools in implementing the revised model of provision (DES, 2017) – or

it may arise more ‘naturally’ as in the internal generation and sponsorship of a new idea between colleagues. In any case, the presence of leaders who are committed to inclusive values, who facilitate collective problem-solving, and who encourage a high level of staff collaboration (Ainscow, 2014) is essential for new ideas and practices to take root.

Successful embedding of new practices also requires attention to three important social aspects that support teacher learning: personal, where teachers’ beliefs, values, attitudes, and motivation are important considerations; social, through the nurturing of relationships between individuals and groups and the provision of supportive contexts that allow enactment and risk-taking; and occupational, through the strengthening of links between theory and practice and the guarantee of professional relevance to participants (Fraser et al., 2007). The process involving collaborative action research can contribute to sustainable development in education systems (Ainscow et al., 2004).

A number of peer coaching and mentoring approaches (Fraser et al., 2007) that would support the process of applying new knowledge and practice are advocated by Ainscow et al. (2004), including mutual observation of classroom practices, followed by structured discussion of what happened; group discussion of a video recording of one colleague teaching; and school-to-school cooperation, including mutual visits to observe good practice or to gather evidence. Analysis of the impact of new professional classroom practice would be assisted by collaborative inquiry (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018) of statistical evidence on observations, test results, attendance registers, or exclusion records; data from the analysis of interviews with pupils; staff development exercises based on case study material or interview data; and dialogue on changes or adaptations in the curriculum (Ainscow et al., 2004). These approaches, which are reflective of communities of practice and collaborative inquiry, have been shown in research to be more transformative than

others, such as award-bearing models (Kennedy, 2005), and therefore more beneficial to the collective efficacy (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) of the whole SEN team.

Findings indicate that collaboration approaches adopted during team teaching provide an opportunity for mentoring of more inexperienced colleagues (Uí Chonduibh, 2017), improving their knowledge and understanding of effective SEN strategies. In-class models of provision support the induction of NQTs and newly appointed SETs (Uí Chonduibh, 2017), through the collaborative planning and joint work (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) involved when engaging the planning, teaching, and review of co-teaching lessons. This approach requires strong commitment to in-class models of support on behalf of all teachers concerned, which may be lacking, since schools are still in a transition phase between withdrawal and in-class models of provision (Rose & Shevlin, 2019). Insufficient time for planning (Abbott, 2007; Casserly & Padden, 2017; Takala et al., 2009) and a lack of mentoring skills can also provide challenges. System-wide support, by way of more specific policy direction to schools in addressing these challenges, is vital in order to improve professional practice. Collective initiative (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) by school staffs in the provision of time for collaborative planning, and the organisation of PD in mentoring skills locally by principals, or nationally by established PD providers, would also contribute to improving practice.

Engagement by SETs in cluster group meetings organised and facilitated by NEPS psychologists supports the PD of SEN teams, showing collaborative inquiry (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). This example of school-to-school collaboration, while limited, strengthens teachers' capacity to address challenging circumstances (Ainscow et al., 2006) and has strong potential to increase teachers' confidence when making judgements about the allocation of additional resources to facilitate learning (Rix et al., 2013). Developing this initiative into a supportive forum facilitating collaborative inquiry by SETs

(Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) can help schools to improve professional practice by resolving immediate problems (Ainscow et al., 2006), and has been found to improve areas such as pupil attainment, teacher motivation, and leadership capacity (Muijs, 2008).

Social learning is an essential feature of the processes involved, since collaboration can increase pupil achievement and reduce teacher conservatism towards change (Hargreaves, 2019). This starts from an assumption that schools have knowledge, expertise, and creativity, but further development requires more effective use of these in given contexts (Ainscow, 1999). For this to occur, collaboration has to be led, facilitated, and supported, over time, so that partnerships can grow and mature by building trust and relationships (Muijs, 2008), as representatives of diverse learning communities learn how to learn from one another. A feature of such maturity is that colleagues are able to disagree without falling out, since disagreement stimulates mutual challenge, genuine reflection, and a willingness to explore new possibilities for moving practice forward. In the absence of such conditions, collaboration tends to take on the features of 'groupthink', where existing beliefs encourage participants to collude with one another rather than create conflict (Ainscow et al., 2004).

Participating in school-to-school collaboration as a strategy for development, as demonstrated by school engagement in local NEPS cluster groups, helps improve outcomes for schools when experiencing specific challenges, such as implementing the revised model of provision. This is possible since members of the community of practice thus formed are mutually engaged in a common enterprise as they build up a shared repertoire of communal resources and have a social dimension (Fraser et al., 2007). Evidence of the sharing of resources, the development of new responses to challenges, and the offering of mutual support show teachers working together to solve problems. Critical dialogue with teachers in partner schools about assumptions that underpin aspirations and

actions can be addressed by teachers challenging each other's thinking and practices while collaborating to develop strategies for supporting vulnerable students. Cross-school subject or thematic groups can engage in the collaborative development and widening of curricula opportunities (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) to take account of learner diversity.

Factors identified as essential for successful school-to-school collaboration include consideration of contextual factors, which needs to be supportive to allow enactment and risk-taking (Fraser et al., 2007), as well as strong motivation and belief in the value of working together as a means to extend PD to improve the quality of education provided to pupils. Additional factors include positive attitudes and relationships, with an understanding that trust and openness already exist in each school – qualities that are then taken into partnerships created with other schools. It is essential to establish appropriate organisational arrangements and agreed principles, including structures and roles to facilitate accountability and effective communication, upon which specific partnerships are based. Such collaborative action would benefit from a strong commitment by management and leadership to shared accountability and learning to work together, in order to learn from difference, to use evidence to promote change, and to identify areas that require review (Ainscow et al., 2004). These local clusters of SETs, if supported by the nationwide Education Centre network, have the potential to develop and to provide a regular forum for collaborative inquiry, mutual dialogue (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2013), and most importantly, professional learning to improve practice.

Evidence of the development of relationships between schools and health professionals such as NEPS psychologists, OTs, and SLTs is positive; nonetheless, it is clear that minimal collaborative practice (Glover et al., 2015) is occurring. Inter-professional groups (Glover et al., 2015) facilitating collaborative inquiry and mutual dialogue (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) would be of benefit and allow mutual professional learning to occur.

These models of PD, which foster teacher self-efficacy through critical collaboration (Fraser et al., 2007), support teachers in reconstructing their own knowledge and therefore are more likely than transmissive approaches to lead to transformative change (Fraser et al., 2007). As examples of collaborative professionalism, these approaches to PD are rooted in inquiry, responsive to feedback, and willing to engage in argument, ultimately leading to educational innovation and improvement (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

### *6.4.3 Teacher autonomy*

The increased individual and collective teacher autonomy in the Irish education system, given to schools in conjunction with the implementation of the new model of SEN provision, carries obligations regarding the organisation of school schedules to facilitate planning, consultation, and decision-making opportunities for all those concerned with SEN matters. It also requires principals and SETs to lead the process of developing school policies that acknowledge and support all aspects of SEN provision given the particular context of the school. Collaborative autonomy (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) is evident in schools, with SETs having the opportunity to work with principals in decision-making on curriculum, instruction, and scheduling (Willner, 1990).

All schools in this study have policies on SEN provision, covering such areas as testing, SEN team allocation, timetabling, resource management, and the organisation of staged provision. The data indicates that school context influences the level of autonomy that SETs retain in the drafting, implementation, and review of these policies. Those in the larger schools have significantly more responsibility, undertaking this task in collaboration with the other post-holders, in a process of mutual dialogue and common purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), while those in smaller schools and in shared SET roles have less autonomy, since the principal retains responsibility for policy review and

updating. However, all staff are engaged in discussions on this process, demonstrating some opportunities for the enactment of collective teacher autonomy.

This study provides important insights into the lack of confidence experienced by principals and SETs in embracing the autonomy afforded to them when making meaning of SEN policy and practice. While participants welcome this increased autonomy, findings indicate that the additional responsibility will require specific PD opportunities for principals and SEN teams (O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010), since the building of professional capacity in schools (Byrne, 2017) has the potential to boost teacher confidence and ensure that principals and SEN teams are well placed to make judgements on resource allocation that will adequately respond to pupils' needs (Rose, 2017).

A collaborative process demonstrating collective initiative, involving principals, SETs, and class teachers, is evident in the procedures and structures existing in schools for the identification and selection of pupils for support. This will require collective inquiry and common purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) going forward, in light of the implementation of the revised model of provision. These recent significant changes in SEN provision have been introduced through top-down policy changes, with schools required to reflect these changes in their SEN policies, planning, and practice, facilitating teachers' professional judgement to be taken into account in the deployment of resources (Byrne, 2017). Principals and SETs are presented with an opportunity to embrace collective autonomy and to confidently make judgements regarding resource provision (Rix et al., 2013), given the influence of their specific school context (Hudson, 1993) and level of pupil needs. Such processes based on collaborative inquiry and common purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) enable the development of school SEN policy towards creating more equitable and inclusive learning environments (Rose & Shevlin, 2019).

School decision-making on SEN provision must reflect collective responsibility (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) and be collaborative and inclusive of all stakeholders, particularly parents and the pupils themselves, in strategy design and implementation. In-school communities of practice and school-to-school networks, focussed on SEN matters, have the capacity to create opportunities for mutual dialogue and collective initiatives, while promoting collective as well as individual autonomy based on shared expertise (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), all contributing to improved professional practice.

## 6.5 Limitations of the Study

When interpreting the findings derived from this research, it must be acknowledged that a number of limitations apply and require consideration. The most significant limitation was in scale. The participants represented a small purposive sample and would not be fully reflective of all primary principals and SETs in Ireland. Findings therefore cannot be generalised to the population, but they are worthy of consideration, since the eight schools chosen as research sites represented a wide diversity of school types.

A further limitation pertains to the fact that parents, pupils, and class teachers were not interviewed in this research. While all are significant partners in decision-making when planning and implementing SEN provision, their absence means that significant perspectives on leadership in inclusive special education is lacking from this study. Although data was triangulated by using multiple sites and multiple data sources, the absence of student and parental voices in particular is a limitation of the study.

Qualitative research, the methodology employed in this study, has limitations, due to the subjectivity of respondents, their opinions, attitudes, and perspectives, which can contribute to bias (Cohen et al., 2011). While the study attempted to present participant views in ways that were truly reflective of those views (Bryman, 2008), qualitative

analysis very much depends on the words and perceptions of people's experience and therefore may not be objectively factual (Cohen et al., 2011). Triangulation of sources and member-checking through respondent validation of facts were employed to enhance the validity of the data.

The case study method adopted in this research also contributed to reducing the limitations inherent in qualitative research by facilitating theory development (Crowe et al., 2011) and enhancing the possibility of generalisability. The data collection, analysis, and findings were considered within the relevant theoretical framework of collaborative professionalism described by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018), which provided a helpful typology in identifying the collaborative approaches and strategies that enable SETs to undertake their role in leading and managing SEN provision. The use of a multiple case study approach facilitated the researcher to test this theory (Crowe et al., 2011) by investigating the existence of cultures of collaborative professionalism in a range of schools. Evidence of the existence of the ten tenets of collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) was found in a majority of cases, with at least some of the tenets existing at all sites, thereby strengthening the validity of this theory and developing a stronger argument for the benefits of collaborative professionalism in leading and managing SEN provision in schools.

Although my positionality in this study was outlined at the outset, my values, beliefs, and experiences have shaped my approach to the research and have influenced my interpretations of data. Since I am part of the world I was researching, I cannot be completely objective. Therefore, I have attempted to comply with ethical considerations and to be as honest as possible in the self-reporting of the research (Cohen et al., 2011). Since the quality of the study depends very much on the integrity of the research process, I have provided transparency in how the data was analysed. Nonetheless, interpretation of

data was informed by my professional experiences, which may be a limitation in the research.

## 6.6 Recommendations for Practice, Policy, and Future Research

The implications of the findings in this study for practice, policy, and future research are documented as follows:

### *6.6.1 Recommendations for practice*

- Given the additional autonomy and responsibilities bestowed on principals and SEN teams with the introduction of the revised model of SEN provision (Tiernan & Casserly, 2018), the creation of in-school communities of practice that would embrace the approaches set out in section 6.4.2 could facilitate reflection on practice and collaborative problem-solving, recognised as central to developing inclusive learning environments (Shevlin, Winter, & Flynn, 2012). There is a need to empower schools through the education of school staff and the development of collaborative contexts. Communities of practice allow SETs to inquire how to improve their practice together and take collective responsibility (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) for implementing what they have discovered (Hargreaves, 2019). It is recommended that schools consider developing voluntary, in-school models of collaboration, such as communities of practice with agreed roles and structures, to facilitate the smooth operation of the engagement and to foster effective communication in the group and to the wider school community.
- The creation, development, and nurturing of school-to-school SET network groups, adopting the collaborative approaches to problem-solving outlined in section 6.4.2, will encourage, engage, and empower teachers, will reduce conservatism towards change, and has the potential to increase pupil achievement (Hargreaves, 2019). The expansion and development of school network support groups where they already exist, and the establishment of new groups in other areas, is recommended,

with facilitation by experienced SETs in collaboration with the Education Centre network.

- The further expansion of the use of in-class models of SEN provision is recommended, with schools using the additional autonomy provided in the model of SEN provision (DES, 2017) to create time for collaborative inquiry and joint work when planning, implementing, and reviewing the teaching process. The planning and implementation of models of in-class support in addition to station teaching is recommended, so that a diverse range of approaches are readily available, given the specific context of the school and class.
- Increasing the availability of in-class models of SEN provision and reducing the withdrawal approach would reduce the possibility of pupil isolation and ensure access to and full coverage of curriculum for all pupils (Rose & Shevlin, 2019).
- Mentoring and induction of new and less-experienced colleagues, both class teachers and SETs, should be incorporated more fully through a collaborative process when planning, teaching, and reviewing the processes of in-class provision.
- Building more cooperative relationships between parents and SETs through regular planned engagement should be a priority. Designing, implementing, and reviewing of IEPs for pupils should be a fully inclusive and collaborative process, with parents and pupils engaged at a meaningful level throughout (King et al., 2018), facilitating greater learning and better outcomes (Flynn, 2013.
- When reviewing and developing school policy on special education, all members of the school board of management, teachers in the school, and support staff involved in the provision of support to pupils with SEN should be facilitated to contribute to the consultation and decision-making process.

### *6.6.2 Recommendations for policy*

- The promotion of communities of practice of SETs, as an effective collaborative strategy for in-school review, planning, and decision-making by the DES

Inspectorate and the NCSE Support Service, could facilitate school improvement while developing open, collaborative cultures. Research has found such models of PD to be more transformative than traditional transmission models (Kennedy, 2005).

- Establishing school-to-school network groups of SETs, again supported by the NCSE Support Service and the Education Centre network, in terms of venues and administration, would allow the sharing of expertise, experiences, and resources promoting the professional growth of teachers and improving outcomes for pupils.
- The establishment of collaborative inter-professional groups involving teachers and health professionals, including NEPS, engaging in joint PD and sharing expertise and skills through the creation and expansion of specific collaborative projects (Nugent, 2012) should be explored and a pilot group commenced.
- Given the need to develop teacher skills in SEN (O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010), the more widespread availability of courses leading to formal postgraduate qualifications in SEN for those appointed to SEN roles would significantly increase SETs' confidence and competence. Increasing SETs' professional capital in this manner would enhance their role as leaders of SEN provision and increase the availability of expertise and skill in the SEN team, thereby making the in-school community of practice more effective.
- The provision of specific PD accessible for all teachers in the areas of assessment, with a particular focus on assessment for learning, is required in order to better inform teachers' planning. Opportunities for SETs to access PD on in-class models of provision, target-setting, differentiation, and monitoring of pupil progress (Byrne, 2017) could improve the competence and confidence of SETs and class teachers when planning, implementing, and reviewing programmes of work for pupils needing additional support.
- While the provision of compulsory modules in SEN at pre-service level by ITEs is welcome, more focussed attention is needed on the areas of knowledge and skills to

implement inclusive practices in school contexts (Hick et al., 2018) in the programme content. This would lessen the requirement for intense mentoring of NQTs by SETs in regard to SEN provision.

- Greater clarity is required in policy regarding the role of SNAs in schools and their PD needs (Kerins et al., 2018). Any review of their responsibilities and duties should involve consultation with themselves most importantly, and also with principals, SETs, class teachers, parents, and pupils, in order to achieve a realistic reflection of the most effective way they can support pupils.
- Policy should direct that formal structures and templates are developed by NCCA and implemented in schools to facilitate the sharing of information on pupils transferring from pre-school to primary school, to allow adaptations to be made in schools and to ensure that pupils gain most from their school experiences (O'Kane, 2016).
- The innovative and creative practices employed by some schools in facilitating familiarisation with second-level schools for pupils with SEN during transition should be collated, documented, and shared by NCCA so that this good practice can be implemented by all schools.
- Given that SENOs are no longer required to process applications for additional teaching supports for pupils with SEN, they could be more available to advise and support schools on SEN provision, in line with the role outlined for them in the EPSEN Act 2004.
- The sections of the EPSEN Act 2004 relating to IEPs have yet to be commenced. However in this new era of the revised model of provision where support plans are replacing IEPs in the planning of programmes for pupils with SEN, the provision of a legislative framework for these plans should now be progressed, to ensure the inclusion of pupil voice in the collaborative process of drafting targets, identifying strategies, and selecting review processes.

- The appointment of a SEN coordinator in each school is recommended, with access to specific PD in the leadership of SEN, designated time for undertaking duties, and a formal role in the in-school management team to enhance the autonomy of the role. Consideration should be given to appointing shared coordinators between smaller schools, so that principals are supported through embracing shared leadership with the coordinator in the management of this vital area, while teachers and pupils have access to the expertise, knowledge, and skills of a leader focussed on their needs and aspirations.
- A more equitable system of providing capitation for pupils with SEN in mainstream schools is required, comparable to that provided to pupils with SEN in special schools and special classes. Additional funding accessed in this way could allow schools to provide more resources and services for pupils.

### *6.6.3 Recommendations for research*

- Given the limitations of this research in terms of the absence of parent and student voices from the data, further research with these two groups as data sources would be of benefit, particularly on their perceptions of the implementation of the revised model of provision.
- The views of class teachers on in-class approaches to supporting pupils with SEN would be beneficial in shaping policy, PD, and resource provision in this area. Pupils' views on this subject could also be explored in order to inform school policy, the planning of strategies, and the provision of resources.
- Research on teacher engagement with health services, including NEPS, OTs, and SLTs, could explore the levels of engagement, structures, and processes of communication and the opportunities for joint work, thereby informing policy, PD design, and collaborative processes.

## 6.7 Concluding Remarks

This study has provided an interesting insight into the policies and practices underpinning the provision of special education in Irish primary schools. It is strongly evident that our system is in a period of transition, and while tentative moves towards more inclusive approaches are evident, challenges for principals and SEN teams are also obvious. I began this research journey as an administrative principal of a 14-teacher school, a role that allowed me to engage with parents, teachers, SNAs, health services, and most importantly pupils with SEN on a daily basis. I had the privilege, in collaboration with the teachers, of leading the provision of SEN, of striving towards more inclusive approaches, and of liaising with all of the partners concerned in the planning, implementation, and review of strategies and practices to allow pupils to reach their potential. This engagement provided a solid grounding on which to base my research.

Shortly after embarking on this study, however, I was seconded to the role of director of an Education Centre, where my primary function is to facilitate the provision of national, regional, and local programmes of PD for primary and post-primary teachers. This role has provided me with a different perspective as a researcher. Although I no longer have regular access to pupils with SEN, I am privileged to be in a position to arrange PD to meet the identified needs of all teachers, including those working in the area of SEN. My study has allowed me to explore the most relevant and effective forms of PD provision, leading me to research the value of the professional learning community on teacher learning for inclusive practice. My analysis of the research findings reflects the literature that identifies collaborative professional inquiry as a potentially transformative model of PD. This reinforced my belief in the capacity of in-school and cross-school PLCs to positively impact on teacher professional learning for inclusive practice. In-school PLCs, in settings where cultures of shared leadership exist, provide opportunities for collaborative

investigation and decision-making on collective staff PD needs, while cross-school PLCs provide supportive environments conducive to exploratory discussion and the identification of the professional learning needs of those present, leading to professional autonomy in the choice of CPD to be accessed.

Following my research, I have had the opportunity to promote collaborative professional inquiry through facilitating teacher access to these transformative approaches to PD. Establishing and nurturing network support groups for SETs that have the capacity to promote the sharing of professional experiences, expertise, learning, and resources are ongoing in our region. In the absence of a national PD programme to facilitate the implementation of the new model of SEN provision in our schools, SETs need sustained support to meet the challenges outlined in the findings of this study and to fully embrace and implement the approaches advocated in this new system. Recommendations outlined in this chapter may assist principals and SETs to overcome at least some of their challenges by engaging in collaborative professionalism and implementing innovative practice that aims to ensure a truly inclusive school environment for all pupils. The practical experience I gained as a school principal, in developing a culture of shared leadership and embracing school autonomy in drafting school policy and long-term plans for SEN provision, has been enhanced by researching these themes and provides me with a broader knowledge and understanding of the theories which will be of benefit in the event of my assuming further leadership roles in school settings.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Interview Schedule – SET / SEN Coordinator

Information to be shared prior to commencing interviews

1. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview which will greatly facilitate my research.
2. I wish to inform you that while full anonymity cannot be guaranteed, I will act professionally and do everything in my power to protect the identity of participants, e.g. by not reporting data given by the participants which might render them identifiable. Data collected will be kept confidential, subject to legal limitations, and all notes and recordings will be kept secretly under lock and key or password protected and destroyed or deleted after two years.
3. Before proceeding, may I check that each of you have completed consent forms?
4. May I ensure that I have your permission to record the interview before we commence? Please be assured that you may ask me to cease recording at any time and withdraw from the interview.
5. The interview will be no longer than one hour in duration.
6. This interview seeks to hear your views on the provision of special needs education in mainstream primary schools. You have received a schedule of the questions already which will guide our discussion. I look forward to hearing your opinions on this subject. However, I do have some key areas that I hope we will cover, so I will check my prompts from time to time to make sure we address all areas.

1. Leadership

Training / Experience

1. How long have you been in the role of Special Needs Teacher?
    a. Do you have qualifications in Special Education?
    b. How has this assisted you in your current role?
    c. What areas do you feel you were ill-prepared for?
    d. Do you plan to undertake further training in the future, and in what areas?
    e. If no, do you plan to undertake training to gain a qualification in Special Needs in the future?
    f. If yes, where and when?
    g. If no, what are your reasons?

Coordinating Role

2. Does your role include responsibility for coordinating SEN provision?
    a. Is your role part of a Post of Responsibility or held in a voluntary capacity?

b. Do you have an agreed schedule of duties for your role as SEN Co-ordinator? Who was involved in drawing up this schedule?
c. Have you accessed any specific training which prepared you for your role as SEN Coordinator?
d. What level of experience of Special Needs Education did you have before taking on the role of SEN Coordinator?

Teaching Role

3. Do you have teaching duties?
   a. If yes, how much of your time in school is taken up with teaching?
   b. Do you feel you have enough allocated time to carry out these duties?
   c. If no, how do you think this challenge could be addressed?
   d. What other duties does your role entail?

Administrative duties regarding SEN.

4. a. Are you responsible for completing application forms for LITH, SNA support and other resources and for liaising with the SENO?
   b. What are the challenges in undertaking this process?
5. What level of support is available to assist you in your role?
   a. Do you have responsibility in regard to the management of budgets/finances for Special Education within the school and the provision of resources?
   b. How is access to/distribution of resources organised within the school?

Supporting and leading SEN team

6. Do you have responsibility for the deployment of the Special Needs team and allocation of classes/pupils to Special Needs teachers?
   a. If yes, what are your priorities in allocations?
   b. Are resource teachers allocated to pupils with LITH and learning support teachers to pupils with difficulties in the high-incidence categories only, or are all Special Needs teachers deployed as a team?
7. Do you meet with the full Special Needs Team?
   a. How often?
   b. Does the Principal or Deputy Principal attend?
   c. Who leads the meeting?
   d. Typically what matters are on the agenda for discussion?
8. Do you organise CPD or induction training for the Special Needs Team and/or the whole staff?

Communication with outside agencies.

9. a. What agencies/other professionals do you connect with in regard to Special Education provision?
   b. What are the challenges in dealing with professionals outside of the school?

2. Teaching & Learning

Models of support

10. Is provision based on a withdrawal system, in-class support or a mixture of both?
    a. If in-class support is provided, what structures exist in order to facilitate planning and review?
    b. What are the challenges in this process?
    c. What criteria are applied in deciding the type of support provided to pupils?

New Model of SEN provision

1. Are you aware of the proposals for the new system of Special Education provision contained in the document 'Delivery for Students with Special Educational Needs: A better and more equitable way'?
    a. If yes, how do you think the implementation of this new system will impact on your school?
    b. What do you perceive will be the benefits of this proposed new system?
    c. What challenges do you think will be encountered in its implementation?

Provision and implementation of IEPs

11. Does the school have a policy on the provision of IEPs to pupils?
    a. If yes, how are class teachers and Special Needs teachers facilitated to draw up IEPs?
    b. What is your role in the process?
    c. Who is consulted in the process of completing the document?
    d. Can you outline the process in the review of IEPs?
    e. What are the challenges in this process?
    f. What is your role in regard to liaising with parents?

Management of Support Staff

12. What are your duties in regard to SNAs?
    a. What strategies do you employ to induct SNAs and facilitate their upskilling?
    b. What are the challenges in managing SNAs?

Supporting Class Teachers

13. Are you involved in mentoring/induction of NQTs in regard to Special Education or differentiation?
    a. If yes, are structures in place in the school to facilitate this?
    b. What aspects of SEN provision does this support focus on?
    c. What are the challenges in this process?

Achievements/Vision

14. What have been your successes to date?

15. What do you view as the benefits, if any, to be gained from the implementation of the proposed new system of SEN provision?
16. What do you view as the challenges, if any, in the implementing of the proposed new system of SEN provision?
17. How would you like to see your role develop in the future?

3. Policy Development

Strategic Plan

18. Does your school have an overall policy/strategic plan for the management of Special Educational Needs provision?
    a. Were you involved in developing and/or reviewing that policy/plan?
    b. How often is the plan reviewed?
    c. What format/structures/process is involved in this review?
19. Do you advise the Board or the ISM team in regard to Special Needs Education, new developments, resources?
    a. Does the Board of Management provide a specific budget for Special Needs provision in the school?
    b. Do you feel you influence changes in Special Education provision in your school?

# Appendix B: Interview Schedule – Principals

Information to be shared prior to commencing interviews

7. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview which will greatly facilitate my research.
8. I wish to inform you that while full anonymity cannot be guaranteed, I will act professionally and do everything in my power to protect the identity of participants, e.g. by not reporting data given by the participants which might render them identifiable. Data collected will be kept confidential, subject to legal limitations, and all notes and recordings will be kept secretly under lock and key or password protected and destroyed or deleted after two years.
9. Before proceeding, may I check that each of you have completed consent forms?
10. May I ensure that I have your permission to record the interview before we commence? Please be assured that you may ask me to cease recording at any time and withdraw from the interview.
11. The interview will be no longer than one hour in duration.
12. This interview seeks to hear your views on the provision of special needs education in mainstream primary schools. You have received a schedule of the questions already which will guide our discussion. I look forward to hearing your opinions on this subject. However, I do have some key areas that I hope we will cover, so I will check my prompts from time to time to make sure we address all areas.

1. Leadership

Training / Experience

1. Do you have qualifications in Special Education?
   a. Did you have any experience of Special Education prior to Principalship?
   b. If yes, how has this training/experience prepared you for your role as Principal?
   c. If no, what areas in Special Needs provision do you find most challenging?

Coordinator's Role

2. Is any support teacher in your school in a Post of Responsibility for SEN provision or undertaking that role in a voluntary capacity?
   a. Do you have an agreed schedule of duties for the person acting as SEN coordinator? How were these devised?
   b. Does the SEN coordinator have teaching duties?
   c. If yes, what proportion of their time in school is taken up with teaching?
   d. What other duties does their role entail?
   e. Is there sufficient allocated time to carry out these duties?
   f. If no, how do you think this challenge could be addressed?

Administrative duties regarding SEN

3. Does the SEN coordinator take responsibility for completing application forms for LITH, SNA support and other resources and for liaising with the SENO?
    a. What are the challenges for him/her in undertaking this process?
4. What supports exist to assist the SEN coordinator to fulfil his/her duties?
    a. Does the Board of Management provide a specific budget for Special Needs provision in the school?
    b. What level of responsibility does the support teacher acting as coordinator have in regard to the management of budgets/finances for Special Education within the school and the provision of resources?
    c. Does the coordinator have responsibility for access to / distribution of Special Needs resources within the school?

Supporting and leading SEN team

5. Does the SEN coordinator share responsibility with you for the deployment of the Special Needs team and allocation of classes/pupils to Special Needs teachers?
    a. If yes, what are your priorities in allocations?
    b. Are resource teachers allocated to pupils with LITH and learning support teachers to pupils with difficulties in the high-incidence categories only, or are all Special Needs teachers deployed as a team?
6. Do you have scheduled meetings with the SEN coordinator?
    a. What matters are discussed?
    b. Do you meet with the full Special Needs Team? How often?
    c. Who leads the meeting?
    d. Typically what matters are on the agenda for discussion?

Liaising with External Agencies

7. What agencies/other professionals do you connect with in regard to Special Education provision?
    a. What is the level of responsibility of the SEN coordinator or support teacher in liaising with professionals outside of the school?
    b. How is this consultation facilitated?

2. Teaching and Learning

Models of support

8. Is provision based on a withdrawal system, in-class support or a mixture of both?
    a. If in-class support is provided, what structures exist in order to facilitate planning and review?
    b. What criteria are applied in deciding the type of support provided to pupils?

New Model of SEN provision

2. Are you aware of the proposals for the new system of Special Education provision contained in the document 'Delivery for Students with Special Educational Needs: A better and more equitable way'?
    a. If yes, how do you think the implementation of this new system will impact on your school?
    b. What do you perceive will be the benefits of this proposed new system?
    c. What challenges do you think will be encountered in its implementation?

Provision & Implementation of IEPs

9. Does the school have a policy on the provision of IEPs for pupils?
    a. If yes, how are class teachers and Special Needs teachers facilitated to draw up IEPs?
    b. What is your role in the process?
    c. Who is consulted in the process of completing the document?
    d. How often are IEPs reviewed?
    e. What are the challenges in this process?
    f. Do you schedule meetings with parents of pupils with special education needs?
    g. Does the SEN coordinator and/or support teachers attend these meetings?

Supporting Class Teachers

10. Does the SEN coordinator /support teacher have responsibilities in mentoring / induction of NQTs in regard to Special Education or differentiation?
    a. How is this facilitated?
    b. Are there challenges in facilitating this process?
11. Does the SEN coordinator / support teacher organise CPD or induction training for the Special Needs Team and/or the whole staff?

Management of Support Staff

12. What are their duties in regard to SNAs?
    a. How does the SEN coordinator / support teacher facilitate the induction of SNAs and their upskilling?
    b. What are the challenges for the SEN coordinator / support teacher in managing SNAs?

Future Developments

13. How would you like to see the role develop in the future?
14. What do you view as the benefits, if any, to be gained from the implementation of the proposed new system of SEN provision?
15. What do you view as the challenges, if any, in implementing the proposed new system of SEN provision?

3. Policy Development

Strategic Plan

16. Does your school have an overall policy / strategic plan for the management of Special Educational Needs provision?
    a. If yes, what is the SEN coordinator's role in regard to policy development / review?
    b. Who was involved in developing and/or reviewing that policy/plan?
    c. How often is the plan reviewed?
    d. What format/structures/process is involved in this review?
17. Do you, the Board of Management or the ISM team seek advice from the SEN coordinator in regard to Special Needs Education, new developments, resources?

## Appendix C: Focus Group Interview Schedule – SET / Support Teacher

Coordinating Role

1. Does your role include responsibility for coordinating SEN provision?
2. What duties are attached to your role?
    a. Administrative
    b. Teaching and learning
    c. Strategic planning/policy development
3. Can you tell me a little about this role?
    a. What is the agreed schedule of duties as SEN Coordinator ? How were these devised?
    b. Do you have teaching duties?
4. Have you accessed any training which prepared you for this role?

Teaching Role

5. Do you have teaching duties?
6. What proportion of your time is spent teaching?
7. What are the challenges in balancing the two roles?

Administrative duties regarding SEN

8. a. What administrative duties are you responsible for regarding SEN?
   b. What are the challenges in fulfilling these duties?

9. What supports are provided to assist you in carrying out your duties?
   a. Do you have responsibility for school budgets for SEN resources, equipment?
   b. How are decisions regarding purchasing and use of resources arrived at?

Supporting and leading SEN team

10. How is the SEN team deployed within the school?
11. Does the SEN team meet in the school, and if yes, how often?
12. How are these meetings facilitated?
13. Do you have a role in organising CPD for SEN and/or class teachers?

Communication with outside agencies

14. What is your role, if any, in liaising with outside agencies and other professionals?

Teaching & Learning

Models of support

15. What models of support exist – in-class or withdrawal?

16. What do you view as the benefits and challenges of both?

Provision and implementation of IEPs

17. Does your school formulate IEPs for pupils with SEN?
18. How is this process facilitated?
19. Are parents invited to be part of this process?
20. How is this facilitated?
21. How often are these reviewed?

Management of Support Staff

22. Do you have a role in regard to the management and deployment of SNAs?
23. Do you have a role in the induction and training of SNAs?
    a. How does this operate in practice?

Supporting Class Teachers

24. Do you have a role in supporting NQTs and/or class teachers in regard to Special Education?
    a. What aspects of SEN does this support generally focus on?
    b. How is this facilitated in the school?

## Policy Development

Strategic Plan

25. Does the school have an overall policy on SEN?
26. What aspects of SEN provision are included in this?
27. What systems exist to review this policy?
28. Who is involved in the review?

## Appendix D: Focus Group Interview Schedule – Principals

Training/Experience

1. Do you have additional qualifications/experience in Special Education?
2. If yes, how has this training/experience prepared you for your role as Principal?

Strategic Plan / Policy

3. Does your school have an overall policy / strategic plan for the management of Special Educational Needs provision?

Role of Support Teacher

4. Is any support teacher in your school in a Post of Responsibility for SEN provision or undertaking that role in a voluntary capacity?
5. Do you have an agreed schedule of duties for the person acting as SEN coordinator? How were these devised?
6. Does the SEN coordinator have teaching duties?

Administrative Aspect of Role.

7. Does the SEN coordinator take responsibility for completing application forms for LITH, SNA support and other resources and for liaising with the SENO?
8. What are the challenges for him/her in undertaking this process?
9. Does the Board of Management provide a specific budget for Special Needs provision in the school?
10. Does the coordinator have responsibility for access to / distribution of Special Needs resources within the school?

Leading the Special Needs Team

11. Does the SEN coordinator share responsibility with you for the deployment of the Special Needs team and allocation of classes/pupils to Special Needs teachers?
12. If yes, what are your priorities in allocations?
13. Are resource teachers allocated to pupils with LITH and learning support teachers to pupils with difficulties in the high-incidence categories only, or are all Special Needs teachers deployed as a team?
14. Do you have scheduled meetings with the SEN coordinator?
15. What matters are discussed?
16. Do you meet with the full Special Needs Team? How often?
17. Who leads the meeting?
18. Typically what matters are on the agenda for discussion?

Models of Provision

19. Is provision based on a withdrawal system, in-class support or a mixture of both?

20. How is this approach organised?

Formulation of IEPs

21. Does the school have a policy on the provision of IEPs for pupils?
22. If yes, how are class teachers and Special Needs teachers facilitated to draw up IEPs?
23. What is your role in the process?
24. Who is consulted in the process of completing the document?
25. How often are IEPs reviewed?
26. Do you schedule meetings with parents of pupils with special education needs?
27. Does the SEN coordinator and/or support teachers attend these meetings?

Liaising with External Agencies

28. What agencies/other professionals do you connect with in regard to Special Education provision?
29. What is the level of responsibility of the SEN coordinator or support teacher in liaising with professionals outside of the school?

Supporting School Staff

30. Does the SEN coordinator /support teacher have responsibilities in mentoring / induction of NQTs in regard to Special Education or differentiation?
31. Does the SEN coordinator / support teacher organise CPD or induction training for the Special Needs Team and/or the whole staff?

Management of Support Staff

32. What are their duties in regard to SNAs?
33. How does the SEN coordinator / support teacher facilitate the induction of SNAs and their upskilling?
34. How would you like to see the role develop in the future?

## Appendix E: Plain Language Statement – SET/ Support Teacher

March 9th 2017

'How can support teachers contribute to the leadership and management of Special Education Needs provision in mainstream schools?'

Dear Participant,

As part of my studies on the Doctorate in Education (EdD) in Dublin City University, Institute of Education, I am required to complete a thesis in which I will investigate a particular aspect of special and inclusive education. I have constructed a research question which I would like to investigate, as follows:
'How can support teachers contribute to the leadership and management of Special Education Needs provision in mainstream schools?'

The purpose of the study is to investigate how support teachers can contribute to the leadership and management of Special Education Needs provision in mainstream schools. The aim is to evaluate how effectively those in this role of SEN teacher contribute to the overall leadership and management of special needs education provision within the school. The research aims to document the work they do, particularly tasks and responsibilities devolved to them, the factors that facilitate the fulfilling of those responsibilities and the barriers that prevent them from doing so. The study will investigate the extent to which they provide leadership through the initiation of innovative change, the development of the school SEN team and the monitoring of improvement in the area of special needs education provision in the school, thereby supporting the Principal and removing part of their administrative burden. The key areas of focus for investigation include contribution to school management and leadership, to strategic direction and development and their role in teaching and learning.

I would like to invite you to participate in this study. This will involve participating in a focus group discussion with six to seven other SEN teachers, followed by a one-to-one interview within a three week period, both of which will be audio recorded. Each interview will last about one hour. I propose to provide you with a list of the questions to be addressed prior to the interview.

I also invite you to maintain a reflexive journal for a period of approximately one month documenting your tasks, interactions and reflections throughout each day. It is envisaged that this will follow the individual interviews.

Before commencing the study I need your written permission to indicate your willingness to participate. I want you to know that participation is voluntary and that you may withdraw from the exercise at any time without giving any reason for the decision to withdraw. I can offer you an oral or written summary of my analysis of the findings on completion of the thesis.

In keeping with DCU ethical procedures, I will take all necessary precautions to ensure that your confidentiality is respected. In reporting my work, I will use a pseudonym for

you and the school. No personal details, no details of the school and no identifying features will be recorded in my written account of the findings or in my completed assignment. However, given that the case study is concentrated in a small number of schools, I wish to inform you that full anonymity cannot be guaranteed. I will act professionally and do everything in my power to protect the identity of participants, e.g. by not reporting data given by the participants which might render them identifiable. Data collected will be kept confidential, subject to legal limitations, and all notes and recordings will be kept secretly under lock and key or password protected and destroyed or deleted after two years.

The research proposed here regarding the benefits, effectiveness and challenges within the systems of SEN provision, including the role of those SEN teachers who coordinate special education at school level, would provide data to assist policy makers in determining structures to be established within the proposed new system of SEN provision and to inform the practice for schools in terms of implementing this new policy. Decisions regarding the establishment of guidelines, procedures and practices to be followed by those involved in providing special education would also be informed by such research.

I would be very grateful if you would agree to assist me in my studies and facilitate me by participating in the study. Should you have any questions about this study, please do not hesitate to ask me.

*Signature*_____

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person,

please contact:

Dr Anna Logan,

Research Ethics Convenor,

School of Inclusive and Special Education,

DCU Institute of Education,

St Patrick's Campus,

Drumcondra,

Dublin 9.

Tel +353-(0)1-884 2248

anna.logan@dcu.ie

# Appendix F: Plain Language Statement – Principal

March 9th 2017

For the participants (Principal):

'How can support teachers contribute to the leadership and management of Special Education Needs provision in mainstream schools?

Dear Participant,

As part of my studies on the Doctorate in Education (Ed D) in Dublin City University, Institute of Education, I am required to complete a thesis in which I will investigate a particular aspect of special and inclusive education. I have constructed a research question which I would like to investigate, as follows:
'How can support teachers contribute to the leadership and management of Special Education Needs provision in mainstream schools?'

The purpose of the study is to investigate how support teachers can contribute to the leadership and management of Special Education Needs provision in mainstream schools. The aim is to evaluate how effectively those in this role of SEN teacher contribute to the overall leadership and management of special needs education provision within the school. The research aims to document the work they do, particularly tasks and responsibilities devolved to them, the factors that facilitate the fulfilling of those responsibilities and the barriers that prevent them from doing so. The study will investigate the extent to which they provide leadership through the initiation of innovative change, the development of the school SEN team and the monitoring of improvement in the area of special needs education provision in the school, thereby supporting the Principal and removing part of their administrative burden. The key areas of focus for investigation include contribution to school management and leadership, to strategic direction and development and their role in teaching and learning

I would like to invite you to participate in this study. This will involve participating in a focus group discussion with six to seven other Principals, followed by a one-to-one interview within a three week period, both of which will be audio recorded. Each interview will last about one hour. I propose to provide you with a list of the questions to be addressed prior to the interviews.

Before commencing the study I need your written permission to indicate your willingness to participate. I want you to know that participation is voluntary and that you may withdraw from the exercise at any time without giving any reason for the decision to withdraw. I can offer you an oral or written summary of my analysis of the findings on completion of the thesis.

In keeping with DCU ethical procedures, I will take all necessary precautions to ensure that your confidentiality is respected. In reporting my work, I will use a pseudonym for you and the school. No personal details, no details of the school and no identifying features will be recorded in my written account of the findings or in my completed assignment.

However, given that the case study is concentrated in a small number of schools, I wish to inform you that full anonymity cannot be guaranteed. I will act professionally and do everything in my power to protect the identity of participants, e.g. by not reporting data given by the participants which might render them identifiable. Data collected will be kept confidential, subject to legal limitations, and all notes and recordings will be kept secretly under lock and key or password protected and destroyed or deleted after two years.

The research proposed here regarding the benefits, effectiveness and challenges within the systems of SEN provision, including the role of those SEN teachers who coordinate special education at school level, would provide data to assist policy makers in determining structures to be established within the proposed new system of SEN provision and to inform the practice for schools in terms of implementing this new policy. Decisions regarding the establishment of guidelines, procedures and practices to be followed by those involved in providing special education would also be informed by such research.

I would be very grateful if you would agree to assist me in my studies and facilitate me by participating in the study. Should you have any questions about this study, please do not hesitate to ask me.

*Signature*_____

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

Dr Anna Logan,

Research Ethics Convenor,

School of Inclusive and Special Education,

DCU Institute of Education,

St Patrick's Campus,

Drumcondra,

Dublin 9.

Tel +353-(0)1-884 2248

anna.logan@dcu.ie

## Appendix G: Consent Form for SETs / Support Teachers

DCU Institute of Education, St Patrick's Campus

Informed Consent Form: Special Education Teachers

Dear Participant,

Please complete the form below in order to give your informed consent for participation in this research as outlined in the attached letter. Please return to me by 16/3/17 in the enclosed stamped envelope.

**I.** Research Study Title: 'How can support teachers contribute to the leadership and management of Special Education Needs provision in mainstream schools?'

**II.** Purpose of the Research: The study is an investigation into the provision of Special Needs education in Irish primary schools. The aim is to evaluate how effectively those in the Special Needs teaching role contribute to the overall leadership and management of Special Needs Education provision within the primary school.

**III.** Requirements of Participation in Research Study: This will involve participating in a focus group discussion with three other SEN teachers, followed by a one-to-one interview, both of which will be audio recorded. Each interview will last about one hour. I propose to provide you with a list of the questions to be addressed prior to the interviews. I also invite you to maintain a reflexive journal for a period of approximately one month documenting your tasks, interactions and reflections throughout each day. It is envisaged that this will follow the individual interviews.

**IV.** Confirmation that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary:

I am aware that if I agree to take part in this study, I can withdraw from participation at any stage. There will be no penalty for withdrawing before all stages of the Research Study have been completed.

Arrangements to protect confidentiality of data, including when raw data will be destroyed, noting that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations.

**VI.** Participant – Please complete the following (*or an appropriately phrased variation)*

(Circle Yes or No for each question).

| | |
|---|---|
| *Have you read or had read to you the Plain Language Statement?* | *Yes/No* |
| *Do you understand the information provided?* | *Yes/No* |
| *Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?* | *Yes/No* |
| *Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions?* | *Yes/No* |

**VII.** Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. The researchers have answered my questions and concerns, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

Participant's Signature:

Name in Block Capitals:

Witness:

Date:

# Appendix H: Consent Form for Principals

DCU Institute of Education, St Patrick's Campus

Informed Consent Form: Principals

Dear _____,

Please complete the form below in order to give your informed consent for participation in this research as outlined in the attached letter. Please return to me by xx/xx/xx in the enclosed stamped envelope.

**I.** Research Study Title: 'How can support teachers contribute to the leadership and management of Special Education Needs provision in mainstream schools?'

**II.** Purpose of the Research: The study is an investigation into the provision of Special Needs education in Irish primary schools. The aim is to evaluate how effectively those in the Special Needs teaching role contribute to the overall leadership and management of Special Needs Education provision within the primary school.

**III.** Requirements of Participation in Research Study: This will involve participating in a focus group discussion with six to seven other Principals, followed by a one-to-one interview, both of which will be audio recorded. Each interview will last about one hour. I propose to provide you with a list of the questions to be addressed prior to the interviews.

**IV.** Confirmation that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary

I am aware that if I agree to take part in this study, I can withdraw from participation at any stage. There will be no penalty for withdrawing before all stages of the Research Study have been completed.

**V.** Arrangements to protect confidentiality of data, including when raw data will be destroyed, noting that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations.

**VI.** Participant – Please complete the following (*or an appropriately phrased variation)* (Circle Yes or No for each question).

*Have you read or had read to you the Plain Language Statement?* *Yes/No*

*Do you understand the information provided?* *Yes/No*

*Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?* *Yes/No*

*Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions?* *Yes/No*

VII. Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. The researchers have answered my questions and concerns, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

Participant's Signature:

Name in Block Capitals:

Witness:

Date:

# Appendix I: Phase 2 – Generating Initial Codes (Open Coding)

| Phase 2 - Generating Initial Codes - 50 initial codes created and populated | Interviews Coded | Units of Meaning Coded | Codes | Interviews Coded | Units of Meaning Coded |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Admin duties of Principal | 10 | 27 | SNA role | 17 | 33 |
| Purchase of resources for SEN | 16 | 26 | Induction of SNAs | 10 | 12 |
| Record keeping and tracking of pupils with SEN | 3 | 8 | System for developing policy on SEN | 11 | 13 |
| Timetabling | 6 | 11 | Role of Board of Management regarding SEN | 10 | 14 |
| Workload of SEN coordinator | 11 | 17 | Identifying and selecting pupils requiring support | 5 | 5 |
| Standardised Testing | 9 | 22 | Planning for in-class support | 14 | 27 |
| Diagnostic testing | 6 | 10 | Existing systems and structures for in-class support | 16 | 44 |
| Transition to second level | 4 | 5 | Challenges in organising in-class support | 10 | 14 |
| Transition from pre-school to primary | 6 | 9 | Advantages of in-class support model of SEN provision | 16 | 40 |
| New model of SEN resource allocation | 4 | 5 | Training in SEN in the future | 6 | 7 |
| Liaising with Speech & Language Therapists | 6 | 9 | Training and expertise of SEN team | 18 | 50 |
| Liaising with Occupational Therapists | 2 | 4 | Mentoring of SEN team and NQTs | 17 | 33 |
| Liaising with NEPS | 19 | 42 | Deployment of the SEN team | 14 | 27 |
| Liaising the Special Ed Needs Organiser (SENO) | 7 | 11 | Coordinating provision of Special Education | 13 | 28 |
| Implementation of new system | 13 | 26 | Appointments to SEN team | 7 | 11 |
| Challenges for schools from implementing new model | 11 | 28 | Withdrawal of pupils | 13 | 22 |
| Advantages to schools of new model | 12 | 19 | Training in SEN for class teachers | 2 | 2 |
| Role of Parents Council | 6 | 6 | The role of class teachers in relation to pupils with SEN | 11 | 15 |
| Parental input into IEPs | 19 | 38 | Advantages of Inclusion of pupils with SEN | 5 | 7 |
| Communication with parents | 18 | 38 | Curriculum design and delivery for pupils with SEN. | 4 | 4 |
| Time for admin and planning | 21 | 56 | Mentoring and induction of NQTs | 5 | 7 |
| Recording and implementing of decisions made at meetings. | 10 | 15 | Managing Behaviour | 1 | 1 |
| Meetings for Planning | 24 | 66 | Principals' experience of SEN | 8 | 12 |
| Training and expertise of SNAs | 9 | 9 | Provision for pupils learning English as an additional language (EAL) | 5 | 7 |
| | | | Pastoral care role of SEN teachers | 3 | 5 |
| | | | Meaning of Inclusion | 5 | 10 |

# Appendix J: Phase 3 – Searching for Themes (Developing Categories)

| Phase 3 - Searching for Themes - 50 initial codes organised and collapsed into 14 categories of codes | Interviews Coded | Units of Meaning Coded |
|---|---|---|
| Admin | 20 | 76 |
| Low Value | 0 | 0 |
| Purchase of resources for SEN | 16 | 26 |
| Timetabling | 6 | 11 |
| Admin duties of Principal | 10 | 27 |
| Record keeping and tracking of pupils with SEN | 3 | 8 |
| Planning | 24 | 146 |
| Time for admin and planning | 21 | 56 |
| Meetings for Planning | 24 | 66 |
| Recording and implementing of decisions made at meetings | 10 | 15 |
| Admin duties of SEN coordinator | 19 | 54 |
| Workload of SEN coordinator | 11 | 17 |
| Team Teaching | 22 | 135 |
| Advantages of in-class support model of SEN provision | 16 | 40 |
| Challenges in organising in-class support | 10 | 14 |
| Planning for in-class support | 14 | 27 |
| Existing systems and structures for in-class support | 16 | 44 |
| The SEN team | 23 | 157 |
| Appointments to SEN team | 7 | 11 |
| Training and expertise of SEN team | 18 | 50 |
| Deployment of the SEN team | 14 | 27 |
| Mentoring of SEN team and NQTs | 17 | 33 |
| Coordinating provision of Special Education | 13 | 28 |
| Training in SEN in the future | 6 | 7 |
| Liaising with external agencies | 23 | 88 |
| Liaising with NEPS | 19 | 42 |
| Liaising with Speech & Language Therapists | 6 | 9 |
| Liaising the Special Ed Needs Organiser (SENO) | 7 | 11 |
| Liaising with Occupational Therapists | 2 | 4 |
| Enrolment of pupils | 9 | 22 |
| Transition to second level | 4 | 5 |
| Transition from pre-school to primary | 6 | 9 |
| Parental involvement in education of children with SEN | 21 | 101 |
| Parental input into IEPs | 19 | 38 |
| Role of Parents Council | 6 | 6 |
| Communication with parents | 18 | 38 |
| New model of SEN resource allocation | 18 | 78 |
| Advantages to schools of new model | 12 | 19 |
| Challenges for schools from implementing new model. | 11 | 28 |
| Implementation of new system | 13 | 26 |

| Phase 3 - Searching for Themes - 50 initial codes organised and collapsed into 14 categories of codes | Interviews Coded | Units of Meaning Coded |
|---|---|---|
| Role and management of SNAs | 19 | 56 |
| SNA role | 17 | 33 |
| Training and expertise of SNAs | 9 | 9 |
| Induction of SNAs | 10 | 12 |
| Individual Education Plans (IEPs) | 19 | 63 |
| Planning process for formulating IEPs | 17 | 51 |
| School policy on SEN | 17 | 41 |
| Role of Board of Management regarding SEN | 10 | 14 |
| System for developing policy on SEN | 11 | 13 |
| Identifying and selecting pupils requiring support | 5 | 5 |
| Assessment | 13 | 33 |
| Standardised Testing | 9 | 22 |
| Diagnostic testing | 6 | 10 |
| The role of class teachers in relation to pupils with SEN | 12 | 17 |
| Training in SEN for class teachers | 2 | 2 |

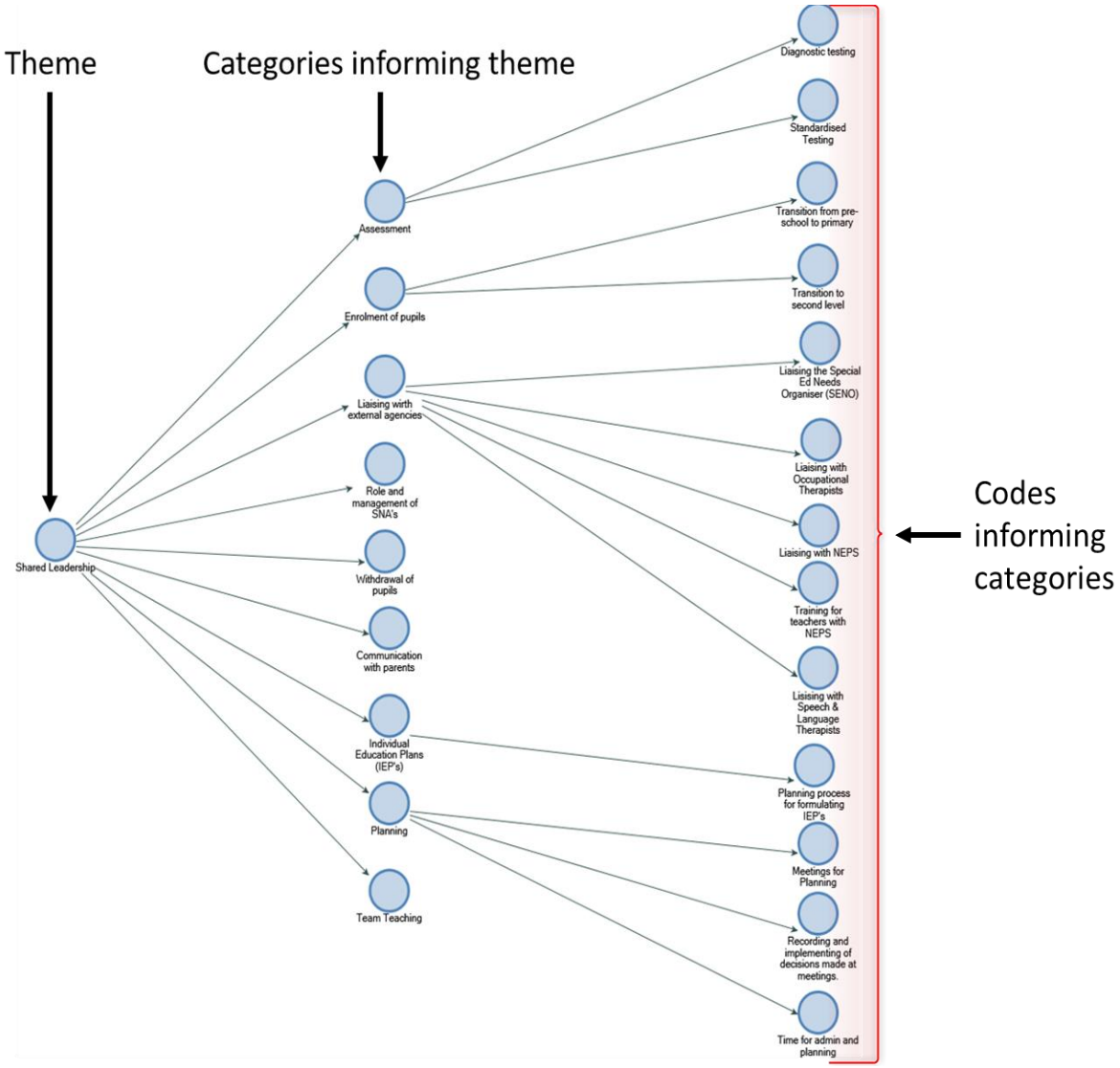
# Appendix K: Phase 4 – Reviewing Themes (Drilling Down)

| Phase 4 - Reviewing Themes - 14 categories mapped and collapsed to 5 broad themes | Interviews Coded | Units of Meaning Coded |
|---|---|---|
| Barriers to Fulfilling Role | 21 | 159 |
| Leading and Managing Change | 22 | 112 |
| Managing SEN Provision | 26 | 504 |
| Practices and Strategies | 25 | 364 |
| Specific Roles & Tasks | 25 | 191 |

# Appendix L: Phase 5 – Defining & Naming Themes (Data Reduction)

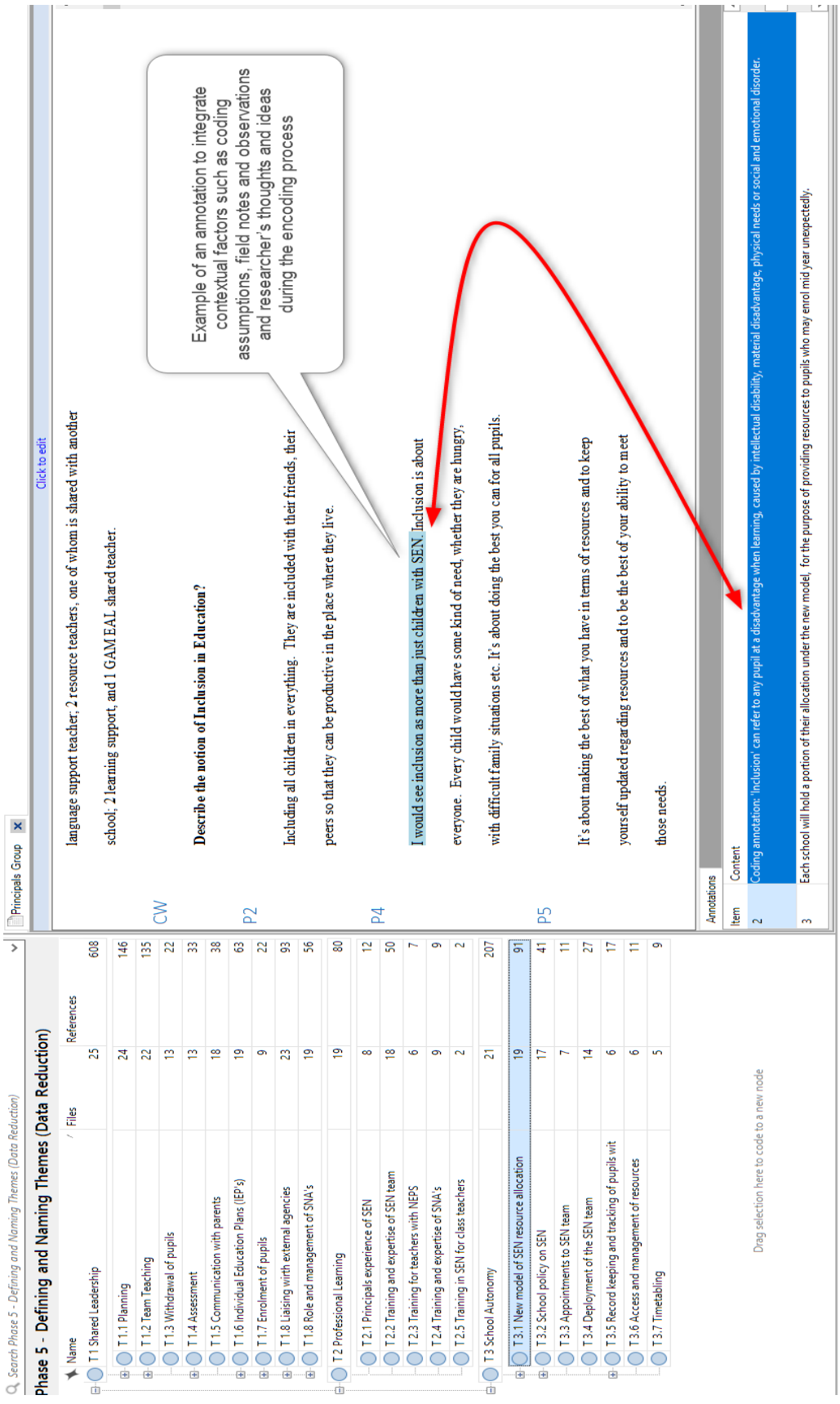
| Phase 5 - Defining and Naming Themes - 3 final themes identified with sub-themes | Interviews Coded | Units of Meaning Coded |
|---|---|---|
| T 1 Shared Leadership | 25 | 608 |
| T 1.1 Planning | 24 | 146 |
| T 1.2 Team Teaching | 22 | 135 |
| T 1.3 Withdrawal of pupils | 13 | 22 |
| T 1.4 Assessment | 13 | 33 |
| T 1.5 Communication with parents | 18 | 38 |
| T 1.6 Individual Education Plans (IEPs) | 19 | 63 |
| T 1.7 Enrolment of pupils | 9 | 22 |
| T 1.8 Liaising with external agencies | 23 | 93 |
| T 1.8 Role and management of SNAs | 19 | 56 |
| T 2 Professional Learning | 19 | 80 |
| T 2.4 Training and expertise of SNAs | 9 | 9 |
| T 2.5 Training in SEN for class teachers | 2 | 2 |
| T 2.1 Principals' experience of SEN | 8 | 12 |
| T 2.2 Training and expertise of SEN team | 18 | 50 |
| T 2.3 Training for teachers with NEPS | 6 | 7 |
| T 3 School Autonomy | 21 | 207 |
| T 3.1 New model of SEN resource allocation | 19 | 91 |
| T 3.2 School policy on SEN | 17 | 41 |
| T 3.4 Deployment of the SEN team | 14 | 27 |
| T 3.7 Timetabling | 5 | 9 |
| T 3.5 Record keeping and tracking of pupils with SEN | 6 | 17 |
| T 3.6 Access and management of resources | 6 | 11 |
| T 3.3 Appointments to SEN team | 7 | 11 |

## Appendix M: Example of flow from codes to categories to themes



# Appendix N: Example of the role of Analytical Memo

# Appendix O: Example of the role of Integrated Annotations



## Appendix P: Sample of Pages from SET Reflexive Diary

26-4-17

A class teacher asked advice on dyslexia today. Child does not have hours – so I cannot take her, I explained: We discussed teacher's concerns and what's she observing: Will be followed up. As be followed up. As I've no experience of teaching this child, I can't take her away and that we need to follow the steps. And then move forward. Will need to read up myself on dyslexia. (Did a course with Marie Stubbings years ago – I need to locate that folder.) Informed principal too of class teacher concerns – and advice given.

27-4-17

Guided reading session going really well: Children in the sessions really enjoy the sharing of books – and it helps me also to get to know the children that I have not taught. The benefits of the small group readings are great for confidence. It keeps me on my toes too.

3-5-17

Time and dates set for Drumcondra Reading / Maths tests: Teacher approached me for advice on EAL learners in her class and her fears/concerns about those children. I reassured her, and told her, those children will be fine. They will do their best: Sometimes I feel, that a child's lack of fluency in English panics teachers into thinking that the child has learning difficulty. But from my experience not just at primary level but from overseas teaching and my own experience in second language acquisition, children normally progress at their own rate or language development: no need to panic – as 90% EAL children do their best in these tests – usually doing better in maths, but not in English, yes they may not be getting 7/8's stens: but then Rome wasn't built in a day and lack of language fluency cannot be mistaken for learning difficulty.

4-5-17

Continue to reassure said teacher about EAL children in class and the Drumcondra Reading / Maths tests. Everyone will be fine. Teachers, as a profession, we put a lot of pressure on ourselves. Our expectations too have to be realistic.
Traveller child today – the motivation to learn is uplifting. Loves to read the little phonics books and enjoys praise.

9-5-17

Helped out this morning with splitting up a class – sometimes as the SEN Teacher, you forget the cut and trust of the classroom pace and routine in a.m. when children enter the room and getting them sorted. One of the drawbacks of the SEN role – is I miss the full buzz of the classroom and the lovely art work on the walls. Art is a subject – I love to teach. The work load and pace in SEN role is difficult too. It is "go-go" at a different pace and chopping and changing groups – moving into classrooms, back to own room and so on. There are the odd days, I miss the classroom routine and your own class of pupils, who

are your children for the school year: You share their ups and downs, the good and bad days: Ah, such is the way.

Drumcondra English Reading tests and completed this week. Some children who were absent will be tested when they return by myself or another member of SEN Team. It's difficult to have all children present, one of the frustrations for a class teacher. No matter how hard you try to ensure full attendance, there may always be one or two absent.