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An Exploratory Study examining the Inclusion of Children with Autism in Primary Schools in Ireland

A thesis written in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy (PhD.)

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DECLARATION

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Eva María García Albarrán,

SUMMARY

Children with Autism are frequently the recipients of separating practices and exclusion from regular schools. Despite the international and national agreements supported by research evidence concerning inclusive education, the gap between policy and practice is still a work in progress. Different aspects influence the inclusion of children with Autism at a macro, meso and micro level. Ultimately, the day to day at the school micro level (i.e., classroom, playground and support classroom) is what sharpens their journey. In addition, previous studies have pointed to the relevance of interactions to explore inclusion in the primary school years.

Interactions are the basic blocks of relationships, relevant for students' academic, social and emotional development in school. Therefore understanding what happens in the daily interactions between children with Autism and the other education actors can shed light on how to implement inclusive education, helping to reduce the gap between policy and practice. This small-scale, qualitative, multiple-embedded case study research explores the interactions between eight children with Autism and the relevant actors in three in-school settings through observations. The triangulation of participants and settings illuminates the similarities and differences in the interactions, making a contribution to knowledge of what enabled and inhibited the inclusion of children with Autism in schools.

The research findings reveal that the interconnection between interactions involving support towards participation appears as a strong facilitator for the inclusion of children with Autism in all in-school settings. The study outlines the essential role of interactions among all participants in facilitating or inhibiting the inclusion of the eight children with Autism in their schools. In particular, the findings emphasise the interactions between teachers and children with Autism as the bridge for further interactions. It highlights that for participation to be successful, it must be underpinned by appropriate support and embedded within the teaching plan and practice of the

classroom. It demonstrates that the participation of children with Autism with their classmates is key for further interactions and, thus, a successful inclusive education. It also reveals the essential role of the context bounding each in-school setting as a bridge to facilitate interactions and participation (e.g., children's position in the classroom).

This study goes deeper in providing a novel approach to the study of inclusion in practice using a close perspective of the interactions among the education actors while applying a systemic frame to the study by including three different school settings. With this novel approach, the thesis contribution to knowledge reveals first the implementation of a systemic approach to research at the school micro level (classroom, support classroom and playground), exploring inclusive education in practice in three in-school settings. Secondly, it acknowledges interactions, support and participation as three intertwined dimensions, which at the same time shed light on paths that enable and inhibit inclusion.

The findings have implications for research, policy and practice. It appeared that, for inclusive education to materialise in practice (i.e., to provide children with Autism with access, presence, participation, achievement and belonging to the school communities), they must be placed in the classroom with support to enable their participation alongside their peers. This support requires teachers to interact with children directly, at the same time that they put into practice strategies embedded within the classroom teaching and learning plan. In addition, it requires SNAs to be deployed collaboratively with the classroom and support teachers to facilitate the participation and learning of children with Autism in all activities alongside their peers. Furthermore, it requires understanding the important role of peers' interactions in the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools and their communities.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of the different actors in the inclusion 'project' and how interactions between the actors in different formats (dyadic or groups)

and settings (classroom, playground and support classroom) influence the performance and experience (or not) of inclusion.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APA	American Psychological Association
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
BOM	Board of Management
CA	Classroom Assistant
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools
DoH	Department of Health
DSM-5	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition
EASNIE	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act
HSE	Health Service Executive
ICD-11	International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 11th Revision
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IEP	Individual Education Plan
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NDA	National Disability Authority
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENO	Special Educational Needs Organiser
SERC	Special Education Review Committee Report
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
RT	Resource Teacher
RSERC	Report of the Special Education Review Committee
SNA	Special Needs Assistants

ST	Support Teacher
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
TEACCH	Treatment and education of autistic and related communication handicapped children
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNUDHR	United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UNCRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNCRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USA	United States of America
WHO	World Health Organization

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

The current research aimed to learn about the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools. Historically, children with disabilities and Autism have been excluded from regular schools and segregated from their communities. However, in the last forty years, policy and practice developments at international and national levels have enabled their access to regular schools alongside their peers. These developments have led to a niche area of inclusive education, supporting the growth and progress of inclusive education over the years. The agreements and legislation (i.e., international and national) that underpinned the inclusion of children with Autism and other disabilities in schools, were based on an equality philosophy, postulating that children with disabilities ought to enjoy equal access to and equal benefits from education. In addition, inclusive education aims to provide equal rights to education to all children, young and adults, regardless of their disability, origin, race, and religion. As a result of policy, practice and research developments in the last forty years, education was accepted as a human right to which all children were entitled, including those with disabilities, contesting the segregation of children with disabilities from regular schools (Azorín & Ainscow, 2020; Pijl et al., 1997; Slee, 2019).

Nevertheless, several debates and tensions around inclusion exist and are reflected in the academic literature, underpinning the need for more research in this area. At the core of the discussion, the key debate concerns the conceptualisation of inclusive education, the lack of agreement on the best settings for children with disabilities (i.e., regular vs special schools) and the consequences of these debates at a practical level. For example, some authors contend that these children are better in segregated schools (Goodall, 2018; Hornby, 2014a; Kauffman et al., 2017; Norwich et

al., 2017; Warnock, 2019), while other authors argue that education is a human right and isolating children with disabilities, including Autism, from their peers based on their difficulties, goes against this principle (Ainscow, 2020; Schuelka et al., 2020; Slee, 2019).

Consequently, for inclusive education to be successfully implemented, the emphasis in research should focus on identifying the best way to enable the inclusion of children with disabilities, including Autism, in regular schools (Ainscow, 2020; Schuelka et al., 2020; Slee, 2019). Therefore, the core for researchers is to move beyond the segregation versus inclusion debate into how inclusive education can not only ensure equal access to education (e.g., presence and participation) but equity in education, where children have the same rights to benefit from education, achieving their educational potential and belonging to their schools' communities (United Nations, 2006).

Nevertheless, the inclusion of children with Autism, as of today, is still a work in progress (UIS, 2018; UNESCO, 2017). Despite the research providing evidence on the suitability of inclusive education and the legislation concerning the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools, the gap between policy and practice is still evident, as it is shown in the number of children with Autism who are not placed full time with their peers in regular schools (UNESCO et al., 2015). In Ireland, for example, children with Autism are often placed in Autistic units within regular schools, separated from their peers, on the understanding that this is the best learning option for them due to their "difficulties". A thinking that points to a deficit-based approach to disability where persons with disabilities' individual difficulties are considered the cause of the problem. The individual approach contrasts with other approaches that take into consideration the environment, such as the social and bio-psychosocial model of disability adopted in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (García Iriarte & Gilligan, 2015).

However, for those placed in mainstream or regular classrooms, scarce evidence exists in relation to how inclusive education is implemented in practice, which resonates with the international literature (Florian et al., 2004). Rather than the exception, segregation in regular schools is common across a number of countries (UNESCO, 2015). For that reason, to successfully implement inclusive education, it is important to identify relevant factors acting as potential barriers for the inclusion of children with Autism (i.e., the environment and the participants). Therefore, exploring the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools can provide information on the barriers and facilitators of their inclusion.

Understanding how inclusion happens in schools requires attention to the day to day of children with Autism at the school micro-level. In particular to their daily interactions since these set the foundations of the different relationships between students and between students and educators (Rudasill, 2011; Wentzel, 2009). Previous studies have confirmed that interactions between students and educators are essential and involve interpersonal connections and instructional and contextual interactions (Pennings et al., 2014, 2018; Pennings & Hollenstein, 2020). Moreover, positive relationships with teachers and peers support the academic, social and emotional development of students, outlining the important role of interactions (i.e., they are the basic building blocks of relationships) in schools (Hamre et al., 2013; Pennings et al., 2014; 2018; Koster et al., 2009). However, research examining the interactions involving children with Autism within the school microlevel is limited (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Jordan, et al., 2019; Symes & Humphrey, 2012). Consequently, to understand how the inclusion of children with Autism takes place in primary schools, attention should be paid to how the interactions between children with Autism and the different education actors (i.e., teachers, support teachers, classroom assistants and peers) take place in their day to day at the micro-level of the school (i.e., in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom).

The present small-scale, qualitative, multiple-embedded case study research is set to explore how the inclusion of children with Autism is happening at the school microlevel with a focus on interactions. Gaining knowledge of the interactions among the actors and the potential facilitators and inhibitors of these interactions could provide information on how best to implement the inclusion of children with Autism in primary schools. In addition, the information could help reduce the gap between policy and practice enabling the implementation of meaningful inclusion that facilitates access to and achievement/benefit from education (i.e., access, presence, participation, achievement and belonging) of children with Autism in regular schools (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Slee, 2018).

The present chapter introduces the study by first discussing the historical background of inclusive education and conceptual understanding of Autism. It is followed by an outline of the research problem, the aims, objectives, research questions and methodologies. The chapter continues with a review of the significance of the study and the researcher's experience and finalises presenting the structure of the thesis.

1.2. Contextual background

Research developments in the field of inclusive education and children with Autism occurred in parallel with the development of declarations, agreements, and conventions that empowered the human right to education for all children, including those with Autism (UNESCO, 2007, 2016; United Nations, 2006). Thus, supranational institutions, national governments, policymakers, researchers and educators have worked towards implementing "education for all children", including minority groups and children with disabilities (UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, 2006).

The increase in the number of children with Autism placed in regular schools in the last thirty years in western European countries, North America and Australia preceded any relevant research concerning the implementation of their inclusive

education (Pijl 1987; Humphrey, 2008a). As a result, schools, educators and parents found themselves ill-equipped with research evidence to cater for children with Autism in regular school (C Bond et al., 2014). Although final figures in the literature are vague, it could be stated that around 1 to 1.5% of the population worldwide are diagnosed with Autism (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009; Sweeney & Staines, 2018).

Inclusive education does not happen only at the school microlevel (classroom, playground, support classroom). Several factors from different levels in the educational ecosystem, named governments, schools and communities, need to work in alignment so that the inclusion of children with Autism is successful (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Rosa & Tudge, 2013; Slee, 2019). For example, the inclusion of a particular child with Autism may require the provision of school support (classroom assistants, support teacher, accommodations) and health support (occupational therapist, psychologist), along with training for teachers and parents, which in turn is dependent on national policies on education provision (Mittler, 2009, 2012; R. Rose & Shevlin, 2014; Schuelka, 2018; Smyth et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the inclusion of children with Autism (at a practical level) takes place at the school microlevel, and it is in the classroom, the playground, and the support classroom where their access, presence, participation, achievement, and belonging may or may not occur.

The tendency followed in the research performed in the field of inclusive education has been varied. Research has been conducted on both; the benefits and difficulties of inclusive education. Concerning the benefits, previous studies concluded that inclusive schools appear to be the best option for children with Autism. These studies confirmed that regular schools provide higher educational, social, and emotional benefits to children with Autism and other disabilities (Ainscow, 2000; Osborne & Reed, 2011; Symes & Humphrey, 2011a; Waddington & Reed, 2017). Regarding the difficulties of inclusive education, studies outlined the challenges associated with implementing inclusive education in practice. In particular, the challenges confronted by educators,

parents, peers and children with Autism in their attempt to achieve an inclusive education that would provide these children with the right tools to participate in the society to which they belong (World Report on Disability, 2011).

The challenges encountered by the different actors involved in the inclusion of children with Autism in schools are varied. Some of those challenges concern teachers' attitudes toward including children with Autism in regular schools. As confirmed by previous studies, teachers' negative attitudes affect the learning and acceptance of children with Autism in regular schools (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; De Boer, et al., 2011; Garrad, et al., 2019; Hind, et al., 2018). In addition, some authors contend that teachers' negative attitudes have been associated with their level of training in inclusive practices and their knowledge and experience about these children's different cognitive and social styles. Thus more training leads to more positive attitudes and more acceptance of children with Autism in regular schools (Lindsay, et al., 2014; Majoko, 2016; Miles & Singal, 2010; Watkins et al., 2019).

Furthermore, previous studies also confirm the potential association between teachers' training and knowledge of Autism and how this could influence their perception of self-efficacy and their attitudes and support towards children with Autism in regular schools. In other words, more training leads to a better self-perception of their efficacy in catering for these children in schools (Anglim et al., 2018; de Boer et al., 2011; Segall & Campbell, 2012; Watkins et al., 2019). However, despite the positive influence that training may have on teachers' attitudes, acceptance and self-efficacy, the general feeling among educators are that without the appropriate multidisciplinary support (i.e., medical, psychological, academic), the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools in practice can be challenging (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Sikes et al., 2007).

Concerning the challenges encountered by children with Autism related to their inclusive education in schools, studies focused mainly on the social problems they experience (i.e., lack of friendships, isolation, and bullying) (Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016;

Lindsay et al., 2014; Lubas et al., 2016). Their conclusions provide evidence that children with Autism have fewer friends compared with their peers. In addition, they tend to be isolated and are more likely to suffer bullying and victimisation in school (Licciardello et al., 2008; Kasari, 2015; Leach & Duffy, 2009; Locke et al., 2017; Owen-DeSchryver et al., 2008; Owen-DeSchryver, 2003; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010). Nevertheless, these studies emphasise the different cognitive and social styles of children with Autism as the main barrier to their inclusion, failing to address the potential impact of other factors as the leading causes for their lack of inclusion in schools (Cook et al., 2016; Goodall, 2019; Hebron et al., 2015; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008b; Rodríguez-Medina et al., 2018). The research overview presented above outlines that educating children with Autism alongside their peers in regular schools benefits their academic, social, and emotional development. However, their inclusion is surrounded by many challenges mainly associated with their different cognitive and social styles.

Albeit the idea of inclusive education as the way forward to creating an equal society with the right to an education for all, children with disabilities and Autism are still segregated from regular schools. The gap between theory and practice remains a work in progress (Ainscow et al., 2019). In particular, when children with Autism are excluded from regular classrooms based on their unique characteristics (De Beco, 2018; de Bruin, 2019; Slee, 2019; UNESCO et al., 2015). A practice implemented in schools questioning the fundamentals of inclusive education (i.e., access, presence, participation, achievement, and belonging) (Ainscow, 2020; Conn et al., 2018; McCoy et al., 2012; Shevlin & Banks, 2021; Slee, 2019). For example, in Ireland, special classes called ASD Units or Early Intervention Units are placed within regular schools to cater for children with disabilities; sixty per cent of these units cater for children with Autism, who spend most of their school day within the unit. In the same line, in recent years, the educational provision of children with Autism in regular schools in Ireland has been subjected to “school short days” (Ireland, 2019). This practice is used extensively across all school

settings, regular and special, and obeys the need for schools to facilitate the adjustment of these children in school by reducing their school hours. However, it has been confirmed that the short school days negatively impact the academic, social, and emotional well-being of children with special educational needs, including those with Autism and their families (Ireland, 2019). This form of education is being contested by different authors who argue about the feasibility of separating children with Autism from their peers in schools, stating that special classes make *inclusion questionable* (Banks & McCoy, 2017; Shevlin & Banks, 2021).

The current thinking in the field of inclusive education contends that in implementing a successful inclusive education, the focus should be placed on what can be achieved. In other words, emphasis should be given to what children with disabilities (and Autism) can learn with appropriate support alongside their peers (i.e., their potential for learning), as opposed to focusing on what they cannot do (i.e., their barriers to learning) (Conn, 2015; Schuelka et al., 2020). In addition, consideration should be given to the impact that external factors could play on the child with Autism, such as the context (Mostafa, 2014), the educational provision in place (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2012), and the educators' attitudes and understandings of disability and Autism (De Boer et al., 2011; Banks & McCoy, 2017; Conn, 2015; Schuelka et al., 2020).

Therefore, in order to achieve a meaningful, inclusive education ensuring access, presence, participation, achievement and belonging, there is a need to understand what happens at the root of schools (i.e., at their microlevel). Addressing this need could help develop appropriate guidance to successfully implement the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools (Ainscow et al., 2019; Pellicano et al., 2018; Slee, 2019). In other words, there is a need to gain knowledge on how the inclusion of children with Autism occurs, taking into account the environment and the individuals at the school microlevel.

1.3. Research problem

As stated in the contextual background, the rapid rise in the prevalence of Autism preceded research leaving a gap between policy and practice concerning the best approach to cater for children with Autism in regular schools (Humphrey, 2008; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a). As a result, the implementation of successful, equitable and meaningful, inclusive education in Ireland and Internationally has not been fully achieved yet (Ainscow et al., 2019; UNESCO et al., 2016; Ainscow, 2020; Schuelka, et al., 2020; Slee et al., 2018; Banks, et al., 2018; Conn, 2015). Placing children with Autism in regular schools is a human right, regardless of their difficulties (UNESCO et al., 2015; United Nations, 2006). Nevertheless, the literature reviewed has shown that in Ireland as well as in many other countries, segregated practices take place under the understanding that some children with Autism cannot benefit from being educated among their peers (Banks & McCoy, 2017; De Beco, 2018). Moreover, previous reports have shown that children with Autism are at risk of exclusion in regular schools (UNESCO, 2016). In Ireland, for example, 65% of children diagnosed with Autism are placed in mainstream classes, with 21% placed in autism classes within regular schools and 14% of these children placed in special schools (Daly et al., 2016).

For inclusive education to be successful, children with Autism should have the same opportunities as their peers in the classroom and on the playground. Nevertheless, if they do not participate in and contribute to the same activities as their peers, their belonging to the group gets compromised, and their inclusion is jeopardised (Ainscow, 2020; Slee, 2019; UNESCO, 2009, 2016). It is understood that belonging and membership are developed in the classroom and the playground through daily participation and interactions, which are essential for all students' academic, social, and emotional development (Pennings et al., 2018, 2014). In addition, successful inclusive education must ensure children with Autism have access, presence, participation and achievement in regular schools (UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, 2006). Consequently,

it can be claimed that the inclusion of children with Autism is still a work in progress and that further research is deemed necessary to gain knowledge on how to best implement the inclusion of children with Autism alongside their peers (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Jordan, et al., 2019; Symes & Humphrey, 2012). Furthermore, in order to gain knowledge about the practicalities of inclusive education in schools, attention should be paid to the daily experiences of children with Autism in schools, which could facilitate tackling the core aspects of their inclusion in practice (Pellicano et al., 2013).

Interactions take place in our daily experiences, and they are the building blocks of relationships that can positively influence the student's academic, social, and emotional development in schools (Hamre et al., 2013; Koster et al., 2009). Moreover, interactions between students and educators are essential and involve interpersonal connections and instructional and contextual interactions (Hamre et al., 2013; Pennings et al., 2014, 2018; Wentzel, 2009). Previous studies have confirmed that positive interactions between children with Autism with their educators and peers can enhance their motivation, engagement, and sense of belonging. In addition, the interactions can influence their academic and social development (Berndt, 2002; Garcia-Reid, 2007; Perdue et al., 2009; Rix et al., 2009a; Shin et al., 2007).

Furthermore, as contended in previous studies examining the interactions of children with Autism, research in this area has focused mainly on the interactions occurring between children with Autism and peers in one setting, such as the classroom or the playground (Locke et al., 2016; Olsen et al., 2019; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010; Santillan et al., 2019). Although a few studies have addressed interactions in multiple settings, these studies mainly occurred in pre-schools, with less emphasis on the early years of primary schools (Hume et al., 2019; Kretzmann et al., 2015; Locke et al., 2016). In addition, most studies examining interactions have used quantitative methods failing to provide detailed information on the day to day interactions between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers (Symes & Humphrey, 2012). Therefore, gaining knowledge about the interactions between children with Autism and

the different education actors in schools could shed light on how these interactions may promote or inhibit the inclusion of children with Autism in the early years of regular school. The following section provides an overview of the aims and objectives of the present research and the questions guiding the study.

1.4. Research Aims, Objectives and Questions

The main aim of this study is to understand how the inclusion of children with Autism occurs in regular primary schools, focusing on interactions. The study explores how the interactions between children with Autism, their teachers, SNAs and peers occur in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom, comprehensively covering the key contexts where children with Autism interact in schools. In addition, the study aims to elucidate how the interactions between the actors in the settings facilitate or inhibit the inclusion of children with Autism in regular primary schools.

The research objectives aim,

- To conduct individual case studies of eight children with Autism in the early years of primary school placed in regular classrooms in Ireland.
- To undertake non-participant observations to collect information on the interactions between children with Autism, their teachers, SNAs and peers in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom.
- To undertake a thematic analysis of the interactions taking place in each individual case and a thematic analysis of the interactions across all cases.
- To identify the interactions between children with Autism and the education actors during structured and unstructured activities in all settings.
- To identify differences and similarities of interactions across three settings: classroom, playground and support classroom.

- To identify facilitators and inhibitors of the interactions between the relevant education actors in the different settings.

Based on the gap of knowledge, the main research question is: How does the inclusion of children with Autism happen in the early years of regular primary school in Ireland?

The question is supported by two main sub-questions listed below.

1. How are the interactions between children with Autism, teachers (general and support classroom), SNAs and peers in the classroom, the playground, and the support classroom, during structured and unstructured activities?
 - a. What are the commonalities and differences in the interactions between children with Autism, teachers (general and support classroom), SNAs and peers in the three in-school settings?
2. What are the barriers and facilitators of the interactions between children with Autism, teachers (general and support classroom), SNAs and peers in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom?

1.5. Research Methodology

The current research is a small-scale, qualitative, multiple-embedded case study research underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm. A qualitative approach produces essential and valuable information concerning the different interactions in the settings, enabling the researcher to gather detailed information about the nuances and complexities of the interactions in the different contexts in rich and in-depth detail (Creswell, 2014; Flick, 2009; Ingleby, 2012).

From an interpretivist approach, the reality is constructed and interpreted differently by each relevant person involved in the different school settings (A. Schwandt, 2000). These multiple interpretations offer different perspectives which are constructed within the now and then, in other words, the reality constructed is context and time

bounded. For that reason, the social reality subject to scrutiny is relative, multiple and varied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Schwandt, 2000; Willis et al., 2007).

The interpretivist approach requires the researcher's presence to have access to first-hand real-life experiences in the school (Gray, 2017). This approach facilitates the collection of rich, detailed and holistic information related to the interactions of multiple participants in multiple settings (Schwandt et al., 2007). However, it also involves the researcher in the construction of the social world under study. The assumptions and preconceptions that the researcher brings to the research are going to guide the choices made in the study, from the methodology to the final conclusions. To ensure rigour and trustworthiness, the researcher must acknowledge their position, clearly stating their approach to ontology, epistemology, and positionality. Furthermore, researchers must adopt a reflexive stance to interpret and question their interpretations throughout the research (Corlett & Mavin, 2018). As Haynes (2017) advises, researchers 'should try to be aware of how our ontological, social and political positioning affects the work that we do by informing the choices we make about research topics, questions, approaches, methodologies and outcomes' (Haynes, 2017, pg. 78). The methodology chapter (pg 92) provides a detailed account on the researcher's philosophical stance, her positionality and the reflexive stance adopted throughout the research.

In addition, adopting a multiple embedded case study research enables explanations and holistic descriptions of what happens at the school microlevel with children with Autism. Furthermore, the case study approach and the method of data collection (i.e., a non-participant semi-structured observation) facilitate an in-depth exploration, description, and analysis of the interactions, dynamics, and complexities of the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools. This type of exploratory research involves the researcher's presence as an observer, which facilitates the collection of 'real life' information about the different interactions occurring in the settings at a particular time (Cooper et al., 2004; Creswell, 2007; Robson, 2011). It also presents a unique opportunity to understand how

the interactions occur within the context of the settings (i.e., classroom, playground, and support classroom). The observations focus on the actors' interactions taking into account interactions between the participants and the contexts where these interactions occur (Swanborn, 2010).

1.6. Research Significance and scope

Interactions are the basis for future relationships (Hamre et al., 2014; Pennings et al., 2018), and relationships in schools are relevant to the development of friendships, acceptance and participation (Koegel et al., 2010; Koster et al., 2009). Hence, relationships are essential to enable membership to the group facilitating the inclusion of children with Autism in schools (UNESCO et al., 2016; United Nations, 2006). It is understood that gaining knowledge of the interactions taking place between children with Autism and the education actors on the day to day in school could shed light on how the inclusion of children with Autism takes place in primary schools (Cameron, 2014; Cameron et al., 2012; Robertson et al., 2003). Additionally, acknowledging the type of interactions that promote or inhibit meaningful participation in the classroom, academic achievement, relationships with peers, and belonging to the group could inform practices that facilitate these children's inclusion in regular schools (Cameron, 2014).

The current research explores the dynamics of these interactions, looking in essence at interactions and how these facilitate or inhibit further interactions, participation, achievement and belonging, which has not been addressed with rich qualitative data based on non-participatory observation. The data gathered from the interactions between children with Autism, educators, and peers in three different school settings can reveal types of interactions, strategies, and accommodations that could influence the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools. Thus, the main aim of the study is to elucidate how interactions facilitate or inhibit the inclusion of children with Autism in regular primary schools with the intention to help reduce the gap between policy and practice.

The researcher observed eight children with Autism, their teachers, SNAs and peers in five primary schools for an average of 5 full days (i.e., 4.5 hours/day), covering the classroom, the playground, and the support classroom. The study shows the nuances and complexities of the interactions between the actors and settings. It provides information on the barriers and facilitators of these interactions and how they influenced the inclusion of children with Autism in the early years of regular school. Moreover, the study highlighted practices that supported further interactions enabling the inclusion of children with Autism alongside their peers, which could help shape future policy and practice. The study seeks to contribute to the inclusion of children with Autism in regular primary schools and aims to provide insight into how to develop a better reality for the inclusion of children with Autism in line with the fundamentals of Human Rights and the UN CRPD (2006). The present study took place in Ireland. The following section provides a brief background concerning the educational provision for children with Autism in this country.

1.7. A Brief background of the educational provision of children with Autism in Ireland

The Irish educational system involves a continuum of provision at pre-primary, primary and secondary levels for children with special educational needs, including those with Autism. Children with disabilities progress through this continuum in regular education and special school settings (Daly et al., 2016). In addition, regular schools incorporate special classes, which are classrooms located within the school building to cater for children with disabilities. These special classes are also called Autistic Units allocated in regular schools to cater for children with Autism (Daly et al., 2016, pg 26). Following the Department of Education Bill in 2015, Special classes are mandatory in new school buildings (Banks & McCoy, 2017). The Autistic Units or Early Intervention Units are dedicated exclusively to children with Autism and operate with a pupil-teacher ratio of 6:1, as well as the support of two Special Needs Assistants. According to Banks

and colleagues, sixty per cent of the special classes in regular primary schools in Ireland cater for children with Autism, who spend most of their school day within the unit.

In regular schools, the educational provision of children with Autism entails their full inclusion in the classroom with extra support from the support teacher in the support classroom for 4,25 hours per week, and, when required, children with Autism are allocated support from a Special Needs Assistant (SNA). The SNAs are allocated to schools to support students with special educational needs (SEN) with additional care needs that ought to be outlined by appropriate professionals. The SNA's responsibility involves enabling children with disabilities to attend and participate in education, and their deployment is granted upon successful application through the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) under the umbrella of the NCSE. The SENO is responsible for considering school applications and adjusting the level of support according to the child's needs in their school journey (Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Logan, 2006). In addition, specific accommodations may be provided in the classroom, such as resting areas, working stations, and arriving at school after rush hour. However, these types of accommodations can vary from child and school.

Furthermore, in recent years the educational provision of children with Autism in regular schools in Ireland has been subjected to "school short days" (Ireland, 2019). This practice is used extensively across all school settings, regular and special. The rationale behind this practice obeys the need to facilitate the adjustment of these children to a regular school by reducing their school hours. The report submitted by Inclusion Ireland in September 2019 highlighted the impact of the short school days on the academic, social, and emotional wellbeing of children with special educational needs, including those with Autism and their families.

Additionally, as part of their educational provision, children with special educational needs in Ireland may avail of the July Educational Provision, which provides extra school hours in July for children with Autism, provided in school or at home.

Furthermore, they can benefit from Home tuition funding, which provides children with financial support for home tuition (Daly et al., 2016).

1.8. The researcher's experience

The present study was fuelled by the researcher's enthusiasm in research and her advocacy for justice. As a mother of three children, this advocacy gained momentum and was shaped around the time they began their journey in regular primary school. The researcher's exposure to children with disabilities in regular schools, including children with Autism, raised many questions: What happens to these children in school? How do they learn? How do they mix with the other children? Are they happy? These questions set the fundamental pillars for the research project.

The researcher in this study comes from a quantitative and positivist position based on a background in psychology and more than a decade of working as a clinical research manager within the medical and pharmaceutical fields. This background positioned the researcher to understand Autism from a psychological view, as stated in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM 5) and accompanied the researcher at the beginning of this project. Therefore, the study began with a positivist lens and an understanding of Autism from a medical perspective and the research of children with Autism through quantitative research and methods.

Nevertheless, the researcher soon acknowledged that to capture the reality of the inclusive education of children with Autism in schools, qualitative research underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm was deemed necessary. It became clear that to answer the study question concerning the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools, a shift in the understanding of Autism and disability was required. Consequently, the researcher acknowledged and embraced the human rights model and the bio-psychosocial understanding of disability as a phenomenon that interacts with the context and is influenced by society (Garcia Iriarte, 2016; United Nations, 2006).

Additionally, the researcher's background in psychology and experience in clinical research within the medical field provided her with a professional and ethical lens focusing on detail from the ethical submission, data collection and data analysis. The experience gained working with medical agencies and hospitals' ethics committees, fieldwork with patients in hospitals, and working directly with doctors prepared the researcher to understand the ethical complexities of this research and the importance of building rapport with those giving their time to take part.

1.9. Thesis Structure

The thesis is organised into eight chapters. Chapter one is outlined above. The second chapter presents the conceptual framework, which comprises a profound overview of the conceptualisation of inclusive education and Autism regarding the different understandings of disability. This chapter sets the conceptual framework that guides the study and addresses the different conceptualisations and debates concerning inclusive education and Autism.

The third chapter provides the state of the art concerning the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools and narrows the focus to the study gap. First, the literature review tackles research on the inclusion of children with Autism at the school micro-level (i.e., classroom, playground, and support classroom). It focuses on the role of each actor involved in the different in-school settings (i.e., teachers, classroom assistants and peers) and the interactions between the actors. Next, the chapter presents the literature search and the past and current research from 2005 to 2021 concerning inclusive education and children with Autism in primary and secondary school. Finally, it narrows the gap in research outlining the relevancy of the interactions and the context of the development of students, pointing out the scarce research on interactions involving children with Autism in the early years of regular primary schools.

Chapter four presents the methodology of the study. First, the chapter outlines the methodology that underpins the research, and it provides a detailed description and justification for the choices made concerning the philosophical stances, ontology, epistemology, and methodological approaches adopted for this study. It is followed by the discussion, the justification for using a qualitative approach, and the decision to adopt a multiple case study design. Secondly, the chapter presents the research strategy, focusing on the recruitment strategy, the method of data collection, and the data analysis. Finally, the chapter concludes with a detailed account of the ethical considerations that accompany the present research.

The fifth chapter presents eight case studies and the analysis of the findings for each case. The case study structure provides first a contextual background related to the child with Autism involving demographic details, classroom information, and the type of support provided. The background is followed by a narrative describing the interactions taking place in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom between the child with Autism, their teachers, SNAs and peers. The cases appear in chronological order from their data collection, distributed throughout the academic year (i.e., June, November, December, February, March, April, May and June). Finally, the concluding section of each case refers to the data analysis outlining the study findings for each case.

Chapter six comprised the cross-case analysis, presenting the recurrent themes identified from the analysis across each case study. The final thematic categories were identified from the uniqueness of each case study and their engagement in the cross-case analysis. The result of this engagement is six overarching themes involving the essence of this research findings.

The six themes are as follows:

1. Teachers' interactions, the bridge to support and participation.

2. Support: the two sides of the coin.
3. Participation at the core of interactions.
4. The lack of peers' reciprocal interactions, a block to inclusion.
5. The context as a bridge to interactions.
6. Lessons learned from the support classroom.

The seventh chapter discusses the study findings in relation to the extant literature, focusing on the facilitators and inhibitors of the interactions between children with Autism and the different actors. The present research findings outline that the interactions among the participants and the management of support (sometimes provided, sometimes offered, sometimes rejected, sometimes imposed) led to different participation scenarios and levels of participation. The chapter discusses the role of these facilitators and inhibitors in the inclusion of children with Autism in regular primary schools. The chapter finalises with a review of the study's limitations and the implications for policy and practice. Chapter eight is the concluding chapter structured around a metaphor, "the inclusive education dance", comprising the essence of this research findings. The metaphor intends to act as a guide to the understanding of the contribution to knowledge. The study metaphor is followed by an overview of the study, including the rationale, literature review and methodology. The chapter finalises with a review of the research strengths and limitations and the researcher's journey.

CHAPTER 2 - THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Introduction to the conceptual framework

The present research is an exploratory study looking to elucidate the inclusion of children with Autism in regular primary schools in Ireland, focusing on interactions between the child with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers. A conceptual framework is necessary to understand the concepts that guide the research project at the first stages and throughout the entire project (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The conceptual framework in this research outlines and connects all of the different ideas supporting the study, comprised of the two main areas of study, Inclusive Education and Autism. As Huberman and Miles (1994) contend, "a conceptual framework is a form of showing key variables or constructs to be studied and the presumed relationships between them" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, pg 18).

This chapter outlines the state of the art of these two concepts. Given that Autism and Inclusive Education are the main concepts explored in the current research project, a close analysis of these two concepts was imperative to gain in-depth knowledge of the nuances, debates and complexities surrounding them. The first section discusses the concept of inclusive education. It provides a brief account of the historical background and the international and Irish legislation on inclusive education. It concludes with the definition of inclusive education and the tensions and debates around the concept.

The second section focuses on Autism; first, it provides historical background on its conceptualisation and the journey that this concept encountered in history. The chapter presents the development of Autism from a mental disorder under the auspices of psychiatry to an understanding of Autism as a natural human variation, among others (e.g., neurodiversity). Finally, in this section, Autism is discussed from a disability perspective, outlining that the understanding of Autism is key to the acceptance and support of children with this label in education and society more broadly.

2.2. Conceptualising inclusive education

The idea of inclusive education emerged in the late 1980s to contest the segregation of children with disabilities in special schools (Pijl et al., 1997). However, this movement was also the result of a vision, a philosophy enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and emphasised in the 1990 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Both pieces of legislation affirmed and reiterated the importance of education as a human right entitled to everyone, regardless of their circumstances. It also affirmed the importance of education as the key to enabling individuals to achieve their full potential and as a way to enhance their participation in society (UN General Assembly, 1989; UNESCO, 1948).

Historically, regarding children with disabilities, their right to education followed a segregated path. Traditionally, the education of children with disabilities happened in special schools or institutions separated from their non-disabled pupils (Borosan, 2017). It was understood then that this form of education was the most suitable due to these children's incapacity to learn in regular schools along with their non-disabled peers, following a medical approach to disability. Viewing disability as an inherent difficulty in the individual presented children's disabilities as barriers to learning in schools (Oliver, 1986). Consequently, these children were segregated from regular education and indirectly from society, assuming that this was the best option for them (Slee & Allan, 2001). This uncontested form of education that remained operative for many years began to be questioned in the decade of the 1980s.

What first emerged as an opposition to a form of education against the segregation of children with disabilities gradually became a movement promoting inclusive education as human rights and social justice for All children at risk of marginalisation, including children with disabilities (Pijl et al., 1997). Nevertheless, the

journey followed by the movement for Inclusive Education has not been easy, and many difficulties have emerged along the way, compromising the viability of this ideal.

The conceptualisation of inclusive education is not exempt from controversy and debate, particularly concerning the best placement and practice to educate children with disabilities and other difficulties. Scholars in the field have questioned the conceptualisation of inclusive education, as well as the efficacy and benefits of Inclusive Education compared with the benefits of Special Education (Ainscow, 2020; Armstrong et al., 2008; Artiles & Kozleski, 2019; Dyson, 2013; Farrell et al., 2007; Florian, 2007; Lindsay, 2007; Miles & Singal, 2010; Norwich, 2014; Schuelka & Johnstone, 2012; Slee, 2011).

In general terms, the rationale and ideal of inclusive education aiming for the education of all children alongside their peers regardless of their disabilities are widely accepted. Nevertheless, the fight between the field of inclusive education and special education continues in the 21st century, and the tensions around the best placement to educate children with disabilities have gained momentum in the last decade. While some scholars advocate inclusive education as the best option to provide children with disabilities with a future in society (Ainscow, 2020; Booth, 2017; Schuelka et al., 2020; Slee, 2019). Other scholars believe that children with disabilities are better off in segregated settings where their education can be adjusted and tailored to their needs (Farrell, 2010; Hornby, 2014a; Imray & Colley, 2017; Kauffman & Hallahan, 1996; Kauffman et al., 2018; Warnock, 2019).

Nevertheless, Inclusive Education in theory and practice ought to involve a) acceptance in regular schools, b) presence in the classrooms and the playgrounds in the same activities with their peers, and c) academic, social and emotional achievement according to their full potential, and d) belonging to the group with acceptance and presence in their classrooms and on the playgrounds' community, regardless of their race, gender, religion and disabilities, whether intellectual or physical (Ainscow et al.,

2009; Slee, 2018; UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, 2006). Unfortunately, despite the unquestionable assumption of inclusion as a human right as the way forward to a better society, from an economic and ethical perspective, nowadays, the number of children in the world excluded from education is still high (UNESCO et al., 2015). Of particular concern is the exclusion of children with disabilities from education, who are more likely ever to attend school or manage to complete primary or secondary education (Ainscow, 2016; Slee et al., 2018; World Report on Disability, 2011).

The following sections refer to the development of the concept of Inclusive Education in the Northern hemisphere (Western, European, and English-speaking contexts). It outlines first the historical background behind the ideal of Inclusive Education to set the map of the journey towards inclusive education. The section reviews the rights framework due to its relevance in the development of inclusive education, outlining the supranational conventions and agreements embracing the right to education for all children at risk of marginalisation, including children with disabilities. It is followed by the background and legislation underpinning inclusive education in Ireland. The section finishes with the definition of inclusive education and the debates and tensions accompanying its conceptualisation and practicalities. In particular, the most recent discussion relating to the field of inclusive education versus special education with a review of the tensions and debates regarding the concept, practicalities, and viability of Inclusive Education in theory and practice.

2.2.1. Children with disabilities and their education throughout history

The inclusion of children with disabilities in education has evolved from the end of the 19th century to date. During the last decades of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, children, young and adults were segregated to institutions, mainly religious, believing that their deficits and impairments impeded these children's participation in society (Thomas et al., 2002). From the 1920s, the education of children with disabilities in the northern hemisphere began to occur in special schools,

segregated from their non-disabled peers, resulting in the emergence of the field of special education (Pijl et al., 1997). The field of special education developed in parallel to regular schools where the education of non-disabled children took place. From the 1920s, the development of Special Education occurred as 'an expression of care' for children with disabilities, regarded as the only alternative for children who were unfit to be educated in regular schools along with their peers with no disabilities (Pijl et al., 1997; Thomas et al., 2002).

Until well advanced into the 20th century, disability was regarded as an impairment inherent to the individual that acted as a barrier to learning (Pijl et al., 1997). Hence the need for a segregated education tailored to their difficulties. Because it was understood that these children's disabilities challenged their learning and participation in society, special schools were uncontested and considered the appropriate and most beneficial option (Florian, 2007; Thomas & Loxley, 2007; Thomas et al., 2006). However, the critical influence of the Emerging Disability Movement in the 1960s, which challenged the traditional medical understanding of people with disabilities and started to focus on their rights, defied this form of segregated education (Mittler, 2012).

The Disability movement emerged to demand equal treatment, access and opportunities for minorities with disabilities (Oliver, 2017). Firstly, it questioned the lack of civil rights of persons with disabilities in society (Oliver, 1996). Secondly, it challenged disability as a problem inherent to the individual and highlighted the barriers imposed by society (Allan, 2010). Finally, influenced by disability activists and scholars' ideas of disability as a social problem, educators, parents, and politicians, began to work towards a more integrative position for children with disabilities in regular schools.

From the 1970s, changes in policy and practice started to take place (e.g., Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975) (Duhaney & Salend, 2010). By the end of the 20th century, the segregation of children with disabilities and other minorities from regular education was contested at policy and academic levels, setting the

emergence of the inclusive education movement (Education Forum, 2000; Pijl et al., 1997). These developments in disability, education and the developments on the rights of disabled people and their education translated into changes in legislation.

In the United States of America (USA), the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 was introduced, amended as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1990 and updated in 1997 to promote 'whole-school' approaches to inclusion. In the UK, the Warnock Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People appeared in 1978. The Warnock report recommended that children with disabilities be placed in regular schools except for those with multiple and severe disabilities (Pijl et al., 1997). Nevertheless, regardless of these key milestones, the societal attitudes toward disability did not change over time, and it was in the late 1980s that the education of children with disabilities in general education settings began to see some light (Mittler, 2012; Oliver, 2017; Oliver & Barnes, 2012; Oliver & Zarb, 1989).

However, the educational provision of children with disabilities in regular schools took the form of integration, where some children who were formerly educated in segregated provisions were now placed in regular schools (Howard, 2004). These children were moved to regular schools based on their potential ability to adjust to the system, while those children with more disabilities remained under the care of the special school (Hegarty, 2001; Miles & Singal, 2010; Slee & Allan, 2001; Wolfendale et al., 1994).

The expectation for these children with disabilities in regular schools was that they had to adapt to the system, as opposed to schools accommodating and adapting to their learning (Ainscow, 1995, 2005; Allan, 2013; Hegarty, 2001; Howard, 2004; Norwich, 2014; Pijl et al., 1997; Slee, 2001, 2008). It was after the Salamanca Statement in 1994 where States were advised to promote inclusive schools as the best possible option, celebrating difference and the provision of the appropriate support to guarantee all

children, including those with special educational needs and disabilities, to learn along with their peers (The Salamanca Statement, 1994). However, almost thirty years later, the inclusion of children with disabilities is still a work in progress (Ainscow et al., 2019).

From the Salamanca Statement (1994), the moral value of inclusion that emerged against the education of children with disabilities in segregated special schools became paramount and a fundamental framework for providing all minorities, including children with Autism, with the support required to overcome poverty and gain freedom (Ainscow et al., 2009). As Thomas and colleagues outlined, 'Moral arguments and empirical evidence gained consensus in seeing inclusive education as an appropriate philosophy and a relevant framework for restructuring education' (Thomas et al., 2006, pg 4). However, the shift from educating children with disabilities in special education to a non-segregated education did not happen overnight.

Although the movement for inclusive education was bounded by national and supranational legislation, these were ambiguous on how to put into practice the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular school settings (Dyson, 2013). The following section outlines the legal framework formed by the supranational conventions and agreements supporting, embracing, and fuelling the Education for All agenda and the ideal of inclusive education, particularly from the late 20th century.

2.2.2. The International policy context framing the ideal of inclusive education

The human right to education was first enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNUDHR) (1948) and emphasised later in the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC), which came into force in 1990. From 1990, the development of inclusive education as a relevant philosophy and framework for restructuring education was bounded by supranational conventions and agreements enshrined by the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The fundamental principle of inclusive education emphasises

the importance of all children having the opportunity to learn along with their peers in regular schools, regardless of their difficulties (Peters, 2007; Thomas & Loxley, 2007). This principle guided UNESCO to protect and strengthen inclusion in education as a fundamental right for all.

In 1990, the World Declaration on Education for All was adopted in response to the educational deterioration occurring in developing and developed countries, drifting away from the fundamentals of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNESCO, 1948). The Declaration on Education for All (1990) endorsed the importance of children, young and adults' education and its relevance in their development within society. Additionally, it advised all governments to include education for All as a priority in their political agendas (UNESCO-World Conference on Education for all, 1990). Nevertheless, the international commitment to delivering quality education to all children failed to specify the education of children with disabilities. As a result, children with disabilities were and still are excluded from conventional education systems under the premise that they could not be educated in regular schools due to their disabilities (Miles & Singal, 2010).

In response to the Inclusive Education Movement and the fundamentals endorsed in the Education for All Agenda emerged the Salamanca Statement (1994). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action in Special Needs Education was endorsed at the World Conference of Special Needs Education in June 1994, with the representation of 95 governments and 25 international organisations. This Statement set the fundamentals for the inclusion of children with special educational needs in regular schools, affirming that this form of provision was the most effective in promoting successful societies (UNESCO, 1994). With the Salamanca Statement, a new era began to include children with special educational needs and disabilities in regular schools. Consequently, Inclusive education emerged as the way forward to abolish segregation and reduce exclusion from education (Kurth et al., 2018). The Statement marked the

move for children with special educational needs to regular schools with adequate provision and support. As Florian (2019) illustrated, the Salamanca Statement 'introduced the idea of inclusive education to the wider education community' (Florian, 2019).

Although the Salamanca Statement (1994) established that children with special educational needs ought to be educated in regular schools, the move from children's segregation in special schools to their inclusion in regular schools only guaranteed their placement (Ainscow, 2003, 2010). Their inclusion was operationalised through "integration". They were integrated with their peers, expecting that children with special educational needs and disabilities would and should adapt to the regular school's agenda with some support (Slee, 2011). Nevertheless, this understanding was far from an inclusive and equitable education for children with learning difficulties and disabilities (Ainscow et al., 2019; Slee, 2019; UNESCO et al., 2015).

Norwich argued that schooling aims to guarantee achievement, learning, social cohesion, and development (Norwich, 2013). However, placing children with special educational needs and disabilities in mainstream schools and expecting them to adapt to the system could not guarantee the essential purpose of education (Norwich, 2013). Consequently, in order to achieve inclusion, placement ought to guarantee their acceptance in the school, their presence in all activities and their achievement according to their potential (Ainscow et al., 2009, 2012).

In 2006, the Salamanca Statement's legal framework for the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools was reinforced by adopting the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), also referred to as CRPD (United Nations, 2006). This convention represented the most important legally binding document reached concerning the rights of people with disabilities. The CRPD Article 24 in Education addressed inclusive education as the way to achieve high-quality education for people with disabilities. It was also central to realising equal access and participation

for all members of society in education/society (Arduin, 2015). In addition, the CRPD understands education as a fundamental human right, a principle to value people with disabilities' well-being, dignity, and capacity for learning to enable their participation in society. It considers Inclusive education as the tool to allow other rights such as freedom, employment, and independence. Furthermore, it regards inclusive education as eliminating barriers and restructuring policy, schools and practices to facilitate inclusion (UNESCO, 2016).

The work started with the Salamanca Statement, was reinforced by the CRPD Article 24 (2006), and gained strength with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) for education, which is the Education for All agenda's successor (UNESCO et al., 2016). Ten years after the World Declaration on Education for All (1990), the framework for action had not been fully achieved. The revision of the goals culminated with the Framework for Action and the United Nations Millennium Declaration Goals (2000) (UNESCO, 2005). In 2015, the goals established in 2000 were reviewed at the World Education Forum and culminated in the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all, adopted in May 2015. The Incheon Declaration recognises a plan for action for people, planets and prosperity encapsulated in 17 goals to be achieved in 2030. Goal 4 was set to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO et al., 2016). The SDG4 reinforces the idea of inclusive education for all children, including those with disabilities, in regular education settings. It is essential to address that the SDG4 place particular relevance on the exclusion of children from regular educational settings and emphasises the importance of providing these children with an appropriate and quality education that will enable and “promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UNESCO et al., 2015, pg 1).

In summary, the international trend in inclusive education set the basis on the legislative front for the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools, which

materialised mainly in the decades between 1990 and 2000. Ireland also followed this trend; the next section, the historical and political framework of inclusive education in Ireland, is provided, emphasising the provision of inclusive education for children with Autism.

2.2.3. Inclusive Education in Ireland

In 1924 the Irish education system fell under the State's responsibility, and schools under the auspice of the catholic church were in charge of the education of these children (Phádraig, 2007). The general belief was that children with disabilities were uneducable due to their difficulties, and their presence was detrimental to the learning and wellbeing of their peers, hence their exclusion from school (Phádraig, 2007).

Nevertheless, systematic government changes developed towards the segregation of children with disabilities, which progressed to the education of children with disabilities in special schools in practice until the decade of the 80s (Phádraig, 2007). In 1947, the first home for children with disabilities was founded, St. Vincent's Home for mentally defective children, which emerged to cater for children with disabilities. These mental institutions maintained children, young and adults with disabilities apart from the rest of society (Phádraig, 2007). In addition, in 1959, the first inspector for special education was appointed by the State. Towards the end of the 1980 decade, children who learned at a slower pace began to be placed in regular schools, while those with physical and intellectual disabilities continued in segregated education (Phádraig, 2007). Additionally, schools began to provide provisions to accommodate children with learning difficulties and those from ethnic minorities and disadvantaged communities (Griffin & Shevlin, 2011; Phádraig, 2007). These changes translated into the emergence of the role of the "remedial" teacher, who provided extra academic support to children with learning disabilities in regular schools (Winter & O'Raw, 2010; Phádraig, 2007).

Despite the changes occurring in the late years of 1980, most of the educational provision for children with disabilities mainly continued in segregated schools. Nevertheless, the significant developments within educational policies and legislation in Ireland marked the point of inflexion and the journey towards the implementation of inclusive education (Griffing & Shevlin, 2011).

2.2.3.1. Legislation towards Inclusive Education in Ireland

The beginning of the 1990s encompassed relevant developments in inclusive education nationally and internationally (Griffin & Shevlin, 2011). In Ireland, the departing point towards the integration of children with disabilities in regular schools materialised with the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (Special Education Review Committee, 1993). In 1993 the SERC report was deployed to address the education of children with disabilities. Although this report can be considered the foundation that supported the development of policy and provision of children with special educational needs and disabilities in Ireland, it failed to include the views of people with disabilities in its review committee. Additionally, the report stereotyped the condition of Autism when addressing the specific level of disabilities, albeit considering their need for educational support. It highlighted their “impairments” as a barrier to their learning in regular schools (Special Education Review Committee, 1993). This consideration impacted the right of children with Autism to be placed in regular schools and resulted in important litigations throughout the 90s in Ireland (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007; Special Education Review Committee, 1993).

An example of these litigations and their consequences was the O’Donoghue court case (Phádraig, 2007). The case upheld the rights of all children to avail of free education, regardless of their physical or mental disabilities, and it was followed by the white paper published in 1995 (Government of Ireland, 1995). The paper included significant initiatives for assessing and delivering special needs education in Ireland. The document recognised the educational needs of children with Autism in regular schools

and the need to provide additional support to facilitate their learning (Government of Ireland, 1995; Griffing & Shevlin, 2011). The white paper was followed by different educational acts relevant to the educational provision of all children, including those with disabilities (see table 1). Among the different Acts developed, the following Acts and the NCSE are considered essential to mention in more detail due to their relevancy to the present research. The Acts refer to children's rights to equality and education and the requirements to accommodate and support them to enable their learning and participation in regular education (Winter & O'Raw, 2010).

Table 1. Legislation in Ireland

1993 - Special Education Review Committee Report, a report on the special needs provision in Ireland from pre-school to secondary school. It sat the basics of inclusive education.

1995 – White paper on education – report that reiterated the right of access to school to all persons, regardless of their differences.

1998 - Education Act established the State's responsibility to provide support and education to all persons, including those with a disability

1999 – National Disability Authority Act established the National Disability Authority and its functions.

2000 – Equal Status Act promotes equality and prohibits discrimination. (Employment).

2000 – Education Welfare Act provides the entitlement to a minimum of education to all children in the State.

2001 – Children's Act provides provision for the protection, care and control of children in the Republic of Ireland.

2001 - The Report on the Task Force on Autism highlighted the rights of children with Autism to access and participate equally as their peers in regular education with appropriate support.

2004 - The equality Act prohibits discrimination on nine grounds, including disability and inclusive education.

2004 – The Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs Act provided the grounds for including children with special educational needs in the education system.

2005 – The Disability Act established an independent assessment of needs and the services required to meet the needs of children aged 0-5 years.

2.2.3.2. The Education Act

In 1988, the Education Act, considered one of the most critical documents concerning the rights and provision of education in Ireland, was signed. Nevertheless, the document's attempt to integrate children with disabilities into regular schools, promoting equality of access, was weak and underpinned by a perception of disability as a barrier to learning. Additionally, the Act lacked provisions to guarantee children with disabilities the right to access regular schools (Phádraig, 2007; Meegan & MacPhail, 2006).

Nevertheless, the Education Act (1998) addressed these children's disabilities from the medical perspective, outlining the disability as the main barrier to their learning. This approach failed to consider other external factors, such as the physical structures of schools, the educators' knowledge and preparedness, and the curricula, as potential barriers to these children's learning in regular schools (Griffin & Shevlin, 2011; Rose & Shevlin, 2014). The development of legislation regarding education and provision for children with disabilities in Ireland culminated with the Education for Persons with Special Education Needs Act (EPSEN Act) in 2004.

2.2.3.3. The Education for Persons with Special Education Needs Act (EPSEN Act)

The Act marked a milestone concerning the educational provision of children with disabilities in Ireland. In this Act, the definition of special educational needs and disabilities moved from a focus on the medical deficit of the child as the barrier to learning (as stated in the Education Act 1998) to an acceptance that possible extrinsic factors could also impact the learning of children with disabilities (EPSEN Act 2004).

Nevertheless, despite the understanding that the difficulties in learning were not the only barrier to learning and inclusion, the definition of special educational needs acknowledged a restriction in learning capacity due to their difficulties. Additionally, the

Act stated that placing children with disabilities in regular schools was dependent on the benefits of this placement for the child with disabilities and their peers. In other words, placing children with disabilities in regular schools was acceptable if these children could fit and adapt to the educational system (EPSEN Act 2004).

Albeit the developments taking place in Ireland concerning the inclusion of children with special educational needs and disabilities, fifteen years after the signature of the Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004), some areas of the Act are still not implemented. The key areas that have not been implemented refer to those sections that confer statutory rights to assessment, education plans and appeals processes on children with special educational needs (NCSE, 2019).

The economic recession that stroke Ireland in 2008 impacted the support provided to children with special educational needs. Although Ireland began to see a financial improvement (Hardiman & MacCarthaigh, 2013), children with Autism continued to suffer delays in diagnosis, and appropriate interventions in psychological support, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and behavioural therapies (Daly et al., 2016; Kinsella et al., 2014).

As of today, the EPSEN Act (2004) is not been fully implemented yet. It is understood that the delay in the full implementation of the EPSEN Act, along with the cutbacks from the recession in 2008, is still acting to the detriment of the appropriate development of inclusive education in Ireland (Daly et al., 2016; Shevlin & Banks, 2021).

While the above acts focus on disabilities in general, a specific policy on Autism was first formulated in 2001. The Task Force report (2001) reviewed and assessed the educational provision and support available for children with Autism, and it established recommendations regarding policy and provision concerning the assessments, interventions, educational provision and learning support for children with Autism.

2.2.3.4. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE)

At the beginning of 2005, the NCSE, an independent institution, was formally established under the umbrella of the EPSEN Act 2004. Since then, the NCSE has overseen a) the coordination of resource applications, b) the coordination of education and health services support, and c) Research and policy advice. Along with the EPSEN Act (2004), the Council is responsible for ensuring that children with disabilities are provided with the support necessary to enable their participation, lifelong learning, and well-being in regular schools (NCSE, 2006).

2.2.3.5. The Report on the Task Force on Autism

The Task Force Report on Autism (2001) was an important point of inflexion with regard to the support and educational provision of children with Autism in Ireland. Despite the recommendations provided in this report in 2001, the early assessment of children with Autism and the early provision of support and interventions from the Health Service Executive (HSE) is still suffering significant delays, and children with Autism are not receiving the interventions required promptly (DES, 2001). In addition, despite the general definitions provided by supranational conventions and agreements, the implementation of inclusive education has remained challenging (Miles & Singal, 2010).

2.2.4. How is inclusive education defined, and what are the tensions around this concept

Inclusive education is uncontested as an ideal; however, it generates conflict when it attempts to be put into practice (Álvarez & Alonso, 2012; Norwich, 2014). The gap between theory, practice and policy prevails at international, national and local levels affecting policy, provision and practice (Mittler, 2012; Westwood, 2018; Haug, 2017).

2.2.4.1. What does Inclusive Education mean?

Inclusive education is regarded as a philosophy based on human rights, social justice, and equity values. It rests on three pillars that are its foundations, first the belief that education is a fundamental human right, second that education is the foundation for a just society, and third the consideration of equity as an overall principle that should guide policy and practice (Ainscow, 2016; Slee, 2019; Slee et al., 2018). In addition, inclusive education aims to abolish segregation and exclusionary practices and maximise all children's participation and achievement in education and society regardless of their difficulties (Booth, 2009).

In practice, the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools involves accepting diversity and differences to reduce the marginalisation and segregation of children with disabilities from general education systems and communities (Ainscow, 2005; Florian, 2019; Pijl et al., 1997). In this case, inclusive education ought to be considered a process that is continually searching for the best ways to respond to diversity; it is about learning how to live with difference and learning how to learn from the difference (Ainscow et al., 2009; Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Azorín & Ainscow, 2020). Therefore, classroom diversity should be taken as an incentive to deploy teaching and learning practices tailored to all children's needs. In addition, it should identify and remove barriers to learning and participation (Ainscow, 2016; Ainscow, Booth et al., 2006; Slee, 2019). For that reason, Inclusive education involves all children at risk of marginalisation, and it recognises the moral responsibility to ensure that those children at risk of exclusion, not only children with disabilities, are present and accepted in regular schools (Schuelka, 2018; Schuelka et al., 2020; Slee et al., 2018).

Furthermore, inclusive education involves more than just a mere placement. It involves acceptance, support, achievement and equity, concepts that ought to be understood as equally relevant in the education of children with disabilities and other vulnerable populations (Ainscow, 2016; OECD, 2012; UNESCO, 2016). For that reason,

when including children with disabilities in regular education settings, it is imperative to consider the effectiveness of these children's education in the short and long term. In other words, that these children participate fully in the school experience and achieve their full potential, similar to their peers (Ainscow, 2020; Slee, 2019; Slee et al., 2018). As Florian (2019) argued, the focus of inclusive education rests on the placement and the outcomes and experiences emerging from the inclusion in mainstream settings, hence the importance of identifying causal relationships between placing children with disabilities in schools and their achievements (Florian, 2019). Nevertheless, promoting inclusion and equity in regular education settings is still under development, and the "field remains confused as to the actions needed to move policy and practice forward" (Ainscow, 2020, pg 1).

In conclusion, taking the operational construction of inclusive education prepared for the Global Educational Monitoring Report 2020, inclusive education refers to securing and guaranteeing all children's right to access, presence, participation and success in their local regular school (Slee et al., 2019). Inclusive education "calls upon neighbourhood schools to build their capacity to eliminate barriers to access to regular schools and ensure presence, participation, and achievement to provide excellent educational experiences and outcomes for all children and young people" (Slee et al., 2018, pg 8).

Inclusion is about the presence, participation and achievement of all students. Here 'presence' is concerned with where children are educated and how reliably and punctually they attend; 'participation' relates to the quality of their experiences whilst they are there and, therefore, must incorporate the views of the learners themselves; and 'achievement' is about the outcomes of learning across the curriculum, not merely test or examination results (Ainscow & Miles, 2009, pg 3).

This definition of inclusive education enshrines the fundamentals of the relevant conventions and agreements on how inclusive education should look in practice (Slee et al., 2019).

2.2.4.2. What are the tensions around the concept of inclusive education?

Inclusive education is not exempt from tensions and debates (Echeita et al., 2009). The fundamentals of inclusive education stated in the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the CRPD (2006) is that all children should be placed in their neighbouring schools, regardless of their difficulties, and with appropriate support (UNESCO, 1994, 2016). One of the main points of discussion contests inclusive education's central ideal, questioning the learning benefits for some children with disabilities in regular school placements.

a) Education and Placement

The conversation on the benefits of placement brings some authors to contend that the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools jeopardises their learning (Hornby, 2011; Imray & Colley, 2017; Kauffman & Hallahan, 1996; Kauffman et al., 2018; Norwich, 2014). The authors emphasise that 'the best place for learning defines inclusion; hence regular school settings are not always the best option (Haug, 2017). Along the same line, scholars such as Kauffman, Haug and Imray, among others, declare that the priority concerning the education of children with disabilities should not rest on the setting but on what is the best option for these children's learning and well-being (Anastasiou et al., 2015; Goodall, 2018; Haug, 2017; Imray & Colley, 2017; Kauffman et al., 2016). These authors recall that the benefit of children with disabilities should be prioritised over the placement, and perhaps, a regular classroom may not suit all children with disabilities. In particular, children with Autism may exhibit higher behavioural, emotional and intellectual needs (Anastasiou et al., 2015; Goodall, 2018; Haug, 2017; Imray & Colley, 2017; Kauffman et al., 2016). As Haug (2017) argues,

'access and placement will replace quality and benefit' (Haug, 2017), and children with disabilities would access regular schools but to the detriment of an education fit to their needs. Additionally, authors like Hornby (2015) and Imray and Colley (2018) declare that the 'vision' of educating all children in regular classrooms cannot be achieved, advocating for different practices in line with 'inclusive special education', which address the education of children with disabilities in both regular and special classes (Hornby, 2015; Imray & Colley, 2017).

The conversation brings other authors to argue that placement and quality can go alongside quality and that children with disabilities have the right to be included in regular schools with their peers (Ainscow, 2003; Miles & Singal, 2010; Slee & Allan, 2001). However, these authors argue that providing children with disabilities access to regular schools is insufficient and cannot be called inclusion. As many scholars defend, children with disabilities cannot achieve their full potential without the appropriate support and accommodations (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). Therefore, when placing children with disabilities and other difficulties in general education settings, they ought to have access to and participate in school activities equally as their peers (Ainscow, 2016; Ainscow, Booth, Dyson, et al., 2006). Nevertheless, if children with disabilities are placed in regular schools without equal opportunities to participate alongside their peers, their placement becomes a form of segregation. This form of exclusion does not only materialise within the school boundaries; it is also transferred to their communities, impacting their sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Slee, 2019).

As Slee contended, the value of belonging is central to inclusion when addressing the inclusion of vulnerable populations, not only as a value but as a successful outcome (Slee, 2018, 2019). The sense of belonging to schools "entails the students a sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others in the academic classroom setting, and feeling oneself be an essential part of the life and

activity of the class” (p.25) (Goodenow, 1993). When schools fail to promote the belonging of children with Autism and other disabilities in their classrooms and playgrounds, in the short and long term there is a risk of influencing how these children will be accepted and belong to society (Ainscow 2020; Schuelka et al., 2020; Slee, 2019).

b) Exclusion in an era of inclusion

The tension around placement extrapolates to the implementation of inclusive education in regular school settings. Almost 30 years after the Salamanca Statement (1994) and 15 after the UN CRPD (2006), there seems to be a lack of conceptual focus in schools on the fundamentals of Inclusive education (Ainscow et al., 2019). In an era of inclusion, adopting special classes and autistic units under the roof of regular schools is common in many countries, including Ireland (Banks & McCoy, 2017).

Additionally, segregation practices as the best educational provision within and outside the classroom are adopted in general school settings (The World Bank Group, 2011; UNESCO, 2016). This form of separated education has been accepted, as appropriate and beneficial, to support children with learning difficulties and disabilities within regular schools (Banks & McCoy, 2017). As Slee argued, inclusive education is acting as a form of segregation for children with disabilities, which occurs when schools' accountability for performance becomes the focus of education, putting at-risk children whose learning pace may differ from the average (Slee, 2019).

The idea of school accountability is linked with neoliberalism reform, where schools are the instruments in charge of preparing competent future employees for the labour markets. In other words, educators must train pupils to achieve in the future and drive successful economies (Hedegaard-Soerensen & Grumloese, 2020). Therefore, schools' accountability for performance creates learning as a competitive matter that affects all students but most importantly, as Slee asserts, accountability 'increases the

precariousness of the trajectories of vulnerable population cohorts' (Slee, 2019, pg 917). Neoliberal reform seeks schools to account for and progress, and it is based on performance and achievement. However, these ideas do not work well with the inclusion of marginalised or at-risk of exclusion populations, particularly children with disabilities (Arduin, 2015; Bacon, 2019; Schuelka et al., 2019; Slee, 2013).

The focus on achievement in schools and the relevancy put on the results from high stakes standardised tests emphasises the achievement of some on the detriment of those who may fall in between the cracks. The consequences of pressure put on schools and educators to produce high-profile students could impact the educational provision of children who may experience difficulties (Slee, 2018). As a result, educators segregate these children from the rest of their peers because they are unable to fit in and achieve the required standards (Hedegaard-Soerensen & Grumloese, 2020; Slee, 2013). Neoliberal policies focusing on accountability, achievement, and individual competition could, therefore, influence how inclusion and diversity is perceived by educators, pushing the idea of inclusive education into the background, resulting in the exclusion of marginalised children, including those with a disability, from regular education (Bacon, 2019; Hedegaard-Soerensen & Grumloese, 2020; Schuelka et al., 2019; Slee, 2013; Slee et al., 2018).

Additionally, scholars such as Kurt and colleagues (2012) and Slee (2019) argue that the use of segregated practices in general education settings appears to follow the philosophies that supported special education practices in the past and today. This hypothesis could explain why children with disabilities, who are educated in regular education settings, are still separated from the group in their learning and activities (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2012; Slee, 2001, 2008, 2019). It can also explain the use of special units in regular schools, built on the understanding that the deficits associated with children with disabilities incapacitate them from being part of the general education settings. It seems that segregation is put into practice in regular schools to support the

learning of children with disabilities in an environment tailored to their needs (Banks & McCoy, 2017; Mittler, 2012; Rose & Shevlin, 2020; UNESCO et al., 2016). Nevertheless, this form of education is not aligned with the fundamentals of inclusive education enshrined in the Salamanca Statement (1994), the CRPD (2006, 2016) and the SDG4 (2015) (UNESCO, 1994, 2016; UNESCO et al., 2016; United Nations, 2006).

The challenges around the implementation of inclusive education and the different attitudinal, structural and political barriers make inclusive education a difficult task (Ainscow, 2016; Ainscow et al., 2019; Slee et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2016). These challenges are widely accepted in the field of Inclusive Education, with many scholars agreeing that the inclusion of children with disabilities and those at risk of marginalisation is still an area under development. Despite the work achieved, much still needs to be done (Ainscow, 2020; Schuelka et al., 2020; Slee, 2011, 2019; UNESCO, 2016). As Slee claims, 'Achieving the right to inclusive and quality education for students with disabilities remains unfinished business, and it cannot be business as usual' (Slee et al., 2018, pg 7). Another area under scrutiny, recognised by many scholars in the field of inclusive education, is the lack of a single standard and international definition of the concept (Calvo Álvarez & Verdugo Alonso, 2012).

c) Challenges around the conceptualisation of Inclusive Education

Conceptualising inclusive education is not a straightforward business and is still an area of much-heated debate (Ainscow et al., 2019; Slee, 2019). It is argued that the lack of a widely accepted operational definition could contribute to misunderstandings about what inclusive education is about, which could explain the challenges encountered when putting inclusive education into practice (Ainscow & Miles, 2009; Azorín & Ainscow, 2020; Schuelka et al., 2020; Slee, 2019). Scholars such as Watkins and colleagues (2009, 2016) agree that the different interpretations of the concept impact how inclusive education is implemented and how its effectiveness is measured. These authors also convey that the problem is taking place in Europe and at an international

level (D'alessio & Watkins, 2009; Meijer & Watkins, 2016; Watkins & Ebersold, 2016). Nevertheless, as Dyson (2013) argues, the definition of inclusive education and its practice varies between and within cultures and educational systems (Dyson, 2013). For that reason, the understanding of inclusive education ought to take into account the different contexts, cultures and political agendas where it is to be implemented (Amor et al., 2019; Azorín & Ainscow, 2020; Miles & Singal, 2010; Peters, 2007).

Despite the importance of having an operational definition of inclusive education, how inclusion is defined is not relevant from the perspective of children with disabilities in schools (Schuelka et al., 2020). As Schuelka et al. (2020) argued, the focus of inclusive education is no longer on the meaning but on how to achieve it. The authors asserted that the focus on inclusive education ought to be placed in the day to day in schools, with an emphasis on the whole experience of children with disabilities in schools. Therefore, the school experience ought to involve participation in the same activities as their peers. In addition to focusing on promoting their sense of belonging to the group and the stimulation of their identity and safety in school as members of their schools' communities (Schuelka et al., 2020). Moreover, children with disabilities and other difficulties should achieve their potential in schools; in other words, they should develop academically, socially and emotionally to their full potential with tailored support. In addition, children with disabilities should be supported to enable their social participation in schools and their communities (Schuelka et al., 2020).

Regarding the operational definition of inclusive education, Goransson and Nilholm (2014), highlighted the diversity in understanding the concept of Inclusive education in research. The authors asserted that despite the importance of having a clear definition of inclusive education, research in the field should focus on the best way to accomplish inclusive education and that "different understandings of inclusion should be seen, to a large extent, as expressions of different views of what schools should accomplish" (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014, pg 1). As Schuelka conceded, the definition of

inclusive education should not be the focus of research in the field. Instead, research in inclusive education should focus on the “how, what, and why” of inclusive education instead of defining and redefining the concept (Schuelka et al., 2020, pg 1&3). For that reason, an international operational definition may not be required; however, a clear operative definition - whatever this may be in the given context - should be clear when researching the field of inclusive education (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014).

In practice, the definition of inclusive education involves eliminating physical and attitudinal barriers to learning and participation in schools. Also, it recognises that children with disabilities and other vulnerable populations ought to have access, presence, participation, a sense of belonging and achievement in regular schools to realise meaningful inclusion. A critical aspect highlighted is the link between inclusion and equity (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Booth, 2011; Echeita Sarrionandia & Ainscow, 2011; Messiou & Ainscow, 2015; Miles & Singal, 2010).

It is considered that achievement is as equally crucial as participation, presence and sense of belonging, and these concepts are all key to successful inclusion in the short and long term (Ainscow, 2020; Sánchez et al., 2019). However, how to put inclusion and equity into practice is still a work in progress. For example, as Ainscow claims, to achieve fairness in schools, it is required to align culture and national and local policies with schools and communities (Ainscow, 2020). Therefore, segregating children from regular schools based on their disabilities and failing to provide an equitable education is a form of exclusion against social justice and fairness (UNESCO, 2016).

2.2.5. Summary

This section has outlined the concept of inclusive education from its historical origins to the influence of the Disability Movement (1960) and the Rights framework anchored in the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, CRPD (2006). Additionally, it has presented a review of the

state-of-the-art concerning the conceptualisation of inclusive education and the tensions in the field.

The concept of Inclusive Education underpinning this research involves the fundamental human right to education for children with disabilities as the way forward to having a better society. Additionally, it recognises the acceptance of diversity, equal rights to access regular schools, presence, participation, acceptance, and achievement in regular education settings. Furthermore, it promotes the importance of a sense of belonging, stimulation of identity and safety (Ainscow, 2016; Ainscow et al., 2006; Booth, 2017; Clark et al., 2018; Fitzgerald, 2018; Mittler, 2012; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Schuelka et al., 2020; Slee et al., 2018; UNESCO et al., 2016).

It is understood that as philosophy, inclusive education is uncontested and accepted as the way forward for restructuring educational systems. However, challenges appear when putting the concept into practice (Ainscow, 2016; Mittler, 2012; Norwich, 2014; Slee et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2017). The idea of Inclusive education is based on the fundamental human right to education, valuing and treating everyone equally and according to their needs.

Furthermore, inclusive Education promotes social justice and prepares vulnerable populations to participate in society, gaining freedom, dignity and respect (Ainscow, 2016, 2020; Booth, 2017; Haug, 2017; Norwich, 2014; UNESCO, 2009). Therefore, the concept involves the celebration of diversity and difference, as well as the consideration of human rights, social justice and equity (Ainscow, 2016; Ainscow et al., 2019; Ainscow et al., 2006; Schuelka et al., 2020; Slee, 2019).

In conclusion, the challenges involved in including children with disabilities in regular schools should not be considered a failure but part of the process. A process that will bring us “successes *en route* for that grander destination” is the inclusion of *All* children in general education settings, regardless of their difficulties (Slee, 2019, pg 918).

The present research explores how inclusion occurs in regular schools, focusing on the inclusion of children with Autism. The conceptualisation of Autism as mental impairment or as a natural human variation can determine how others perceive children with Autism, which could shape the education and inclusion of these children in regular mainstream schools (Jordan et al., 2019). The following sections provide a review of the concept of Autism, outlining the evolution experienced by the concept of Autism in history and how the understanding of Autism evolved from the medical field to the Neurodiversity Movement.

2.3. The concept of Autism

This section presents the concept of Autism and how it has developed from its first appearance in 1943 to date. Traditionally the definition of Autism has been linked to the medical field. It is considered, from this perspective, a neurodevelopmental disorder occurring within a spectrum, characterised by difficulties in social communication, social interactions and restrictive, repetitive patterns of behaviours, interests and activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). On the other hand, Autism, from a medical approach, is understood as a health and mental illness inherent to the individual and caused by biochemical and psychological dysfunctions (Fitzgerald, 2017).

Additionally, Autism is not considered a pathology by many people with the label of Autism and by several scholars. From the neurodivergent model, Autism is a naturally occurring behavioural, cognitive, and emotional divergence. Consequently, autistic people ought to be treated equally to the rest of human beings, ensuring that their rights to education, employment and a just and equitable life are not altered (Armstrong, 2015; Kapp et al., 2013; Owren & Stenhammer, 2013).

The concept of Disability, as well as Autism, have been traditionally linked with the medical profession. Consequently, the limitations of Autism are understood due to the individual impairments that disable the person in different areas of society.

Nevertheless, the disability movement in the 1960s shook this approach, and Disability acquired a sociocultural and political dimension viewing people with disabilities as a minority group who had suffered similar ways of oppression as any other minority group (Oliver, 1989; Oliver, 2017; Oliver & Barnes, 2010).

The following sections present the definition of Autism from the medical lens outlining the developments concerning research examining the causes of Autism. It is followed by the definition of Autism in the modern mental health systems, its diagnosis and Classification Diagnostic System. The second part of this section focuses on other non-medical approaches to Autism, for example, the neurodiversity movement or Autism as a neurodiversity movement or Autism as a naturally occurring variation. The last part of this section presents the connections between the constructs of Autism and disability.

2.3.1. The development of Autism from a medical perspective throughout history

The concept of Autism, which stems from the Greek word “autos”, meaning self, was first used by a Swiss psychiatrist, Dr Eugene Bleuler, in 1911. Bleuler utilised the concept of Autism to describe a particular mental state seen in people diagnosed with schizophrenia. This particular mental state was characterised by patients' extreme withdrawal from themselves, away from social interactions and communication with others (Feinstein, 2010). However, the concept of Autism as a medical construct in the field of psychiatry did not appear until later, in 1943, when Leo Kanner, an Austrian psychiatrist based in the United States, described a group of children with emotional and intellectual impairment, characterised with extreme “aloneness” from early life. Kanner (1943) categorised this form of pathology as “infantile autism” (Michaels & Amasino, 1999). In 1960, Kanner’s diagnosis of Infantile Autism was widely acknowledged and recognised as a rare disorder that affected children primarily with moderate to severe intellectual impairment (Feinstein, 2010).

Around the same time (1944), on the other side of the ocean in Austria, Hans Asperger published an article, ignored at the time, related to children with a similar diagnosis to Kanner's that Asperger also called Autism. Asperger referred to these children as characterised by social communication problems, with not easily recognised intellectual disability. However, the work of Asperger's was highly ignored until Uta Frith translated his work in 1991 (Asperger, 1991). The debate around Autism and Aspergers brought up debate around the decade of 1990, which is still prevailing today (Jordan, 2012; Wing, 2005).

Since the publication of the work of Kanner in 1943, many psychiatrists and psychologists have focused on the causes and treatments of Autism. Thus different aetiologies populated the literature from the decade of 1950 to date. The psychoanalytic discourse placed the causes of Autism in the psyche, an ego differentiation problem from 1950 to 1960. Autism was also considered the result of their "refrigerator mothers", mentioned first by Kanner and revisited by Bettelheim later in 1959 (Bettelheim, 1959). The main developments in understanding the features and aetiology of Autism materialised in the decade of 1960. In Europe, the major work of psychologists and psychiatrists, such as Uta Frith, Lorna Wing and Michael Rutter, who began their search for the "organic" origin of Autism (Frith, 1972), added essential connotations to the concept of Autism as it is known today within the medical field.

Lorna Wing and Michael Rutter, both psychiatrists, set the fundamental basis for the concept of Autism as a spectrum disorder in the decade of 1970. Both authors established Autism as a neurodevelopmental condition and agreed on the hypothesis of the genetic origin of Autism and that these genes acted on a spectrum. Rutter also supported the Triad of Impairments established by Lorna and Gould in 1979 (Rutter, 1978; Wing & Gould, 1979). In addition to the understanding of Autism as a spectrum, Lorna Wing established that there were children who presented some communication and language problems but with no intellectual impairment. This statement fed into the

debate that there was a subtype of Autism or a separate condition called Asperger's (Wing, 1981, 2005). These advances were followed by research in the genetics of Autism, which was first developed by the work carried out by Rutter with twins (Folstein & Rutter, 1977). Research in the field of genetics as the possible cause of Autism continues today (Folstein & Rosen-Sheidley, 2001; Geschwind, 2011; Geschwind & Levitt, 2007).

In parallel to the investigations performed by Lorna Wing and Rutter on Autism, the decade of 1980 was characterised by remarkable productivity in researching the cognitive deficits in children with Autism. Psychologists such as Uta Frith, Simon Baron-Cohen, Tony Attwood, and Amitta Shah made important discoveries about Autism. Baron-Cohen's doctoral work in 1985 generated the Theory of Mind, which was used to explain a lack of cognitive capacity to understand other beliefs, desires, or intentions that may differ from one own (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). The work of Tony Attwood also added to the theory of mind. The author showed the lack of expressive gestures in children with Autism, which could affect their communication, adding importance to the function of gestures in the difficulties in communication associated with children with Autism (Attwood et al., 1988). Additionally, the work of Amitta Shah and Francesca Happé shaped the development of the theory of weak central coherence in the decade of 1980 (Frith & Happé, 1994; Happé, 1993; Shah et al., 1982). The development of these three cognitive theories attempted to explain the enigma of Autism (Jordan et al., 2019).

As outlined in this section, much research has been developed since Kanner's first diagnosis of Autism. However, the causes and treatment of Autism are still elusive. The enigma of the causes of Autism still exists (i.e., environmental influences, biological and genetic factors, and psychological dysfunctions), requiring further research and evidence (Runswick-Cole, 2016; Straus, 2010). A brief review of the history of Autism has shown the complexity of the construct from a medical perspective. In addition, it revealed the changes that occurred throughout history concerning the aetiology of

Autism and diagnostic criteria, which have not yet arrived at a clear conclusion (Straus, 2010). The following section outlines the concept of Autism from the diagnostic criteria and the severity of the condition. This section is relevant to understanding how Autism is defined and understood within the medical field. Additionally, the medical diagnosis of Autism is still a requirement to determine children with autism health support, educational provision, and financial support (Jordan et al., 2019).

2.3.2. The medical diagnosis of Autism

As highlighted in the previous section, the development of Autism as a psychiatric condition was not exempt from difficulties and contradictions. The features of Autism were confirmed to be complex and varied from person to person (Feinstein, 2010; Wing, 1993, 2004). In their search for the diagnostic criteria of Autism, psychiatrists and psychologist researched the behavioural, emotional, and cognitive features of children with Autism to compile a list that could comprise the diagnosis of Autism (Rutter, 1978; Wing & Gould, 1979; Wing & Wing, 1971). The work of psychiatrists such as Sir Michael Rutter in 1978 and Lorna Wing and Judith Gould (1979) were relevant and influential in the diagnostic and classification criteria of Autism as it is known today.

The triad of impairment presented by Lorna Wing and Judith Gould in 1979 (Wing & Gould, 1979) established the diagnostic criteria for Autism. The criteria became the fundamental basis that influenced the classification systems. The classification systems globally used in modern mental health systems are the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD) and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) used to establish the diagnosis of Autism (Fitzgerald, 2017; Jordan & Roberts, 2019; Wing, 2005).

The “Triad of Impairments” established that children with Autism presented with a) impairment in social interactions, characterised by having trouble in social situations and establishing social interactions, b) impairment in communication, characterised by

difficulties in establishing communication with others caused by difficulties with speech and language skills, as well as difficulties in reading the intonation of others, and c) Impairment on imagination caused by their difficulty in imagining alternative outcomes to situations, as well as to predict what will happen next. As a result, children with Autism present repetitive behaviour patterns and a rigid style of thinking (Wing et al., 1976). Nowadays, in modern mental health systems, the diagnosis of Autism depends entirely on the DSM and ICD developed from psychiatrists' influence and the work of Lorna Wing and Sir Michael Rutter (Rutter, 1978; Slee, 2018).

a) Diagnostic Classification Systems and Autism

The classification systems currently used to diagnose Autism are the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), eleventh version (2019), and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), fifth revision (2013); both systems were developed to categorise the nature of mental illness and to guide professionals. The ICD is a diagnostic tool for clinical purposes, epidemiology and health management, while the DSM is constructed to categorise mental disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organization, 2019).

Both systems refer to Autism as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a neurodevelopmental disorder and a spectrum classified as a mental disorder and a disability. From this approach, Autism is understood as a psychiatric condition inherent to the individual, a mental illness characterised by deficits in social interactions and communication and restrictive, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities. These symptoms must have an early onset in life and cause significant impairment in social, occupational, and other important areas of current functioning and are not better explained by intellectual developmental disorder or global developmental delay. The DSM 5 (2013) establishes a level of severity from one to three, and the level of support required ranges from “requiring support” to “requiring very substantial support” (APA, 2013). However, Autism is understood not only as a medical feature but also as a form of

neurodiversity, and the next section presents this different approach to understanding Autism.

2.3.3. Autism and Diversity

Autism, as it is understood in the medical field, has been contested by autistic communities and scholars in the disability field. From the 1990s, the focus on Autism as a socially and culturally constructed concept gained strength (Jordan & Roberts, 2019; Straus, 2010). From this approach, Autism as a concept is a group of behaviours, abilities and attitudes that are culturally grouped in a label. As a cultural construction, Autism is considered a natural human variation that society has reconfigured to establish the difference between “normally able” and “stigmatised disabled” (Straus, 2010). Moreover, Autism is developed by society as a result of the parameters established about what is considered “normal” and “abnormal” (Timimi, 2005). Additionally, Autism has also been considered an identity (Pollack, 2013) by those previously diagnosed with Autism, and it is the basic premise of the Neurodiversity Movement (1990) (Armstrong, 2015, 2017; Bagatell, 2007; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Kapp et al., 2013).

a) The Neurodiversity Movement

Neurodiversity was first mentioned in the early years of the 1990's decade by journalist Harvey Blume and autism advocate Jude Singer (Armstrong, 2017). However, the work by the autism activist John Sinclair set the basis for this movement with his essay “Don't Mourn for Us” in 1993 (Armstrong, 2015). The Neurodiversity Movement considers atypical neurological developments, the differences in the brain, as normal in human nature, and as a result, neurodivergence ought to be recognised as any other human variation, such as gender and race (Kapp et al., 2013). Under this approach, the brain's variations are not linked to mental health or disease. The movement urges a change in the understanding of Autism from pathology and deficit that requires a cure to the acceptance of Autism as a natural variation (Armstrong, 2015).

The Neurodiversity Movement establishes that people with Autism have the same rights as those who fall under the “normal” criteria, also called neurotypicals (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012). Therefore, autistic people ought to be treated equally to those considered neurotypical in all different areas of society, such as school and work (Lorenz et al., 2017). However, the movement is not exempt from critics. It is understood that the variation in the severity of mental and health conditions associated with some people with Autism is not considered in the neurodiversity movement. Autistic people who struggle in everyday activities argue that the ideas of the neurodiversity movement are not representative of all but some who can navigate the world without extra support (Bagatell, 2010; Broderick & Ne’eman, 2008; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Runswick-Cole, 2014).

b) The Neurodiversity Paradigm

Within the understanding of neurodiversity emerged the Neurodiversity Paradigm, which is not the paradigm of the Neurodiversity Movement. The Neurodiversity paradigm is a philosophy that understands that neurodiversity is a natural and valuable form of human diversity (Walker, 2014). This paradigm recognises that what constitutes a normal brain or neurocognition is culturally constructed and that the differences in the brain, neurocognition and social behaviours are natural variations. Therefore, the cultural construction of the difference as “abnormal” constitutes Disability (Walker, 2014). This approach promotes the acceptance and understanding of differences in the way of thinking and learning for children with disabilities as a natural variation instead of a dysfunction (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Thomas, 2003).

It asserts that the focus on the deficits, particularly in the classroom, affects the teaching and learning of children with Autism and impacts how their teachers perceive these children. A focus on the deficits and not on the strengths could impact teachers’ expectations, as suggested by research, which powerfully influences the outcomes of children with disabilities (Anglim et al., 2018; Gershenson et al., 2016; Mesibov & Shea,

1996; Peterson et al., 2016; Robertson et al., 2003; Rodríguez et al., 2012a; Rubie-Davies, 2010; Turner et al., 2015). The neurodiversity idea urges the consideration of the strengths of children with disabilities in their teaching and learning and their interests and aspirations (Armstrong, 2017). The concept of Autism is also considered a disability in policy and education practice. The disability models aim to provide a description and conceptual framework to explain what disability is and how it is experienced by people who have a disability (Shakespeare, 2015).

2.3.4. Autism and Disability

Disability, nowadays, is associated with Human Rights to education, independence, employment, and health support that were denied to people with disabilities throughout history (Garcia Iriarte, 2016; Oliver, 2017; Oliver & Barnes, 2010). In 1990, the Disability Movement significantly contributed to changing how society perceives disability today and enhanced the importance of maintaining the rights of people with disabilities (Oliver, 2017).

Nevertheless, despite the changes and developments in the understanding of disability and the right to education, the exclusion of children with disabilities from education around the world is still important, particularly for children with Autism (UNESCO et al., 2016). To resolve this problem, barriers must be eliminated to enable access and participation in education and therefore, in society (UNESCO, 2016; UNESCO et al., 2016; United Nations, 2006; World Report on Disability, 2011). The perception and understanding of Autism and disability have an important role since they can determine how children with Autism are provided (or not), access, presence, participation and achievement in education and society (Jordan, Roberts et al., 2019; Milton, 2016). The following section presents the three main models of disability operating in practice in education.

a) The Medical Model of Disability

From the outset, Autism has always been linked to the medical field, particularly the psychiatric and psychological grounds, which determined Autism as a mental disorder, an impairment inherent to the individual which requires a cure (Asperger, 2009; Baron-Cohen et al., 1985; Frith, 1989; Kanner, 1943; Rutter, 1978; Wing, 1988). The construction of Autism from a medical model of disability establishes Autism as a deficit inherent to the individual. Therefore, Autism is to be perceived as a variation from the norm, an impairment that causes disability. In schools, children with Autism who are perceived from the medical model of disability are seen through a lens of deficit and impairment where their difficulties are considered their barrier to learning (Armstrong, 2014; Kapp et al., 2013; Timimi, 2014).

b) The Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability understands disability as socially imposed through physical and attitudinal barriers to people with impairments (Oliver, 1989). The difficulties experienced by people with disabilities in navigating the world are not explained as a result of their impairments but as the barriers they encounter within education, employment and community that affect their participation and achievement in society (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Kapp et al., 2013; McGuire, 2012; Nadesan, 2013; Mike Oliver, 1986; Straus, 2010). Therefore, attitudinal and physical barriers ought to be overcome to facilitate the education of children with Autism in schools (Ainscow, 2020; Allan, 2010, 2013; Miles & Singal, 2010; Slee, 2019).

c) The Biopsychosocial Model of Disability

The Biopsychosocial Model of Disability emerged in 1977 in response to the need for a new medical model (Engel, 2012). From this model, disability is not seen as a limitation caused by an impairment or societal barriers but the limitations of a person due to the combination of personal, health and environmental factors. The limitations are not

considering the result of the impairment but the consequence of the interactions of the person's health problems with environmental and personal factors (Álvarez et al., 2012; Engel, 2012). From this approach, the health and psychological components generated from impairment are considered relevant factors limiting the functioning of people with disabilities. However, the impact of the environment, and the barriers associated with it, are also taken into consideration as potential factors influencing a person's limitations. The Biopsychosocial Model of Disability is widely accepted nowadays, and it is the model endorsed in the World Report on Disability (2011). In addition, The International Classification of Functioning Disability and Health by the World Health Organization (ICF) draws on this model (Cieza & Bickenbach, 2015; Functioning and Disability Reference Group, 2010; World Report on Disability, 2011).

The different models of disability have been criticised in the literature. On the one hand, the medical model failed to include the impact of the environment on the limitations of persons with disabilities (Anderson, 1975; Oliver, 1990). Conversely, the social model has been criticised for not considering the realities and subjective experiences of those living with an impairment (Shakespeare, 2002; Shakespeare & Watson, 2001). Moreover, the biopsychosocial model has been criticised for the lack of philosophical coherence, sustainable influence on praxis, and the failure to honour subjectivity (Álvarez et al., 2012; Benning, 2015; Hatala, 2012; Nassir Ghaemi, 2009).

c) Autism, Disability and Education

The construction of Autism and disability from a medical, social and biopsychosocial approach can determine how children with Autism are perceived and supported in schools (Jordan & Roberts et al., 2019; Milton, 2016). Nowadays, medicine and other health sciences professionals are still influential in the health, education and financial provision of children with Autism in Ireland and globally (Fitzgerald, 2017). The diagnosis of Autism is considered relevant to provide them with early interventions within the health system as appropriate (Fitzgerald, 2017). In some countries like Ireland, most

school-age children with Autism begin their school journey accompanied by a professional diagnosis before enrolment or during their first couple of years of schooling (Daly et al., 2016). As evidenced by this practice approach, the medical model of disability is essential in understanding Autism. Nevertheless, it adds a limitation to the inclusion of children with Autism since it focuses primarily on the impairments giving limited appreciation to other factors (i.e., personal, contextual, social) that could influence the education of these children in regular schools (Thomas, 2003).

Moreover, the medical model is also important in how educators are trained to understand Autism. The professional development of educators tends to link the features associated with Autism with the medical diagnosis of Autism which contends their difficulties as impairments and barriers to learning (Ainscow, 2005; Corona et al., 2017; Humphrey & Symes 2013; Leblanc et al., 2009; Norwich & Nash, 2011; Shyman, 2012). However, as argued by many scholars, the diagnosis of Autism from a medical model, although relevant from a health perspective, is not required for their education, and it should not determine the teaching and learning of children with Autism in schools (Ainscow, 2003; Corona et al., 2017; Humphrey & Symes, 2013).

On the contrary, to educate children with Autism in regular schools, relevance should be provided to the strengths and needs of these individuals (Slee, 2019). For that reason, for children with Autism to be able to learn in regular schools, teaching and learning ought to be adapted in the best way that suits these children's learning (Jordan & Roberts, 2019). A diagnosis in school, at its best, represents a label and the stigma that sometimes may accompany the diagnosis (Timimi, 2014, 2015). This approach could be accompanied by segregated practices and interventions that, far from including the child with Autism in the classroom, promote their isolation and exclusion (Ainscow, 2020; Runswick-Cole, 2016; Slee, 2013, 2019).

2.3.5. The prevalence of Autism

The prevalence of Autism has increased dramatically in the last 30 years (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009; McConkey, 2020). An increase that has been reflected in the number of children with Autism placed in regular schools following policy changes and associated legislation in these two decades. Many are the hypothesis that has been put forward to explain this rapid rise, globally and in Ireland, in the number of children diagnosed with Autism. On the one hand, the expanded diagnosis criteria in the DSM and ICD were believed to have generated that rapid increase (Bailey et al., 2013; Matson & Kozlowski, 2011). On the other hand, the newer version of the DSM in 2013 compiled a series of changes to adjust the increase in the prevalence of Autism due to the diagnostic criteria (Young & Rodi, 2014). Additionally, this increase in prevalence was explained due to a rise in awareness and early diagnosis and the recognition of Autism as a lifelong condition (Matson & Kozlowski, 2011).

There are currently no reliable methods to establish an accurate prevalence of Autism in Ireland and globally (Boilson et al., 2016; Sweeney & Staines, 2018). Hence, studies have assessed the prevalence of Autism using a combination of methods to help them arrive at a figure (Fombonne, 2018; Sweeney & Staines, 2018). Various studies have provided different figures worldwide. For example, Baird (2006), in the UK concluded a 1% prevalence in the childhood population (Baird et al., 2006), while Baron-Cohen (2009) estimated a prevalence of 1.54% in children aged 5-9 years old, and Kim et al. (2011) concluded a prevalence of 2.64% in a South Korean community of children aged 7 to 12 years old. In Ireland, the Health Service Executive requested a recent study by Sweeney and Staines to shed light on the prevalence of people with Autism, estimated at 1% of the population (Sweeney & Staines, 2018). In Ireland, the Department of Education accepts an estimated prevalence of 1.5% for children with Autism of school age. This prevalence rate comprises the number of children diagnosed

with Autism accessing services catering for special needs in Ireland (Banks & McCoy, 2011; Boilson et al., 2016; Daly et al., 2016).

2.3.6. Summary

In summary, this section has explored the concept of Autism and revealed its complexities and nuances. Autism, from its origins, has been linked to the medical field. As such, Autism is understood as a neurodevelopmental disorder, a spectrum characterised by difficulties in social communication, social interactions and restrictive, repetitive patterns of behaviours, interests and activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The conceptualisation of Autism rooted within the medical field implies a biological and psychological element to understanding Autism. Nevertheless, Autism is also understood as socially and culturally constructed, which establishes Autism as a group of behaviours, abilities and attitudes that are culturally grouped in a label. From this perspective, Autism is considered a natural human variation reconfigured by society as a result of the parameters established about what is considered “normal” and “abnormal” (Straus, 2010; Timimi, 2005). Additionally, Autism is seen by those previously diagnosed with Autism as an identity and the basic premise of the Neurodiversity Movement (1990) (Armstrong, 2015, 2017; Bagatell, 2007; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Kapp et al., 2013; Pollack, 2013). The idea behind the neurodiversity movement is that Autism is not a pathology but part of human diversity, adding another dimension to the understanding of Autism as a natural variation of the human condition instead of a medical condition (Broderick & Ne’eman, 2008; Jordan & Roberts, 2019; Walker, 2014).

The concept of disability is also understood as a disability in policy and education practice. Therefore, the understanding of Autism, from an impairment perspective, a social or a cultural barrier could determine how children with Autism are perceived and supported to navigate their lives in education and society. Therefore, the concept of Autism as a disability can be seen as a) a limitation due to an impairment inherent in the

individual (the medical model), b) a limitation due to the barriers imposed by society (the social model), and c) a limitation due to the combination of biological, psychological, and environmental factors (biopsychosocial model).

Some other models, for example, understand disability as a cultural construct or a reason for affirmation. However, for the purpose of this study, the medical model, the social model, and the biopsychosocial model have been described since these are the models of disability most widely used in education, determining how Autism is dealt with by policymakers, educators, and society.

2.4. Chapter concluding remarks

The conceptual chapter outlines the conceptualisation and debates surrounding Inclusive Education and Autism, showing their complexities and nuances. The conceptual framework guides this research affirming that education is a human right entitled to all children, young and adults, regardless of their differences. Therefore, children with Autism have the right to be educated in regular schools along with their non-disabled peers. Additionally, the conceptual framework contends that Inclusive Education involves placement, presence, achievement and belonging. Consequently, placing children with Autism in regular schools, segregating them to special units, and putting in practice a separate education within the classroom is also a form of exclusion. Moreover, the analysis of the concept of Autism revealed its complexities and nuances.

Although certain patterns are common in most children with Autism, the reality is that Autism is heterogeneous, everyone is unique, and what works with one child may not work with others. Consequently, educating children with Autism in school requires understanding the child and what works for them. However, despite this heterogeneity and the difficulties encountered in the current education system, the fundamental basis of inclusive education ought to prevail. For that reason, when approaching the education of children with Autism in regular schools, emphasis should be provided on the strengths

and needs of these children instead of their impairments. In addition, other factors (i.e., personal and contextual) should be considered a potential barrier, apart from the different social, cognitive and emotional styles linked with children with Autism. For that reason, to facilitate the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools, an approach of celebration of difference and diversity with the understanding that education is a human right must be adopted (Ainscow, 2016, 2020; Ainscow et al., 2019; Allan, 2013; Mesibov & Shea, 1996; Slee, 2019; Slee et al., 2018).

The next chapter reviews the existing literature and provides the state of the art concerning the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools narrowing the focus to the research gap on the day to day at schools for children with Autism. The literature review tackles research related to the inclusion of children with Autism at the school micro-level (i.e., classroom, playground, and support classroom). It focuses on the role played by the education actors (i.e., teachers, SNAs, classroom assistants and peers), paying attention to their interactions in the different in-school settings where children with Autism are educated in regular schools (i.e., classroom, playground and support classroom).

CHAPTER 3 - LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Introduction

The debate concerning the feasibility of inclusive education is still open (Imray & Colley, 2017; Slee, 2019). However, from the late 90s, the number of children with Autism placed in regular schools increased considerably, with variations in the number of placements between countries and within countries (Baio et al., 2018; Baron-Cohen et al., 2009; Elsabbagh et al., 2012; McConkey, 2020). In Ireland, a study conducted by Daly and colleagues in 2016 identified that 65% of children diagnosed with Autism were placed in regular classes, with 21% placed in autism classes within regular schools and 14% of these children placed in special schools (Daly et al., 2016).

There is also a disagreement on the best educational placement for children with Autism and other disabilities. Some authors argue that children with Autism are better placed in special schools that fit their needs and that regular schools are not the place where they can thrive (Goodall, 2019b; Imray & Colley, 2017; Marshall & Goodall, 2015; Norwich, 2014). While other authors defend that the inclusion of children with Autism and other disabilities in regular schools is a human right. However, to facilitate its implementation, adjustments are required at all levels in national and local policy and in practice in schools (Ainscow, 2020; Ainscow & Miles, 2009; Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Slee, 2019; Slee & Allan, 2001).

Additionally, research exploring the benefits of these two settings for children with Autism and other disabilities is inconclusive. Only a few studies have compared the academic and social achievement of children with Autism in regular and special schools with diverse results (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2012; Reed et al., 2012; Rowley et al., 2012; Waddington & Reed, 2017). Therefore, the focus of attention should not rest on what placement suits them best but on implementing inclusive education practices and strategies that will enable all children, including children with disabilities and Autism, to

access and participate in the society to that they belong (Ainscow, 2020; Ainscow et al., 2019; Ainscow & Miles, 2009; Schuelka et al., 2020; Slee, 2018, 2019; UNESCO et al., 2015).

As some researchers defend, realising the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools is not an easy enterprise. However, it is feasible with the appropriate willingness, knowledge, awareness, training, support and tools (Calder et al., 2013; Norwich, 2005; Pellicano et al., 2018; Slee, 2013). Nevertheless, today, there are still gaps between policy and practice, which is significant in the case of children with Autism (Ainscow et al., 2019; UIS, 2018; UNESCO et al., 2015). Hence the need for more research to gain knowledge on how inclusive education takes place and what can be done to make the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools accessible, participative and achievable (Slee et al., 2019).

The review of the literature concerning the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools shows the difficulties encountered by children with Autism to access inclusive education in regular schools (Lindsay et al., 2013; McGregor & Campbell, 2001; Pellicano et al., 2018; Segall & Campbell, 2014). However, more importantly, it transpires that behind these children's limited inclusion lays a belief that their "difficulties" pose challenges to educators, parents, peers, and children with Autism themselves in regular schools, compromising their successful inclusive education (Lindsay et al., 2013; Pellicano et al., 2018; Roberts & Simpson, 2016).

Other researchers have confirmed the benefits of regular schools for the academic, emotional and social development of children with Autism (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Kasari et al., 2011; Morewood et al., 2011; Santillan et al., 2019). However, more research is required to understand how the inclusion of children with Autism occurs in regular primary schools, in particular in the area of facilitators and inhibitors, what is working and what is not in their inclusion in schools (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Jordan & Roberts, 2019; Symes & Humphrey, 2012).

It is important to understand that inclusive education can not materialise if children with Autism do not have the same opportunities as their peers in the classroom and the playground. If they do not participate in and contribute to school activities similarly to their peers, their involvement as members of the group does not occur, and inclusion does not happen (Ainscow, 2020; Slee, 2019; UNESCO, 2009, 2016).

In schools, interactions between students and educators are essential and involve interpersonal connections and instructional and contextual interactions (Hamre et al., 2013; Pianta & Hamre, 2009; Rudasill, 2011). In addition, belonging and membership are developed in the classroom and the playground through daily participation and interactions, which act as the building blocks of relationships (Pennings et al., 2014, 2018). In line with this information, the literature review chapter aims to provide an overview of the state of the art concerning the inclusion of children with Autism in regular primary schools. The review tackled research related to the inclusion of children with Autism at the school micro-level (i.e., classroom, playground, and support classroom), with a focus on the role played by each of the actors (i.e., teachers, support teachers, classroom assistants and peers) involved in the different in-school settings, and the interactions taking place between the actors. The chapter opens with an overview of the search procedure and follows with a literature review related to the role of teachers, classroom assistants and peers in the inclusion of children with Autism in regular primary schools. The chapter ends by outlining the gap in the literature that underpins the present research.

3.2. Literature review search procedure

The literature review search comprised an exhaustive review from 2005 to 2021 of electronic databases, manual searches of key journals, and searches in general search engines such as Google Scholar. Trinity College, the University of Dublin library, served as the portal to access the electronic databases searched, PsycINFO, ERIC,

SAGE, ProQuest, the Dissertation and Theses Database, Taylor and Francis Journals, the Australian Education Index, and the British Education Index.

The completion of the search happened through manual searches and reference lists, including journal articles and books with a review of key authors, such as Slee, Ainscow, and Booth, among others, and a systematic review of relevant journals and special issues, such as *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *Educational Research*, *Autism*, *European Journal of Inclusive Education*, *Disability and Society*, *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability* and REACH. Additionally, Google Scholar was reviewed to cross-reference articles and other updated literature that may not have been included in previous databases.

The preliminary search comprised material from 2005 to 2016 and included a combination of primary terms (i.e., Autism, Inclusive Education, Regular primary schools). In addition, limiters and secondary search terms were used (i.e., teachers, CA, peers, children with Autism, classrooms, playgrounds, and support classrooms). This strategy aimed to narrow the material towards this research's primary aim to explore how the inclusion of children with Autism happens in regular primary schools. To keep the academic rigour, peer-reviewed, and accessible in full text, English or Spanish were selected for review.

The exhaustive literature review aimed to understand the current state of the art in the inclusion of children with Autism in regular primary schools, focusing on the interaction between children with Autism and the key actors in different school settings. The following sections provide a critical review of previous research examining the inclusion of children with Autism in primary schools.

3.3. Interactions between children with Autism and peers in regular schools

Parents and educators agree that placing children with Autism in regular schools is positive because it enables them to interact with peers from the same community and facilitates their friendships outside the school walls (Falkmer et al., 2015; Hodges et al., 2020; Owen-DeSchryver et al., 2008; Roberts & Simpson, 2016; UNESCO, 2017). Previous studies confirmed that being educated along with typically developing peers facilitates pupils with Autism to learn social rules by imitating their peers, which also supports children with Autism to practice social skills to prepare them for their inclusion in society (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012; Jones & Frederickson, 2010; Symes & Humphrey, 2010). Additionally, attending school with children with Autism enables peers to forge their learning, understanding and acceptance of diversity (UNESCO, 2016, 2016). As Koegel et al. (2012) state, the social dimension of education plays an essential role in the inclusion of all children, including children with Autism, in regular schools (Koegel et al., 2012).

However, placement in regular schools does not ensure that all children will be socially included (Koster et al., 2010; Sip Jan Pijl et al., 2011). In school, the relationships and friendships between pupils are built through daily interactions, setting the basis that promotes all students' social participation and inclusion within their schools' communities (Koster et al., 2010; Owen-DeSchryver et al., 2008). Positive interactions enhance social skills and foster relationships, favouring all pupils' academic, social, and emotional development, including those with disabilities (Blatchford et al., 2016; Hay et al., 2004). Conversely, the lack of social interactions interferes with children's relationships and their acceptance and inclusion within the group (Sip Jan Pijl et al., 2008; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010). Therefore, fostering positive interactions among children with disabilities and peers in regular schools is relevant to promoting their academic, social and emotional development and inclusive education (Jones & Frederickson, 2010; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, previous research shows that children with Autism encounter difficulties in their social inclusion in primary and secondary regular schools (Boutot & Bryant, 2005; Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Kasari et al., 2011). Children with Autism tend to have fewer friends than their peers with no disabilities (Cullinan, 2017; Locke et al., 2016; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010). They have more difficulties being accepted in their peers' social networks and are prompt for bullying and victimisation (Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Kasari et al., 2012; Locke et al., 2016). Additionally, children with Autism have been found to be at an increased risk of isolation and a lack of social support from their peers (Locke et al., 2010; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010; Rowley et al., 2012; Shih et al., 2019; Tonnsen & Hahn, 2016). Furthermore, Locke et al., (2013) found that their social difficulties in school did not improve over time.

Research emerged to tackle these difficulties by developing social interventions that would support the social interactions and participation of children with Autism with their peers in regular schools (Hochman et al., 2015; Kretzmann et al., 2015; Owen-DeSchryver et al., 2008; Sreckovic et al., 2017). Peer-mediated interventions got particular attention in research due to their effectiveness in the interactions of children with Autism. Moreover, the studies revealed that increasing the awareness of the different social styles of these children would facilitate the interactions between peers and children with Autism (DiSalvo & Oswald, 2002; Watkins et al., 2015).

It is essential to mention that most of the research reviewed outlined the different social styles as impairments in social communication and interaction for children with Autism as the main barrier. Thus, these studies departed from the premise that the "impairment" of children with Autism could act as a barrier to their social difficulties in regular schools (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008b; Kasari et al., 2011; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010). Overall, these studies revealed that the social difficulties of children with Autism in primary and secondary schools were due to their "impairments" in social communication and interactions, failing to consider other potential

factors (i.e. personal, contextual) that could influence the interactions between children with Autism and peers (Hochman et al., 2015; Kasari et al., 2012; Kasari & Smith, 2013).

Conversely, some other research demonstrated that children with Autism had positive social interactions with peers in the classroom and on the playground (Locke et al., 2017; Macintosh & Dissanayake, 2006; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010). For example, Chamberlain et al. (2007), compared the social involvement of children with Autism and children without disabilities in primary schools. The authors employed a mixed-methods approach, including sociometric questionnaires, interviews with parents, teachers' questionnaires, and classroom observations. In addition, they explored the social involvement of 14 children with Autism compared to their aged and gender-matched peers in seven regular primary schools (2nd to 5th class). The study concluded that children with Autism had lesser reciprocal friendships and experienced lower peer acceptance with lesser network centrality than their peers with no disabilities.

Nevertheless, the authors demonstrated that some children with Autism had reciprocal friendships. In addition, it revealed that the proximity and interactions with their peers benefited the social performance of children with Autism. The authors argued that despite the higher number of friends and peer acceptance seen in pupils with no disabilities, the critical aspect revealed in the study was that children with Autism demonstrated they enjoyed having friends. Additionally, these children with Autism maintained positive relationships with their peers and were mostly happy with their relationships and the number of friends they had in the classroom (Chamberlain et al., 2007).

The conclusions from the Chamberlain et al., (2007) study contrast with the results from other research, which confirm that the "impairments" in social communication and interaction of some children with Autism put them at risk of social exclusion in regular schools (Cullinan, 2017; Locke et al., 2016; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010). Chamberlain et al. (2007) pointed out that the understanding of friendship that

children with Autism had could be different from their peers. However, this study also emphasised that these difficulties could lay on the understanding that some peers could have about the different social characteristics displayed by children with Autism. Thus, peers' understanding and unawareness of children with Autism and their unique characteristics could facilitate their interactions. The authors argue that equipping peers with knowledge about the unique social characteristics of these children could enhance their interactions, relationships and acceptance (Chamberlain et al., 2007). This finding resonates with Calder et al. (2013), who asserted that peers' interpretation of the different social styles and behaviours of children with Autism could influence their social interactions (Calder et al., 2013).

In addition, Chamberlain et al. (2007) also highlighted that examining how the interactions between children with Autism and peers occur in the classroom and the playground is essential to understand how interactions between children with Autism and peers materialise. The authors assert that gaining knowledge about the interactions of both groups can provide insight into the best ways to support understanding and interactions between children with Autism and peers in regular schools (Chamberlain et al., 2007).

Furthermore, Rotheram et al. (2010) explored the social involvement of 79 children with Autism compared with 79 age and gender-matched peers in regular primary schools (2nd to 5th grade) using a friendship survey. The conclusions from this study that resonates with Chamberlain and colleagues (2007) revealed that children with Autism were less accepted and had fewer friends and network centrality than their peers. Additionally, it was confirmed that the gap increased gradually as these children with Autism moved from second grade to fifth grade, highlighting the importance of examining the social interactions between children with Autism and peers in the early years of primary school. In addition, the same authors) emphasised the need to understand the potential environmental factors (apart from the unique characteristics of children with

Autism) that could influence the social involvement of children with Autism in the classroom and the playground, in particular, the games played in the playground (Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010).

Concerning the playground, research confirmed that this environment provides pupils with an opportunity to interact socially and freely with their peers. The playground is an unstructured area that enables pupils to develop social skills and allows them to make friends (Couper et al., 2013; Pellegrini & Holmes, 2006). In the playground, pupils make groups with those children they feel comfortable with, and it usually is in the early years of their schooling that these relationships form the basis that will determine stronger friendships in future years. Therefore, how these relationships form in the early years in the classroom and the playground will accompany them on their school journey (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005; Sterman et al., 2020).

Most research examining children with Autism in the playground focused on exploring their behaviour and how they engaged socially with their peers. Nevertheless, the studies understood the different social styles of children with Autism as the barrier to their successful social inclusion with their peers. The conclusions from these studies revealed that children with Autism tend to be located on the periphery of the social network of their peers and spend more time on their own than engaging with peers (Dean et al., 2014; Frankel et al., 2011; Gutierrez et al., 2007; Ingram et al., 2007; Locke et al., 2016, 2017; Santillan et al., 2019).

One such study by Kasari et al. (2011) examined the social relationship between 60 children with Autism between 6-11 years old compared with age-matched peers from the same classroom in primary schools. The method of data collection comprised observations of playground engagement and peers and teacher self-report on social engagement. The conclusions from this research revealed that most children with Autism, particularly with full-time support (e.g., classroom assistants), appeared to be placed more often in the periphery of their peers' social networks in the classroom. In the

playground, these children with Autism had fewer and inferior quality reciprocal friendships and spent more time on their own than engaging with peers. Most importantly, most children with Autism engaged less with their peers in group games in the playground, regardless of their social position in the classroom. The social position of children with Autism in the classroom did not replicate in the playground, revealing the detachment among the settings. One limitation of the study was the reduced observation hours to two weekly observations. Furthermore, the authors suggested the relevant role of the playground in the development of social interactions and the importance of developing interventions that could facilitate social engagement among peers (Kasari et al., 2011).

Additionally, Locke et al. (2016) examined naturally occurring joint engagement and peer interactions in the primary school playgrounds between 51 children with Autism and 51 peers of the same age-grade and ethnic groups. The data was gathered with the Playground Observation of Peer Engagement, a time-interval behaviour coding system. The authors concluded that children with Autism tend to spend less time (40%) than their peers (70%) in joint engagement in reciprocal activities. Additionally, the study concluded that children with Autism spent more time in solitary play and interacted less with their peers (less frequent initiations) but were less successful in reciprocal initiations (Locke et al., 2016). Moreover, this research revealed that children with Autism could engage in solitary games, but they also engaged in conversation and games in the playground with their peers (Locke et al., 2016).

This study's results emphasise the importance of understanding what children with Autism want in the playground, which requires accepting and respecting certain solitary behaviours as part of their social style (Locke et al., 2016). These conclusions concur with Pellicano et al. (2013), who confirmed the need to understand and accept the different social styles of children with Autism (Calder et al., 2013). Although the study's conclusions are promising, the sample involved peer models previously selected

by their teachers as acceptable to engage with children with Autism. Observations also were reduced to two observations per child, which could fail to provide a detailed picture concerning the joint engagement and social interactions between children with Autism and peers.

With regards to the social interactions of children with Autism in multiple in-school settings, Silva and Pereira (2016) investigated the social interactions between six children with Autism, who were placed in a special unit within the regular school building, and their peers in different in-school settings. The age of these children ranged from 6 to 10 years old, and their social interactions were explored through participant observations. These observations occurred in three informal and unstructured settings: the playground, the dining area, and the study visits, where these children joined their non-autistic peers. The study concluded that proximity and regular interactions between children with Autism and peers enabled them to initiate reciprocal contact favouring relationships. Additionally, children with Autism seemed to engage in positive interactions and welcomed interactions with their peers. The study also highlighted that proximity and interactions between children with Autism and peers facilitated peers to accept the diversity of children with Autism and enhanced interactions (Luísa & Pereira, 2016). It is essential to understand that the children with Autism participating in the research were educated in a separate unit and joined their non-autistic peers for lunch and recess, which are unstructured activities. Consequently, the study failed to provide a rich picture of the interactions between these pupils in an inclusive setting (classroom and playground) during structured and unstructured activities.

The lesson learnt from this study is the link between interactions and inclusive education. The study outlined that when these children with Autism and peers had the opportunity to interact regularly, the interactions were engaging and reciprocal, showing that for inclusive education to materialise, children with Autism need to be placed with their peers in the classroom and the playground (Luísa & Pereira, 2016).

Similarly, Pinto et al. (2018) examined the social participation of 59 children with Special Educational Needs aged 9-11 years old and their peers (316 pupils) in four regular primary schools. The conclusions from this quantitative study revealed that to promote relationships between children with special needs and peers, it is vital that children have contact with them. Furthermore, the study outlined that when all pupils share the same experiences in the classroom, their relationships are positive and meaningful. Hence exploring how these interactions happen and what promotes or inhibits the interactions is relevant to shed light on the inclusive education of these pupils (Pinto et al., 2018).

In conclusion, the literature review has outlined that most research concerning the social inclusion of children with Autism and peers departs from the premise that the unique social styles of children with Autism act as a barrier to their social interactions and acceptance. Moreover, it interferes with their inclusion in their peers' social networks. However, other researchers conclude that children with Autism, although to a lesser extent than their peers without Autism, could socially engage and interact with their peers in the classroom and the playground. Nevertheless, the research included in this literature review failed to examine the interactions between children with Autism and their peers in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Locke et al., 2016; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010).

Moreover, the research reviewed showed a limitation in the use of qualitative research comparing naturally occurring interactions between children with Autism and peers (Gilmore et al., 2019; Locke et al., 2016). Gaining knowledge on the naturally occurring interactions between children with Autism and peers in different school settings could shed light on the potential barriers and facilitators of these interactions and whether these interactions favoured or inhibited the inclusion of children with Autism in regular primary schools. Therefore, the interactions between children with Autism and peers in the classroom and the playground warrant further investigation.

In addition, the literature review has shown that teachers are considered the engine of education and are at the front line responsible for children's teaching and learning in schools (Ainscow, 2007). The following section reviews the role of the classroom teacher in the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools.

3.4. The role of the classroom teacher in the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools

The literature review has shown that teachers are considered the engine of education and are at the front line responsible for children's teaching and learning in schools (Ainscow, 2007). They play an essential role in including children with Autism and other disabilities in regular schools (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; UNESCO, 2016). Teachers are also responsible for ensuring these children's presence, participation, achievement and sense of belonging in classrooms and playgrounds (Slee et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2005).

Additionally, teachers' training and awareness of the individual characteristics of children with Autism can positively influence their perception of Autism, their self-efficacy and their attitude towards the inclusion of children with Autism (Anglim et al., 2018; Parsons et al., 2016; Garrad et al., 2019; Rodríguez et al., 2012; Segall & Campbell, 2012). At the same time, teachers' positive attitudes, confidence and knowledge influence their use of inclusive strategies and classroom management, favouring the inclusion of children with disabilities and Autism in regular schools (Koegel et al., 2012; Lindsay et al., 2014; Spratt & Florian, 2015). Moreover, how teachers manage the classroom environment and their instruction and support also influence how all students learn, and it also promotes or inhibits the interactions between peers and between teachers and students (Perry et al., 2002; Hamre et al., 2013; Roorda et al., 2011; Cameron et al., 2012).

The interactions set in the classroom by the key educational actors impact the academic, emotional and social development of all students in the classroom (Hamre et al., 2013). Therefore, positive teacher-student interactions facilitate students' motivation (Luckner & Pianta, 2011; Perry et al., 2002) and engagement in classroom activities (Hughes & Kwok, 2006; Roorda et al., 2017). Interactions among teachers and pupils occur daily in schools and set the basis of their relationships. The research concerning the interactions between teachers and children without disabilities showed that interactions influenced students' academic and social outcomes, which can prevail over time, particularly for students at risk of exclusion (Cadima et al., 2010, 2016; Crouch et al., 2014). At the same time, studies concluded that interactions between teachers and students could affect pupils' social interactions (Baker, 2006; Englehart, 2009). Therefore, positive interactions favour healthy relationships between teachers and students, enhancing students' academic, social and emotional development (Davis, 2003; Pennings et al., 2018; Thijs et al., 2011).

Interactions are the building blocks of relationships (Pennings et al., 2014). For that reason, gaining knowledge on the interactions between teachers and pupils with disabilities, including Autism, in primary schools could provide insight into how these interactions facilitate or not the inclusion of children with Autism (Cameron et al., 2012; Farmer et al., 2011, 2018; Pennings et al., 2018; Robertson et al., 2003). However, most of the available research on children with disabilities focused on the relationships between teachers and children with disabilities and provided insufficient information about the interactions between teachers and pupils with Autism (Blacher et al., 2009; Cameron, 2014; Eisenhower et al., 2015b; Longobardi et al., 2016; Robertson et al., 2003; Cameron et al., 2012; Pennings et al., 2014). Moreover, research studying the relationships between teachers and children with Autism outlined the unique social, emotional and intellectual characteristics of these children as the essential barrier to the limited teacher-student relationships (Cameron, 2014; Eisenhower et al., 2015a;

Longobardi et al., 2016; Robertson et al., 2003), failing to consider those relationships are dyadic and affected by individual characteristics and the context (Hamre et al., 2013).

The limited research on the interactions between pupils with Autism and teachers revealed that their interactions with pupils with disabilities in the classroom differed from those with pupils without disabilities (Cameron et al., 2012). The research concluded that the interactions between teachers and pupils with disabilities focused on their social learning with less support for their academic learning. As a result, the authors contended that the reduced interactions between teachers and pupils with disabilities placed these children on the periphery of their classroom communities. The authors also explained that limiting children with disabilities, access, involvement, and participation in classroom activities with their peers could be detrimental to their inclusive education (Alves & Gottlieb, 1986; Chapman et al., 1979).

More recent research demonstrated similar results and the tendency for teachers to reduce their one-on-one interactions with children with disabilities, particularly during instruction (Cameron et al., 2012). In these studies, teachers seemed aware of the needs of children with disabilities. However, other factors, such as lack of time and their perception of disability, seemed to interfere and define their lack of support. Moreover, it appeared that the support of the classroom assistants negatively influenced the interactions between teachers and pupils with disabilities (Cameron & Cook, 2013; Cameron, 2014; Cook & Cameron, 2010; Jordan & Stanovich, 2001).

For example, Cameron et al. (2012) investigated the frequency of one-on-one verbal interactions between teachers and pupils with and without disabilities in a sample of pupils from kindergarten to eighth grade. The sample comprised 17 general and support teachers, 13 paraprofessionals, 26 children with mild and severe disabilities (13/13) and 13 peers. This quantitative study provided information on the frequency of one-on-one support by quantitatively measuring the frequency of interactions among the

different educators and paraprofessionals. The results revealed the limited interactions between teachers and pupils with disabilities compared to pupils without disabilities (Cameron et al., 2012). In this study, interactions were observed using the Inclusive classroom observation system (Cameron 2004), which quantifies the teacher's verbal communication with the child during instruction. The interactions are categorised into five categories (a) academic (e.g., interactions direct to lesson content), (b) behavioural (e.g., interactions related to pupil behaviour), (c) social (e.g., interactions related to instruction in social and communication styles), (d) functional (e.g., interactions related to community living, self-care), and (e) procedural (e.g., interactions related to classroom management and routine).

Nevertheless, despite the relevant results, the quantitative nature of the research failed to provide a naturalistic view of the day to day in the classroom and the interactions between children with disabilities, teachers, and classroom assistants. In addition, the interactions observed related only to verbal instruction, failing to consider other types of interactions, such as personal interactions. (e.g., personal connections, enjoyment, and enthusiasm in the interactions between teachers and pupils with disabilities) (Hamre et al., 2013; Pianta & Hamre, 2009).

In an extension of the previous research, the same authors explored how teachers perceived their one-on-one verbal interactions with their pupils with and without disabilities during academic instruction. The mixed-methods study findings provided insight into the classroom practices and the interactions between children with disabilities and teachers. However, the interviews failed to provide a comprehensive view of teachers' interactions with pupils with disabilities in the context of the general classroom during instruction (Cameron, 2014). Interviews, as a method of data gathering, add the perception and opinion of the interviewee. In Cameron et al. (2014) study, the information collected throughout interviews included the teacher's perception, failing to

provide a holistic and naturalistic view of the interactions between children with disabilities and teachers in schools and how these interactions occurred.

In conclusion, the information that emerged from the literature reviewed is insufficient to understand how the interactions between pupils with Autism and teachers occur in schools, requiring further research. The literature review revealed that various factors could influence teacher-student interactions, such as personal, contextual and professional factors (Brophy & Good, 1970; Chapman et al., 1979; Cook & Cameron, 2010; Hamre et al., 2013). Therefore, when looking at interactions and what promotes or inhibits these interactions and the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools, the context and the actors in those contexts should be considered (Cameron, 2014; UNESCO et al., 2016). The following section critically reviews the literature concerning the role of the support teacher in the inclusion of children with Autism, focusing on their interactions.

3.5. The role of the support teacher in the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools

Including children with Autism, as featured in the literature reviewed, involves extra support from adults in or outside the classroom with qualified support teachers and classroom assistants. The classroom assistants and support teachers' responsibilities in schools differ depending on the country (Rose & Shevlin, 2020). However, the main difference between professionals relates to their professional backgrounds and duties. Support teachers have professional qualifications in teaching and, in some cases, special education. Their duties and responsibilities involve providing children with Autism with academic, social, and emotional support on a one-to-one basis or in small groups. This support may happen in the primary classroom or a separate classroom. On the other hand, the duties and responsibilities of the classroom assistants involve the care

and non-academic needs of children with disabilities and Autism in the classroom and on the playground (Rose & Shevlin, 2020).

For example, in Ireland, support teachers (called special education teachers) are responsible for the extra teaching and learning of children with disabilities (also called special educational needs). Their support involves teaching within the main classroom or in the support classroom individually (i.e., one-on-one support) or in small groups (Rose & Shevlin, 2020). Among their responsibilities, support teachers also overview, develop and monitor the individual educational plan (IEP) for children with Autism and other disabilities (Fitzgerald & Radford, 2017). The support teacher role in Ireland shares similarities with the support teachers in the UK, USA, Italy, and Sweden (Rose & Shevlin, 2020).

Previous research regarding the interactions between children with Autism and support teachers are scarce, and most of the research available focused on teachers' attitudes, professional role and responsibilities, and relationships (Brownell et al., 2010; Feng & Sass, 2013; Ghani et al., 2014; Takala et al., 2009). However, with regards to support and teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children with Autism, research in both mainstream and special schools revealed that support teachers' age, training, external support, experience and knowledge of Autism played an essential role in these teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools (Abuhamour & Muhaidat, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2012).

Other studies examined the role of the support teacher compared to the classroom teacher. For example, Devecchi et al. (2010) examined the support and classroom teachers' role and professional development. They concluded that classroom teachers hold the teaching and learning responsibilities for children with disabilities in the classroom, while support teachers are subordinated to the classroom teacher and provide extra support (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010). In addition, some other research findings outlined the potential negative impact of the support teacher's presence on the

interactions between classroom teachers and children with Autism (Longobardi et al., 2012). Similarly, Devecchi et al. (2012) compared the role of the support teacher in Italy with the Teaching Assistant in England, revealing that classroom teachers' reliance on the support teacher could affect how teachers related to children with disabilities in the classroom (Devecchi et al., 2012).

Concerning the relationship between the classroom and support teachers and children with Autism, Longobardi et al. (2012) examined and compared, through questionnaires, classroom teachers and support teachers' relationships and their perception of their relationship with 14 children with Autism and their peers in the classroom. Fourteen schools were involved, with one child with Autism allocated in each classroom. The conclusions from this study revealed that support teachers had a closer relationship with children with Autism and were more aware of these children's academic and social needs than their classroom teachers. In contrast, classroom teachers seemed emotionally and academically distant from these children. According to the authors, this distance could be related to a reliance on the assistance of the support teacher. The authors outline that the learning and development of children with Autism in schools require positive relationships with both teachers, confirming the importance of the support teachers' role as facilitators in the relationships between children with Autism, teachers and peers. (Longobardi et al., 2012).

In conclusion, research examining the naturally occurring interactions between children with Autism and support teachers is scarce. Most of the research available focused on the role of the support teacher, their attitudes, and the differences in their relationship with children with disabilities compared with the classroom teacher. However, information concerning the interactions between support teachers and children with Autism and how these interactions enable or inhibit the inclusive education of these children in regular schools is scarce and warrants further research.

Classroom assistants are also involved in caring for children with Autism in the classroom and on the playground. Thus, understanding the classroom assistants' role in the education of children with Autism in regular schools is also relevant. Therefore, the following section critically reviews the classroom assistant's role.

3.6. The role of the Classroom Assistant in the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools

Classroom Assistants (CA) are given different names in different countries. For example, school aides could be named Special Needs Assistants, Classroom Assistants, Teaching Assistants, School Assistants and Paraprofessionals. Either way, it refers to professionals assigned to assist and support children with disabilities, including those with Autism, in regular schools (Alborz et al., 2009; Butt, 2016; Giangreco et al., 2010a; Rose, 2000; Webster et al., 2015; Webster & De Boer, 2021). Although the responsibilities of classroom assistants may involve some variations from country to country, the basic idea attached to their role is to assist and support children with disabilities, including children with Autism, within the regular school environment (Blatchford et al., 2009; Giangreco, 2003; Rose, 2000). For example, in Ireland, SNAs are deployed to support children with disabilities care needs, a role categorically non-teaching in nature. The responsibility of the SNA involves supporting children with disabilities to access their learning in the classroom (i.e., helping them focus on the lessons) and acquiring independent living skills. The assistance provided by the SNA ought to be balanced at the minimum required level (DES - Circular 0030/2014, 2014).

The literature reviewed showed that most of the research available concerning the role of the classroom assistant (CA) focused on children with disabilities in general, with less emphasis on children with Autism specifically. Therefore, research examining the role of the CA in the inclusion of children with Autism in regular primary schools is scarce (Emam & Farrell, 2009), except for some studies on children with Autism in

secondary schools (Healy, 2011; Humphrey & Symes, 2013; Symes & Humphrey, 2011b). Furthermore, most research on children with Autism refers to studies with CAs aimed at developing interventions to improve the academic and social achievement of children with Autism in regular schools (Kim et al., 2017; Rispoli et al., 2011; Walker et al., 2020).

Conclusions from previous research examining the CA role and the inclusive education of children with disabilities revealed that CAs are considered an essential asset by parents, educators, and principals for the support and inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools (Butt, 2016; Giangreco & Doyle, 2007a; Logan, 2006; Rose & O'Neill, 2009; Symes & Humphrey, 2012). For example, CAs assist children with Autism in adjusting to the classroom routine and help them with the different school transitions in regular schools (Emam & Farrell, 2009d; Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Rose & O'Neill, 2009; Symes & Humphrey, 2012).

Conversely, other research outlined the negative consequences for the learning of children with disabilities associated with the role of the CA. An aspect to consider relates to the unclear definition concerning the responsibilities of the CA. The lack of clarity on their responsibilities has led CA to perform duties outside their work scope. For example, CAs may adopt a pedagogical role for which they are not professionally prepared (Blatchford et al., 2009; Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009; Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Logan, 2006; Webster et al., 2011). Previous research confirmed that the pedagogical role of the CA seems to be widely performed in regular schools (Webster et al., 2011; Giangreco, Edelman et al., 1997; Suter & Giangreco, 2009). Additionally, some other studies confirmed that children under the pedagogical support of the CAs lacked engagement and achievement compared with their peers (Carter et al., 2009; Giangreco et al., 2010a, 2013; Rutherford, 2012; Webster et al., 2011). Similar conclusions were achieved in other studies examining the quality and learning of children with disabilities under the assistance of the CAs (Radford et al., 2014; Rubie-Davies et al., 2010).

In line with these conclusions, many researchers contested the deployment of the CA due to the negative consequences of their support (Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Webster et al., 2011). These authors advocated the need to rethink the role of the CA to ensure that their support enabled the academic and social development of children with disabilities in regular schools (Blatchford et al., 2011; Webster et al., 2013).

The support of the CA has also been associated with having a negative influence on the participation and learning of children with disabilities and their academic and social interactions with teachers and peers, which are fundamentals of inclusive education (Butt, 2016; Giangreco, 2010b; Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Malmgren & Causton-Theoharis, 2006; Tews & Lupart, 2008). In addition, it emerged from the literature that separating children with disabilities, including Autism, from the group to work with the support of the CA in individual or small groups in the classroom is detrimental to their learning (Giangreco, 2009). Moreover, these studies also revealed that closed and "motherly support" from the CA also interfered in the interactions and independence of these children with disabilities (Blatchford et al., 2011; Butt, 2016; Emam & Farrell, 2009d; Malmgren & Causton-Theoharis, 2006; Saddler, 2014; Symes & Humphrey, 2012; Cameron, 2014; Cameron et al., 2012).

Despite the potential negative consequences that the support of the CA may have on children with disabilities, little is known about the influence of the interactions between children with Autism and CAs in their inclusive education. Unfortunately, research examining the interactions between children with Autism and CAs is scarce, and most of these studies involve children with Autism in secondary schools (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Symes & Humphrey, 2012).

For example, Symes and Humphrey (2012) explored, with a mixed-method approach, the role of the CA in the inclusion of 120 pupils, comprising pupils with Autism, pupils with other disabilities, and children with no disabilities in 11 regular secondary schools in England. The data gathered with structured and unstructured observations

concluded that children with Autism participated less in classroom activities than the rest of the pupils in the study. Additionally, children with Autism, particularly those who seemed to rely on the support of their CA, showed more difficulties working independently. These children did not support other classmates in their learning and did not seem to get along with their peers (Symes & Humphrey, 2012). The study provided relevant information about the role of the CA and how it influenced the interactions between young with Autism and their peers.

The conclusions from this study stressed the importance of exploring the interactions between children with Autism and CAs in the early years of primary school. In addition, research in this area could provide knowledge on how the interactions between children with Autism and their CAs could affect the interactions between children with Autism, peers and teachers in the classroom and on the playground (Symes & Humphrey, 2012).

Further research in secondary schools by Symes and Humphrey (2011b) examined the school culture, policy and practices that could hinder or facilitate the inclusion of children with Autism in secondary schools in England. The interviews of 15 CAs highlighted that CA access to expertise and knowledge of Autism were essential to support children with Autism in school. Additionally, the role of the teacher in the classroom emerged as relevant, particularly concerning the deployment of CA support. The study revealed that the interactions and communication between teachers and CA concerning the support provided in the classroom to pupils with Autism enabled the inclusion of these pupils effectively in regular schools (Symes & Humphrey, 2011).

Similar results were confirmed in a different study by Farrel & Emam (2009). The authors explored with a multiple case study design the tensions experienced by primary and secondary regular schoolteachers and how these tensions could influence their support to include children with Autism. The sample involved 17 children with Autism, between 7 to 16 years old, in three primary and five secondary regular schools. The data

collection involved semi-structured interviews with Teachers, CAs and Special Educational Need Coordinators (SENCOs) and non-participant observations inside and outside the classroom. The conclusions from this study revealed that how teachers perceived the different social and academic styles of these children with Autism increased their tensions in the classroom. Moreover, this tension influenced how they managed and deployed the support (i.e., teachers and CAs) in the classroom (Emam & Farrell, 2009). Additionally, it showed that the relationships established between teachers, CAs, peers and pupils with Autism influenced the support provided to these children with Autism and their relationships with educators and pupils in the classroom and the playground.

Nevertheless, the authors approached the unique characteristics of these pupils with Autism as the main cause of their teachers' tension. Despite the author's operationalisation of the teacher-pupil relationship from Pianta (2001) as 'a living system and a vehicle through which positive emotional experiences, concrete help, information, and support can be organised and transmitted' (Emam & Farrell, 2009, pg 408). The interactions between pupils with disabilities, teachers, and Teaching Assistants were observed and described in detail. Nevertheless, the conclusions of the study revealed that the observations failed to explore how the interactions between the actors occurred during their day to day in all activities. Instead, the focus of the observations rested on how these interactions caused tension and how the tension affected the quality of the teacher-pupil relationship (Emam & Farrell, 2009).

Furthermore, Rubie-Davies et al. (2010) examined the quality of the support of the CAs in primary schools using a multimethod approach from audio-recorded data. The authors compared the verbal interactions between the CA and pupils and between the teacher and the pupils in the same lessons in 15 regular schools (eight primary and seven secondary schools). The study aimed to provide a detailed description of the nature of the interactions between pupils and CAs and Teachers and pupils (Rubie-

Davies et al., 2010). The results highlighted that strict comparisons between CAs and teachers must be taken with caution because both have different roles. However, the study outlined that the deployment of CA on one-on-one support appeared to disconnect some children with disabilities from the support of their teachers (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010). Although the results added to research about interactions between children with disabilities, teachers, and SNAs, the focus on verbal interactions during instruction in literacy and numeracy lessons exclusively failed to provide a complete picture concerning verbal and non-verbal interactions between children with disabilities, SNAs and teachers through all activities in different school settings.

The conclusions from this literature review concerning the role of the CA in the inclusion of children with Autism outline that CAs are considered essential by educators, pupils with Autism and parents to support their journey in regular school (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Logan, 2006). However, Classroom Assistant (CA) support can also be detrimental to the inclusive education of children with Autism. Particularly if the presence and support of the CA interfere in the interactions between children with Autism, teachers and peers in regular schools (Cameron, 2014; Emam & Farrell, 2009; Malmgren & Causton-Theoharis, 2006; Symes & Humphrey, 2011, 2012). Given the potential negative effect linked to CA support in the interactions between children with Autism with teachers and peers. In addition to the lack of research, particularly in the early years of regular primary school, the interactions between children with Autism and CAs require more investigation.

According to the literature review, exploring the interactions between children with Autism and CAs in different in-school settings could shed light on how these interactions favour or hinder the interactions between children with Autism and the group (Cameron, 2014; Cameron et al., 2012). Additionally, to gain a rich knowledge of the complexities of the interactions between CAs and children with Autism in the classroom

and the playground, it is essential to consider their interactions concurrently with teachers and peers (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Symes & Humphrey, 2012).

3.7. Concluding remarks from the literature review

The literature review focused on the role played by teachers, support teachers, classroom assistants and peers in the inclusion of children with Autism at the school micro-level and the interactions between the actors. It outlined the dearth of research exploring the interactions between children with Autism, teachers and peers in the early years of primary school. It also highlights the focus on research on the different social and academic styles of children with Autism as the potential barrier to their inclusive education. However, the reviewed studies failed to consider other factors such as teachers, CAs, peers, personal factors (i.e., training, attitudes, perceptions), contextual (i.e., school settings) and environmental factors (i.e., support and accommodations) as potential facilitators or inhibitors in the interactions between children with Autism and the education actors (Cameron et al., 2012; Emam & Farrell, 2009; Gilmore et al., 2019; Locke et al., 2016; Robertson et al., 2003; Symes & Humphrey, 2012). Moreover, the research reviewed showed a limitation in the use of qualitative research comparing naturally occurring interactions between children with Autism, teachers, CAs and peers (Cameron et al., 2012; Emam & Farrell, 2009; Robertson et al., 2003; Symes & Humphrey, 2012).

Concerning the operationalisation of interactions from the literature review, the focus seems to rest on verbal interactions based on instruction with less emphasis on non-verbal and verbal interactions between children with Autism, teachers, CAs and peers in regular primary schools (Hamre et al., 2014). Therefore the current study was guided by Pianta and Koster for the operationalisation of interactions between teachers and students and pupils with disabilities and peers (Hamre et al., 2001; Koster et al., 2009; Pianta, 1999).

Based on previous theoretical and empirical work in the educational and psychological field, Pianta and colleagues proposed that three broad domains support the interactions between teachers and students. The three domains comprised a) emotional support, b) classroom organisation, and c) instructional support. In addition, each domain consists of a series of dimensions that are described by a series of indicators (Hamre & Pianta, 2007). Their operationalisation supports the measurement of interactions between teachers and pupils (Hamre et al., 2012).

In addition, the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools can not be achieved if they do not have meaningful interactions leading to positive social participation with their peers (Freitag & Dunsmuir, 2015; Garrote et al., 2017; Koster et al., 2010). Koster and colleagues (2010) contend that social participation is a multidimensional concept that involves four key aspects, a) friendships/relationships, b) contacts/interactions, c) students' social self-perception, and d) acceptance by classmates. With regards to the second key aspect (contacts/interactions), the authors acknowledged five key themes a) playing together, b) working together on tasks, c) Participation in group activities, d) (un)acknowledged initiations, and e) Social isolation (Koster et al., 2009). Thus this operationalisation can support gaining knowledge about the interactions between children with autism and peers in regular schools (Koster et al., 2009; Mamas et al., 2021).

The review of the literature highlighted a gap in knowledge related to the inclusion of children with Autism in primary schools. Particularly the interactions between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers in different in-school settings. The following section elaborates further on this knowledge gap.

3.8. The gap in knowledge

Interactions are the building blocks of relationships, and positive relationships between students and educators are considered relevant in students' academic, social

and emotional development in schools (Hamre et al., 2014; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992). Interactions between pupils in schools are essential for their social learning and emotional development (Cameron, 2014; Pennings et al., 2014; Robertson et al., 2003). How pupils socially interact in the classroom and the playground defines their social position and social status within the group. It also locates pupils centrally or peripherally to their classrooms and playgrounds' social networks. When pupils are on the periphery of their peers' social network, there is a risk of isolation and a lack of belonging to the group that eventually could influence pupils' academic, social and emotional development (Bossaert et al., 2011; Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Koster et al., 2010; Pijl et al., 2008).

According to previous research, children with Autism tend to be isolated within the group and are often located on the periphery of their peers' social networks (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008b; Jamie Sue Owen-DeSchryver, 2003; Saggars, 2015). However, not all children with Autism have the same experiences (Calder et al., 2013; Gilmore et al., 2019; Locke et al., 2017; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010). Therefore, understanding the naturally occurring interactions between children with Autism and peers in the classroom and the playground can provide light on what enables and inhibits their interactions and inclusion in regular primary schools.

Additionally, the literature review outlined the notion that teachers are the engines of education, and in the case of children with disabilities, they appear to be the main drivers of their inclusion at the micro level of the school (i.e., classroom, support classroom and playground). Teachers are responsible for their pupils' teaching and learning, and how they interact and relate with their pupils plays an essential role in classroom dynamics (Cameron, 2014). In the classroom, the interactions between teachers and pupils are embedded within their instruction and support. How these interactions occur can also influence the interactions, relationships and friendships

between all pupils, including children with disabilities (Englehart, 2009; Farmer et al., 2011; Hamre et al., 2013).

In this line, positive interactions that promote support and participation are essential to facilitate the inclusion of all children in school, including those with Autism (Pennings, 2014; Emam & Farrell, 2009; UNESCO et al., 2016). However, research exploring the interactions between children with Autism and teachers is scarce to the researcher's knowledge. In particular, with a focus on their relationships (Longobardi et al., 2012, 2016). In addition, research exploring the relationships between teachers and students with Autism focused on the individual characteristics of children with Autism as the main barrier to their relationships, failing to examine the naturally occurring interactions between children with Autism and teachers. Additionally, it failed to consider the influence of personal and contextual characteristics in the relationships between teachers and children with Autism (Longobardi et al., 2016; Parsons et al., 2016; Prino et al., 2016).

Interactions are the building block of relationships, and the interactions between teachers and students have an important role in pupils' development (Hamre et al., 2013). Given the scarce research examining the interactions between teachers and children with Autism and the important role of the interactions in the inclusion of children in schools, this area warrants further investigation.

The literature review also showed the essential role of the Classroom Assistant (CA) in the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Symes & Humphrey, 2012). Nevertheless, their support and presence also emerged as negative, in particular regarding the learning of children with Autism in schools and their interactions with teachers and peers (Cameron et al., 2012; Giangreco et al., 2005; Symes & Humphrey, 2012; Webster et al., 2011; Webster & Blatchford, 2013; Webster & De Boer, 2019). In addition, some of the negative consequences linked with CA support appeared to be associated with the CA's responsibilities. Particularly responsibilities

involving pedagogical roles that separated children with Autism from the group, influencing their interactions and participation (Butt, 2016; Webster et al., 2011).

The fact that the deployment of CA support may separate children with Autism from the group requires further consideration (Bosanquet et al., 2021). The provision of support (i.e., through the CA) aims to enhance their participation and interactions within the group, but research on children with disabilities revealed opposite outcomes. Additionally, there is a dearth of research examining the influence of the CA on the inclusion of children with Autism in regular primary schools (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Symes & Humphrey, 2012). Further research is required to understand the impact of the CA's role in the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools. Particular attention should be paid to the facilitators and inhibitors of these interactions and how they could influence the interactions between children with Autism and the group (Cameron, 2014; Chamberlain et al., 2007; Symes & Humphrey, 2012).

The literature review also highlighted that the dyadic interactions between children with Autism, teachers, CAs and peers could potentially influence the dyadic interactions between children with Autism and the education actors (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Locke et al., 2016; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010). Nevertheless, research comparing the interactions between children with Autism, teachers, CAs and peers have not been performed to the researcher's knowledge.

Consequently, it is essential to learn about the nuances and complexities of the interactions between children with Autism and the different key actors and to acknowledge the influence the context may have in these interactions (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Locke et al., 2016; Symes & Humphrey, 2012). To date, research exploring comparatively the interactions between children with Autism and the different key actors in different in-school settings in the early years of regular primary school is scarce and requires further investigation.

Concerning the best methodological approach, the predominant use of quantitative methods employed in previous research failed to provide a more detailed and in-depth description of the interactions between children with Autism and the different actors in the school. Therefore, according to previous research, non-participant observations are deemed the most suitable method for gathering information concerning the interactions between the different actors in the three in-school settings. This method of data collection seems the most appropriate to gather naturally occurring behaviours *in situ* and comparatively in the classroom, the support classroom, and the playground.

Concluding the literature review revealed that interactions are the pillars of relationships forging participation, acceptance, and belonging to the group (Hamre et al., 2013). However, research has not examined naturally occurring interactions between children with Autism, teachers, CAs and peers in different school settings. The next chapter provides a detailed description of the methodological elements that underpin the present research.

CHAPTER 4 - METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

This research aimed to gain knowledge on the inclusion of children with Autism in the early years of their regular primary school education in Ireland. The study focused on the interactions between children with Autism, their teachers, support teachers, SNAs and peers in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom. Children with Autism are still at risk of exclusion in regular schools. However, the review of the literature has shown a gap in knowledge concerning the day to day interactions between children with Autism and the relevant actors in school (Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012). Moreover, little is known about how interactions occur in the early years of regular primary school. Consequently, gaining knowledge about how children with Autism interact in schools, particularly in the early days, could provide light on the best approach to support their inclusive education.

The present chapter outlines the methodology that underpins this research and provides a detailed description and justification for the choices made regarding the philosophical stances, ontology, epistemology, and methodological approaches adopted for this study. It is followed by the discussion, the justification for using a qualitative approach, and the decision to adopt a multiple case study design. It also outlines and describes in detail the research design and strategy, the recruitment strategy and the method of data collection, as well as the strategies followed during the data analysis. Finally, the chapter provides a detailed account of the ethical considerations that accompany the present research.

4.2. Research Rationale

In the last three decades, the number of children diagnosed with Autism and their placement in regular schools has increased dramatically (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009; Daly et al., 2016). Despite the development of local, national and international conventions

and legislation promoting the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools, their exclusion is still latent (UNESCO et al., 2016). In Ireland, 65 % of children with Autism are placed in regular schools, 21% in autistic units within regular schools, separated from their peers with no disabilities, and 14% in special schools (Daly et al., 2016). Following Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools is a human right and key to enabling the inclusion of children with Autism in society (De Beco, 2018; UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, 2006). Additionally, the review of the literature outlined the dearth of knowledge and research concerning the interactions between children with Autism at the school micro-level, which seems pivotal to understanding the potential barriers or facilitators to their inclusion in regular schools.

For that reason, the current research is set to explore how the inclusion of children with Autism takes place in the early years of regular primary schools in Ireland. The main aim of this study is to gain knowledge on how the inclusion of children with Autism happens in regular primary schools. In addition, it aims to gain information on the interactions between children with Autism, their teachers, Special Needs Assistants (SNA) and peers in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom. These three settings comprehensively cover the key contexts where children with Autism interact in schools. To finalise, the study aims to elucidate how the interactions between the actors in the settings facilitate or inhibit the inclusion of children with Autism in regular primary schools.

The research objectives are aimed,

- To conduct individual case studies of eight children with Autism in the early years of the primary school placed in regular classrooms in Ireland.

- To undertake semi-structured, direct, non-participant observations to collect information on the interactions between children with Autism, their teachers, SNAs and peers in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom.
- To undertake a thematic analysis of the interactions in each case and a thematic analysis of the interactions across all cases.
- To identify the interactions between children with Autism and the education actors during structured and unstructured activities in all settings.
- To identify differences and similarities of interactions across three settings: classroom, playground and support classroom.
- To identify facilitators and inhibitors of the interactions between the relevant education actors in the different settings.

This exploratory study intends to add to the current debate concerning the inclusion of children with Autism in the classroom. It also aims to shed light on how best to promote the inclusion of children with Autism in schools, focusing on the interactions between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers. In addition, the current research intends to help reduce the gap between policy and practice.

Based on the gap of knowledge, the main research question is: How does the inclusion of children with Autism happen in the early years of regular primary school in Ireland?

The question is supported by two main sub-questions listed below.

1. How are the interactions between children with Autism, teachers (general and support classroom), SNAs and peers in the classroom, the playground, and the support classroom, during structured and unstructured activities?
 - a. What are the commonalities and differences in the interactions between children with Autism, teachers (general and support classroom), SNAs and peers in the three in-school settings?

2. What are the barriers and facilitators of the interactions between children with Autism, teachers (general and support classroom), SNAs and peers in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom?

This small-scale, qualitative, exploratory, embedded multiple case study research involved five regular primary schools and eight children with Autism, their classroom and support teachers, Special Needs Assistants, and peers. A multiple case study provides richer information from different contexts (Merriam, 1988; Stake et al., 2006; Yazan & De Vasconcelos, 2016; Yin, 2014). In the current research, eight children with Autism formed the multiple case study, adding multiple sources of information concerning interactions. The cases were embedded because they involved three settings (i.e., classroom, playground and support classroom) and different participants (i.e., children with Autism, classroom teachers, support teachers, SNAs and peers). The case studies allowed for the study of a phenomenon in the context where it occurs, and the multiple embedded case study design allowed for an in-depth exploration of the interactions in context, providing a breath in context (i.e., five schools, the classrooms, playgrounds, and support classrooms) (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured, non-participant direct observations focusing on the interactions occurring within the classroom, support classroom and playground (Patton, 2005; Robson, 2011). In addition, observation is a method of data collection used when examining interactions in the classroom and the playground (Emam & Farrell, 2009, 2009; Luísa & Pereira, 2016; Pennings et al., 2014).

According to PG and Chang, 'In planning a study, researchers need to think through the philosophical worldview assumptions that they bring to the study, the research design related to this worldview and the specific methods or procedures of research that translate the approach into practice' (PH. and Chang, 2009) In addition, as stated by Greenbank 2003, "The inclusion of reflective accounts and the acknowledgement that educational research cannot be value-free should be included in all forms of research"

(Greenbank, 2003). The philosophical stance is essential in research since it guides the research journey. The following section focuses on the philosophical stance underpinning this research, guiding all the steps of the research process from the topic of study to the final conclusions.

4.3. The Research philosophical stance

A philosophical stance is a 'worldview', a 'belief' that leads the researcher in the research process from the set-up to the design and the data outcomes (Willis, 2007). A series of elements are placed under the umbrella of the research philosophical stance dictating and guiding the research (Creswell, 2007). Guba and Lincoln identified four elements; axiology, ontology, epistemology, and methodology, which hold the researcher's beliefs, assumptions, and values (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Guba and Lincoln (1994) informed that in defining a philosophical stance, the researcher must answer four questions. The axiological question asks; "What is the nature of ethics?"; the ontological question asks, "What is the nature of reality?"; the epistemological question asks, "What is the nature of knowledge and the relationship between the knower and the would-be known?", and the last question makes reference to the methodology asking "How can the knower go about obtaining the desired knowledge and understandings?" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). On the same line, Crotty (1998) established that any research process involves four essential elements: epistemology, theoretical perspectives, methodology and methods. These four elements are interrelated; thus, one element informs the next and so forth in the research process (Crotty, 1998). Drawing from these authors, the ontology and epistemology in relation to this study are next presented.

4.3.1. Ontology and Epistemology

In the current research, the researcher adopted a relativist ontology and constructivism epistemology. In introducing ontology and epistemology, it is important to

understand that the ontological and epistemological assumptions and beliefs are relevant to the research process (Crotty, 1998). The philosophical stance underpins the theoretical perspective that guides the research methodology, the methods of data collection, and the analysis of the data (Creswell, 2007; Gray, 2017). Consequently, before researchers begin the research journey, they need to define their philosophical standpoint about the nature of the social world and how knowledge is acquired.

Ontology is the study of being and refers to the nature of reality subject to study. In other words, it denotes the nature of the world around us and how it exists. Hence, it relates to the researchers' beliefs about the nature of reality; their views of the world (Creswell, 2013; Gray, 2017). The researchers' views of the world in research can be realistic or relative. For example, realist researchers believe that the world exists independently of our knowledge, while relativists understand reality as multiple, varied and dependent on the observer and their subjective cognition of this reality (Pun et al., 201). Researchers with a relativist ontology establish their position in the research as part of it, and they make this explicit, an approach less common in researchers with a realist ontology. On the contrary, realist researchers establish themselves as outsiders, and thus they do not consider their preconceptions and assumptions subject to biases during the research process (Pascale, 2011).

Along this line, Gray (2017), as well as Crotty (1998), acknowledge that realities in the social world can be a) objective and tangible and need to be discovered by the observer, b) constructed from the intersubjective interactions between individuals and the outside world, and c) subjective and imposed on the object by the observer (Gray, 2017; Halper, 2014). Objective and constructed realities are based upon a *being* ontology, while subjective realities based on the observer's subjective cognition are based upon a *becoming* ontology (Creswell 2014).

In addition, how the nature of reality is understood (what can we know) guides the researchers' epistemology (how can we know it) (Grix, 2002), which is the branch of

philosophy concerned with what counts as knowledge and how it is acquired. There are three main epistemologies in research, a) objectivism (meaning exists within an object, and the reality is objective and independent of the researcher), b) constructionism (meaning is created/constructed between the subject and the object), and c) subjectivism (meaning exists within the subject who imposes that meaning to the object) (Crotty, 1998; Gray, 2017). Researchers who have a relativist ontology, which is the case in this research, assume that reality is intersubjectively constructed (constructionism) through meanings and understandings developed socially. It is also recognised that the researcher must be present to gather information about what is to be known (Hiller, 2016).

Concerning the ontology and epistemology underpinning the researcher's philosophical stance, the researcher must understand the aims and nature of the study (what is being studied and why). The current research aims to explore how the inclusion of children with Autism happens in regular schools by focusing on how the interactions between children with Autism, their teachers, SNAs and peers occur in the classroom, playground and support classroom. The data collected from these interactions aimed to elucidate how they facilitated or inhibited the inclusion of children with Autism in the early years of primary school.

Due to the nature of the study, it was appropriate to adopt a relativist ontology and constructivism epistemology. A relativist ontology assumes that knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and participants, and a constructivism epistemology understands meaning as created/constructed between the subject and the object. Consequently, they cannot be separated from what they know (Schwandt, 2007), and both knower and known are linked in the research process because their knowledge and understanding of the world (in a given context and time) is central to how they understand themselves and others (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). In addition, according to a relativist ontology, the researcher acknowledged that the reality observed in schools is

multiple and varied (different perspectives) rather than one unique reality (realist ontology). This variety is due to the different constructions and interpretations of the different actors in the different settings, including the researcher's perspective.

Moreover, the nature of the study required an understanding of the interactions in school as they occurred in the natural setting, which can be dyadic between two individuals but can also occur with more individuals in a group. In addition, it was acknowledged that the interactions between the actors in the settings were varied and influenced by the participants' historical, cultural and personal backgrounds and experiences. A reality that was also determined by the situation or event happening in a particular moment and time, which can differ across situations (Crotty, 1998; Gray, 2017). Consequently, the researcher assumed that knowledge was co-constructed between the researcher and participants, thus, they cannot be separated from what they know (Schwandt, 2007). For that reason, both knower and known are linked in the research process because their knowledge and understanding of the world (in a given context and time) is central to how they understand themselves and others (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

In order to gather information about the phenomenon under study, which is the day to day of children with Autism in school, the researcher must be present and get as close as possible to the participants in the school settings where these interactions occur (i.e., within their context and time) (Iphofen & Tolich, 2019). In the present research, the interactions between individuals are based on their different intersubjective constructions and interpretations of their social world. Each participant interprets their world differently and thus will interact differently in each situation. Therefore, the interactions subject to observation are varied and multiple, dependent on the observer and their subjective cognition of this reality. Thus, they require the researcher to reflect on the moment as they occur, in a particular situation, underpinned by the researcher's perception of that reality. Due to the data collection method (non-participant direct observation), this study

presents the researcher's view concerning the interactions between the education actors in different settings, a perspective that will differ from others (Gray, 2017; Saunders et al., 2019).

It is understood that in the study, the researcher's knowledge and background could not be detached from the research process and must be acknowledged as they can add bias to the research process (Gray, 2017). This exercise of acknowledgement must be reflected throughout the research process to ensure rigour in the methodology chosen and during the data collection phase and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). (See section 4.9. pg 153).

In contrast, researchers with a realist ontology understand that reality is separated from the knower and that meaning exists within the object and, thus, it is objective. Therefore, researchers with a realist ontology and an objectivist epistemology consider their position as outsiders; for that reason, the researchers' assumptions and beliefs are not relevant or of concern since the reality of the study is tangible and static, and their methodologies and methods are valid and reliable (Creswell, 2007). With concern to the present study, a realist and objectivist approach did not suit the purpose of the research due to the exploratory nature of the study and the understanding that the interactions between the different education actors are context and background-bounded. Therefore the reality subject to scrutiny is varied and multiple, as opposed to static.

As mentioned above, the researcher's ontology and epistemology form the researchers' philosophical stance guiding their actions within the research process. The philosophical stance guides the study's research paradigm, which is explained in the next section (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 2002).

4.3.2. The research paradigm

Guba and Lincoln identified four research paradigms: positivism, post-positivism, critical theories (and related ideological positions), and constructivism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). At the same time, Creswell defined four philosophical worldviews: postpositivist, constructivist, transformative and pragmatic (Creswell, 2007). However, the most recent classification mentioned by Denzin and Lincoln (2017) confirmed that despite all different paradigms and associated theories, all approaches could be contained under five main paradigms: a) positivist and postpositivist paradigms, which are used to predict knowledge objectively, b) critical theory (such as feminism and race), which are used to gain knowledge that will help to emancipate or liberate action, c) constructivism (interpretivism), used to understand knowledge, and d) participatory (postmodern) paradigms used to deconstruct knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Creswell (2007), on the other hand, asserted that the different classifications of paradigms presented in the literature are not exhaustive (Creswell, 2007). Given the lack of an agreed classification of paradigms, positivism and interpretivism are discussed as they are considered the most dominant research paradigms and represent two ends of the spectrum of research worldviews.

The interpretivist paradigm proposes that knowledge is constructed intersubjectively from the interactions between individuals and their social world (Gray 2009). Conversely, the positivist paradigm establishes reality as tangible, external to the individual and objective, separated from the person's interpretation of meaning. In addition, the interpretivist paradigm establishes that the construction of meaning is supported by the individual's (researcher and participant) experiences that are developed through personal exposure to the world complemented by their cultural and social background, which enables the construction and reconstruction of the meaning of the social world they live in (Cohen et al., 2011).

Therefore, and in alignment with the purpose of this research exploring how the inclusion of children with Autism takes place in the early years of primary schools in Ireland, interpretivist was considered the most adequate paradigm. A paradigm that emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries, in opposition to the positivist paradigm (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). The interpretivist paradigm assumes that knowledge is neither generalisable nor universal, which is debated by positivist researchers who understand that the subjectivity and lack of generalisability of results attached to the interpretivist paradigm is a limitation (Schwandt, 2000). Nevertheless, from an interpretivist perspective, one of the main benefits relates to the close presence of the researcher in the field, which enables the researcher to understand and explain the social reality of the participants within the context where it occurs. Furthermore, this closer position provides rich and deep information about the topic of study, which could not be gathered from an outsider position (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013).

In the present study, the researcher's closeness enabled access to first-hand information, and it allowed the researcher to get to know the participants and their day to day interactions within the boundaries of the three in-school settings. Hence, it facilitated collecting daily holistic and in-depth information related to the participants' naturally occurring interactions (i.e., their actions, behaviours, communications, how they interacted with each other in different activities, etc). Furthermore, it gave the researcher room to understand the nuances and complexities of these interactions with regard to the inclusion of children with Autism in education and how it facilitated or inhibited the inclusion of these particular children with Autism in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013).

Furthermore, this first-hand information was actively co-constructed by the different education actors. These co-constructions were actively generated by the children with Autism, the classroom teachers and support teachers, the SNA, peers and the researcher in the three in-school settings at particular times. In addition, the

information was complemented and fed by the participants' cultural and social backgrounds, generating the knowledge that fed this thesis.

However, the closeness of the researcher requires taking into account the potential of bias and preconceptions surrounding the interpretivist researcher in their interpretation of the participants' construction of their reality (Gray, 2017). Which refers to the fourth question mentioned by Guba and Lincoln, related to the axiology in the research described in the next section. Axiology relates to the role of values, beliefs and assumptions that guide the researcher in the study. It also relates to the role of ethics within the research process (Saunders & Lewis, 2019).

4.3.3. The Axiology

The interpretivist researcher acknowledges that the research process involves close presence with the participants within their context and is value-bound. In the current research, the researcher's closeness to the participants in the schools required the researcher to understand that the study was value-laden and contextually unique. Hence the researcher's presuppositions, assumptions, and values were present from the research set-up to the study conclusions and acknowledged at all times (Gray, 2017).

Contrarily, pure positivist researchers establish that their distance from the participants prevents their values and assumptions from interfering with the data collection and analysis. Their role is to maintain objectivity and be detached from the research process. In contrast, post-positivists acknowledge the cognitive and emotional presence of the researcher in the research process and the potential influence. They assume that those influences, beliefs and preconceptions do not influence the results because these are within control due to the physical and emotional distance between the researcher and researched (Creswell, 2007).

Nevertheless, the interpretivist researcher acknowledges their presence in the field and their bias (pre-conceptions and assumptions). In addition, they also consider

the influence of the researcher's presence on both the participants and the researcher's process of meaning-making (Gray, 2017; Schwandt, 2000). For that reason, the interpretivist researcher acknowledges that the researcher's physical, cognitive and emotional presence and engagement with the participants within the study context form part of the research process and cannot be separated. Thus, to ensure rigour in the study and the production of trustworthy data, the researcher must establish their positionality during the research process and must adopt a reflexive stance throughout (Corlett & Mavin, 2018; Holmes, 2020; Moore, 2012). The next section outlines the researcher's positionality, which is influenced by their personal and professional experiences, beliefs, and background. Furthermore, it influences every aspect of the research process, from the selection of the topic of study to the outcomes and results (Moore, 2012). It is essential to acknowledge that axiology also refers to the ethical considerations of the study, which has been addressed in section 4.10 of this chapter.

4.4. The researcher's positionality

Positionality requires flexibility from the researcher concerning his/her views, values and beliefs about the study design and process. In other words, the researcher must be prepared to adapt to the challenges and changes that the study may encounter in the journey, from the topic decision to the data conclusion of the study (Holmes, 2020). Therefore, the researcher's position must develop and grow alongside the study, following the demands of the study (Holmes, 2020). Acknowledging this development involves the researcher reviewing and reflecting on their positionality on an ongoing basis.

Because reflexivity informs positionality, the researcher acknowledges their positionality through self-reflexion, shaping the research process at all levels. Furthermore, understanding that the researcher and his/her positionality will form part of the research is also essential since it will define the data gathering and interpretation of the study findings (Corlett & Mavin, 2018; Holmes, 2020; Moore, 2012). The researcher's

personal and professional background and experiences are relevant to understanding their study position (Holmes, 2020). The present research began its journey in search of a better understanding of how the inclusion of children with Autism occurs in primary schools in the quest for a better way to support their inclusive education. The researcher's main aim was always to understand how children with Autism were doing in mainstream schools, particularly in the early years.

As a mother of three small children, the idea began to materialise when the oldest child began primary school along with other children with Autism and intellectual disabilities. Wondering what happened in school with children who had a diagnosis of Autism and how they were learning and progressing alongside their peers set the basic blocks of the study. The researcher's background in Psychology and 11 years working as a clinical trials manager in the medical and pharmaceutical field set the researcher's position into a positivist stance at the beginning of this project. This approach was transformed through self-reflection, readings, conversations with supervisors, the researcher's involvement in the Structured PhD, and the researcher's advocacy for including children with disabilities in regular schools.

The research decisions were underpinned by the researcher's personal and professional background and her understanding of education as a human right for all children based on the fundamentals of the United Nations Convention on the Right of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006). The researcher departed from the premise that educating children with Autism in the same classrooms alongside their peers is the way forward to enable a just and equitable society. Nevertheless, the researcher understands that placing children with disabilities in regular schools is not sufficient to facilitate their inclusion and participation in the society in which they live. To have a meaningful, inclusive education, children with Autism should have access, presence, participation, achievement, and belonging in regular schools. Furthermore, it is

recognised that children with Autism should be granted appropriate accommodations (i.e., academic, emotional, social and structural levels) to enable them to learn alongside their peers. Additionally, at the beginning of this project, the researcher's background in Psychology and clinical research predisposed her to an understanding of Autism through a medical lens. This understanding has developed into the position of the researcher in the study now.

The researcher defends Autism as part of human diversity, a label or diagnosis that is given to a very heterogeneous group of children and adults, some with strong learning support needs and some without them. The researcher acknowledges that children with Autism should not be addressed by their medical label, but they should be considered as a diverse group of people with different learning and behavioural styles. These different styles do not seem to be addressed by a narrow curriculum tailored to "typical" individuals without the label of Autism. For that reason, it is essential to ensure that the needs that these children with Autism could have in schools (academic, social and emotional) do not constitute a barrier to their inclusion and learning. Instead, schools should be prepared to cater for a diversity of learning, behavioural and emotional styles, some of which fall into the category of Autism. Therefore, Autism may be better defined as a heterogeneous group of people with different learning, behavioural, and emotional styles, as opposed to an impairment.

Along with stating a clear positionality, taking a reflexive stance enables the researcher to acknowledge their bias and also how these can creep into the research process, ensuring the researcher works through reflexivity on the potential influence of his/her beliefs and pre-conceptions in all stages of the research journey (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). The following section dive deeper into the researcher's reflexivity process and how she guarded against bias from the set-up of the first building blocks that constituted this research.

4.4.1. The researchers' reflexive stance

As Berger (2015) affirmed, the interpretive researcher needs to “better understand the role of the self in the creation of knowledge; carefully self-monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on their research; and maintain the balance between the personal and the universal” (Berger, 2015). Acknowledging the potential of bias and how these influence the research process is essential to maintain and ensure trustworthy conclusions and rigour in qualitative research (Corlett & Mavin, 2018).

The relativist (ontology) and constructivism (epistemology) researchers acknowledge that the researcher and the researched construct the reality subject to study, which differs from the discovery of knowledge postulated by positivist and objectivist researchers (Schwandt et al., 2007). In the first case, the construction of knowledge is influenced by the researcher's subjective interpretation of knowledge. In addition, the intersubjective construction of knowledge between the researcher and those researched needs to acknowledge the influence of the researcher, which requires the researcher to be transparent about their positionality and be reflexive during the research process to ensure rigour in the research (Gray, 2017).

In the present research, when the researcher was in the field observing the participants and how they interacted while taking notes about their behaviours, actions and communications, simultaneously, she was endeavouring a process of self-examination to acknowledge potential emotional reactions towards the event observed and her pre-conceptions and assumptions based on the professional and personal background (Probst, 2015). This is what Probst and colleagues called the “double perspective”; in other words, researchers focus not only on the data they are observing but on their self-preconceptions, agendas and biases and how these creep on their focus on the data and their interpretations (Probst, 2015). For example, it was easy for the researcher to drift to a psychologist's position and observe aspects of the child's

behaviour that could be easily explained under the Autism diagnosis. However, the researcher acknowledged that independently of a diagnosis, children with Autism ought to learn alongside their peers with appropriate support when in school. Thus the focus shifted to the participants' interactions, their personal contact and the support provided underpinning the interactions. The continued self-examination enabled the researcher to re-focus the perspective away from a medical interpretation considering other actors, support and the environment.

Reflexivity is not without tensions and criticism in its conceptualisation and processes. For example, some authors criticise the potential pitfall that reflexivity may cause in the research process if researchers' focus on reflexivity becomes more central than the research itself (Lynch, 2000). In addition, researchers can understand reflexivity and its practices differently depending on their philosophical stance. For example, positivist researchers use reflexivity to acknowledge and control bias to enable the objective position of the researcher (Cunliffe, 2003). However, in the current study, the researcher's interpretive/constructivist approach uses reflexivity to acknowledge that the participant and researcher are co-constructing the social reality under scrutiny in a particular context and time.

The interpretivist researcher must acknowledge their pre-conceptions, assumptions and emotions in this co-construction (Corlett & Mavin, 2018). In this study, reflexivity is not implemented to ensure objectivity. Conversely, reflexivity is put into practice to understand that although it is impossible to separate from the research, pre-conceptions must be brought to the surface to understand their potential influence in the study (Haynes, 2012). Despite some authors' arguments concerning the importance of the balance between the focus on the researcher's self-questioning and what is happening in the field, reflexivity, in particular in qualitative research, is fundamental to bolstering credibility and trustworthiness (Corlett & Mavin, 2018; Finlay, 1998; Lynch, 2000b; Subramani, 2019). Haynes (2017) acknowledged that "a researcher engaging in

reflexive research may encounter tensions in the extent of self-disclosure and focus on research processes. Nevertheless, reflexivity enables research to be insightful, questioning, inter-subjective and transparent on several levels” (Haynes, 2012).

Although the conceptualisation of reflexivity is well acknowledged in qualitative studies, as well as the benefits that reflexivity has in enhancing the rigour and trustworthiness of qualitative data, there is less information about how reflexivity is enacted in practice (Corlett & Mavin, 2018; Haynes, 2012). Different authors suggest various strategies, and the literature is populated with different “checklists” of how to ensure quality in qualitative research. An important aspect to consider is that the researcher’s philosophical stance defines and guides how reflexivity will take place. In addition, the consensus among scholars is that the reflexive researcher must constantly question him/herself about the decisions taken during the research and how their ideas shape this process in one direction or another (Corlett & Mavin, 2018; Finlay, 1998; Haynes, 2012). The researcher’s self-reflexion should not only be acknowledged and brought forward but recommended that it is a straightforward and transparent process. Therefore the strategies suggested by most authors are to record thoughts, self-questioning and personal disclosure of assumptions and pre-conceptions in the form of writing comments, memos and research diaries in all phases of the research (Corlett & Mavin, 2018; Cunliffe, 2003; Probst, 2015).

According to Schwartz-Shea and colleagues (2012), “Reflexivity refers to a researcher’s active consideration of, and engagement with the ways in which his own sense-making and the particular circumstances that might have affected it, throughout all phases of the research process, relate to the knowledge claims he ultimately advances in written form” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013, pg 100). Reflexivity in practice is not a one-off activity but an ongoing process related to all stages of the research and decisions made during the study related to the philosophical stance, methodology and conclusions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012). A detailed explanation and description of the

strategies implemented by the researcher to ensure quality and rigour in the study are outlined in section 4.9 of this chapter entitled Rigour and trustworthiness of the data.

In conclusion, the researcher's philosophical stance underpins and guides the research in all research stages, from the selection of the topic of study to the literature review and the research questions. In addition, it guides the methodology, rationale, and justification for adopting one research approach over other options. The methodological approach underpinning this research is described in the next sections. The author adopted a qualitative approach to research as the most appropriate approach to capture the nuances and complexities of the participants' interactions in the three in-school settings (Creswell, 2007; Gray, 2017).

4.5. The methodological approach

4.5.1. Introducing the three main methodological approaches

Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches are the main methodological approaches employed when doing research in general (Creswell, 2014; Morgan, 2014; Rocco et al., 2002; A. Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010). Qualitative research is an approach that focuses on exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals infer from the world in which they live (Creswell, 2014). For qualitative researchers, the nature of reality is multiple and variable and is perceived differently by different people (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This variability and multiple reality depend on everyone's experiences and the historical and cultural influence they had. Therefore, the background of each individual shapes their interpretation of reality (Creswell, 2014). The association between the interpretivist beliefs and the qualitative approach have also been supported by other researchers (Arcidiacono et al., 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2005; Chang, 2009; Merriam, 2009).

Quantitative research is an approach that examines the relationship among variables emphasising the measurement and analysis of cause and effect and focusing on the causal relationship between the variables but not on the processes (Creswell, 2014). Mixed methods research is an approach to research where the data is collected using quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. The information gathered is analysed and interpreted using quantitative and qualitative strategies, adding the strength of both approaches to understanding research problems (Creswell, 2007; Morgan, 2014; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

The present research adopted a qualitative approach as the most suitable approach to research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is understood that a qualitative approach to research has its limitations, particularly the lack of generalisability, making it difficult to replicate and generalise results in a broader context. In addition, the sample size tends to be smaller than quantitative samples, and the data collection and analysis process is time-consuming (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Ritchie et al., 2013; Silverman, 2013). However, for the purpose of this study, a qualitative approach was more suitable due to the phenomenon of study; the interactions between children with Autism in the early years of primary school (4-8 years of age).

It was understood that a qualitative approach to research would enable the researcher to gather in-depth information on how the interactions occur between all actors within the specific context. It would also facilitate understanding the nuances that emerged from these interactions within the context. In addition, it would enable the researcher to gather thick descriptions of the nature of the interactions, which were multiple, variable, and perceived differently by different people (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Schwandt, 2000; Merriam, 2009).

4.5.2. The rationale for a qualitative approach to research

Researchers that use a qualitative approach aim to collect data related to behaviours, relationships, understandings, and interactions of particular groups in

specific situations (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Schwandt, 2000; Merriam, 2009). Therefore, a qualitative approach is most suitable for this study because it can provide detailed and thick descriptions of the observed interactions, which produce essential and valuable information (Merriam, 2009). In addition, it enables the researcher to understand the behaviours associated with different situations and how the participant's interactions developed and emerged during those situations (Creswell, 2014; Flick, 2009; Ingleby, 2012).

Additionally, with a qualitative approach, the researcher becomes the instrument of data collection, which allows for a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances of the participants within the context surrounding these individuals. Moreover, this rich and in-depth understanding of the realities subject to study enables the researcher to find complexities otherwise missed with a more scientific and positivist type of enquiry (Flick, 2013). In the present study, through non-participant observation, the researcher gathered thick descriptions of the participants' interactions in the three in-school settings.

However, when the researcher is the instrument of data collection and interpretation, as it occurred when using observations as the only method of data collection, the data is mediated by the researcher and co-constructed between the researcher and the participants. Thus it implies that the pre-conceptions of the researcher can not be removed from the research. Nevertheless, the researcher must acknowledge that research is 'value laden' and that biases are present (Creswell, 2003). One way for researchers to acknowledge bias is to position themselves in the study, acknowledging and reporting their positionality (i.e., values and potential biases) (Creswell, 2007). The researcher clearly stated her positionality, acknowledging her professional and personal background in the current research (see section 4.4). She also adopted a reflexivity stance to ensure rigour and trustworthiness during the research process (see section 4.4.1) (Corlett & Mavin, 2018).

In qualitative research, reflexivity invokes the internal audit and questioning performed by researchers to "think" and analyse the research practices and how these ensure the quality of the study. It is about questioning the nature of the reality under study and how knowledge is acquired. It also involves the relationship between the researcher and the participants, reviewing the rationale for choosing a specific methodological approach over others, and the type of data collection methods. In addition, it relates to how the researcher addresses their pre-conceptions and personal and professional relationship with the topic of study and how it guides the data collection and analysis (Holmes, 2020). Furthermore, in the current study, the conceptual framework (see chapter 2) bounded the concepts of the study, guiding the researcher throughout the study process.

The data analysis in qualitative research is flexible and non-linear, allowing for emergent questions and procedures that can evolve during the research process. In the present study, the data gathered from the observations were interpreted and inductively analysed using thematic analysis to identify the themes in each case. Qualitative research enables the data collection *in situ*, within the context, and facilitates an inductive analysis of the data from the particular to the general. The themes that emerge from the inductive process are interpreted by the researcher, adding meaning to the data (Creswell, 2014; Silverman, 2013). The inductive analysis allows for ambiguities and contradictions in the data, which is a true reflection of social realities (Denscombe, 2010). In the present research, the detailed and thick descriptions of the interactions were inductively analysed to identify the themes that comprised the study findings. As Creswell (2014) asserted, 'qualitative research is inductive focusing on the individual meaning and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation' (Creswell, 2014, pg 4).

In qualitative research, there are different approaches to enquiry. Creswell defined five approaches: Narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory,

ethnography, and case study research (Creswell, 2007). The current study adopted a case study approach as the most suitable strategy for enquiry; the rationale underpinning this decision is presented in the following section.

4.5.3. The rationale underpinning the case study approach to enquiry

There are five approaches to enquiry in qualitative research: Narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study research (Creswell, 2007)

a) Narrative research reports the life of a single individual, and the narrative can be understood as the method of enquiry or the phenomenon of study. According to Czarniawska (2004), “narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected” (Czarniawska, 2004, pg 17). The narrative approach is challenging due to the amount of information to be collected and the clear understanding expected from the researcher about the life of the participants (Creswell, 2007). In addition, narrative research did not suit this research due to the exploratory nature of this study since this research aims to gain knowledge at the specific time that the interactions occur between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers in three different in-school settings.

b) Phenomenology is a descriptive form of enquiry seeking to understand the experiences that different individuals may have about a given phenomenon. It intends to gather the 'universal essence' of their different perceptions regarding the same reality (Creswell et al., 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Although the study sought to learn how the participants experienced interactions in the regular classroom, the enquiry did not focus on their personal and perceived experiences. The current research takes a different direction aiming to understand how the interactions occur, under which circumstances, and how the different participants are involved in these interactions through observations.

c) Grounded theory is a form of enquiry that focuses on generating a theory grounded on the data collected from the field. In this form of enquiry, the researcher seeks to generate explanations from the individuals' experiences of a determined phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Grounded theory is not an approach to enquiry suitable for this study since the study aims to explore the interactions among the child with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers in three settings. As Creswell (2013) affirmed, 'Although a grounded theory researcher develops a theory from examining many individuals who share in the same process, action, or interaction, the study participants are not likely to be located in the same place or interacting on so frequent a basis that they develop shared patterns of behaviour, beliefs, and language' (Creswell, 2013, pg 90).

d) Ethnography is a form of enquiry where the researcher describes and interprets a culture-sharing group's behaviour, values and beliefs in their day to day. In this research, the study aimed to understand the dynamics, interactions, and behaviours of the different actors in the different settings vis-à-vis the inclusion of children with Autism. However, it should be understood that the classroom was a school, a sub-culture-shared group. Therefore, this research aimed to explore how the dynamics of the actors in the classroom occurred around the child with Autism, but it did not intend to describe and interpret their beliefs, values, and interactions as a culture-sharing group. As Creswell (2013) asserted: 'The entire culture-sharing group in ethnography may be considered a case, but the intent in ethnography is to determine how the culture works rather than to either develop an in-depth understanding of a single case or explore an issue or problem using the case as a specific illustration' (Creswell 2013, pg 97).

e) Case study research, according to Creswell, a 'Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time. The final aim of the data collection is to report descriptive case studies accompanied by the themes emerging

from the narrative. The cases might be individual or multiple cases (a multisite study) or a single case (a within-site study)' (Creswell, 2013, pg 97).

The current study adopted a case study research methodology as the most appropriate qualitative approach to enquiry. The rationale for this decision was that case study research facilitated an in-depth exploration, description and analysis of the interactions, including the dynamics and complexities between the actors in the different settings. This approach enabled the researcher to explore a real-life problem within the context where it occurred (Creswell, 2013). In addition, it facilitated gathering data about how participants interacted within the group in different settings (Swanborn, 2010), using 'how' and 'why' questions (Stake et al., 2006; Yin, 2014).

A case study design provided holistic and in-depth descriptions of what was happening concerning the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools with a focus on interactions. It was understood that interactions were context bounded, and their study required the presence of the researcher to gather detailed accounts of the nuances and complexities of these interactions and how they facilitated or inhibited the inclusion of children with Autism in the schools. Because the phenomenon could not be separated from the context, case study research was the best option for this study.

In addition, the methodology of the present study adopted an exploratory, multiple, embedded case study research as the most suitable approach to enquiry (See next section). This approach seemed the most appropriate and beneficial option to explore children with Autism interactions within the regular classroom, including children from different schools and settings. Moreover, it facilitated gathering in-depth descriptions of the different interactions occurring in the participating schools bounded within their contexts (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The following section further elaborates on this statement.

4.5.4. A multiple embedded case study research

The case study will be classified accordingly depending on the type of case study research and what the study aims to achieve. For example Stake (2010), whose philosophical orientation is constructivist, argued that the main aim of a case study is not to generalise to other cases but to focus on the local situation of a particular case. Stake (1995) divides case studies into three types a) intrinsic case, a single case study important on its own, b) instrumental case, a single case study where the focus is on going beyond the case to understand the phenomenon of study broadly and c) a collective case, which is the multiple version of an instrumental case study aiming to learn broadly about a specific phenomenon (Stake, 1995).

While Yin (2014), with a more positivist orientation than Stake, classified case study designs as descriptive, exploratory, evaluation and explanatory. The author proposed that descriptive case studies focus on describing the phenomenon in a real-life context, while explanatory case studies explain causality, how the events occur, and why. In addition, evaluation case study research seeks to evaluate an intervention or practice, whereas exploratory studies precede the formulation of research questions or specific methodological procedures. Thus the aim is to discover theories and generate new questions for future studies (Yin, 2014). As can be seen, the authors' philosophical orientations emerge in their approach to the final outcome of case study research. While Yin (2014) established the final aim of case study research as testing preconceived ideas, Stake (1995) postulates a more constructivist epistemology and argues that the outcomes of case study research are to provide light, insight and further understanding of a particular phenomenon (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014; Yazan & De Vasconcelos, 2016).

With regards to the current research, the main aim was to explore how the inclusion of children with Autism was happening in regular schools in Ireland and what was happening at the school microlevel with a focus on interactions. For that reason, the nature of the study was exploratory, and it required the presence of the researcher as an

observer to facilitate the collection of naturally occurring information within the school context. As Schutt (2012) described, exploratory research 'seeks to find out how people get along in the setting under question, what meaning they give to the actions, and what issues concern them'. Therefore, the main goal is to elucidate 'what is going on here?' (Schutt, 2012, pg 13).

In addition, it was understood that adding multiple schools would add strength and rigour to the study; thus, the study design opted for multiple case study research. The typology of case study research adopted in the study was that specified by Yin and Stake. Therefore it is inferred that this research adopted a multiple (Yin 2014) or collective (Stake 1995) case study design because multiple pieces of evidence are more convincing and robust than one single piece from a single case study design (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

As Stake asserted, using multiple cases yielded more productive and more in-depth information about the phenomenon of study, which magnified the perception and understanding of the research topic (Stake, 1995). At the same time, Yin (2014) confirmed that the substantial benefits of using more than one case study to research complex phenomena added strength to the study in question (Yin, 2014). Nevertheless, the research does not aim to test preconceived theories or generate new ones. Instead, in line with the ontology and epistemology of this research (i.e., the philosophical stance) aims to provide insight into how the inclusion of eight children with Autism happened in five regular schools, considering the interactions between the education actors in three in-school settings (Stake, 1995; Yazan & De Vasconcelos, 2016). As clearly stated in Yazan (2016), case study research "still does not have a legitimate status as a social science research strategy because it does not have well-defined and well-structured protocols" (Yazan & de Vasconcelos, 2016, pg 134).

The researcher acknowledges that both authors Yin and Stake had differing epistemological approaches. For that reason, special care was taken in the research

design to ensure that it was in line with the researcher’s philosophical stance following Stake (1995) while benefiting from the detailed explanation of case study research and its practicalities from Yin (2014) to guarantee a robust design to answer the research questions (Stake, 1995; Yazan & de Vasconcelos, 2016; Yin, 2014).

Case study research is formed and structured by the following components; the case, the context, the main unit of analysis and the subunits of analysis (Yin, 2014), as outlined in the next table. The embedded approach of the present research involves the interactions between the child with Autism and other actors in the three in-school settings as the main unit of analysis. The interactions between other actors concerning the child with Autism (i.e., teachers, support teachers, SNAs and peers) in the different contexts (classroom, playground, support classroom) as the subunit of analysis (see table 2).

Table 2. The Units of Analysis

Case – Child with autism	
Context – Classroom, Playground, Support classroom	
Main unit of analysis	Subunit of analysis
Interactions between the child with Autism and other actors (teachers (classroom and support), SNAs and peers)	Interactions between the Classroom Teacher, the Support Teacher, the Special Needs Assistant (SNA), Peers

Developing appropriate research designs is essential since a good design will lead to appropriate conclusions. Moreover, the research design is linked to the philosophical assumptions connecting the research approach with the methodology, methods of data collection and analysis (Iphofen & Tolich, 2019). The research design is considered the logical sequence that connects the research questions with the conclusions involving steps such as data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2003). The following section describes in detail the present research design.

4.6. The Research Design

The current study was completed in three stages; the first stage comprised ethical approval granted from the School of Social Work and Social Policy Research Ethics Committee in Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin, on the 28th of April 2016. The second stage of this research involved the pilot study, which took place in May 2016. However, since the pilot study intended to provide information and confirmation of methods only, the data gathered and the observations made were not included in the final study findings. The third stage comprised the primary research, a small-scale qualitative, exploratory, embedded multiple case study research. The data collection of the primary study took place from June 2016 to June 2017, including five schools and eight children with Autism, their classroom teachers, support teachers, SNAs and peers. The primary study's data analysis and write-up took place between July 2017 and September 2021.

4.6.1. The Pilot Study

The pilot study aimed to allow the researcher to become familiarised with the routines and procedures in the early years of primary school. Additionally, it allowed the researcher to observe children with Autism within their classrooms and playground environment. The pilot study provided insight into how best to approach children with Autism in the classroom. In addition it help the researcher to manage the presence of the researcher with the child with Autism and how to gain their consent into the study. (Harrington et al., 2014; Kelly, 2007; Lewis, 2003; Loyd, 2013). Moreover, the pilot study enabled the researcher to learn the best way to approach teachers and SNAs to build positive rapport. The pilot study also provided a “test run” of the study methods of data collection pertinent to the non-participant observations in the classroom, support classroom and playground.

The pilot was completed in May 2016 for the duration of four weeks in one Catholic primary regular school in Ireland. The participants involved in the pilot study were one child diagnosed with Autism, their teacher, support teacher, special needs assistant (SNA), peers, the school principal, and the child's mother. The study was conducted in May, with fourteen full days of observations in the classroom and the playground and one day of observation in the support classroom. The documentation was reviewed during the first three days of the study and the interviews during the last week of May.

The pilot study gave the researcher a good insight into the teaching and learning plan and how the different activities were distributed during the school day (i.e., structured and unstructured activities, formal and informal activities). In addition, the interviews were modified to be more succinct and direct with the questions to reduce the interviews to 30-40 minutes. However, the data collected in the pilot study has not been included in the case study analysis and cross-case analysis due to the nature of the pilot study (i.e., to gain insight, verification and clarification on the study method and school procedures) (Creswell, 2013; Silverman, 2013; R. Stake, 2010; Yin, 2013).

4.6.2. The primary Research

The data collected in the field from June 2016 and June 2017, as well as in the Pilot study, involved four methods of data collection, a) semi-structured interviews with principals, parents, teachers (general and support classroom), SNAs and children with Autism, b) Direct Non-participants semistructured observations in the classroom, support classroom and the playground, c) Review of School documentation pertinent to the child (confirmation of diagnosis, provision of support, teacher education plan, child with Autism educational outcomes, Individual Educational Plan, any other relevant information about provision of support and academic outcomes), d) Demography questionnaires to gather information about teachers, SNAs and principals years of experience working with children with Autism and in school, and training.

From the beginning, the study methods of data collection comprised semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection, complemented by observations, document analysis and background questionnaires. However, the data collected from interviews, demographic questionnaires and document review were not included in the final analysis of this research. In retrospect, it must be acknowledged that despite the need for qualitative researchers to be flexible and adapt their designs to provide new insights, the approach followed in this research with the non-reported data raises research ethical and integrity issues and thus is an approach that should be very carefully considered (Woods, 2019).

4.6.2.1. The rationale behind the non-reported data

Researchers should be flexible in qualitative research (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). Flexibility involves adjusting the research (e.g. research questions and methods) to ensure that it provides new information and answers the questions that the research aims to answer (Oakley, 2002; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). In addition, it aims to produce knowledge that would offer new insights into how to best support those under scrutiny.

The current research aimed to fill a gap in knowledge concerning the inclusion of children with Autism in regular primary schools at the school micro level. In particular, concerning the interactions among all education actors in different in-school settings. According to previous research, interactions between all educational actors during structured and unstructured activities are confirmed to play an essential role in pupils' academic, emotional and social development in schools (Penning, 2020, 2018). However, the gap in knowledge rests on the interactions at the school micro level between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers. In addition, there is a dearth of knowledge concerning the relationship between interactions and inclusive education for children with Autism (Cameron, 2014).

The researcher, through constant verification (i.e., repetitive checks on the research process and researcher's interpretations) and a reflexive stance (i.e., self-reflection and supervisors' review), with the support of the supervisors, acknowledged that the data collected from the interviews did not answer the research questions. Instead, it only highlighted the difficulties educators, SNAs, principals and parents encountered in the inclusion of some of these children with Autism, which according to the education actors, was associated with these children's difficulties due to their Autism. In addition, the interviews confirmed that the challenges experienced by the education actors appeared to be exacerbated by a lack of support, resources and training to support the inclusion of these children. Although the information provided in the interviews was relevant and contributed to the inclusive education discourse by confirming the problems already highlighted in previous research, it failed to address the gap in knowledge; how are these children included, and how are the interactions among all education actors facilitating or inhibiting the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools.

Conversely, the data gathered from the observations provided an ample ground for exploration about what happened in the natural context between the education actors in the three in-school settings. The detailed data corpus from the observations exposed the daily interactions between the education actors. In addition, it revealed how these interactions enabled in some cases and inhibited in others, the inclusion of these eight children with Autism in the classroom, the playground, and the support classroom, providing an original contribution. It is relevant to understand that direct observations are often used in qualitative research to reconcile and complement the information provided in the interviews, and it is often common to find discrepancies between what people say and what people do (Robson & McCartan, 2016; Gray, 2018). In addition, direct non-participant observations offer the opportunity of getting a sample of the natural context on the field with a "lack of artificiality" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 345). Therefore it

was considered adequate to focus on the data corpus collected with the observations as appropriate to address the gap in knowledge. Nevertheless, it is important to reiterate that not including all the data collected in research could be considered unethical and bears moral, ethical and integrity implications, discussed in the next section (Nind, 2016).

4.6.2.2. Ethics and integrity concerning the non-reported data

In accordance with Trinity College's good research practice (2014, 2021), any research should be conducted following the ethical principles of respect for the individual subject or population, beneficence, and the absence of maleficence (the research should aim for the maximum benefit trying to avoid any harm) and justice (the research population should be treated with honesty and integrity). In addition, research integrity relates to the performance of research to the highest standards of professionalism and rigour and the accuracy and trustworthiness of the research in publications and elsewhere (Research Integrity Report in Ireland, 2019; Trinity College Dublin, 2014, 2021).

Focusing the data analysis and discussions on the data collected from the observations followed the genuine aim of providing a new contribution to knowledge concerning how the inclusion of children with Autism takes place in the day to day of the early years of primary schools. Although the School of Social Work and Social Policy Research Ethics Committee did not require the submission of an amendment for this change on the treatment of the data collected and not used in the final analysis. The decision should have been reported in writing to the schools to keep them cognisant of all changes and the rationale following these decisions. For example, the non-reported data was always intended to be used in future publications.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the participants gave their consent and time to the interviews, and the background questionnaires, which were not reported in the thesis. Therefore, they should have been informed when the decision took place

and how this could affect the final results. It is important to mention that the schools were not fully on the blind side regarding this decision. The researcher informed the school principals about the adjustments to the study through casual conversations, but written information was never provided before the final research submission.

The dissemination of findings to the schools is planned to occur at the end of the PhD process. After examination, the schools and participants will be informed in writing of the study conclusions and the rationale behind the non-reported data. In the event that the school staff or parents of those children with Autism are no longer working or studying in the school, the dissemination of findings will fall under the responsibility of the school principal due to confidentiality and data protection issues (Denscombe, 2010; Research Integrity Report in Ireland, 2019; Trinity College Dublin, 2014, 2021).

4.6.2.3. Implications regarding the non-reported data

Concerning the data from the interviews, it is important to reiterate that adding this data would have portrayed the participants' experiences concerning the inclusion of children with Autism. For example, teachers' lack of support and training for children with Autism in schools is portrayed in the literature as an important factor influencing teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy in catering for children with Autism in their classrooms. However, the study aimed to explore other factors concerning the inclusion of children with Autism at a practical level by providing exemplars of their daily interactions and how these enabled or not their inclusive education. This information was captured during observations contrarily to the data collected through interviews which provided information related to the challenges and difficulties experienced by teachers, SNAs and parents.

In addition, the non-reported data concerning the children's diagnostic information and learning needs, although relevant in schools to support children with Autism, did not provide information about how the support required was put into practice and whether the support enabled the inclusion of these children in schools. In the literature review of this

thesis (Chapter 3), it is argued that previous research focused on children with Autism “impairments” as the main barrier to their inclusive education. This study postulates and defends that other factors can influence how children with Autism are included in schools regardless of their needs.

The researcher also understands that putting these children's needs upfront during data collection and analysis had the potential risk of masking other factors influencing their inclusion. The current study acknowledged the needs of all children with Autism during the observations, with a focus on the support provided during the lessons and in the playground. However, these needs were not considered as the cause/explanation of the interactions observed. For example, when presenting the cases, if the child was not participating, the focus of the observation rested on the type and level of appropriate support and interactions from all education actors tailored to the individual child to enable their participation. In other words, the focus was on the level of support, structural accommodation and personal contact, as opposed to focusing on what the children could not do because they had a diagnosis of Autism. In addition, the non-reported data also involved methodological considerations addressed in detail in the next section.

4.6.2.4. Methodological considerations for the non-reported data

The data collected during the study influenced the researcher to the choices made in this research. The collected and non-reported data became part of the researcher’s knowledge stressing the need to guard against bias and maintain rigour. Therefore, to enable the collection and analysis of trustworthy data, the researcher was required to acknowledge her assumptions and preconceptions and how these could creep into the research process by adopting a reflexive stance (Corlett & Mavin, 2018). Through reflexivity, the researcher acknowledged that the data collected during the study was mediated. In particular, during the data collection and the data analysis, due to the potential influence that the information that the researcher already knew from the

interviews, background questionnaires, and document review could have on the final analysis (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013).

The researcher acknowledged that the information gathered through interviews could not be ignored and understood that it informed the researcher's approach throughout the data analysis and conclusions of the study. This information constituted bias, similar to those brought from previous professional and personal experiences dealt with through reflexivity. For example, the researcher had to address, in some cases, the use of medical terms and explanations related to behaviour that was focused on the medical diagnosis of Autism when completing the case study. Information was reflected upon with the supervisors and amended accordingly in the cases, ensuring the focus on the data.

It is important to reiterate that in research, the case of non-reported data raises ethical and integrity concerns and should be carefully reviewed. The following section describes the research process and each step followed, from the set-up of the study to the data analysis. Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 capture and discuss the study findings of the interactions between eight children with Autism and the actors in different settings from the data gathered through semi-structured direct non-participant observations in five primary schools in Ireland.

4.6.3. The research process

As a novice researcher doing case study research, the researcher encountered a dearth of detailed information about how to conduct case study research. Although a researcher, as Merriam conveyed, is selected "because of the nature of the research problem and the question being asked" (Merriam, 1988, pg 41), the researcher must follow a series of steps in the process of research. Creswell (2014) described an seven-step model of research where the researcher 1) Identifies the research problem, 2)

Reviews the literature, 3) Selects participants/sample, 4) Collects data, 5 and 6) Analyses and Interprets the Data, 7) Reports and evaluates research (Creswell, 2014).

Concerning case study research, Baxter and Jack (2008) reviewed the study design and implementation of case study research for novice researchers. In their article, the authors revealed Stake and Yin from a constructivist orientation asserting that both Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) based their approach to case study on a constructivist paradigm. The authors (Baxter and Jack, 2008) asserted that constructivists claim that truth is relative and dependent on one's perspective. In addition, they confirmed that this paradigm "recognizes the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning, but does not reject outright some notion of objectivity" (Baxter et al., 2008, pg 545). Furthermore, the authors provided a detailed review of definitions, types of case study research analysis and how to address rigour and trustworthiness in case study research (Baxter et al., 2008).

The review of the literature concerning case study research confirmed to the researcher that the author who most comprehensively covers all different phases of research using a case study approach was Yin (2014), in his book 'Case Study Research: Methods and Design' (Yin, 2014). However, his book denotes the author's positivist philosophical orientation despite Baxter and Jack's assumption that Yin was of a constructivist approach. Consequently, the researcher considered the book a good starting guide that ought to be adapted to fit the researcher's philosophical stance.

The research process was divided into three phases; the first phase focused on defining the research focus of attention and defining the philosophical stance and methodological approach that was best defined to gain knowledge about the inclusion of children with Autism in the early years of primary school in Ireland. The second phase focused on accessing, collecting and analysing the data corpus pertinent to each case study, and the third and last phases focused on analysing the data across cases and writing the concluding report. The table presented below (table 3) is an adaptation of the

research procedure used by Yin (2014). Phase I was adapted to include the research questions that guided the study before the case selection and the design of data collection. Phase III was also adapted because this research did not intend to generate theory or develop policy (Yin, 2014). Instead, in the conclusions from the cross-case analysis in Phase III, this research informed and reported what was seen in the interactions between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers in the classroom, playground, and support classroom. This type of conclusion resembles what Stake called 'assertions' (Stake 1995) or 'building patterns' or 'explanations' (Yin 2014). The conclusions of the case study analysis present what Creswell identifies as 'the general lessons learned from studying the case(s)' (Creswell, 2013, pg 121).

Table 3. Multiple case study procedure (adapted from Yin, 2014)

Phase I Define and Design		Phase II Prepare, Collect and Analyse		Phase III Analyse and conclude
Research questions (1.1)	Select cases (1.3)	Conduct the 8 case studies (2)	Write the 8 case reports individually (2.1)	Cross-case analysis of the eight cases (3.1)
	Design data collection protocol (1.2)		Perform within case analysis of each individual case report (2.2)	Draw Cross Case conclusions from the cross-case analysis (3.2)
				Write cross case conclusions (3.3)
				Lessons learned (3.4)

4.6.3.1. Recruitment of schools and participants

Gay and colleagues (2012) established that "Because many potential participants are unwilling to undergo the lengthy demands of participation, sampling in qualitative

research is almost always purposeful” (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012, p. 135). In the present study, participants were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling aims to recruit a sample with certain commonalities to collect reliable data (Rose & Shevlin, 2014).

In the current research, a total of five schools took part (Table 4); three of those schools were recruited with a purposive sample (schools 1,2 and 4), and two schools via snowball sampling (Schools 3 and 5). The snowball sampling was due to the recruitment difficulties encountered in the recruitment phase. For that reason, the researcher sought recommendations and contacts from two of the schools already taking part in the study. The recruitment of these schools accessed via snowball sampling followed the same procedure in schools 1, 2 and 4.

Table 4. Study population

Schools & Sampling procedure	No. 1 Purposive	No. 2 Purposive	No. 3 Snowball	No. 4 Purposive	No. 5 Snowball	TOTAL
	5 Schools					
Children with Autism	1	2	1	3	1	8 children with Autism
Classroom Teachers	1	2	1	3	1	8 Classrooms Teachers
Support teachers	1	2	1	3	1	8 Support teachers
SNAs	1	2	1	3	1	8 SNAs
Pupils per classroom	25-30	25-30	25-32	25-30	25-30	Less than 240 pupils in total

4.6.3.2. Selection criteria: Schools and Participants

The recruitment process involved the recruitment of schools first, followed by the recruitment of participants upon approval from the school Board of Management. The recruitment followed an inclusion/exclusion criteria developed for the study to select schools and participants with certain similarities. However, attempting to select schools and participants that are the same is difficult due to the differing nature of the schools,

the in-school classroom and the participants taking part in the study. Therefore, to ameliorate these differences, the selection of schools and participants followed a series of common criteria for all sites and participants, guiding their selection. At the same time, these criteria bound each case, adding strength and facilitating the collection of reliable data (Rose & Shevlin, 2014).

The inclusion criteria that guided the selection of schools and participants were,

- a) Catholic primary regular schools in a city in Ireland, with no special classes or autistic units for children with special educational needs. First, Catholic schools are higher in proportion in Ireland, and second, the use of special classes and autistic units is not general in all schools in Ireland.
- b) Schools located in a similar geographical and socioeconomic area (No DEIS schools)¹. The rationale for choosing this socioeconomic area followed the aim to select schools with no specific support, provided to DEIS schools in deprived areas, except for the allocation of Support Teachers and Special Needs Assistants (DES, 2005).
- c) Children between 4 to 9 years old. (Equivalent to Junior Infants class to Second Class in the Irish school system).
- d) Children diagnosed with Autism by the Health Service Executive (HSE)² in Ireland (national health system). At the time of fieldwork, the allocation of resources in schools was determined by such a diagnosis. However, in September 2017 (after the fieldwork), the legislation was amended, and the allocation of resources was no longer dependent on a diagnosis from the HSE (DES, 2017).

¹ Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) the Action Plan for Educational Inclusion, was launched in May 2005 and remained the Department of Education and Skills policy instrument to address educational disadvantage. The action plan focuses on addressing and prioritising the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through second-level education (3 to 18 years). (Department of Education).

² HSE – (Health Service Executive), The HSE provides public health and social care services to everyone living in Ireland.

- e) Children in receipt of support in school from a Support Teacher and a Special Needs Assistant³.
- f) Children who spent most of their school day in the regular classroom, meaning that these children were in the regular classroom for all subjects except for their time spent with the special needs teacher and/or additional resources. The review of the child's teaching plan and Individual Educational Plan confirmed this support and time in the classroom in the first week of the fieldwork.
- g) Full-time staff and full-time allocation teacher. Teachers had to be allocated to the child's classroom for the entire academic year with no replacement or trainee teachers. The school's Principal and teachers confirmed this criterion.
- h) Full-time staff Special Needs Assistant. SNAs had to be working full time for the school as SNAs, regardless of the support hours allocated to the child with Autism. School principals and SNAs confirmed this criterion.

The next sections outline the process followed to gain access to schools, parents, children with Autism and school staff. The study documentation pertaining to this phase of the study can be found in the appendix section. (See appendices A to N).

4.6.3.3. Gaining access and the recruitment process

Schools were approached by email and phone call, and once the principal agreed to take part in the study, approval was sought from the school Board of Management. Once the Board of Management approved the research to be carried out in the school, the principal contacted parents with children with Autism to seek their interest in the research. After parents agreed for their children to participate in the study, Information forms and Consent were distributed to the school staff participating in the study. In addition, the parents of the pupils in the classroom were informed by the school principal

³ Previous to the General Allocation Model circular 2017, children with Autism with a diagnosis were categorised as high incidence. Thus they received extra support from a support teacher for up to 4.25 hours a week (Department of Education and Science, 2005).

in writing. The letter informed them about the nature of the research and the presence of the researcher. In addition, the researcher’s contact details were provided should they require further information about the study prior to or during the fieldwork (see table 5).

Table 5. The stages of gaining access to schools and participants

Stages in the process of gaining access	Gatekeeper	Before Fieldwork	During fieldwork
Stage I Schools	Principal	Principal accept school involvement in the research	
	Board of Management	Board of management granted permission to the school to be involved in the research	
Stage II Parents	Principal	Principal invited families to get involved in the research.	
Stage III Children with Autism	Parents	Parents granted permission for their child to take part in the research. Parents informed their children with Autism about the study with the support of a copy of the children Information form and Assent gaining their verbal consent.	
Stage IV Teacher SNA	Principal Teacher Support teacher SNA	Teachers (classroom and support) consented to take part in the study	
		SNAs consented to take part in the study	
Stage VI Peers	Parents of all pupils in the classroom	Parents were informed in writing about the presence and purpose of the researcher in schools	
Stage VII	Children with Autism	Parents informed their children at home about the nature of the research and the researcher’s presence in the classroom, playground and support classroom at home.	Children were informed about the study first by their teachers and then by the researcher before they assent to the study.

4.6.3.4. Gaining access to Schools

The recruitment strategy followed by the researcher involved contacting regular primary schools in a city in Ireland using the school contact list from the Department of Education. The schools contacted were limited to a geographical area with a similar

socioeconomic background (medium) known to the researcher. In addition, schools were catholic primary regular schools servicing children from 4 to 12 years old, and the average number of pupils studying in the schools was 500 pupils. From March 2016 to June 2017, 42 schools were approached with information letters (see Appendix I) sent by email informing them about the study, followed by phone calls (table 6). From the first approach, some principals informed the researcher of their decision not to participate in the study through their school secretary. While those who spoke with the researcher on the phone confirmed their refusal due to time constraints. From the first 42 schools contacted, 20 school visits were arranged by the researcher to inform the principals about the study in more detail. From these visits, 13 principals refused to participate due to a lack of time to accommodate the researcher in the school during the observation period, and seven principals confirmed their interest in learning more about the study. Information letters were distributed with detailed information about the study to those seven principals and the Principal (gatekeeper) Information and Consent Forms (see Appendix D and E). A second meeting was arranged with those principals who confirmed their interest in the study once they reviewed the documentation sent. During this second meeting, the principals informed the researcher of the potential number of children suitable for the study according to the inclusion criteria (see table 6).

Table 6. Contacts with school

Gaining access procedure	Documentation submitted
Study information by email	First letter to schools with brief information about the study
Phone call	Follow up email to confirm meeting arranged by phone
First visit	Research introduction letter Principal (gatekeeper) information and consent forms.
Second visit – After acceptance from the Principal.	Submission of documentation to the Board of Management seeking permission to carry out the study in the school
Third visit – After permission from Board of Management was granted.	Parents of children with Autism invitation letter, and acknowledgement of interest.

Following the formal agreement to participate in this research from each Principal, the study documentation was submitted to the school Board of Management (See Appendix K), seeking their permission to conduct the study in the school. The documentation provided to the Board of Management had been previously reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the School of Social Work and Social Policy at Trinity College Dublin, The University of Dublin, on the 28th of April 2016.

The research documentation submitted to the School Board of Management for approval comprised the following:

1. Participants' Information Forms and Consent/assent Forms.
2. Observation Checklist.
3. Document analysis checklist.
4. Demographic Questionnaire.

Once the school Board of Management granted permission for the school to take part in the current research, the role of selecting and contacting parents of children with Autism fell under the responsibility of each school principal.

4.6.3.5. Gaining access to parents and children with Autism

Each school principal was responsible for contacting families of children with Autism in their schools. The researcher had no access to the school population for confidentiality reasons. Principals informed parents about the study with an information letter provided by the researcher and previously approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Trinity College (See Appendix L). This information letter outlined the study rationale and invited them to involve their child in the study. In addition, attached with the letter was an acknowledgement form for parents to return to the school, signed within one week, should they consider participating in the research. The acknowledgement form included their agreement for the researcher to contact them for further discussions (See Appendix L).

A total of 16 families were contacted among the five schools participating in this research (see table 7). From the total 16 families contacted, ten agreed to meet the researcher to discuss the research further, with a final agreement of eight parents to involve their child in the study.

Table 7. The number of families contacted by school and responses.

School Number	Families Contacted	Families met	Families enrolled
1	3	2	1
2	7	3	2
3	1	1	1
4	4	3	3
5	1	1	1
5	16	10	8

Once parents agreed to learn more information about the study, the researcher contacted parents by phone first, followed by a meeting arranged at their convenience within the school premises where possible. Due to work commitments, some meetings took place over the phone or outside the school premises. In all cases, parents were informed about the study and were given one week to consider their participation. The researcher emphasised the voluntary nature of their participation, with no coercion or pressure. Once parents confirmed their agreement to participate, the researcher provided them with the Parents Information Form and Consent, Parents/Children Information Form and Consent, and Children Information Form and Assent (see Appendix A, B, C). The researcher emphasised the voluntary nature of their participation again, with no coercion or pressure.

After parents confirmed their agreement for their child to participate in the study, parents and school staff were provided with the Participant Information Form and Consent for their review and signature should they agree to participate in the study. Consent to the study was returned to the school once signed within one week of distribution. Two sets of parents refused to participate in the study; one decided to resume their agreement to participate in the study after discussing it with friends and

family, while the other set of parents, who were separated, did not arrive at a mutual agreement.

4.6.3.6. Gaining access to school staff: Teacher, Support Teacher, and Special Needs Assistant

Once the school and the parents of the child with Autism had consented to the study, the next step was to gain consent from the school staff involved with the child with Autism (i.e., Classroom teachers, Special Needs Assistants (SNA), and Support teachers). Principals were responsible for informing the staff about the study with an information letter previously provided by the researcher and approved by the Ethics Committee at Trinity College Dublin (See Appendix F, G, H). In addition, principals were responsible for distributing the participant Information Forms and Consent previously provided by the researcher to teachers and SNAs. The school staff had a week to consider their participation in the study before signing their consent.

Once the Participant Consent forms had been signed and returned, the researcher intended to meet with school staff before fieldwork for an introductory meeting. However, arranging a time to meet school staff proved difficult, and except for the pilot study and school 02, information concerning the study and clarifications for teachers and SNAs were disclosed over the phone. Nevertheless, on the first day of fieldwork, the study information was further reviewed with teachers (classroom and support) and SNAs, prior to the fieldwork to ensure their understanding of the study and the researcher's presence in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom.

4.6.3.7. Peers and their parent's information about the study

Principals informed in writing to all parents with pupils in the classroom where the observation was going to be carried out about the study and provided the researcher's contact details for further clarification. However, the researcher was not approached by any of the parents for the duration of the fieldwork. In addition, on the first day of

fieldwork, the teacher introduced the researcher to the class, informing all pupils, including the child with Autism, about her presence and the nature of her job, which involved observing and taking notes about children's learning in school. In addition, teachers informed all pupils of the researcher's location at the back of the classroom for the duration of her project.

4.6.3.8. Obtaining children with Autism assent to participate in the study; an ethical consideration.

Once parents agreed to participate in the study, they were provided with the Parents Information Form and Consent, the Parents/Children Information Form and Consent, and Children Information Form and Assent (See Appendix A, B, C). Parents were informed of the importance of discussing the research with their children, with the Children Information Form and Assent support. The intention was first to provide their children with Autism with prior information about the researcher and the parental agreement and give the child notice that the researcher was going to be in the classroom, preparing the child for her presence. In addition, this exercise aimed to help their child with Autism understand the nature of the study and give him/her the opportunity to place his/her verbal agreement/disagreement before the fieldwork. However, the researcher informed parents that the forms would be signed at the school to ensure the children's voluntary agreement to the study after meeting the researcher.

The Children Assent was not signed before the fieldwork for ethical reasons: First, the researcher was allowed in the classroom once all participants agreed on the study, which occurred shortly before the first day of fieldwork. The researcher understood that meeting the children with Autism outside the school to get their assent was unethical. Secondly, asking children with Autism between 5 to 9 years old to read, understand and sign a child-friendly document before the fieldwork from a strange was considered unethical in the sense that they would have put the children with Autism in the study under unnecessary stress, which could have been interpreted as "coercing"

them into agreeing to participate in the study. Additionally, providing informed consent to parents to get their children's signatures could be considered a form of coercion since the children could have signed because they were asked to do so.

This study was child-centred, and for that reason, the information pertaining to the study and the signature of the Assent required to be done in the school, in the presence of the researcher and under circumstances that did not put the child under any unnecessary stress. However, once the study commenced in the schools, the researcher realised that getting close to some of the children was going to take more time and effort than previously anticipated. In particular, five of these children were nervous about the researcher's presence and refused to initiate any contact with her. Since gaining their Assent to the study under these conditions felt unethical. The situation was discussed with the school principals and the children's parents, who confirmed their children's verbal agreement on the study before fieldwork commencement. It was agreed that it was more appropriate to get the children's information form discussed with them and the Assent signed once the children were used to the researcher's presence. Although parents had signed their consent for their child to take part in the study, verbal permission was sought from parents and principals to collect study data before the child's Assent was signed. In addition, it was confirmed that the data would not be used if the child refused to take part in the study at any time before and after the signature. Moreover, the researcher, the school principal and the parents agreed that the data (i.e., observations and document review) could be collected before the child assented to the study due to time constraints for the school and the researcher. Nevertheless, all children with Autism participating in the study must have the Informed Assent signed before their interviews, which was completed as discussed.

Gaining informed consent is a core element of ethical practice. Participants in research, especially children, must be able to express their agency within the research process based on their competence in decision-making. The decision must be based on

adequate information about the research process and the uses of the data generated by their involvement (Heath, S., et al., 2005). Additionally, to obtain valid consent, it has to be given 'freely', based on 'adequate information,' and it has to be an 'ongoing process' (Skelton, 2008). For that reason, fieldwork commenced in schools based on the confirmation of the adult but under the premise that the consent would be signed once the child got accustomed to the researcher's presence.

Once the children with Autism taking part in the study got comfortable with the presence of the researcher, they were informed about the study. The child information form and assent forms were explained with visual cues. This approach followed the advice of authors such as Preece and Jordan (2010), who contend that visual clues are the best approach when communicating with children with Autism (Preece & Jordan, 2010). The same authors also convey that using visual approaches in research that involves children with communication problems is more accessible and less stressful (Preece, 2002).

Therefore, the Child information and assent forms were drawn in a child-friendly manner with pictures and symbols about the researcher, the university, the school, the classroom and the yard. The document was informed and signed in a place the child felt comfortable with, previously advised by the classroom teacher and the SNA. The researcher met most of the children with Autism in the study in the library, a place known by these children to guarantee they were anxiety free. Children in the study were informed about the project and why the researcher was present in the classroom and the playground. Information was provided regarding the voluntary child participation with no coercion and the child's right to withdraw their participation at any time. The child confidentiality and the right for the researcher to seek support if necessary were also explained (See Appendix A). The children were reassured with the support of the witness, who depending on availability, involved the Support teacher, the SNA and parents in some cases. Children were asked about their understanding of the study and

their consent before they signed their Assent to the study. Additionally, the verbal consent of these children was sought every time the researcher observed the child and the SNA outside the classroom, for example, when they went outside for walks during free time.

4.7. Method - Semi-structured direct non-participant observations

Semi-structured non-participant observations are the method of data collection adopted in the current research. Observation is considered a powerful method of data gathering to produce relevant data about the practicalities of the day to day. In particular is a suitable method of data collection to explore interactions between children with Autism, teachers, peers and SNAs in different in-school settings (Cameron et al., 2012; Emam & Farrell, 2009; Symes & Humphrey, 2012). The observation method allows the researcher to experience and gather first-hand data within the real context of the study (Cohen et al., 2011). Furthermore, using observations as the only method of data collection enable access to richer data related to the participants' behaviours, communications and interactions as they occur in their natural setting (Blackshaw et al., 2012).

Two types of methods of observation populate the literature, participant and non-participant observation, and both have advantages and disadvantages. The most important advantage of these two forms of observation is the opportunity for the researcher to access first-hand information within the context. Nevertheless, in both cases, the intrusion of the researcher in the setting and with the participants has the potential risk of influencing the quality of the data collected (Cooper et al., 2004).

On the one hand, participant observations enable the researcher's involvement within the group, providing access to rich, detailed real-life information (Cresswell, 2003). However, on the other hand, the researcher's active involvement could impact the notes-taking and the data interpretation. For example, observing the interactions between

pupils on the other side of the room is difficult if the researcher supports the teacher in the classroom. Additionally, the researcher as a participant involves a form of intrusion in the day to day of the participants with the potential risk of impacting the quality of the data collection (Cohen et al., 2011). In other words, the presence of the researcher as a participant may influence the classroom routine and, thus, the potential interactions that could have taken place between the different actors without the presence of the researcher. In addition, direct non-participant observation can reduce the impact of the intrusion factor and difficulty in taking notes and interpreting the data at the site. However, it compromises collecting richer first-account information that could only occur with participant observation due to the close involvement of the researcher (Rose & Grosvenor, 2001).

In the current research, observations were twofold; firstly, they aimed to gather information about the interactions between the actors in the different settings. Secondly, they allowed the researcher to see any commonalities or differences among the interactions in different situations, within and between the settings. For example, the observations in the classroom facilitated the researcher to observe differences and commonalities in the interactions between children with Autism and teachers in structured and unstructured classroom activities.

For that reason, direct non-participant observation was adopted as the method of data collection since it enabled access to the interactions occurring in the three in-school settings within their natural contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Fusch et al., 2018). In addition, the observation protocol (semi-structured observations) guided the data collection facilitating the researcher to focus on the information related to the research questions and the aim of the research without compromising the collection of holistic and rich data (Gray, 2017). Research with children, particularly children with Autism, requires a prudent approach in the classroom and the playground because the researcher's presence could impact the child's classroom routine. Consequently, a series of strategies

(see section below) were put into practice during the observation period to ameliorate the impact of the intrusion factor.

4.7.1. The observation method and children with Autism

In order to reduce the impact of the researcher's presence in the school routine and in these children with Autism, the researcher was introduced to the child gradually during the observation period. In addition, the researcher ensured a certain distance from the child with Autism was always maintained to avoid interference in the interactions between the child with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers. The gradual approach involved the following routine:

1) The researcher was introduced to all children and sat at the back of the classroom, allowing the child with Autism to become familiar with her presence.

2) The researcher accompanied the child with Autism and the SNA when they walked to the support classroom, the playground or simply when they were outside the classroom for a break. Always after gaining verbal consent from the child with autism.

3) When the researcher accompanied the child with Autism and the SNA outside the classroom, the SNA introduced the researcher to the child, and a gradual and friendly conversation was initiated between the researcher and the child with the support of the SNA.

4) The researcher joined all pupils in the playground accompanied by the SNA. The researcher was a mere observer beside the SNA. They walked around in the playground enabling the child with Autism to get familiarised with the researcher's presence.

4.7.2. The observation process

At each school, observations occurred in the classroom, the playground, and the support classroom. The researcher observed the classroom for four hours, the

playground for 20 minutes and the support classroom for 45 minutes each day. The days allocated for each child in every context are outlined in table 8. The variations in the hours depended on the days allowed in the school. In some schools, the researcher was allowed more days in the classroom, for example, in the case of Joe (six days) and Max (seven days). However, in other schools, factors such as school holidays, maternity leave, standardised assessments and school activities restricted the time allowed in the classroom, hence the variation in the days of observations⁴. Doing research in schools can be complicated when observations occur for the duration of the school day. In all cases, teachers and principals were accommodating and friendly, but after a number of days, it was noticed that not all teachers were fully comfortable with the researcher's presence in the classroom. Hence in some cases, no more observations were arranged after a holiday break, for example (See table 8).

Table 8. Days of observations

Child	Days of Classroom observations	Days of playground observations	Days of Support classroom observations
Max	7	7	1
John	5	5	1
Laura	5	5	2
Peter	4	4	1
Sean	4	4	4
Joe	6	6	1
Paul	5	5	5
Carl	4	4	5
TOTAL	40 x Observations - Classroom (4 hours each day)	40 x Observations - Playground (20 minutes each day)	20 x Observations - Support Teacher classroom (45 minutes each day)

⁴ It needs to be taken into consideration that the researcher spent more days in school than the observation period, to allow for the review of the documentation and the interviews. However, as already explained the data gathered was not used in the final analysis.

Due to the nature of this exploratory study, the data collection could have been endless, hence the development of a semi-structured observation protocol to help the researcher narrow the focus of the data collection. The semi-structured observation provided room to gather rich and detailed data, narrowing the focus of attention to the interactions between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers in the classroom, the playground, and the support classroom. The observed areas involved the interactions between the actors, focusing on personal contact, communication, support, and participation in the different settings.

Before the data collection, the operationalisation of interactions between teachers and pupils was adopted from Hamre et al. (2007), and the definition of the interactions between children with Autism and peers was adopted from Koster et al. (2009). According to Hamre and Pianta (2007), teacher-student daily interactions play an essential role in the students' academic, social, and emotional development in schools. The authors developed this conceptualisation based on previous theoretical and empirical work in the educational and psychological fields (Hamre & Pianta, 2007). Hamre et al. (2007) proposed that the interactions between teachers and students were supported by three broad domains, a) emotional support, b) classroom organisation, and c) instructional support. Each domain consists of a series of dimensions which at the same time are described by a series of indicators. For the purpose of this study, the interactions between teachers and children with Autism and the interactions between SNAs and children with Autism were guided by Hamre et al. (2007) domains concerning the interactions between teacher and students in the classroom (i.e., emotional support, classroom organisation and instructional support).

Therefore, in the interactions between teachers and peers, attention was given to interpersonal interactions (emotional support), focusing on their verbal and nonverbal communication. Observations also focused on the interactions based on instructional support: how teachers and children with Autism interacted during classroom activities,

how they were supported to participate in the same activities, and what type of interactions occurred in these circumstances (verbal and non-verbal). In addition, attention was paid to the classroom organisation, which involved a) the use of accommodations, b) variations in the assessment of learning when including the child with Autism, c) the level of feedback, and d) the strategies put in place to engage and support the participation of these children among the group.

Additionally, the interactions between children with Autism and peers were guided by Koster et al. (2009) and their conceptualisation of social inclusion, social integration, and social participation. From their literature review, the authors extracted a series of themes related to friendship and relationships, contacts and interactions, perception of pupils, and acceptance by classmates. For the purpose of this study, the themes related to contacts and interactions were adopted to guide the focus of observations. These themes operationalised the interactions between children with Autism and peers as a) playing together, b) working together on tasks, c) participating in group activities, and d) acknowledging initiations and social isolation (Koster et al., 2009). The semi-structured observation protocol intended to narrow the areas of observation but aimed to gather as much information as possible regarding the interactions taking place in the different settings and the participants (See Appendix P).

Furthermore, the contexts (i.e., classroom, playground, support classroom) were also operationalised. The conceptualisation followed the structure of the activities taking place in each setting and the teacher's guidance and intervention. Therefore, activities were classified as structured when they were guided and followed a strict structure set by the teacher. Structured activities were divided between formal (instruction and assessment) and informal (writing task). In addition, unstructured activities were free of adult intervention and enabled pupils' time away from a fixed and structured environment (See Appendix P, Q, R).

During the observation, notes were taken on the general interactions taking place in the classroom throughout the school day. The researcher gathered information through the lessons, and any event that stood out as different from the routine was described in detail. Each child had a notebook assigned, and notes and impressions from the researcher were always recorded. Further comments were added after each observation day to add any details considered relevant. The observation protocol was used as a guide throughout the observations and the collection of notes. The data collected was coded in accordance with the activities structure in the classrooms and the playground (i.e., structured and unstructured activities) and the participants. Additionally, narratives were written following the data collected in the form of one day in the school. The narrative summarised the different activities in the classroom and the playground, the routine followed, including the interactions occurring among all education actors involving teaching, learning and support. These narratives formed the primary evidence to construct the eight case studies included in this thesis.

4.7.3. The data reduction strategy

In qualitative research, the amount of data collected in the field is voluminous and large, and the first step to enable the researcher to analyse the data is to organise and reduce this data. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), data reduction is the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994, pg 11). Reducing the data collected involved summarising the data following the conceptualisation of terms pre-established for the observations. After the data collection, the observation notes were “reduced” to generate the case study reports. For the purpose of this study, a data reduction strategy was developed to ensure that the essence of the data collected was maintained while providing an accurate, rich and economic narrative. The data reduction strategy grouped the interactions based on the activities where these took place (i.e., structured and unstructured) activities in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom between children with Autism,

teachers, SNAs and peers. The reduction strategy extracted first the background information related to the child with Autism, the context of the support provided, and the different accommodations put in place. Then, it followed the interactions taking place in the classroom, the playground, and the support classroom. The data were summarised according to structured and unstructured activities. For example, similar events with limited variation during instruction were summarised by explaining how instruction took place and how the interactions occurred between the different actors in general terms. Any event related to the instruction that stood out from the general pattern observed was described in detail.

Data reduction strategy

1. Contextual background

- Child school background – Child age, class year, classroom participants
- Resources - ST and SNA
- Classroom physical layout and child location
- Accommodation/adjustments – library, working station
- Teaching and Learning – Classroom routine and differentiated curriculum, IEP, and any information that could be relevant to the case
- SNA role

2. Classroom

Interactions (i.e., personal interactions, communication, instructional support, classroom organization) between the child with autism, teacher, and SNA during structured (formal and informal) and unstructured activities. Interactions (i.e., engagement, communication, initiations and reciprocal interactions, support, working together on tasks, participating in group activities, (Un)acknowledged initiations and social isolation) between children with Autism and peers.

3. Playground

Interactions (i.e., personal interactions, communication, instructional support, classroom organization) between the child with autism, teacher, and SNA during structured (formal and informal) and unstructured activities. Interactions (i.e., engagement, communication, initiations and reciprocal interactions, support, working together on tasks, participating in group activities (Un)acknowledged initiations and social isolation) between children with Autism and peers.

4. Support classroom

Interactions (i.e., personal interactions, communication, instructional support, classroom organization, between the child with autism, teacher, and SNA during structured (formal and informal) and unstructured activities. Interactions (i.e., engagement, communication, initiations and reciprocal interactions, support, working together on tasks, participating in group activities, (Un)acknowledged initiations and social isolation) between children with Autism and peers.

In the current study, the data reduction strategy aimed to guide the data summaries and guarantee that the summaries accurately reflected the observations. The summaries were presented in the form of narratives which formed the case study reports for each child with Autism taking part in the study. The study findings are outlined in each case study in the form of descriptive information concerning the interactions between children with Autism, teachers, peers and SNAs in the classroom, the playground, and the support classroom. The data analysis involved a reduction of the data collected (extracting the findings), followed by a data display (organising for meaning) and drawing conclusions (explaining the findings) (Miles, 2014).

4.8. The methods of analysis

Making sense of raw data in qualitative research is challenging, and authors such as Patton (2002) suggest that to understand qualitative data, researchers should be

open to the multiple possibilities or ways to think about a problem, engaging in “mental excursions” using multiple stimuli, “side-tracking” or “zigzagging,” changing patterns of thinking, making linkages between the “seemingly unconnected,” and “playing at it,” all with the intention of “opening the world to us in some way” (Patton, 2002, p. 544).

Moreover, Yin (2014) described data analysis as a process of examining, categorising evidence, tabulating, testing or otherwise recombining evidence to produce empirically based findings (Yin, 2014, pg 132). According to Creswell (2013), 'Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organising the data [...] for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion' (Creswell, 2013, pg 180).

In the present study, Clark and Braun's steps for thematic analysis were adopted to analyse the study data (See table 9). Thematic analysis allows for the interpretation of the data and the exploration of the context during this interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Analysing the data using thematic analysis can be inductive or deductive. An inductive analysis allows the data to determine the themes. The exploratory nature of this study required an inductive approach when analysing the data to enable new themes and patterns to emerge. However, the theoretical framework that guided this research also predetermined the researcher's approach to the data. For example, understanding Autism as an impairment that limits these children or as a form of diverse social and cognitive styles. In other words, understanding autism as part of human diversity predetermined how children with Autism and their behaviours and interactions were perceived during the observation and data analysis. Additionally, the themes and subthemes identified were reviewed to address their internal consistency to ensure that the themes were telling a coherent story. The external heterogeneity was also reviewed to guarantee that the themes were unique and different from other themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 9. Stages of Thematic analysis (Adapted from Braun and Clark, 2006)

Stages of Thematic Analysis
1. Familiarisation with the data
2. Creation of initial codes and creation of categories
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

1. Familiarisation

In the current study, familiarisation with the data occurred during the observation phase. The collection of data in schools enabled the researcher to get used to the data and the amount of information that was collected. The notes were read immediately after the observation was completed to add further details and impressions from the observations. Once the data from all cases had been gathered, the notes were read several times in order for the researcher to become familiarised with the final data collected. The data reduction and narrative of the case studies also enabled familiarisation with each case. In addition, the case study narrative outlined the nuances and complexities encountered in the interactions between the actors in the different settings permitting the coding of the data.

2. Creation of initial codes and creation of categories

Initial codes and categories were created within the narrative of each case and worked throughout the data. These were noted in the margins of the observation notes/narratives and checked across case studies until a final codebook from the observations was created.

For example, “it is observed that Max works mainly with his SNA during structured activities. During the activities, the teacher focused on the lessons, paying little attention to Max. It is common to see Max wandering around the classroom; on

some occasions, his behaviour can escalate. The SNA is in charge of Max. His teacher gets involved with Max during structured activities only if really necessary”.

From the quote above, the following codes were identified/generated: 1) Teacher disconnection; 2) SNA responsibility; 3) Max like/don't like working isolated.

3. Searching for themes

The themes were identified from the information gathered under the categories and the codes. Themes were identified for each case study, pertinent to the interactions of each child with Autism with their teachers (classroom and support), their SNAs and peers in the classroom and the playground.

4. Reviewing themes and renaming themes

In the current research, these two steps, reviewing and renaming themes, happened iteratively. The themes were identified from what was observed in each case study, and the themes were compared against the data. In some cases, themes were discarded, while subthemes from original themes were identified in other cases. The researcher reviewed the themes several times and rephrased them accordingly, following discussions with her supervisors.

5. Producing the report

The case studies are complemented with detailed extracts from the data in the form of exhibits, which is the most common form of data illustration in qualitative research (Scagnoli & Verdinelli, 2017; Verdinelli & Scagnoli, 2013). The extracts aimed to provide an exemplar of the original observation notes concerning the interactions between children with Autism and the relevant actors in the three in-school settings. In addition, the events included in each exhibit were selected to provide a range of observations based on the themes.

As outlined in the research process adapted from Yin (2014), in multiple case study research, the data analysis occurs within cases and across cases (Yin, 2014).

Therefore, a cross-case analysis took place to discern common and different themes in the eight cases (Creswell, 2013; Iphofen & Tolich, 2019; Yin, 2014). The cross-case analysis compared the themes identified in each case, looking to clarify whether similar, different, or unique patterns were identified across the eight cases in the study.

The cross-case analysis followed similar stages to those in the case study analysis. First, the themes identified in each case study were compared across all cases. Second, when possible, the themes were grouped into categories (i.e., a form of “umbrella” category), and the themes from the case studies were allocated to these categories. Third, themes that best represented the overarching meaning of all cases were identified from the categories. Fourth, the themes were reviewed and compared across the data. Finally, the themes in the cross-case analysis were presented in the form of overarching themes connecting with the research questions.

Establishing trustworthiness and authenticity in qualitative research is pivotal to recognise the study as rigorous (see table 10) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following section discusses how the credibility and trustworthiness of the data were established in the current research.

4.9. Rigour and trustworthiness of the data

In order for the researcher to gather information about the inclusion of children with Autism in the early years of primary school, the researcher has to be present and has to get as close as possible to the participants taking part and the place where these interactions happened (i.e., within their context and time) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012). In the present research, this closeness enabled the researcher access to first-hand information, allowing her to observe the participants in their day-to-day, and how they interacted within the boundaries of the three in-school settings. In addition, being close to the participants facilitated collecting daily holistic and in-depth information related to the participants' naturally occurring interactions (i.e., their actions, their behaviours, the way

they communicated with each other, and the type of support provided). Furthermore, it allowed the researcher to understand the nuances and complexities of these interactions concerning the inclusion of children with Autism, based on how these interactions facilitated or inhibited the inclusion of these particular children with Autism in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom (i.e., to what extent these children participated and interacted with their educators and peers in all activities), (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

However, contrarily to what occurs in interviews where the participants share the information with the researcher when the method of data gathering is observation, the researcher is the main tool of data collection. Thus, the data collected is presented from the perspective of the researcher, who will inform about what is happening in the field by watching what the participants do and listening to what they say (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). For that reason, to ensure rigour in the study with regards to a) how it is conducted, b) the trustworthiness of the data collected, c) the analysis of the data, and d) the presentation of results, the researcher had to ensure that her own bias, preconception, and knowledge and background were considered and acknowledged during the entire research process (Gray 2017).

Although avoiding the researcher's preconceptions and bias is impossible in qualitative research (Creswell, 2003), any effort must be made to achieve trustworthy and quality data. In other words, the researcher must ensure that the data provided is accurate information about what happened in the schools with the eight children with Autism. In the current research, the rigour was ensured by establishing a clear positionality which was described by the researcher's personal and professional background (Section 4.4) (Holmes 2020). In addition, the thesis conceptual framework (Chapter 2) and the protocol of data gathering (Appendix P) guided the observation process and the interpretation of the data (Gray 2017), underpinned by the researcher's reflexive stance (Section 4.4.1). Through reflexivity, the researcher acknowledged that

qualitative research is not linear and that verification is required by moving back and forward between the design of the research and the implementation to ensure the alignment between philosophical stance, methodology, and results. Thus, the research process was constantly under verification and evolving to ensure the quality and rigour of the study (Morse et al., 2002).

In addition, the research process and implementation were verified through reflexive questioning, aiding the researcher in ensuring that the data collected, although interpreted by the researcher, showed the naturally occurring interactions in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom. Furthermore, the reflexive questioning ensured that the data revealed the nuances and complexities concerning the inclusion of the eight children with Autism in the study. In research, reflexivity is the process of self-questioning in all stages of the research. It comprises the philosophical stance, the sample, the study design, the methods and the analysis to ensure the rigour of the data collected, the findings and the conclusions.

In the present research, the researcher worked through reflexivity on the potential influence of her beliefs and preconceptions in all stages of the research journey. The process of self-reflection was also shared with the supervisors, who guided the researcher in her interpretations of the data and the acknowledgement of potential bias. Particular emphasis on potential preconceptions was paid during the data analysis due to the researcher's exposure to the data previously collected with other methods of data collection (i.e., interviews, background questionnaires and document review) (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Barrell et al. 2020). As Berger (2015) stated, researchers need to "better understand the role of the self in the creation of knowledge; carefully self monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on their research; and maintain the balance between the personal and the universal" (Berger, 2015). Table 10 describes the process of reflexivity carried out by the researcher during the research process to ensure rigour in all research phases.

In practice, the researcher implemented reflexivity by taking notes during and after data collection. Furthermore, she received feedback from supervisors on drafts and reviewing written sections during data analysis, discussion of findings and concluding sections. In addition, the researcher's perspective was reviewed during supervision sessions to take an alternative approach when a medical understanding of Autism was predominant. The researcher adopted a reflective stance and acknowledged the following areas in practice (table 10) to ensure the rigour and trustworthiness of the data.

Table 10. Reflexivity in practice

Adapted from (Corlett & Mavin, 2018; Cunliffe, 2003; Haynes, 2012; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022).

AREAS OF REFLEXION	QUESTIONS OF REFLEXIVITY	REFLEXIVITY IN PRACTICE
<p>Personal Reflexivity How do my unique perspectives based on my personal and professional background influence the research? (See section 4.3.)</p>	<p>What are my assumptions about the reality subject of study and the nature of knowledge?</p> <p>How are the researcher's positionality, identity, and power influencing the process of knowledge production?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledgement of the influence on the researcher during each phase of the study process by taking notes and feedback from supervisors to ensure the researcher's bias was acknowledged. The researcher reflected on the shift from a positivist to a relativist approach to research and ensured alignment to the philosophical stance in each phase of the study. Thus causality due to diagnosis was questioned and revised during data collection, analysis and write-up. • Data collection focused on the semi-structured protocol. The researcher acknowledged and reflected upon the data and focused on the interactions and the support provided to enhance these children's participation with their peers. It avoided overinterpretation of the data, for example, due to teachers' training or attitudes. • Review of overinterpretations, in particular related to the

		<p>medical diagnosis of Autism. The researcher understood that the needs of these children with Autism were relevant for their inclusion as individuals, but this was not the focus of attention in the study. Reflexivity was applied to ensure that the data collected related to the actors' interactions, behaviours, communications, and support, and how these enabled or did not their inclusion. This was implemented in practice through feedback from supervisors on drafts and reviewing written sections during data analysis, discussion of findings and concluding sections</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledgement of the role of the researcher as a tool for data collection. Understanding that the researcher influenced all the phases of the study, the data collected and how it was collected as well as how it was interpreted which was influenced by the researcher's position and conceptual understanding. A reality that would be interpreted differently by some other researchers with different ontology and epistemology.
<p>Interpersonal Reflexivity How does the power of relationships between the researcher and researched influence the research and the people involved? (See section 4.4.)</p>	<p>What is my expected role as a researcher? What effect does my role have in the research? How am I related to the participants? What type of relationship do I have with them? How may these interactions influence my perception as a researcher?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledgement of the power of the researcher in others. The factor of intrusion Understanding that the researcher's presence could influence the researched behaviour/interactions. (i.e., behaving as the researcher could expect it). For that reason, repeated observations of similar situations (i.e., instruction) were performed to understand different paths and interactions.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding that level of interactions researcher/researched may influence their behaviours and perceptions. Thus in practice, the researcher maintained a certain distance from the participants to reduce the researcher's impact, for example, by sitting at the back of the classroom and not interfering during activities.
<p>Methodological Reflexivity How are the methodological decisions being made, and the methodological implications (See section 4.6.2.)</p>	<p>Is the research data answering the data questions? How does the data collection method empower the research and the views of those under scrutiny? Is the methodology ensuring rigour and providing new knowledge?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledge the methodological decisions undertaken in the study and ensure ethical, rigorous and paradigmatically aligned. Discussions with supervisors and participants to ensure transparency and clarity were always exercised. It must be understood that in qualitative research, the researcher constantly reviews and makes decisions while reacting to the data. Consideration must be taken with methodological decisions to the ethics and rigour of the study. (i.e., voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, the potential for harm, and communication of results. In practice, this was achieved by taking notes before and after data collection and through constant feedback from supervisors on drafts and reviewing written sections during data analysis, discussion of findings and concluding sections.

4.10. Ethical considerations

According to Trinity College's good research practice (2021), any research should be conducted following the ethical principles of respect for the individual subject or population, beneficence, and the absence of maleficence (the research should aim for

the maximum benefit trying to avoid any harm) and justice (the research population should be treated with honesty and integrity). Research with children raises unique ethical issues principally related to the idea of competence, autonomy, and vulnerability. In addition, children with special educational needs are considered a population at risk of vulnerability in research. Therefore, the early age of participation in this study, from 5 to 8 years old, also raises ethical considerations and issues to reflect on.

Gaining informed consent is a core element of ethical practice. Participants in research, especially children, must be able to express their agency within the research process based on respect for their decisions and choices. As previously explained in this chapter, the decision must be based on adequate information about the research process and the uses that might be made of the data generated by their involvement (Heath, et al., 2005).

4.10.1. Methodological issues of including children with ASD in research

a) Informed Consent and assent

Children with Autism are considered children at risk of vulnerability. Therefore special attention was paid to the preparation of the Informed Consent to ensure the children with Autism consenting to the study understood the research and its implications (Skelton, 2008). In order for the informed consent (i.e., detailed information about the study) and the assent (signature page for assent) to be meaningful for children with Autism, it is important to understand how they communicate and how others communicate with them in the school context (Loyd, 2013). In the current study, children with Autism signed the assent during fieldwork to allow them to get familiarised with the researcher. This approach enabled the researcher to get familiarised with the children and find the best approach to communicate the contents of the informed consent.

In the current study, Information forms were given to parents for their review and explanation to their child. Parents were informed during their first meeting with the

researcher to inform their child about the study and the presence of the researcher in the room. The study was explained at home, and the child was consulted before the parents signed the informed consent/assent. The child's assent to the study was initially planned to take place on the first day of the study and prior to observations. However, it was noticed that children required more time to get used to the researcher before they could be approached with the informed consent. Agreement with parents and principals did take place, and some children with Autism consented after the study observations commenced in the school.

Nonetheless, ongoing consent was sought throughout the observation phase. Once observations began, and the researcher and the child became familiar with one another, the assent was signed. The child's assent was signed in places where the child with Autism felt comfortable, as advised by the teacher and SNA. When required, the SNA, the Support Teacher, or one parent accompanied the researcher when seeking the child with Autism assent on the study. The child was informed with the Children Informed Consent, which was child friendly and with pictures to facilitate their understanding, the SNA, Support Teacher and parents who witnessed the consent intervened when they felt necessary, and the researcher allowed such intervention as it was understood that the child comfort and reassurance was the priority.

The study was explained on an ongoing basis to the child prior to any study procedure (i.e., observations, accompanying the child when with the SNA), and their voluntary participation was stressed at all times, assuring their right to withdraw at any time with no negative consequences (Farrell, 2005; Kelly, 2007; Loyd, 2013).

b) Right to withdraw

Participants were informed of their voluntary participation in this research and their right to withdraw at any time. Information was provided verbally and in their consent form. No participants withdrew from the study.

c) Confidentiality

All information pertaining to this research, from schools to participants, including any information recorded in the documentation reviewed (i.e., IEP, Teaching Plan, Academic Assessments, Diagnosis and provision records) was anonymised to ensure confidentiality. Description of schools and participants was also anonymised by omitting detailed information about school locations and the exact size of schools. Electronically stored data and contact details were also anonymised, and signed consent forms were stored in a locked, secured cabinet. The researcher agreed to store the anonymised data for a maximum duration of 5 years following the successful examination of this thesis at the School of Social Work and Social Policy at Trinity College Dublin, after which the researcher will destroy it by deleting all files. At the same time, non-anonymised data should be deleted after successfully examining the thesis.

d) Data Gathering

When doing research, particularly with children with Autism, it is important to identify the needs of each participant prior to the data collection (Creswell, 2013; Harrington et al., 2013; Miles, 2014; Yin, 2013). A balance should be considered between the different types of needs a) the individual needs that are unique to the person, b) the common needs shared with others and c) the exceptional needs shared by some (Norwich, 2009). In the present study, the researcher prioritised the needs of the participants, particularly children with Autism. The researcher maintained her distance from them to ensure the presence of the researcher did not add any extra disruption to their routine in school (Cridland et al., 2014; Harrington et al., 2013; Lewis & Porter, 2004, 2007; Patton, 2002).

e) Dissemination of findings

The dissemination of findings is commonly considered a task outside of the research process, confining its promulgation to academic journal articles and/or conference proceedings (Keen & Todres, 2007). However, dissemination of the research

findings will contribute new data to ongoing discussions in the area of inclusive education and educational outcomes. Hence the importance of sharing the findings not only among stakeholders but also among children with Autism and their families participating in the research (Cridland et al., 2014).

Providing feedback to participants on the research findings and overall outcomes offers children with Autism and their families information related to policy changes and access to publications they otherwise would not have. It allows them to understand the commitment of the researcher in qualitative research, facilitating a positive experience of their participation (Keen & Todres, 2007). For the purpose of this research, the dissemination of findings to the schools will occur at the end of the PhD process (Cridland et al., 2015). An informative letter with the study conclusions will be provided to the schools after the Viva-voce exam. In the event that school staff or parents of those children with Autism are no longer working or studying in the school, the dissemination of findings will fall under the responsibility of the school principal due to confidentiality and data protection issues. Furthermore, research findings will be disseminated through public talks and journal articles.

4.11. Conclusion

This chapter has presented the research methodology. Information was first provided on the rationale of this study, the aim and objectives that are guiding the study and the research questions, followed by a description of the philosophical underpinnings, the methodological approach, and the research design. Next, it described and justified the choice of adopting an exploratory multiple-embedded case study research design for this study. Finally, it provided a detailed explanation of the evaluation and justification of the method of data collection and data analysis adopted in the present study. In conclusion, attention has been paid to the research's ethical considerations and evaluation of the research's quality. The next chapter addresses the study findings, presenting eight case studies in the form of a narrative outlining the interactions between children with Autism,

their teachers, SNAs and peers in the classroom, the playground, and the support classroom.

CHAPTER 5 - CASE STUDY REPORT - STUDY FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Chapter introduction

The present chapter presents and analyses the study findings related to the interactions between eight children with Autism in five regular primary schools in Ireland. Each case study presents a narrative about the interactions between the child with Autism, their teachers (classroom and support), their SNA and peers in the classroom, the playground, and the support classroom. During the observations, the researcher took a distant position from the group and avoided interference with the routine of the different actors.

The case studies first provide the contextual background related to the child with Autism in school, including the demographic details, classroom information, and support. The background is followed by a narrative concerning the interactions of the different actors during structured and unstructured activities in the three in-schools settings. The next table presents the different activities related to structured (formal and informal) and unstructured activities (table 11).

Table 11. The organisation of school activities

TYPE OF ACTIVITIES		CLASSROOM	PLAYGROUND	SUPPORT CLASSROOM
STRUCTURED ACTIVITIES	FORMAL	Instruction and assessment of learning		Instruction and assessment of learning
	INFORMAL	Writing work, artwork, computer, Physical education		Educational games and chatting time with ST
UNSTRUCTURED ACTIVITIES		Transitions Lunch	Free play in the playground	

The order of appearance for each case study follows the chronological order of the data collection. The following table 12 presents the link between the children with Autism taking part in the study and the school.

Table 12. Children with Autism and Schools

SCHOOL #	CHILD NAME (pseudonyms)
SCHOOL #1	MAX
SCHOOL #2 Classroom A, B	JOHN (A)
	LAURA (B)
SCHOOL #3	PETER
SCHOOL #4 Classrooms A, B, C	SEAN (A)
	JOE (B)
	PAUL (C)
SCHOOL #5	CARL

Each case study finalises with the concluding comments section, which provides the individual analysis of the present research study findings concerning the interactions between the actors with reference to the child with Autism in the three in-school settings.

5.1. MAX

5.1.1. Contextual Background

Max was an eight-year-old boy attending first class in his local regular primary school in Ireland. The total number of pupils in the classroom was 23, and they were distributed around the classroom around five tables, seating 4 to 5 pupils in each group table. Max's group table was positioned between the teacher's desk and the interactive board in the middle of the classroom. The researcher sat at the back of the classroom with no interference with the classroom routine.

Max's extra support in school involved arriving at school at 9 am every day, twenty minutes after the morning rush and ten minutes after his peers had settled in the classroom. Max also received 30 minutes of extra daily support in the support classroom along with two more pupils with disabilities from other classrooms. The support classroom was a small room furnished with a desk for the support teacher and a second desk allocated to work with pupils. Max also availed of a full-time SNA, whose responsibilities involved assisting Max in his daily school activities in the classroom while working in the working station, during group activities, and in the playground.

Max's classroom was spacious and bright, with a restroom and direct access to the playground. In addition, he availed of a built-in working station, where Max worked on his differentiated curriculum with computer-based literacy and numeracy activities with the support of the SNA. This separated routine involved a significant portion of the school day. Notwithstanding, Max joined the group for instruction in mathematics, art, physical education, and computer lessons, and he also shared lunch and recess in the playground with his peers. Moreover, Max had two separate breaks in the sensory room for 20 minutes in the morning and afternoon. Apart from the working station, there were no other physical accommodations available in the classroom (i.e., the reading area).

5.1.2. Interactions between Max, his teachers, SNA, and peers in the classroom

a) Interactions during structured formal activities

Max returned to the classroom with his Support Teacher around 9:30 am every day, who handled Max's responsibility to Miss SNA. The interactions between Max and his SNA seemed positive, and they appeared comfortable and relaxed in each other company. Mr teacher and peers continued their lessons in the classroom without acknowledging that Max had returned to the classroom. However, Miss SNA knew the routine and guided Max to the working station, where he was scheduled to complete computer-based activities in literacy for one hour before their first recess.

Max did not like working on his working station. Almost every day, he was unsettled and unhappy when asked to work separately from the group. It was common to see his SNA attempting to get Max settled with the support of his schedule and the reward chart. However, most days after returning to the classroom, Max began to wander around the classroom, which did not seem to alter the classroom routine. It appeared that the SNA was entirely in charge of keeping Max focused on his activities with little interference from the classroom teacher, who mostly did not interact with Max.

On the days when Max would not settle, Miss SNA would take him outside the classroom, and they walked in the corridor or sat outside the classroom to complete the workbooks related to the lesson taking place inside. The interactions between Max and his SNA were fluid but denoted Max's dependency on her full support to be there. The SNA's responsibility appeared to cover areas outside her job scope. For example, when Max was not settled in the classroom, the SNA invited some of his peers to go outside the room with Max, and they all worked on the lesson under her supervision.

Exhibit 1

Max is not happy in the working station; he is unsettled and nervous. Then his SNA allows him to move around the classroom. The routine in the classroom continues without interruptions, but Max begins to move chairs and touches his peers' heads. The tension in the classroom rises, and some pupils are now distracted and unhappy. The teacher asks Max to stop, but he ignores his request and moves towards the interactive board and attempts to switch it off. Finally, the teacher interrupts the lesson and approaches Max asking him to sit on his working station. Max moves away from the interactive board and his teacher but refuses to go to his working station. The SNA takes over and nicely asks Max to go outside for a walk, but he is not happy to leave the classroom. Then the SNA asks some of his peers to accompany them; Max seems happy with the arrangement. Outside the classroom, they continue with the lesson on their books with the support of the SNA. Max is happy and interacting well with his peers, who seem to go along with Max under the guidance of the SNA. When the group joins the classroom again, the lesson is finishing, and it is time to do writing work. The SNA asks Max to go to the working station to work on the computer, and he seems happy to do so. The teacher (who is instructing his pupils on the workbook page) continues with his task and does not acknowledge Max and the SNA entering the classroom and retrieving to the working station.

After their first morning recess, Max was scheduled to join the group during their lessons in mathematics. This activity took place without the SNA support, who was due on her break. Before the lesson started, the interactions between Max and his peers were characterised by reduced interaction, with limited acknowledgement, reciprocal communication and initiation from both Max and his peers. Soon after the instruction began, the norm was for Max to become unsettled and to wander around the classroom until he found something that distracted him. If Max was settled at the back of the classroom, Mr Teacher would not contest his behaviour, and Max would be left at his own pace. Albeit Max was disengaged with the activity, he seemed to be in tune with what was happening, as he showed on numerous occasions answering Mr Teacher's questions.

Exhibit 2

The SNA is on her lunch break and Max is sitting in his group table. The lesson on mathematics is on the interactive board and the teacher is instructing his pupils. Max begins to move around the classroom while the lesson continues. Finally, he settles at the back of the room and plays with the village the class is building for their end of school project. The teacher does not interfere when Max leaves his desk and the lesson. After the instruction the teacher begins with questioning his pupils on the lesson and Max answers one of the questions from his position, his teacher thanks Max and continues with the lesson.

Although Mr teacher acknowledged Max's answers and praised him, Mr teacher would not pursue his participation any further by including Max in his assessment of learning, perhaps because Max had not previously participated in the lesson. However, the opportunity to include Max within the group was missed showing that Max was physically present, but the classroom interactions did not enable his participation and inclusion in the community of the classroom.

b) Interactions during structured informal activities

After their last recess of the day, the last section of the school day comprised structured and informal activities such as art, physical education, or computer learning. Max joined the group for these activities and was seen as engaged and participative. During these structured activities, Max was involved within the group, and Mr Teacher ensured that Max was given leading roles in guiding the team, particularly in sports games and computer projects. Most days, the atmosphere around the activities involved positive interactions between Max, his teacher, and his peers, enabling Max's participation and teamwork within the group. The SNA support during these activities comprised a less close presence, wandering around the classroom and providing support to the rest of the students and Mr teacher when required but keeping a certain distance from Max.

During the observations, it was noticed that Max enjoyed working with the group, and he appeared comfortable among his peers. Even though most of his peers seemed relaxed around Max and worked well with him on activities involving art and computer projects, it was common to see peers avoiding Max during these activities unless Mr teacher requested them to pair for group work. When requested by their teacher, pupils worked with Max under their teacher and SNA supervision. The interactions between Max, his teacher, peers and SNA during these activities seemed to favour Max's participation and placed him within the group. Despite the fluid interactions among the group, it was noticed that the SNA walked Max away from the group when he exhibited anger or frustration. This routine appeared to relax Max and kept the class dynamic going.

Exhibit 3

All pupils are working on a project about cities of the world using power point. Max loves the computer and his teacher is allocating Max to lead the search on the computer. Because there are two computers on the classroom all groups have been given a slot to work on it. While they wait they have to work on their project as a group. Max is happy working in the computer and loves leading the search, when they finish gathering all the cues from the computer the group moves to their desks. Max is happy with his peers and he is participating on the task talking and laughing with his classmates. Although his approach with his peers could be seen as “bossy” his peers are following his lead with no difficulty. The teacher approaches their group on a few occasions and Max is happy to show their progress to the teacher, who praises Max and the group for a great work. When the project is finished, the group has appointed Max to present the power point to the whole class, Max is very happy to be appointed that role.

c) Interactions during unstructured activities

The first break of the morning occurred at 10:30 am. During this recess, pupils had their lunch at their group tables while watching a movie. Lunch was unstructured, with a limited adult presence, and with the only supervision of the SNA, who sat at the back of the classroom, allowing children to eat with limited interference. Max joined the group for lunch and sat at his group table with his peers. However, it was observed that the interactions between Max and his peers were limited. While the rest of the group tables in the classroom were interacting, chatting and communicating lively, it was quieter in Max’s group table except for some small talk. There was a lack of reciprocal interaction and communication between Max and his peers, and neither Max nor his peers

attempted to initiate interactions during their lunch break. Most days, after Max finished his lunch, he hid in the restroom or wandered to the back of the classroom. On some occasions, Miss SNA would invite Max to go for a walk, and at other times she would sit with Max in his working station and they had a chat.

Exhibit 4

During lunch all students were watching a movie while talking and interacting. Max is sitting with his peers and eating his lunch but he is not talking to them neither are their peers talking to Max. He is looking at his peers, but no further interactions are taking place. When Max finishes his lunch, he puts his lunch box in his bag and walks to the restroom for most of the lunch break, until his SNA asks him to return to his desk. Max is not happy and seems nervous at his desk, while his peers are focusing on the movie after their lunch. When Max moves again from his desk, the SNA suggests him to go for a walk. Max seems relaxed and happy chatting with Miss SNA.

Before going out to the playground, the transition was always an exciting and lively experience for all pupils, including Max. Max followed the routine of clearing the table and lining up in the line, and the interactions between Max, his teacher, SNA, and his peers appeared positive during this transition. In the classroom, Mr Teacher and Miss SNA walked around the line while interacting with all pupils; in general, everyone seemed in good form, and interactions were fluid between pupils and educators. During this endeavour, his SNA maintained a certain distance from Max. When Max was calm during the playground transition, the interactions among the group were positive. The interactions between Max and his peers were reciprocal, and he seemed comfortable interacting with his peers. Max was also seen initiating conversation with those peers near him and participating in their discussions. However, Max seemed more comfortable with the adults and sought their company more often than his peers.

5.1.3. Interactions between Max, his teachers, SNA and peers in the playground

Playground recess took place around 12:30 pm. The corridor beside the classroom was mostly busy and noisy around this time of the day, and on some occasions, Mr Teacher guided pupils to go out by the classroom back door, which connected directly with the playground. All pupils walked to the playground with their teacher and SNA before Mr teacher took his break. During the transition to and from the playground, the interactions among the group seemed positive.

Once in the playground, the interactions between Max and his peers were always supervised by his SNA. Miss SNA encouraged Max to get involved with his peers, but his attempts to interact with them appeared unsuccessful on most occasions. In most cases, peers would involve Max in their games if requested by his SNA, but he seemed placed on the periphery of the group. For example, they allowed the presence of Max to watch them play cards, but he was not included in the game. On these occasions, Miss SNA was seen encouraging his peers to include him in their games by highlighting Max's behaviour as a difficulty and ensuring her support in the event of Max getting upset. Nevertheless, the interactions between Max and his peers in the playground were not fluid and, in most cases, were absent without the SNA's encouragement and guidance.

Exhibit 5

In the playground all pupils are playing around and Max is walking with his SNA. Then Max approaches his peers who are playing cards on the bench and tries to play with them. His peers get a little defensive when Max wants to grab their cards and they refuse to let him play. The SNA approaches the group and tells Max to be nice and gentle while asking his peers to help Max to play with them. She reassures his peers that Max will be on his best behaviour and that she will stay near by to be sure he is good. When the SNA moves away to talk to another SNA, the group continues with the game but eventually Max gets bored and leaves the group. While the SNA is talking to the other SNA Max joins some other peers from his class who are playing “hide and seek”, but despite Max running around with his peers, he is not included in their game. Eventually, Max returns to his SNA and he seems happy and content with her.

5.1.4. Interactions between Max, his support teacher, and peers in the support classroom

Max's extra hours with his support teacher (ST) took place each morning between 9-9:30 am in the support classroom. Miss ST collected Max from his classroom every day. Max did not seem happy with this arrangement, and it was a norm more than the exception to see him refusing to go to the support classroom. In most cases, Max's refusal escalated to frustration, requiring, at times, the teacher's intervention to help Max relax. Nonetheless, it was noticed that despite the repeated behaviour, no strategies were put in place to support Max during this transition, and the “telling the news” activity occurred every morning at the same time, just before Max's extra support class.

Following the advice of the support teacher, observations in the support classroom were reduced to one observation only. Max shared his support with two more

boys with disabilities in the support classroom, where he seemed comfortable, and the interactions between Max, his peers, and the teacher were reciprocal, acknowledging and engaging. However, Max appeared less enthusiastic and interactive throughout activities in the support classroom, and he wandered around the classroom while his ST and peers continued with their work. Although the ST attempted to grasp Max's attention to the activities with the support of the reward chart, he seemed unsettled and refused to work on his workbook. After fifteen minutes of negotiations in a 30 minutes class, the ST gave Max the iPad while the ST continued working with the other two pupils⁵. The interactions between Max, his pupils and the teacher were limited for the duration of the session. He was playing educational games on the iPad while his ST and peers worked on an activity requiring pupils to speak in turns, promoting their social interactions.

5.1.5. Analysis and Concluding Comments

The present case study exhibited different interactions between the group that seemed to depend on the activities and the settings where these were taking place. These interactions placed Max either in the periphery or central to the group, facilitating or inhibiting his interactions and, at the same time, his inclusion in the three in-school settings.

In the classroom, the interactions between Max, his teacher, SNA and peers varied between structured (formal and informal) and unstructured activities. During structured and formal activities (i.e., literacy and numeracy), Max's participation in classroom activities was limited, with teaching and learning practices taking place in the working station separated from the group, an approach that did not seem to work with Max since he often walked around the classroom, attempting in some cases to get his teacher and peers' attention, as shown in exhibit 1. Moreover, the interactions and

⁵ The researcher was informed by the ST that the behaviour observed during this one observation was regular in the support classroom.

support between Max and his teacher during formal activities were minimal, and they were characterised by a reliance on Miss SNA's support, with limited teacher interaction and support.

Concerning his peers, the interactions were also reduced during formal activities, which could be explained by the physical barrier imposed by his working station affecting his interactions and participation within the group. Max's desk allocation separated from his classmates seemed to influence the interactions between Max, his teacher and his peers. Additionally, it inhibited the opportunity for Max to participate in the same activities within the group.

Conversely, as shown in exhibit 3, when Max was placed with the group during structured and informal activities (PE, Artwork and computer), the interactions between Max, his teacher and his peers appeared fluid, friendly and positive. During these activities, Max was placed within the group, and he was provided with full teacher support to enable his full participation within the group. Max appeared engaged, and his behaviour differed considerably from what was experienced when he was placed away from the group, as happened in exhibit 1 (i.e., moving around the classroom and running outside). During structured and informal activities, Max worked with his peers on different projects, and he was involved in leading the group with his teacher's support. Additionally, the SNA support was indirect, with reduced close presence, which allowed Max more space with his peers.

Additionally, the interactions between Max and his peers differed when the group was under their educators or SNA guidance from those where there was limited adult supervision, for example, in the playground, as seen in exhibit 5. In addition, Max was placed in the periphery of the group during lunchtime, as seen in exhibit 3, and during transitions between lessons and the playground (Exhibit 5). Without the educator and SNA support, natural interactions (i.e., similar to those interactions among all pupils) between Max and his peers were limited or absent. When in the classroom and under

the teacher and SNA's support and guidance, peers interacted with Max when requested (refer to exhibit 3). However, when Max and his peers were together without the teacher and SNA interference, interactions were minimal, particularly during playground and lunch breaks (refer to exhibits 4 and 5).

A potential explanation for the lack of interactions between Max and his peers could rest on how peers interpreted Max's different social styles, for example, when Max approached the group in a way that could be seen as abrupt by some of his peers (for example, in the playground as seen in Exhibit 5). Additionally, the lack of interactions with his peers could be explained as a result of a domino effect. For example, the limited interactions between Max and his teacher in certain activities and the strong influence of the SNA's presence and support could negatively influence peers' interactions. In addition, the disconnection between Max and his teacher, which could be fuelled by the use of separated teaching and learning practices and Max's refusal to work in the working station, could influence how his pupils perceived Max (for example, in Exhibit 1).

Furthermore, the SNA support and proximity in the playground seemed to influence their interactions negatively. First, the SNA's constant physical presence could act as a physical barrier between Max and their peers. Second, the strategies put in place by the SNA outlining Max's behaviour as the main barrier could interfere with how their peers perceived Max and their confidence in playing with him. For example, as shown in exhibit 5, when the SNA encouraged his peers to include him in the games, she emphasised his behaviour as a problem that required her supervision, which could have explained peers' avoidance in the SNA's absence.

Additionally, the interactions between Max and his Support teacher were not fluid. Max refused to go to the support classroom in the mornings, and during their sessions, Max's reduced focus on the activities concluded with the support teacher leaving Max at his own pace while she concentrated on providing support to the other students in the

classroom. This lack of interactions seemed to influence Max's learning, which could negatively affect his academic and social development.

To conclude, this case study exposed the potential effect that interactions could have on Max's participation within the group and, thus, his inclusive education in the three in-school settings. In those activities where Max was included as part of the group with the appropriate tailored strategies to facilitate his participation with his peers, the interactions between Max, his teacher, peers, and SNA were fluid, and Max was central to the group. Conversely, separating Max from the group and alienating him from the rest to work with his SNA seemed to influence the interactions between Max and the group and his participation and placed him in the periphery of the group.

5.2. JOHN

5.2.1. Contextual Background

John was a nine-year-old boy attending second class in his local primary mainstream school in Ireland. The classroom was a spacious and bright room with colourful art hanging on the walls and did not avail of a separate workstation. The number of pupils in John's classroom was 27, distributed around six tables in the classroom. John was located in the front row of the class, at a group table with three other girls (4 pupils table). This table composition was the exception in the classroom as the rest of the group tables were gender-mixed and with more pupils. The position given to John in the classroom placed him relatively close to the interactive board and on the other side of the room, opposite Miss Teacher's desk. John joined all pupils during lessons and assessments with no apparent curriculum differentiation and no extra support from his classroom teacher.

For the academic year, John was allocated full support from a Support Teacher (ST) for 45 minutes every day in a separate classroom. The support classroom was a small room furnished with the support teacher's desk and a round table in the middle of the room where children worked in their extra classes with their teacher's support. John's support was shared with another child with disabilities twice weekly, and they worked in their individually prepared work with the ST support. Both children worked in social skills activities comprising social stories with turn-taking at the end of the class.

John also availed the support of a part-time Special Needs Assistance (SNA). The SNA role involved assisting John and another child with disabilities in the classroom for two hours daily. The SNA support was distributed to the classroom to provide full support to one of the pupils, and she was also allocated to provide John with indirect support when required. For example, she ensured John would not hide in the restroom during transitions

and called his attention if he was out of focus during lessons. Additionally, the SNA role involved playground supervision, where she kept a distant eye on John providing support when necessary.

5.2.2. Interactions between John, his teachers, SNA, and peers in the classroom

a) Interactions during structured formal activities

In the classroom, the teaching and learning occurred with the support of the interactive board and the assessment of learning. The assessment involved individual and group questioning from their teacher after instruction. Through this questioning, pupils earned points that enabled them to move up on their weekly reward chart. The points were sufficient rewards to motivate and encourage pupils to take part in the activity. This activity involved all pupils, and the classroom atmosphere was lively, with the majority of the pupils engaging and participating.

John was involved in the same activities with no apparent differentiation and no evident extra support from his teacher and SNA. It was observed that John liked mathematics, and during these lessons, he was focused, attentive and participative throughout the assessment. Conversely, it was common to see John getting distracted while reading books he had on his lap in other subjects, such as English. On the days that the SNA was in the classroom, she kept John focused on the lessons by taking the book away and standing nearby. Nevertheless, in her absence, John read his books discreetly during instruction, with little attention to and from his teacher.

John's preference for mathematics was also seen during the teacher's assessment of learning after instruction. John appeared eager to participate in his teacher's questioning by putting his hand up to get his teacher's attention. During this activity, the interactions between John, his teacher and his peers seemed fluid. Miss Teacher involved John in the activities and encouraged his participation, praising him when required. Similarly, the interactions between John and his peers were positive, they included John in the activities, and often his peers from the group table appointed him as the team leader to answer their teacher's questions on behalf of the group. On many occasions, John was cheered by his team and his peers in the classroom when he did well in this activity, which occurred regularly, and he appeared happy to see his group earning points and moving to higher positions in their classroom chart.

Exhibit 1

John seems to like mathematics, he is attentive and focuses on the interactive board. The lesson has finished now and the teacher is asking the group tables to work together on the problems on the whiteboard. John is very excited and seems to be in charge of his table. His peers seem to rely on him and are allowing his leadership easily. The group tables are working on solving the problem with no support from their teacher, who is working at her desk. The working period has ended and John is ready with their answers. He seems very competitive and puts his hand up straight away to be picked by his teacher. Another peer goes first but the answer is not perfect, then another group is chosen but they are not giving the correct answer. John remains with his hand up very anxious to be picked by his teacher. The time has arrived and John has given the correct answer, his team is winning this round and they are all very excited. The teacher praises the team and John for their good work. He seems so happy.

Conversely, John's engagement with other subjects' activities, such as English, differed from those in numerical lessons. John seemed less enthusiastic and less keen to participate in these activities, and he was also out of focus and prompted to be distracted reading his books or hiding in the restroom. John's limited enthusiasm and engagement in these activities seemed to reduce his participation and attention, but his educator did not encourage him to participate and engage in the activity. On the other hand, the interactions between John and his peers differed from those taking place during numerical activities, with limited interaction and engagement.

b) Interactions during structured informal activities

In the classroom, structured and formal activities were combined with structured and informal activities, such as writing work, which took place after instruction and intended to put into practice the knowledge acquired during the lessons. These activities involved artwork, singing, and physical education outside the classroom. During these hands-on activities, the support appeared to be the same to all pupils, with no apparent individual differentiation, except for the support provided by the part-time SNA to one of the pupils (not John) in the classroom. John was involved in these activities and seemed engaged with some of the tasks, particularly in physical education.

Nevertheless, John appeared less participative in some informal activities, such as writing work. In the transition between instruction and writing tasks, it was common to see John wandering around the classroom or hiding in the restroom, which delayed, in some cases, the time he allocated to the writing task. Moreover, John seemed out of focus during the task and had difficulties finalising these writing activities in a tidy fashion, having to complete the activities at home. During these tasks, John did not receive any specific or differentiated support from his teacher, and when his SNA approached his table, he tended to hide his work copy and dismissed the SNA support. Notwithstanding, the SNA managed her support by diverting her attention to John's peers before reviewing his work. The interactions between John and his peers at the

group table seemed fluid during structured and informal activities, particularly during art and physical education. Both John and his peers were reciprocal in their interactions and engaged in the tasks accordingly. However, during writing-work activities, John seemed to maintain a certain distance from the girls at his table and often hid his writing work from them, covering his work copy with his arm.

Exhibit 2

After spellings the teacher asked her pupils to work on their workbooks, writing the words exposed on the whiteboard. John goes to the toilet and spends a good while there until his SNA notices his absence and tells the teacher. She asks John to go back to his table and he obeys with no hesitation. He seems nervous, uneasy, and begins his work, nearly at the time his peers are almost finished. The girls at his table are asking if he needs help but he covers his workbook, he is anxious and upset. Meanwhile, his teacher is checking on the other tables, while the SNA approaches John, but he does not seem happy and covers his workbook with his hand when the SNA asks about it. The teacher approaches John's table and checks on the girls' work. Because John's work remains unfinished, she asks him to finish the task at home as part of his homework. John is clearly upset but in silence places his workbook in his bag, while the teacher transitions...one, two, three.... to the next lesson.

A similar situation occurred during singing activities when pupils were practising Christmas songs. During this task, the atmosphere in the classroom was lively and cheerful. However, John did not seem to enjoy this activity, and he was covering his ears and placing his arms over his head. Besides John's limited participation in this activity, the teacher and classmates continued with their practice, and John was neither encouraged nor supported to participate in the task.

c) Interactions during unstructured activities

Unstructured activities comprised transitions between lessons and recess, distributed between mid-morning lunch and the early afternoon playground. Additionally, pupils had time to interact and play with their peers freely before going to their classrooms when arriving at school in the morning.

John arrived at school every day with his mother, but he walked on his own to the school ground and joined his peers in the line. In general, pupils gathered in groups as they arrived; some were chatting and laughing while others ran around their line supervised by SNA and some teachers. In the playground, upon arrival, the interactions between John and his peers seemed fluid and positive. He approached the line and joined one of the groups where his peers greeted and soon involved him in the conversation. When with the group, John appeared to be part of the gang, and his peers seemed to involve him in their talks and play. John seemed to have a slim conversation, which did not seem to influence the interactions between John and his peers.

Notwithstanding, some of John's peers tended to encourage him to misbehave, mainly when returning from the playground. In these events, John seemed happy to please his peers, despite the potential trouble with his teacher and SNA, perhaps unaware that his peers' intentions were not friendly.

Exhibit 3

The class is returning to the classroom from recess with their teacher and SNA, some of John's peers are messing and jiggling. John looks at them smiling and jiggling with them. The teacher asks the group to be quiet and continue up the stairs to the classroom. These peers continue messing and now John is beside them smiling at them messing, then they prompt John to run up the stairs to get first in the line. [All children had strict instructions to walk in silence and beside the banister going up the stairs]. Nevertheless, John takes the risk and moves up running outside the line. His peers are laughing loud at this point and Miss teacher catches John halfway through...she is not impressed and reprimands John for his behaviour and asks him to return to his position. John seems upset and returns to the line without hesitation, those peers who instigated John are now laughing and John smiles at them. In the classroom the teacher reminds all pupils about the rules and John keeps his head down, he seems upset and maybe embarrassed?

This situation occurred again on another occasion when returning from the playground during their afternoon recess. In both cases, John appeared upset when his teacher and SNA reprimanded him, but he smiled at his peers when they laughed. Despite these events, John and his peers' interactions seemed fluid and positive in the playground. John seemed included in his peers' games, and rarely was he seen alone.

In the classroom, unstructured activities comprised free time during their transitions between activities and lunch. During lunch, the interactions between John and his peers differed from their interactions in the playground and the line. John shared his group table with three other girls and appeared to interact differently with the girls than the boys. Although the girls appeared engaged and seemed to include John in their conversations, he seemed less enthusiastic in their presence than when he was with his

male peers in the morning, for example, when hanging his coat in the rack or the line before going to the playground.

5.2.3. Interactions between John, his teachers, SNA and peers in the playground

Playground recess took place around noon for twenty minutes. Before going out to the playground, pupils wrapped up their books and work copies at their table and lined up beside the classroom room. Playground time was exciting for all pupils, and John joined his classmates on the line smiling and chatting with his peers. John seemed relaxed during this transition time, following the same routine as his peers. On their walk to the playground, all peers, including John, interacted with each other while following their teacher's lead. The interactions between John and his peers appeared fluid and friendly. In the playground, John was included in the boys' games. They all played football or basketball, John seemed to be part of the gang, and he played well with his peers without incidents or disagreements among the group. John occasionally wandered on his own in the playground for a short time between games. Nevertheless, his peers welcomed and included John in the games once he returned to the group.

5.2.4. Interactions between John, his support teacher, and peers in the Support Classroom

John was collected every day by his support teacher from the classroom, and they both walked to the support classroom with other pupils from another classroom, who shared extra support with John (twice daily). The interactions between John, his support teacher, and his peer appeared fluid and chatty on their way to the classroom. The students had their work organised and their schedule and chart over the table in the support classroom. John and his peer seemed to know their routine well, and all (teacher and pupils) engaged in conversation while preparing for the activity. During their structured work, both children worked on their tasks with their teacher's constant support,

who was revising their work and providing verbal and writing instruction individually. John's activities involved extra support, mainly in writing exercises, comprehension, and concentration, which seemed to be the areas where he required additional support. Although it was common to see the boys giggling and getting distracted by each other, their teacher managed to return their attention to their work with the reward chart's support. At the end of the class, the pupils were scheduled to work with educational games as a reward, fostering social interactions. Both boys seemed excited about their games and played together, following the support teacher's instructions. The interactions between John, his teacher and his peer during the game were fluid and appeared positive, and they all seemed to enjoy the game while chatting and laughing. After 45 minutes, the group walked with their support teacher to their classrooms. It was noticed that once in the classroom, John walked rapidly to his group table and sat focusing on his books, dismissing his support teacher's goodbyes. It seemed that John's interactions with the support teacher changed in the general classroom compared with the support classroom.

Exhibit 4

John loves the playground, he plays well with his peers, he is embraced and included in all games. John is playing football with his classmates, running around and having a good time. He is competitive and likes to win but he seems to have a good sense of sport and does not get annoyed or frustrated easily. He seems very easy going and adaptable with his mates. After the match he seems nervous and goes behind the shed for a few minutes, but he soon returns with his mates who are now sitting on the floor playing cards. John sits with them and they continue with the game including John in their play.

5.2.5. Analysis and Concluding Comments

At first sight, John seemed to be included in the classroom like any other pupil. He was placed in the classroom full-time, received limited support and took part in the same curriculum with no evident differentiation. Additionally, the SNA support in the classroom was limited, and John appeared to be well able to follow the classroom routine without her constant support. John's interactions with his peers in the playground and the support classroom also seemed positive and fluid. In the playground, he was included in his peers' games and seemed to be part of his peers' network of friends. Simultaneously in the support classroom, John was well included and supported, and the interactions were fluid between teachers and peers.

Nevertheless, in the classroom, interactions were not always fluid and positive, and in some cases, the interactions between John and the different actors could put him at risk of exclusion. Despite John's developments and achievements in school, some academic areas required further support, such as writing, comprehension and spelling.

However, support was absent in the classroom and only addressed in the support classroom. The limited support in the classroom seemed to influence John's participation in these activities as well as the interactions with his teacher and peers, placing John in the periphery of the group.

Additionally, this case study revealed the potential negative influence associated with John's extra support. It was noticed that John's interactions with his support teacher and SNA were fluid reciprocal, and friendly, but mostly when John was on his own with them. When he was near his peers, John seemed to dismiss the SNA and support teacher's presence and refused their direct support. This reaction could be explained as a fear of stigma; John seemed to react when treated differently from his peers as if he understood that there was a negative connotation associated with this differentiation.

5.3. LAURA

5.3.1. Contextual Background

Laura was a seven-year-old girl attending first class at her local school in Ireland. The classroom was bright and spacious, furnished with bookshelves and a desk at the back of the room for extra activities and no further differentiated accommodation. The classroom was formed by 27 pupils, distributed around six tables in the classroom with 5 to 6 pupils at each table. Laura sat at the back near the door, and her teacher was on the other side of the room. The researcher sat away from the pupils, avoiding any interference with the classroom routine.

Laura availed of extra one-on-one support from a support teacher for 45 minutes daily in the support classroom throughout the academic year. A small room furnished with shelves full of books and educational games and two working desks. Additionally, Laura availed of two hours of daily support in the classroom from her SNA, whose responsibilities involved assisting Laura with her differentiated curriculum in literacy and numeracy, which took place in the classroom in the assigned working area separated from the group. In the afternoon, pupils benefited from unstructured time in the playground. An open area that enabled pupils to interact freely and play together with limited adult interference. In the playground, Laura did not avail of specific supervision from her SNA.

5.3.2. Interactions between Laura, her teachers, SNA, and peers in the classroom

a) Interactions during structured formal activities

The classroom structure involved instruction with the support of the interactive board and assessment of learning through questioning and hands-on activities on an individual and group basis. Laura sat with the group for all activities except during writing

work in literacy and numeracy and her extra support hours in the support classroom.

Laura's differentiated work in literacy and numeracy was completed with the support of her SNA at a separate desk within the classroom.

During structured and formal activities, Laura's focus and concentration were slim, with a tendency to move away from her desk and into the restroom. However, her teacher was constantly on Laura's case concerning her movements, requesting her return to her desk when lessons were taking place, which Laura followed with no hesitation. Once at her desk, Laura's focus and concentration were slim, and she was seen rocking her chair, checking her school bag, and playing with her colours. Nevertheless, besides these interactions, there was no other form of interaction between Laura and her teacher during structured and formal activities, neither during lesson instruction nor during the assessment of learning.

After the instruction, the teacher began her pupils' assessment of learning through individual and group questioning. During this activity, the atmosphere in the classroom tended to be lively, and all pupils seemed to engage in the task by following their teacher's instructions. Laura also appeared focused on the task and seemed excited about it, smiling and chatting with her peers. Nevertheless, the interactions between Miss Teacher and Laura during this activity were almost absent, and Laura's attempt to participate by putting her hands up was not considered leaving Laura on the periphery of the group. Consequently, Laura's participation during the assessment of learning was minimal, with reduced to no support from her teacher to encourage and facilitate Laura's involvement within the group.

Exhibit 1

Laura moves a lot in the classroom during instruction while her teacher keeps asking her to return to her table. After instruction, the teacher is asking questions, Laura seems excited and happy with the activity. The teacher chooses pupils randomly if their hands are up, Laura has her hand up for almost the duration of the individual questioning, but her teacher is not asking her any questions. Now we move to group work, they are working on some story, they need to write the end. All group tables are working on the story, but Laura is not taking part. Her peers at the table are discussing the story, giving possible ends but Laura is looking at them in silence, smiling and laughing with them. The SNA asks her peers to give Laura a role on their discussion, but they do not follow up on the request. The teacher is assessing all pupils work, but when arriving to Laura's table no support is provided to her.

Additionally, the interactions between Laura and her peers during these activities, particularly when involved in group work, appeared limited and disconnected, with reduced communication and engagement. Following the individual questioning, the assessment of learning involved group work. In this particular case, pupils were instructed to resolve a numerical problem placed on the interactive board, and Laura was part of her group table. Nevertheless, the interactions between Laura and her peers during the planning of this assignment were limited. However, neither Laura nor her peers appeared to work together on the task, which seemed to place Laura in the periphery of the group. As a result, Laura seemed to have limited interactions and involvement in any of the group discussions related to the numerical problem.

The SNA approached the table in the interim to check on their progress, but Laura did not seem happy with her presence and dismissed her SNA. It was noticed that Laura seemed uncomfortable with the SNA's presence, in particular when direct support

was provided in front of her peers. In response to Laura's reaction, her SNA left the table to come back at a later stage; this time, her approach involved more subtle support, where the SNA requested Laura's peers at her table to allow her to choose the team leader. Nevertheless, once the SNA left the group, peers continued to work on their assignment without including Laura in their planning.

While the activity was taking place, Miss Teacher walked around the room assessing the group's progress, but when she approached Laura's table, her interactions were minimal, and she did not provide Laura with any extra support to enable her participation with the group. At the end of the activity, all group tables presented their solution to the classroom as a group. During the presentation in front of the classroom, Laura joined her group table, but when Miss teacher questioned each pupil on the team regarding their problem-solving approach, Laura was not involved in this questioning. The interactions between Laura, her teacher and her peers during the presentation were absent, but despite the lack of interactions, Laura did not seem upset with the fact that she was not directly involved in the activity in the same way as her peers, and she remained calm and smiling for the duration of the presentation.

In general, the interactions between Laura, her teachers and her peers during structured and formal activities showed a disconnection characterised by a lack of interpersonal interactions and support that seemed to affect Laura's participation in structured and formal activities.

b) Interactions during structured informal activities

Structured and informal activities took place after instruction and assessment of learning, which involved writing work on the allocated workbooks, while Laura worked separated from the group with her SNA for numerical and literacy work. However, it was noticed that Laura was not happy with the arrangement, and in most cases, she refused to move to the back desk with her SNA, requiring certain negotiation from the SNA.

During the negotiation, it was observed that the classroom teacher continued with her tasks, giving the SNA full responsibility concerning Laura's extra support during writing activities. The interactions between Laura and her SNA seemed fluid, but Laura's refusal to work on the back was evident, given the number of times she attempted to return to her group table and her lack of focus and interest in accomplishing the worksheets assigned.

Exhibit 2

After the assessment of learning, pupils work on their workbooks. The SNA asks Laura to sit on the working station to work on spellings and maths. Laura refuses to do the work on the work station and asks to do it at her group table alone but the SNA tries to convince her. Laura likes emoticons and they have a full selection of stickers to play once finishing her tasks. Laura is not happy, she wants to work at her table, she does not like the other table. You go.....she says to the SNA,..... I can do my work her at my table.....I don't want to go....Eventually the SNA sits beside Laura and very calmly explains to her that it is easier for them to have all their stuff in the other desk and that is why they have to work there. Laura seems to understand and sits with her SNA at their working station for five minutes before the end of the activity and the transition to the next lesson.

Structured and informal activities also involved artwork, physical education, singing and hands-on work. The interactions between Laura, her teacher and her peers appeared fluid and positive during these activities, which appeared to facilitate Laura's participation and engagement. For example, during the observation, Laura and her classmates were getting ready for her Christmas show, and every day there was time allocated to practice their performances and songs. Laura appeared excited and engaged and seemed to love her part as an angel in their play, as seen in her

excitement and commitment to the practice. The interactions between Laura, her teacher, and her peers during their practice were fluid and friendly, and Laura was involved and engaged in the activity. It was common to see the teacher praising all team members, including Laura, and they all seemed relaxed and happy.

Exhibit 3

They are practicing their Christmas show, Laura is very excited and starts talking with her teacher about it while all classmates are getting to their positions. The teacher is very nice and talks to Laura about her part and how well she is doing. Laura shows a big smile, she seems proud of herself, and her teacher continues to praise her until she is asked to take her position in the crib as an angel. Laura said her line (small and simple), her performance is perfect, she is into the role and her teacher applauds them all for such a great performance. Everybody is very excited and chatting away, Laura and her peers are also talking lively.

Along the same line, Physical Education (PE) seemed to be one of Laura's favourite activities, she was engaging and focused, and her interactions between Laura, her teacher, and her peers were positive and friendly. The teacher ensured Laura always had a partner for the exercises, and she supported Laura on the tasks, for example, jumping obstacles, to enable her to achieve on their individual and teamwork. Additionally, the interactions between Laura and her peers seemed positive and fluid, and her peers paired with Laura when instructed and supported her when required, for example, by helping her jump holding her hand.

c) Interactions during unstructured activities

Unstructured activities comprised free time in the morning when getting to school, during recess during lunch, and in the playground, enabling interactions with pupils freely and without much adult interference. Every morning Laura arrived at school with her mum or dad and joined her peers in the playground, where interactions seemed fluid at this time of the morning. Once in the classroom, the routine involved hanging their coats and revising homework, a transition period that created an unstructured environment facilitating interactions between pupils and their teacher. Laura appeared chatty and engaging during this activity and was involved in conversations between her classmates and their teacher. In her excitement, Laura's approach could be abrupt at times, and she could interrupt her peers' conversations or would not allow other pupils to talk and share their news while she was talking. However, it was observed that the interactions between Laura and her peers continued fluidly under the teacher's supervision.

The interactions between all pupils and their teacher appeared fluid and friendly, and the first impression was that of camaraderie between pupils and teacher. It was common to see their teacher walking around the classroom, talking with her pupils and pupils gathering around her table, sharing their news. Likewise, the interactions between Laura and her teacher seemed fluid, and Laura was often seen chatting and joking with her teacher. Additionally, Miss teacher ensured that Laura was always involved in their classroom conversations, and often she praised Laura in front of her peers for any achievement she would have shared. For example, when Laura won a medal in her extracurricular activities, Miss teacher requested a round of applause for Laura.

Conversely, throughout their lunch, it was observed that the interactions between Laura and her peers at the group table were not as fluid as the interactions taking place when their classroom teacher was around. It appeared as if Laura was placed in the periphery of their peers' network at their group table. Pupils were involved in their conversations while Laura was eating her lunch, the interactions were minimal, and

when Laura attempted to initiate a conversation with them, the answers were short and direct and did not enable further interaction. Moreover, it appeared that Laura avoided the group table once she finished her lunch, as she spent most of the recess in the restroom. Once the teacher returned to the classroom, the routine was picked up, and interactions became fluid again.

5.3.3. Interactions between Laura, her teachers, SNA and peers in the playground

Another unstructured activity referred to the playground, a recess that occurred in the afternoons. While getting ready to go to the playground, the atmosphere in the classroom was cheerful, and all pupils seemed happy while in the line getting ready to go to the yard. Laura was not different; she was excited and chatty with her classmates, and the interactions between Laura, her teacher, and her peers, seemed fluid and friendly. Once in the playground, pupils went to their allocated area under the supervision of the SNAs and some teachers. It was common to see them gathering in groups to play games such as football, hide and seek and basketball while other groups sat on a bench to talk.

Conversely, the interactions between Laura and her peers in the playground differed from the interactions observed in the classroom. Laura played mostly on her own, and her attempts to join her peers were, in most cases, unsuccessful and frustrating. When she was not included in the games, she was unhappy, as shown in her anger by taking her peers' ball away or knocking their cards. Sometimes Laura sat beside her peers, but she was clearly on the periphery of the group with limited interactions and engagement. It was noticed that Laura would also wander and attempt to play with other peers in the classroom from other classes; however, these attempts were also unsuccessful in most cases.

Exhibit 4

All pupils walk to the playground, and they began to play, some are seating on a bench, others are playing hide and seek or football. Laura seems out of place in the playground, she walks around, and approaches the girls from her class. Just before going to the playground, they are talking about beauty stuff with Miss Teacher, and Laura is involved in the conversation. However, the girls are not talking much to her, Laura tries to talk but she gets tired from standing beside the girls while they are in conversation without listening much to her and wanders around the yard. She approaches the boys who are playing cards, but definitely they are not letting her play, she talks to them, but they don't seem to listen. Eventually Laura gives up and approaches a group of girls from another class who are playing basketball, she asks to play politely but they do not seem to involve Laura in the game, when she tries to grab the ball that falls beside her, the girls report Laura to one of the SNAs in duty. Laura tries to explain that the ball has fallen beside her. The SNA asks Laura to walk with her and she does it with no complain.

5.3.4. Interactions between Laura and her support teacher in the Support Classroom

Laura availed of extra support for 45 minutes every day, and her support teacher collected her from the classroom after chatting with the classroom teacher to assess Laura's progress during that day. The interactions between Laura and her support teacher appeared fluid and friendly while walking to the support classroom and in the classroom. The one-to-one interactions and support and the use of different strategies, such as reward charts and activities of interest for Laura, seemed to favour Laura's focus and interest in the activities. Finally, Laura and her teacher sat together at a round table and began their lesson. Although Laura seemed to struggle with reading and

comprehension, the interactions between Laura and her teacher involving personal interactions and close academic and emotional support seemed to facilitate Laura's understanding and achievement of the tasks. During the session, Laura appeared focused, and when she got distracted, her teacher assisted her in concentrating on the tasks with different strategies.

Moreover, Laura and her support teacher appeared relaxed with each other's company, and the session flourished without problems. Before the end of the class, Laura was scheduled to play an educational game with her teacher, which was very exciting for her. During the game, Laura was chatty and made jokes with her support teacher. At the end of the session, Laura and her support teacher walked to the classroom, where both teachers shared impressions concerning Laura's progress.

5.3.5. Analysis and Concluding Comments

Laura's case study highlighted that Laura's participation in the classroom appeared determined by interactions between her and her educator. During core activities such as mathematics and English, there was a lack of interactions between Laura, her teacher and her peers, with limited support, which seemed to influence Laura's participation in these activities. It was noticed that Laura had a differentiated curriculum for numeracy and literacy, and perhaps not being at the same level as her peers in core subjects could generate low expectations for her educator. Consequently, the teacher's understanding of Laura's ability to take part in core subjects influenced Laura's participation and interactions with the group. Laura also seemed aware of her differentiation from her peers, which was associated with her SNA support, and she constantly refused her help and doing work away from the group. Laura's rejection could be explained as a fear of the stigma of being seen as different from the group.

Conversely, Laura's participation and support through structured and informal activities and some unstructured activities in the classroom were fluid and positive. The

support provided and positive interactions between Laura, her teacher and her peers enabled Laura's participation in the classroom. Laura's interactions with her teacher and her participation in the classroom seemed to positively influence, in turn, the interactions with her peers, revealing the potential influence of the teacher's role model in her students' interactions.

Despite the positive interactions taking place between Laura and her peers in certain activities in the classroom, these interactions only occurred under adult supervision. Without adult influence, the interactions between Laura and her peers were brief in some cases and absent in others. This seemed to place Laura on the periphery of the group, disconnected from her classmates. In summary, the interactions between Laura and the actors in the different in-school settings and the support received could place Laura at the centre or the periphery of the group, influencing her inclusive education in her regular school.

5.4. PETER

5.4.1. Contextual Background

Peter was a seven-year-old boy attending senior infant class (second year in school) in his local regular primary school in Ireland. The total number of pupils in the classroom was 28, and they were distributed around five tables in the classroom, with five to six pupils at each table. Peter sat with three pupils on the first row, near the exit door and opposite the teacher's desk, placed at the other end. The researcher sat at the back of the classroom in a corner. The classroom was spacious, bright and colourful, and their finished artwork was hanging on the walls. The accommodation included a small rest area formed with three shelves facing the wall and a working station at the back of the classroom to enable Peter to work on his differentiated curriculum with the support of his SNA. Outside the classroom, the school availed of a spacious library/playroom used for pupils that needed a break from the classroom.

For the academic year, Peter was provided with extra daily support for 45 minutes in the support classroom and the assistance of a full-time Special Needs Assistant (SNA) in the classroom and the playground. The support classroom was a spacious room furnished with books, educational games, and two desks, one allocated for the teacher and the second desk to work with the pupils on their one-to-one sessions. The support teacher was in charge of preparing Peter's differentiated worksheets in literacy and numeracy, which Peter completed in the classroom, separated from the group and with the support of his SNA.

The SNA support involved assisting Peter with his day-to-day school care and safety needs and access to the curriculum. In the classroom, the SNA sat beside Peter to ensure his focus on the lessons and assisted him in completing his differentiated curriculum. Miss SNA was responsible for Peter's differentiated worksheets folder and

ensured the completion of these activities during the week. In the playground, Peter's support was indirect and with limited interference.

Peter was allocated to the classroom full-time, but his schedule differed in some areas from the general classroom plan. In the classroom, during literacy and numeracy lessons, Peter worked separately from the group in his tailored activities with the support of his SNA. After the first recess, he joined the group table accompanied by his SNA, who sat beside him to help him to focus on the lessons.

5.4.2. Interactions between Peter, his teachers, SNA, and peers in the classroom

a) Interactions during structured formal activities

During structured and formal activities, the interactions between Peter, his teacher and his peers were absent, particularly when the SNA was present. Peter and his SNA spent most of the school day together, and it seemed that Peter's responsibility rested entirely on her. The SNA assisted Peter with his differentiated curriculum and supported him in navigating all classroom activities. In the classroom, the interactions between Peter and his SNA were fluid, and they seemed close and comfortable in each other company.

Exhibit 1

Everybody is sitting at their group tables while Mr Teacher is getting ready for their lessons. The SNA asks Peter to go to their back table to do their homework. Peter and his SNA are sitting facing the windows and giving their back to the rest of the class. They can hear Mr Teacher talking, while they speak in low voice. Peter is following the explanation of his SNA who is showing him different squares, triangles, and circles, he must match the number with the figures. The teacher is asking questions to all pupils, the class is full of noise, but Peter continues at his working station.

During structured and formal activities, Peter's participation and engagement were limited and, in most cases, absent. First, he was separated from the group during literacy, numeracy and writing work, which prevented his participation in these activities. Second, Peter sat with the group after his first recess but was accompanied by his SNA, who sat beside him at the table, ensuring he was focused on the lessons. Throughout the lessons, Peter would not engage in activities naturally; for example, he would not put his hand up to answer his teacher's questions during the assessment of learning. At the same time, the interactions between Peter and his teacher were limited, and he lacked teacher support to facilitate and encourage Peter's participation and engagement in the task. Peter was physically present in the activity but was not participating or involved in the group.

For example, during an Irish lesson, Peter sat at his group table accompanied by his SNA. His classmates were engaged in conversation at their tables while their teacher introduced the lesson and organised the interactive board. In this interim, the interactions between Peter and his peers were limited, while the interactions between Peter and his SNA were fluid. Peter seemed to engage with his SNA in small conversations, but his

verbal communication with his teacher and peers was minimal. However, it was noticed that despite Peter's lack of verbal interaction with his peers, his body language exhibited an attempt to interact. Peter was looking at his peers while they were talking, and he smiled at them, paying attention to their conversation. Nevertheless, the interactions between Peter and his peers were absent.

When the lesson began, pupils focused on their teacher's instruction and the interactive board, but Peter did not seem to engage with the lesson as he seemed distracted and unconcentrated. Eventually, Peter retired to the library at the back of the classroom. Peter returned to the group table when the teacher began to pose questions to all pupils concerning different types of foods and the Irish translation based on the pictures shown on the interactive board. The classroom atmosphere was lively during this activity, and all pupils appeared engaged and enthusiastic about the activity. Pupils were putting their hands up when their teacher asked them a question while speaking simultaneously. Peter appeared focused and attentive to what was happening around him through the activity with a big smile and moved nervously in his chair. However, he would not put his hand up, and his teacher did not approach him with appropriate support to enable his participation in the task. As a result, Peter missed the opportunity to participate in the task with his peers.

b) Interactions during structured and informal activities

Peter joined the group for structured and informal activities, such as artwork and Physical Education. For these activities, Peter would not have the close presence of his SNA, who sat at the back of the classroom, leaving Peter at his own pace. Except during writing work, when the SNA provided Peter with direct assistance at the group table or in the working station. Peter seemed lost and out of focus in most cases and unengaged without the direct support of his SNA. In this situation, the interactions between Mr teacher and Peter were almost absent and lacked individual support. Furthermore, the interactions between Peter and his peers during the events were also limited and almost

absent, lacking initiation and support during individual and group activities. At the same time, Peter would not request any information or support from his peers.

Exhibit 2

The SNA is now working at the back of the classroom and Peter is on his own at his group table. The lesson is about traffic lights and crossing the road, with the help of the interactive board the teacher is asking all pupils the safest ways to cross the road. The pictures in the interactive board are clear, stating that we cross the road when the traffic light is green. The lessons is very interactive, pupils and teacher are talking and discussing road safety. Peter is looking at his teacher and peers, but he does not seem very engaged, neither is his teacher engaging him. Peter is smiling though when they all laugh, he is not oblivious of what is happening around him, but he is not taking part. The lesson continues with the interactive board, the teacher is instructing more road safety features, Peter rests his head on the table while the class continue with their lessons.

Throughout these activities, the responsibility to provide Peter with individual support seemed to rest always on the SNA, independently of the teacher's approach to Peter's group table. Support that appeared always welcomed by Peter, seeing the lift on Peter's face and the smile when his SNA approached him at the table. In general, Peter accomplished his tasks with his peers once he received the instructions. Notwithstanding, the interactions between his peers at his table remained absent, which seemed to place Peter in the group's periphery.

For example, during artwork, the classroom was involved in making a vase with clay. Each group table worked together in one section of the vase. Peter joined the group

for this activity while his SNA sat at the back of the classroom, providing him with indirect support when required. All pupils were standing around their tables while their teacher provided detailed instructions on the task. After the instruction, pupils began to work on the vase, but Peter remained there, standing and looking at his peers motionless. The teacher approached each table, addressing pupils' understanding and progress. However, when approaching Peter's table, the interactions between Peter and his teacher were minimal, and no individual support was provided despite Peter's lack of engagement in the task. Eventually, the SNA approached the table and provided Peter with detailed one-on-one instruction that facilitated Peter to work on the clay vase. The SNA also ensured that Peter was included in the group by providing Peter with a group task. However, despite placing Peter within the group, the strategy did not generate reciprocal interactions between Peter and his peers.

c) Interactions during unstructured activities

Peter arrived at school every morning with his dad, and he stood in the line while his peers played around and gathered in small groups. In the line, the interactions between Peter and his peers were limited by a lack of interactions and communication. Peter joined the group routine in the classroom, placing his coat on the hook and sitting at his group table. While placing their coats, pupils engaged in talks, and the atmosphere was lively while getting settled into the school day. The interactions between Peter and his peers in the coat section were limited, but it was noticed that he seemed to pay attention to his peers' conversations and stood beside them, smiling and laughing with them. Despite Peter's lack of verbal communication, he seemed interested in his peers' conversations. When Peter returned to his group table, his SNA assisted Peter in emptying his bag and getting his homework ready for revision. Soon after settling in his group table, Peter began to wander around the classroom and hid in his secluded library until all pupils got settled to commence the school day.

During the first recess, Peter joined his group table for lunch with his SNA, who assisted him in taking his lunch from the bag. However, the SNA sat away from the table, leaving Peter at his pace. The atmosphere in the classroom was lively, all pupils were chatting while eating, and some of them watched the movie on the interactive board. Peter's pupils were chatting and laughing at his group table, and Peter was looking at them with attention, smiling and laughing with them. Peter's body language seemed to reflect his interest in his peers (looking at them, smiling), but it did not materialise in further interactions. After finishing his lunch, Peter left his group table and hid in the restroom.

5.4.3. Interactions between Peter, his teachers, SNA, and peers in the playground

The second recess in the afternoon involved free time in the playground with limited adult interference. Peter joined his peers in the playground with limited interference from his SNA, who would provide support only when necessary. Otherwise, she remained distant, giving Peter time at his own pace. During the week, pupils played freely three times a week, and for the rest of the days, they adhered to the Group of Four introduced by the classroom teacher as a strategy that involved pupils playing together in assigned groups of four. The group composition changed each week, and pupils could check their assigned group (which had the name of an animal) on the classroom door before their recess.

Exhibit 3

All pupils are in the playground, Peter walks with his SNA who encourages to play with all children in the yard. Peter goes to a corner of the yard and rests there for a few minutes. He seems to like being on his own and his SNA allows his time off with no interference. Today they have free time, which means that they can play with whoever they wish. Other days they play with their group of fours. After a while, the SNA approaches Peter to ensure he is okay and then he begins to walk around on his own. Then he sees his older brother and joins him and his friends. They seem to be used to have Peter around, they are talking to him and he (although with no verbal communication) smiles at them and seems happy. The SNA approaches the group to ensure Peter is okay but he wants to stay with his brother. His classmates are running around the playground and they pass near Peter from time to time, but no interaction is taking place either way.

In the playground, Peter and their SNA had limited interaction. The SNA walked around the yard while keeping an eye on Peter, but there was no interference in his play, for example, encouraging Peter to play with his peer or vice versa in the playground. Furthermore, Peter would not approach his SNA during recess until it was time to return to the classroom. The interactions between Peter and his peers during the playground were not different from the interactions in the classroom. It was common to see Peter walking around alone while his peers gathered in groups and played games. Nevertheless, Peter was seen getting close to his peers, standing beside them and running around by their side, but his peers never reciprocated this form of initiation.

Despite the limited interactions between Peter and his peers, he remained by their side in most cases as if he was part of the group when clearly, he was placed on the periphery of their peers' network.

During the group of four, the interactions between Peter and his peers exhibited the pupils' absence of interactions with Peter and his unsuccessful attempts to form part of the group. For example, while waiting in the classroom line to be guided to the yard on a random day, Peter asked his SNA about his assigned group. Once in the playground, Peter joined his group and remained with them for the rest of their recess. During their game, It was evident from the observation that Peter was allowed to be part of the game, and he was present in the group, but his peers did not seem to consider him part of the gang. They were playing and running around while Peter followed them, but he seemed outside their group network, lacking engagement and communication with Peter.

Despite the lack of interaction with his peers, Peter continued playing with them and appeared happy while in his peers' company. When their recess ended, Peter joined his classroom's line along with his peers, who were engaged in conversation but did not seem to be part of it. Although Peter was smiling and looking at them, his peers did not embrace Peter in their chat, and Peter did not attempt to communicate verbally with his peers.

5.4.4. Interactions between Peter, his support teacher, and peers in the support classroom

Observations in the support classroom took place on one occasion due to the Support teacher's advice. Every day Peter and his SNA walked to the Support Classroom, where he had a one to one 45 minutes support. At first sight, the interactions between Peter and his Support Teacher seemed fluid and positive, and Peter followed his routine and sat at his desk once greeted by his teacher, ready for his class. In the classroom, Peter's work for the day was displayed on a visual schedule and a timer to announce to Peter the end of one task and the start of the next.

Exhibit 4

Peter arrives to the support classroom with his SNA, she promises him she is going to stay outside waiting for him, because he gets nervous if she goes. Inside the classroom he sits on the table and waits for the support teacher to tell him what to do. They are cutting hearts for valentine's day. He does not seem to like cutting with scissors. Then he goes behind the teacher's desk and hides under the table. The support teacher continues with the activity and allows Peter to rest for a few minutes. Then, calmly she asks Peter to return to the table and he does as he is asked without any problem. While doing their art work the teacher is asking Peter about the colours they are using, which one he likes the most and the different shapes they are using for their work. Peter seems to struggle with words, and his communication is limited but he seems happy to cooperate and he tries his best. Peter goes again to hide behind the table after he has finished with his artwork, soon after the SNA appears in the room to collect Peter. He seems happy to see his SNA, and walks outside with not hesitation. The SNA and the ST share impressions about the lesson before returning to the classroom.

Although Peter followed his teacher's instructions with no hesitation, it was noticed that he needed constant movement breaks, as he regularly moved around the classroom and behind his teacher's desk. The teacher allowed some room for Peter to settle in these situations, but he was encouraged to return to his work, something he did with no complaints. Both support teacher and child seemed comfortable in each other company, but the communication was limited and focused on the tasks.

During the session, Peter seemed to struggle with the tasks, but his support teacher adapted each task accordingly and provided support with different strategies, for example, to facilitate the identification of numbers and colours. It was evident from the material used in this session that Peter's academic level was lower than his classmates. Notwithstanding, Peter was engaging and participative with the support teacher, and he seemed eager to please and followed instructions with no hesitation.

5.4.5. Analysis and concluding comments

Peter's case study revealed that the interactions between Peter, his teacher, SNAs and peers placed Peter outside the group locating him in the periphery of his classroom and playground community. In the classroom, the interactions between Peter and his teacher in all activities (i.e., structured and unstructured) were characterised by a lack of support and interpersonal contact that seemed to influence Peter's participation and inclusion in classroom activities. For example, it was common to see Peter out of focus in some activities when his SNA was not around, but his teacher did not encourage Peter's participation in the lesson. On other occasions, Peter appeared engaged in the activities, such as when the teacher asked all pupils questions about food in Irish, but Peter's lack of initiation was not counteracted with support to enable his participation.

Peter's case study also exhibited that the SNA's presence and support separated Peter from the group (teacher and peers), potentially negatively influencing Peter's

interactions with his teachers and peers. It seemed that the responsibility provided to the SNA, involving Peter's academic, social and emotional learning in the classroom, acted as a barrier to the interactions between Peter and his teacher. In the classroom, the teacher relayed entirely on the SNA, which could explain the lack of support he provided to Peter. For example, in artwork, the teacher did not provide individual support when Peter was not working at his table, despite approaching his group to review their progress. Contrarily, the SNA provided Peter with the appropriate one-on-one instruction, enabling Peter to accomplish the task. It appeared that how the SNA support was deployed in the classroom influenced the interactions and the support provided by the teacher, which at the same time seemed to affect Peter's participation in the activities.

Additionally, the management and deployment of support concerning Peter's learning placed the teacher's academic responsibility for Peter on the periphery when he relied on the support teacher and SNA assistance for Peter's learning. This form of dependency could influence the teacher's sense of responsibility toward Peter's learning, acting as a barrier to his interactions with Peter and support to his learning and participation in the classroom.

Additionally, the close support and constant presence of the SNA seemed to influence Peter's independence in navigating the classroom environment. It was noticed that the SNA tried to encourage Peter's independence in the playground, which was successful in the fact that Peter was not in her company in the playground, which could facilitate his interactions with his peers. In the classroom, the same strategy had proved difficult. For example, during artwork, the support was only provided by the SNA; neither the classroom teacher, his peers, nor Peter initiated interactions to resolve the situation. Therefore, it could be interpreted that Peter's dependency on the SNA could also hinder the interactions between Peter, his teachers, and his peers.

Regarding the strategies and accommodations put in practice to facilitate Peter's inclusive education, it appeared that this accommodation drove Peter further away from

the group. For example, Peter was separated from the group in the mornings with his SNA to facilitate his work on his differentiated curriculum, but this strategy alienated Peter from the group. On the one hand, he was not present as part of the group during the activity. But, on the other hand, this separation acted as a physical barrier to the interactions between Peter, his teacher and his peers. Furthermore, transferring teaching and learning responsibilities to the SNA (who are not equipped for that role) also interfered with teacher support and interactions.

Similarly, when required, Peter used the classroom accommodation (i.e., the library), which occurred while lessons were taking place. Although this form of accommodation (i.e., the library) was provided to enable Peter to relax, allowing Peter to use the library and move around the classroom during lessons, it could negatively influence Peter's participation and belonging to the group during activities. Additionally, the lack of presence within the group could limit the interactions between the actors. Therefore, the management and deployment support (i.e., accommodations) negatively influenced Peter's interactions with the group and meaningful participation in the classroom.

The interactions between Peter and his peers lacked reciprocity in the classroom and the playground, situating Peter in the periphery of their peers' network of friends and isolating him from his peers. One of Peter's characteristics was his limited verbal communication. Notwithstanding, he was a well-mannered child who was seen approaching the group, getting close to his peers, smiling at them or laughing at their jokes. Despite his reduced verbal communication, it could be said that Peter's body language exhibited his interest in the group or his interest in belonging to his peers' network of friends. Notwithstanding, the reality reflected something different, and Peter's attempts to communicate and play with his peers were not reciprocated. Nevertheless, the lack of peers' reciprocation placed Peter outside their network of friends, which isolated him from the group.

In conclusion, the interactions between Peter and the group in the two in-school settings placed Peter away from the classroom and playground community and excluded him from the group. It seemed that Peter's accommodation and differentiation to support his inclusion in the regular school interfered with the interactions between Peter, his teacher and his peers, driving Peter away from the school community and jeopardising his inclusive education.

5.5. SEAN

5.5.1. Contextual Background

Sean was a six-year-old boy attending senior infant class (second year in school) in his local regular primary school in Ireland. The classroom was formed by 27 pupils who were distributed around six tables in the classroom, seating four to five pupils at each table. Sean's group table was placed at the back of the classroom and was formed by two other pupils and his SNA. The classroom teacher sat opposite Sean on the other side of the room and beside the interactive board. The researcher sat away from the pupils, avoiding any interference with the classroom routine

For the academic year, Sean received extra support from a support teacher daily in the support classroom for 45 minutes. The support teacher collected Sean every day from his classroom and walked him to the support room, a small classroom furnished with shelves filled with books and educational games and two desks, one allocated for their one-on-one sessions, the other was the teacher's working desk. The room also had a computer for pupils to work on their interactive activities, and Sean worked on literacy, numeracy and multisensory activities on the computer. Sean also availed a full-time Special Needs Assistant (SNA) who always accompanied him in the classroom and the playground. The SNA's responsibilities involved Sean's primary care and safety, ensuring Sean's focus during classroom activities, and assisting Sean in completing writing activities.

Sean's classroom was bright and spacious, with books and colourful posters placed on shelves at the back of the room. A small table at the back of the classroom was used for artwork and a restroom. The classroom did not avail of specific accommodations such as secluded areas or working stations. However, in the morning, Sean arrived at school ten minutes after his peers, joining his classmates during their playtime before the lessons. Concerning Sean's teaching and learning, he was placed in the classroom full-time and joined his peers for the same activities. There was no

evidence that Sean had a differentiated curriculum; he joined his peers in the same activities with the support of his SNA.

5.5.2. Interactions between Sean, his teachers, SNA, and peers in the classroom

a) Interactions during structured formal activities

In the classroom, Sean joined the group for structured activities with the support of his SNA, who sat by his side for all lessons. Classroom instruction occurred with the support of the interactive board and with peers' assessment of learning throughout teacher questioning. It was common to see Sean moving nervously on his chair, waving his arms and balancing in his chair during structured and formal instruction. In this interim, Sean received support from his SNA, who rubbed his back and hands to help him relax regularly. During the interim, the teacher was focused on delivering the lesson to all pupils.

Exhibit 1

Miss Teacher begins the lesson with the interactive board, she is instructing her pupils in spring clothes and the different garments that are common during spring. Sean begins to move his arms while his SNA rubs his back firmly. The lesson continues and the teacher asks questions to her pupils about their favourite colours and clothes during spring time. Sean seems uneasy, anxious moving on his chair, moving his arms up and down. His teacher continues rubbing his back and talking to him. Despite being unsettled Sean remains at his seat, blocked by his SNA. Writing work begins and Sean takes his workbook to complete the activity. Sean works with the support of the SNA, while the teacher walks around the classroom ensuring pupils are accomplishing their tasks.

Throughout the lessons, the teacher posed questions to her pupils based on the material exposed on the interactive board. In some cases, pupils were selected when they put their hands up; other times, Ms teacher chose one pupil to answer the question verbally or in writing on the interactive board. The interactions were fluid, and the atmosphere in the classroom was lively during their assessment of learning. Nevertheless, the interactions between Sean and his teacher did not seem to flourish in the same direction. On the one hand, Sean did not appear to engage in the activity; he was out of focus and unengaged despite the SNA prompts and support to encourage Sean's participation in the activity. On the other hand, his teacher did not seem to acknowledge Sean's lack of participation and no support or encouragement was provided during the activity. Furthermore, at his group table, peers were engaging, participative and interacting with the group in opposition to Sean, who was physically present but in the periphery of the group.

For example, during one English lesson, the teacher questioned her pupils about the different types of flowers they could see around (i.e., in the playground, in their gardens and on the street). Pupils became engaging and participative, putting their hands up, and the interactions between the teacher and pupils during the activity appeared fluid and supportive. It was common to see their teacher encouraging pupils and guiding them toward the activity. However, Sean did not seem to be as engaging as his peers in the task, and despite his SNA's attempts to motivate Sean to participate, he remained silent without actively participating in the activity. Throughout the task, the interactions between Sean and his teacher were absent and lacked support to enable Sean to participate in the group.

Sean's lack of participation in structured and formal activities was common during the observation period, with one exception. On one occasion, Sean was asked to answer some questions on the interactive board in front of the class. At first, Sean appeared

confused, and it took several attempts from the SNA and the teacher to encourage Sean to approach the front row. Once he was in front of the interactive board, Sean seemed to struggle with the answer despite his teacher's prompts, and in the end, the teacher gave the final answer. When returning to his group table, Sean appeared unhappy and at his table, he put his head down while his SNA was rubbing his back to help him relax. The activity continued in the classroom, with more pupils approaching the interactive board to answer their teacher's questions. However, Sean was unengaged and out of focus while his SNA was attempting to get him to focus on the task.

b) Interactions during structured informal activities

Structured and informal activities occurred after formal lessons and involved activities such as writing work, physical education, and artwork. During these activities, Sean sat at his group table with the support of his SNA. Throughout structured and informal activities, the presence and support of the SNA were more evident, and the interactions between Sean and his SNA revealed Sean's dependency on the SNA's support to accomplish certain tasks. For example, Sean seemed to struggle in activities such as spelling, which required constant support from his SNA, who assisted him in the academic aspect of the task, such as holding the pen and spelling, and also, she helped Sean relax when frustrated for not following the speed of the class. During these activities, the interactions between Sean and his teacher were absent and lacked any support to enable Sean to accomplish the spellings. Similarly, the interactions between Sean and his peers were absent, in particular when the rest of the class was freely interacting in the transition between spellings and the next lesson while Sean was finalising the spellings with his SNA's support. Finalising his task at a later stage impeded Sean from interacting with his peers during the transition.

Exhibit 2

The lesson begins with the teacher informing his pupils about the spelling task, she is showing pictures on the interactive board and asking them to write the word on their whiteboards. Just before the activity begins, Sean begins to move in his chair, touching his head and waving his arms around while his SNA is rubbing his back. During the activity, Sean seems to struggle with the spellings and writing. He seems to struggle grasping the pen and writing the words. His SNA is encouraging Sean to write the words while trying to help him grasp the pen correctly, but eventually, Sean refuses to continue writing on the whiteboard. Despite his refusal, the SNA continues providing Sean with support and encouragement to finalise the task. Sean finishes his task at a later stage. Meanwhile, his peers are interacting at their desks freely in the transition between one lesson and the next. Throughout the spelling activity, the interactions between Sean and his teacher were absent and lacked support, similarly to the interactions between Sean and his peers.

Conversely, the interactions between Sean, his teacher, SNA and peers in structured and informal activities such as physical education differed from writing and spelling activities. In physical education, Sean was part of the group, and the interactions seemed fluid between Sean, his teacher and his peers. The teacher instructed all pupils with no differentiation, and Sean followed her prompts as well as his peers. Similarly, the interactions between Sean and his peers seemed fluid, and he was seen pairing with a boy with whom he was friendly in the classroom and the playground.

Moreover, the SNA support was indirect throughout physical education, allowing Sean time at his own pace. Although she walked with Sean to the hall for physical education, the SNA would take a second-place position in the hall, supporting Sean only

when required. For example, when Sean became unsettled after running, the SNA took him away from the group to go for a walk and helped him relax by rubbing his back. In these circumstances, the interactions between Sean and his teacher were minimal, and the SNA was entirely in charge, highlighting the role and responsibilities conferred to the SNA.

c) Interactions during unstructured activities

In the classroom, unstructured times happened in the transition between lessons and during lunchtime at first recess. Sean joined his group for lunch with the company of his SNA, who sat beside Sean and assisted him when necessary. At lunch in the classroom, pupils focused on their food and the movie on the interactive board; some would engage in conversation while others would focus on the screen. At Sean's group table, no engagement in conversation took place among the children, and while the two pupils focused on their food and the movie, Sean's interactions were absorbed by his SNA in her attempt to ensure that Sean finished his lunch. At Sean's group table, initiation and reciprocal conversations were absent in most cases, a pattern that became more evident during free time (i.e., lunch and transitions) than in classroom activities. The relationship between Sean and his SNA appeared strong, and it became evident that free interactions between Sean and his peers at his group table were not fluid and did not occur naturally. At the same time, the SNA would not encourage any interactions between Sean and his peers in the classroom; contrarily, her focus was on maintaining Sean calmed and relaxed.

During the transition between lessons in the classroom, the atmosphere was lively and noisy, with all group table captains collecting their workbooks from the teacher's desk and distributing them among their tables. In the interim, pupils enjoyed their free time engaging in conversation with peers and teachers. Nevertheless, the conversations occurred between the two pupils at Sean's group table, but Sean and his

SNA seemed outside the peer group. During this transition, the classroom teacher interacted with her pupils when distributing the workbooks and re-initiating the lesson.

5.5.3. Interactions between Sean, his teachers, SNA and peers in the playground

Playground time was an exciting time for all pupils, and Sean was not an exception. He knew his routine, and with the support of his SNA, he tidied his desk, got his coat and lined up with his peers in the classroom, the interactions were fluid, and all pupils were chatting and laughing. When guided to the playground, all pupils followed the silence rule and walked along with their teacher. In the playground, all pupils went to play, and the SNA became the principal supervisor while the teacher went for her break. The interactions between Sean and his SNA in the playground were minimal, and the support provided was indirect and only when needed. Despite being in the periphery, the SNA often approached Sean when his play became abrupt. Otherwise, the SNA would not interfere in Sean's play and interactions with his peers.

In the playground, the interactions between Sean and his peers seemed fluid and positive. Throughout their games, Sean was included in his peers' network and was popular and happy among his peers. It was common to see Sean leading the group, and his peers were happy following him around when running in the yard. Although Sean played with all his peers, he was friendly with another boy, and it was common to see them together while playing with the group.

Exhibit 3

Sean loves the playground, he gets ready, grabs his coat and lines up to go outside. In the playground the SNA is placed at a fair distance without interfering in his play, unless he is playing rough with any of the boys. They are playing hide and seek, and Sean is the leader of the game, he is the tallest and the fastest of the bunch and he is full of energy running around while his peers are following him around. Sean seems happy and his peers are comfortable and happy around Sean. The recess gets to an end, and all pupils are asked to line on their marked section. Sean follows the rules with no problem and then his SNA joins him to walk him back to the classroom.

5.5.4. Interactions between Sean and his support teacher in the support classroom

The support teacher collected Sean every day from his classroom, and both walked to the support room. They seemed content in each other's company, and Sean was chatty and lively in the support teacher's company. In the classroom, Sean's work was arranged prior to his arrival, and he was verbally informed of the schedule allowing him to choose the first activity. The final activity involved an educational game of his choice, which Sean chose every day at the beginning of his session. This strategy worked well with Sean and seemed to motivate him toward the different activities. Throughout the session, the interactions between Sean and his Support teacher were fluid and relaxed, they seemed to get on very well, and it was evident that Sean was happy with his teacher's company. The classroom began every day with Sean and his teacher sharing their news from the day before; the camaraderie between both was evident, and it was common to see Sean laughing and joking with his teacher.

During their session, Sean appeared engaging and participative and followed his teacher's instructions. However, Sean was easily distracted, particularly with activities that he found more difficult, as it occurred with literacy (i.e., reading, writing, and comprehension). It was noticed that Sean's routine was very flexible and changed from one activity to the next according to Sean's needs at each time. It was common to see Sean working on reading and comprehension in the classroom, but he was soon changed to literacy activities on the computer when he struggled with reading and writing. At all times, the support teacher ensured that Sean was engaging and happy with the activities maintaining his level of enthusiasm. It was noticed that Sean did not move his arms in the support classroom; he was engaging and chatty with his support teacher most of the time. The last stage of their session was Sean's favourite; both his teacher and Sean seemed to enjoy playing educational games, making jokes and laughing during the games. When walking back to the classroom, Sean appeared happy, lively and chatty, and in the classroom, Sean returned to his desk with his peers and SNA without difficulty.

Exhibit 4

The support teacher arrives to the classroom and Sean's face lifts up, he gets up and ready to go very quick. Outside the classroom it is evident that Sean and his support teacher get on very well. The journey to the support classroom takes a couple of corridors, and a set of stairs to the first floor. During this walk, Sean, and his support teacher chat lively about their lives. They are laughing and joking, and Sean seems to know the support teacher's husband and kids by name, although he never saw them. In the classroom Sean is cooperative and relaxed, he does not need to be rubbed on his back and in any case, he doesn't experience the arm movements and chair rocking seen in the classroom. Sean is cooperative, engaging and interactive with the support teacher. They go through the lesson with the same attitude seen in their walk, very amicable and relaxed.

5.5.5. Analysis and Concluding Comments

This case study revealed Sean's integration (he is placed in the classroom with his peers) into his regular school with limited inclusion in the classroom (he is not participating alongside his peers with his teacher's support). Throughout the lessons, the interactions between Sean and his teacher in the classroom were limited, while the SNA was entirely responsible for Sean's care, including his academic support. However, the interactions between Sean and his SNA were fluid and friendly.

In the classroom, the SNA deployment and the teacher's management of support seemed to influence the interactions and support between Sean and his teacher. Throughout structured and unstructured activities, the SNA was entirely in charge of the focus and learning of Sean in the classroom, while the teacher's support and personal

contact with Sean were absent during these activities. Additionally, the SNA support could also influence Sean's participation with his peers in certain activities, such as spelling and assessment of learning. During spelling, Sean required a higher level of support resulting in Sean and his SNA working separated from the class routine. On the contrary, when the SNA support was indirect, and her presence was allocated within a certain distance, as occurred during physical education, Sean and his teacher exhibited a better connection, and Sean appeared central to his group.

The presence of the SNA also appeared to influence the interactions between Sean and his peers in the classroom. Peers' interactions with Sean were almost absent in all activities when the SNA was present. The close support and relationship between Sean and his SNA appeared to prevent Sean's and his peers' connection and initiation of communication. Contrarily in physical education and in the playground, where the SNA remained distant, the interactions between Sean and his peers were fluid and friendly, and it was common to see Sean leading his peers as it occurred in the playground.

The study findings also highlighted that a close relationship and support between Sean and his SNA seemed to create dependency in Sean that could influence his navigation of the school environment. For example, in activities such as spelling class, writing work, and lunch, Sean seemed to depend on his SNA support and assistance to achieve the tasks, which at the same time prevented Sean from taking part in these activities with the group. In addition, although Sean required his SNA support and assistance to remain focused and calm during classroom activities, the study findings also exposed Sean's capacity to navigate certain activities (i.e., playground, physical education) without his SNA's constant support. Consequently, the motherly role of the SNA, in this case, seemed to create a dependency on Sean and interfered with Sean's interactions with the other actors and participation in the classroom.

Additionally, the study findings revealed the support teacher and classroom teachers' different approaches in their interactions and support to Sean. In the support

classroom, the interactions were fluid and exposed a friendly camaraderie reflected in each of their one-on-one sessions. A relationship fuelled with tailored strategies that enabled Sean's participation and achievement. On the contrary, Sean's participation and achievement in the regular classroom were reduced as well as his teacher's direct contact with him and support.

To conclude, instead of ensuring Sean's inclusive education, the deployment and management of the SNA support drove him away from the group. In this case, the SNA support resembled a "protective bubble" involving Sean and his SNA, deployed to ensure his integration, and physical presence within the group. Nevertheless, this "protective bubble" acted as a barrier that prevented Sean from interacting, participating, and belonging to his classroom community.

5.6. JOE

5.6.1. Contextual Background

Joe was a seven year old boy attending first class in his local regular primary school in Ireland. The number of total pupils in the classroom was 31, three of whom had learning difficulties (2 children with Autism and one with intellectual disabilities). All three children received support from two SNAs who were allocated full-time in the classroom and the playground. The classroom was bright and spacious, and the 31 pupils were distributed around the classroom around seven tables, seating 4 to 5 pupils at each group table. Joe's group table was formed by three pupils (including Joe) and the SNA, who provided full-time support to Joe and another pupil with learning disabilities. The group table was located on the front row near the library and the whiteboard and relatively close to the teacher who was placed in the middle of the room. The researcher sat away from the pupils, avoiding any interference with the classroom routine.

Joe's accommodations involved access to a built library located beside his group table, available to use when Joe required time out from the classroom noises, though he was encouraged not to use it during lessons. Additionally, Joe was allowed to scribble on the whiteboard located near him at each transition, which seemed to help him between lessons and recess.

For the academic year, Joe availed of extra support with a support teacher for 45 minutes every day and a Special Needs Assistant, who provided care support in the classroom and the playground. The support classroom was located near Joe's classroom, a small room with an ample desk used for the one-on-one sessions between Joe and the support teacher. The SNA support involved Joe's care needs and support to help Joe to navigate the classroom and the playground environment. In the classroom, the SNA's responsibilities ensured that Joe was focused on the lessons, as well as she assisted Joe

during transitions. In the playground, the SNA supervised Joe from a distant position with no other interference.

For example, the SNA provided support to enable Joe to follow the teacher's instructions during classroom writing by ensuring he had the correct page on his workbook. The teacher informed the SNAs daily about the classroom plans and guided them on the strategies to follow with the children under their care. For example, one morning, Joe arrived at school upset from home (his mother informed the teacher), and he seemed unsettled when he arrived at the classroom. Before their lessons, the teacher guided the SNA to use the accommodations available in the classroom (i.e., the library and the whiteboard) to facilitate Joe's transition.

Joe spent most of his school hours in the classroom except for the time allocated to his support teacher. He did not have an apparent curriculum differentiation, and he participated and contributed to all classroom activities as well as his peers with tailored support provided in situ by his teacher. Additionally, Joe's social style and communication were different from his peers; he would not engage in conversation easily and seemed happy in his own space. Nevertheless, the communication was reciprocal and fluid each time he approached his teacher and peers.

5.6.2. Interactions between Joe, his teachers, SNA, and peers in the classroom

a) Interactions during structured formal activities

The interactions between Joe, his teacher, SNA, and peers during structured and formal activities were fluid and positive, and he navigated the classroom at his own pace. Joe participated in all activities and lessons at the same level as his peers but with tailored support. During instruction, The SNA support ensured Joe's focus on the interactive board and the lesson with an indirect approach since the SNA would not interfere with Joe's participation and engagement in classroom activities.

Instruction was followed by the teacher's assessment of learning with the support of the interactive board. The teacher posed questions to her pupils, who would put their hands to get their teacher's attention. The atmosphere in the classroom around this task was lively, and the interactions were positive enabling pupils and teacher communication and interactions. Joe formed part of this enquiry, but he was normally less eager than his peers to take part and was prompt to distraction. Nevertheless, the teacher always ensured Joe's inclusion in the inquiry by asking him questions tailored to his level and enabled his participation in interactive board activities by choosing tasks that required the use of the pencil. In the classroom, support and strategies were implemented as required and varied according to Joe's needs, and the differentiation was subtle and embedded within the classroom routine.

Exhibit 1

Joe arrives to the classroom first thing in the morning along with his SNA, teachers and peers. He leaves his bag on his chair and goes to the white board where he begins to scribble three little pigs. He loves drawing about the little pigs while he recounts the story. While he is distracted with his scribbling the classroom atmosphere is noisy with all pupils getting their homework outside their bags and settling into the new classroom day. The SNA takes the homework outside and leaves the notebook ready on the table for the teacher to be reviewed. The teacher is reviewing all notebooks, when she gets to review his notebook, she calls Joe to sit at his table which he does with no hesitation. Joe is the last table on the teacher review and from there she moves to the interactive board to begin with her instruction.

In a particular lesson in English, pupils were learning words and spelling. During their assessment of learning, the Teacher asked them to complete the words on the

interactive board, encouraging all children to partake and praising individual and table work. The class lesson appeared very interactive. Joe's put his hand up with the encouragement of his SNA and was prompted by his teacher, and he was invited to the interactive board. The teacher question requested Joe to point out the figure that corresponded to the noun she was calling out. In this activity, Joe took the interactive pen and connected the word with its corresponding picture. While Joe was completing the activity, the teacher took her time and guided Joe with prompts that enabled him to complete the task. When Joe accomplished the job, he was happy and smiling, and all his classmates joined their teacher to praise Joe for his achievement. A common practice with all students.

b) Interactions during structured informal activities

In the classroom, the interactions between Joe and the group (teacher, peers, SNAs) were fluid and reciprocal during structured and informal activities. Activities such as writing work, physical education and artwork involved a close interaction between pupils and their teacher as well as the SNAs. All actors in the classroom worked together for artwork as well as during physical education, and it was common to hear pupils, teachers and SNAs making jokes and chatting away. The dynamic of the classroom was positive and engaging, and all pupils appeared happy while working on their tasks.

During writing work, pupils followed their teacher's instructions, and they received close support from the teacher walking around the tables and spending time with different children at the time, depending on the subject. Joe was not an exception, and the teacher ensured time to sit with Joe during core subjects (i.e., English, maths and Irish) to ensure he was accomplishing the activity. Throughout the activities, the SNA support was indirect; her responsibility was to ensure that Joe followed the teacher's instructions and engaged in the task. However, if Joe presented any difficulties with the activity, the SNA would always call for the teacher's support. For example, in a random lesson in mathematics, Joe found some sums difficult, and the SNA advised Joe to

continue with the next activities, waiting for the teacher's support. When the teacher approached Joe's table to review their progress, she was informed of the sums Joe found difficult, and she sat with Joe to provide him with one on one support.

c) Interactions during unstructured activities

Unstructured activities took place throughout the day and provided free time for the children to interact freely without the strict structure of the lessons and the educator's interactions. The strategies put in practice around unstructured times seemed to facilitate Joe's interactions with the group in the classroom and the playground. Joe's social and communication styles were different from his peers, but these strategies seemed to promote Joe's participation and engagement within the group and generated a positive dynamic between the actors that placed Joe always central to the group.

In the next section, these strategies are presented embedded in four different scenarios revealing how the different strategies enabled the interactions between Joe and the group in the classroom and the playground.

1. Arriving at school

Joe arrived every morning at school with his Mum and settled in the line. The playground in the mornings was noisy, with many students, parents and SNAs in the yard. Joe always stayed in the line on his own and in silence, without interacting with his peers who were running and playing around the line. At ten to nine, all children walked to their classrooms with their teachers and SNAs. Joe walked to the classroom silently, holding his SNA's hand, and he seemed content. The interactions between teachers, pupils and SNAs were limited since they had a silence rule walking in the corridor to the classroom, which Joe followed well.

In the classroom, pupils handed their coats and moved to their group tables pupils took their homework for review. The atmosphere in the classroom was lively, and everyone was talking and sharing their news while getting ready for their lessons. Joe

followed the classroom routine, he hung his coat and placed his bag at his group table, but then he moved to the whiteboard and began to scribble, a strategy used at each transition between recess and lessons. Joe was also strategically positioned beside the library and the whiteboard, and very rarely he used the library during transitions.

2. Line Captain going to the playground

Before going to the playground, the atmosphere in the classroom was energetic. The teacher and both SNAs were prompting pupils to get ready, tidy their desks, and get their coats before lining in the front of the door to go out to the playground, positioned right beside the door. In preparation to go out to the playground, Joe had been assigned the role of line captain, which enabled him to be first to the line when he was ready, but it also protected him from the rush and noise of the environment. In the line, Joe seemed calm, and the interactions between Joe, his peers, teacher and SNAs seemed positive. Every week, the Teacher appointed another peer to share the role of line captain with Joe, enabling Joe's interactions and concealing the differentiated strategy. The interactions between Joe and his SNA were indirect; she walked near Joe to the playground without interfering in his interactions with his peers.

During this observation, Joe appeared to follow the routine without the support of his teacher and SNA. Joe stood in the line, and when his peer joined him in the line, both accepted each other company. Although Joe would not initiate a conversation with his peers, he was immersed in their talks, as showed in their body language (i.e., all pupils were smiling and looking at each other). Once outside, pupils played around the same area, and when Joe joined them, they included him in their games. Before recess got to an end, Joe returned to his line and waited there patiently. The SNA, who had been supervising Joe from a relative distance, accompanied Joe until all pupils gathered to return to their classroom. Then Joe guided his peers to the classroom, which allowed him to be the first in the room before the rush of all pupils.

3. Group Table leader

Writing work happened after each lesson's instruction, and the activity involved the completion of the students' workbooks at their tables. Each table captain, appointed every week, had to collect the workbooks from the teacher's desk and distribute them at their group table. Joe was table captain most weeks, and he knew this activity well. While collecting the books from the teacher's desk, the interactions between Joe, his teacher and the pupils were positive. Despite Joe's limited communication, his peers included him in the conversation, smiling and looking at each other.

Moreover, the interactions between Joe and his teacher were fluid and positive, and Joe was seen joking and laughing with her in most cases. After collecting the books, Joe distributed them among his peers at the group table, calling their names aloud from the book. Joe seemed confident with this responsibility, and after he finished the task, he sat down at his desk, where his SNA praised him for a good job.

4. "Show and Tell"

Show and tell took place before their lessons on Fridays when students brought their favourite toy to school and shared their stories with the toy. In the previous "show and tell," Joe seemed nervous, and on some occasions, he had been allowed to scribble on the whiteboard during the activity. In this event, the activity took place on a Tuesday. The reason behind this change in the day was that Joe had brought a toy to school. When Joe showed his teacher the toy, she decided to alter her lesson schedule to introduce Joe's toy to his peers. At first, Joe was reluctant because it seemed that he only intended to share the story with the teacher. However, when the teacher asked her pupils if they were interested in Joe's story, their positive reactions motivated Joe to share it with his peers. Because Joe was unsure of what to say and he was not talking, the teacher requested her pupils to ask questions to Joe about his toy.

The communication between Joe, his teacher and his peers became fluid, and he shared the story about his toy without a problem. The general impression, while the

activity took place, was camaraderie and understanding among the group. In the end, Joe appeared happy and confident among his peers, and when he returned to his desk and his SNA praised him for a good job, he seemed very content.

These four events showed how the different strategies put in place in the classroom, and the playground enabled Joe to participate in the group activities as one of the group. In the case of Joe, the teacher's additional support did not highlight Joe's limited communication and social styles, and it seemed to calm him during noisy and rushed transitions facilitating his participation within the group. Consequently, Joe was central to his classroom and playground communities.

5.6.3. Interactions between Joe, his teachers, SNA and peers in the playground

Joe was involved in the games in the playground despite his different communication styles. Joe did not seem to engage much in verbal communication, but he joined the group and his body language, smiling, laughing and looking at his peers, seemed sufficient initiation for his peers to embrace Joe in his games. Moreover, Joe was friendly with another two boys, and it was common to see them paring when playing with the group. Conversely, on some occasions, Joe appeared to prefer his own company, and he would sit near the classroom door. On these occasions, some of his peers would approach him to play, but when Joe refused, this was accepted, and he was not disturbed. Meanwhile, the SNA support remained at a distance without interfering with Joe. When Joe preferred to be on his own, the SNA tended to leave him alone, maintaining a close distance.

Exhibit 2

Joe seems comfortable in the playground. He is a quiet boy, and he walks along his SNA outside. In the yard he goes to a seating area where all his classmates gather during this recess. Pupils are following Joe outside the classroom and follow him to the spot. Once in the seating area all pupils chat and interact with each other but Joe seems happier in the company of three other boys, and he is around them all the time. Despite Joe's limited communication, his peers seem comfortable with him and they seem to have an understanding on their dynamic that does not affect their play. The SNA is in the playground at a fair distance keeping an eye on Joe but with no other interference.

5.6.4. Interactions between Joe, his support teacher, and peers in the support classroom

The observations between Joe and his support teacher occurred on one occasion and during Joe's social group session on Fridays. The reason followed the support teacher wished to allow one observation only. Each Friday, Joe chose one of his peers in the classroom to accompany him to the support classroom for his social support class. When they arrived at the classroom, the interactions between Joe, his peer and his support teacher seemed fluid. They shared some news about the coming weekend, and while Joe appeared interested in the conversation, he did not share any information. Their teacher introduced the game for their social session, which involved building a house together. During the game, the interactions between Joe and his peer were fluid and reciprocal. However, Joe began to show signs of stress, rocking his chair when the game became more complex and required more communication with his peer.

During the session, the teacher reprimanded Joe's behaviour, asking him to focus on the game, but Joe was not happy and continued rocking his chair. When the

teacher raised his voice, Joe got upset and hid under the table until the end of the session. Back in the classroom, the teacher was informed of the incident and instructed the SNA to allow Joe to scribble on the whiteboard until he was calm. The classroom teacher disagreed with the support teacher's approach toward Joe, revealing some friction in the interactions between both teachers.

5.6.5. Analysis and Concluding Comments

The present case study findings revealed that the management of support, accommodation, and the context in the classroom, combined with tailored support, promoted Joe's interactions and participation and placed him central to the group. The teacher's support highlighted her complete control and responsibility for Joe's academic, social and emotional development in the classroom, also reflected in the interactions between the teacher and the SNA. This case study revealed the critical role of classroom teachers as directors and leaders of the classroom micro-system. Her leadership and guidance ensured the implementation of support and accommodations appropriate to facilitate Joe's participation in the classroom, which reinforced his positive interactions with all the actors.

Among the strategies put into practice in the classroom, the teacher closely supervised the SNA support and guided the SNA help in line with her teaching and learning plan enabling Joe's participation and engagement in group activities. The SNA was deployed to support Joe in his care needs, but she also worked alongside the teacher, with her guidance, to facilitate Joe's participation in and contribution to classroom activities. The SNA tended to maintain a certain distance from Joe in the classroom and the playground. Although she was present and provided educational support when necessary, and under the teacher's guidance (i.e., ensuring his focus in the lessons, walking by his side to the playground), she also allowed Joe to navigate the school context at his pace with limited interference. This form of support seemed to

positively influence the interactions between the actors in the classroom and the playground.

Additionally, the different support strategies implemented in the classroom among the different activities (structured and unstructured) enabled positive interactions among the actors. For example, appointing Joe as his table captain to distribute the workbooks enabled him to interact with his peers and teacher naturally, and it provided him with responsibility and status among the peers in his group. At the same time, it facilitated his transition to the playground and kept the child calm, further enabling interactions. Consequently, tailored support to enable the child's participation in classroom activities facilitated positive interactions among the group and placed Joe central to his classroom and playground communities.

Tailored strategies also facilitated Joe's participation in and contribution to classroom activities and enabled positive interactions with his peers and teacher. For example, when Joe completed tasks on the interactive board as part of his learning assessment, his teacher guided him succinctly to complete the task, enabling him to participate in the same activities as the rest of his classmates. Although differentiation from peers was present because the teacher adjusted the task and the questions to suit Joe's level, this differentiation was embedded within the teaching and learning of the entire class.

Furthermore, the management of the context, understood as the accommodations implemented within the classroom's physical space also played an essential role in the interactions between Joe and the different actors. The accommodations put in place (i.e., library, access to whiteboard) and Joe's position in the classroom seemed to facilitate positive interactions and enabled Joe's inclusive education. For example, Joe's position in the classroom near the wall and the window gave him room for safely rocking his chair and easy access to the library and the whiteboard. In addition, his access to the interactive board and his teacher enabled

interactions between Joe, his teacher and his peers and facilitated Joe's participation and contribution to classroom activities.

In conclusion, this case study revealed the teacher's critical role in setting up the building blocks that enabled Joe's participation and interactions among all actors. The domino effect generated by the teacher's guidance and supervision created a positive environment where Joe's inclusion was part of their classroom and playground routine.

5.7. PAUL

5.7.1. Contextual Background

Paul was an eight year old boy attending second class in his local regular primary school. The number of pupils in the classroom was 28, and they were distributed around six tables seating 4 to 5 pupils at each table. Paul sat at the front of the classroom near the front door and the interactive board opposite his teacher's desk. The researcher sat away from the pupils, avoiding any interference with the classroom routine. Paul's table was larger than the rest of his classmates and was positioned beside a wall furnished with an extensive shelf storing books and other games, such as Legos, that were of interest to Paul. Paul sat beside his SNA and three other pupils with special educational needs. The classroom was small, with little room to move around, and pupils' interactions mainly occurred at their group tables. Concerning Paul's teaching and learning, he did not have an apparent differentiated curriculum and seemed to follow the same routine as his peers.

Regarding Paul's accommodations, he availed of the support of a part-time Special Needs Assistant in the classroom and the playground, who provided Paul with care needs and academic support. Additionally, Paul availed daily support for 45 minutes in the support classroom, a small room furnished with bookshelves and two desks, one allocated for pupil-teacher one-on-one support and the teacher's desk.

5.7.2. Interactions between Paul, his teachers, SNA, and peers in the classroom

a) Interactions during structured formal activities

In the mornings, the lessons focused on core subjects (i.e., mathematics, English and Irish), Paul joined the group every day for the first 30 minutes before going to his support teacher. During this first instruction, the interactions between Paul, his teacher and SNA were not positive and focused on Paul's behaviour and his lack of focus on the

lessons. It was common to see Paul refusing to pack the Lego game before the lesson, and he was prompted to ask his teacher questions during instruction. The interactions between Paul and his teacher denoted tension and frustration from the teacher, who was not happy with his interruptions and Paul's lack of cooperation. Moreover, the tension between the teacher and the SNA was also palpable during these events.

Assessment of learning through questions with the support of the interactive board took place after instruction. The interactions between the teacher and her pupils became very dynamic during the activity, and the classroom atmosphere was energetic. Paul also became eager to join the group and put his hands up to answer his teacher's questions, sometimes not following the rules of turn-taking. However, he was never included in the activity, and it was common to see Paul frustrated and raising his voice in his attempt to be heard.

On one particular day during the assessment of learning, when Paul realised that his peers were engaging in conversation with their teacher, he tried to get involved by answering the questions without following the classroom rules of turn-taking. When the teacher ignored Paul's comments, he became brusque and loud, and his teacher reprimanded him for interrupting the class and demanded his SNA to keep him under control. The situation was resolved with the SNA giving Paul his Lego to play with.

During the observation period, it was common to see the classroom teacher refer to Paul's behaviour as "bold" when he did not follow the rules and was frustrated. Furthermore, his name was regularly moved to the bottom of the classroom reward chart⁶ as a result of his "bad behaviour". On two occasions, Paul's behaviour was disciplined with the "white card", and he was sent to another classroom with extra homework.

⁶ The reward chart was used everyday to praise or discipline pupils. Their names moved up (good) or down (bad) according to their behaviour, achievements and focus in the classroom. At the end of the week the best pupil and group table were rewarded.

Exhibit 1

Paul arrives to his classroom, first thing in the morning, he gets his Lego and spreads the cubes on the table. He seems to love playing with Lego and it keeps him distracted from the noise in the classroom. In the meantime, his peers are getting settled for their lessons. The teacher switches on the interactive board and commands her pupils to wrap up and focus on their lesson in English. Pupils are not focusing on the teacher's request, and she needs to raise her voice. Once the class settles Miss Teacher asks Paul to put his Lego away, but Paul is not listening. The teacher asks Paul again with exasperation and tells the SNA to speed the tidy up. The tension is palpable, and Paul begins to throw the cubes on the table. The teacher asks Paul to stop and tells him that this behaviour is bold, but Paul is not listening. The teacher asks the SNA to resolve the situation and begins with the lesson. During the lesson, Paul is unsettled and unhappy, and he refuses several times to sit down and focus on the activity. He talks loudly and interrupts his teacher with questions. The teacher ignores Paul most of the time, but her frustration is palpable during the lesson.

During these incidents, the interactions between Paul, his teacher and SNA were tense and negative, exhibiting an attempt to content Paul's behaviour without putting into practice support to facilitate Paul's inclusion within the group. However, in most cases, Paul relaxed when he was allowed to draw on his small whiteboard, read the Atlas and play with Lego, activities of his interest that kept him distracted during the lessons.

Concerning the interactions between Paul and his peers, these were absent at all times during formal activities. In addition, Paul's position in the classroom and at his group table placed him physically away from his peers, leaving no room for interactions and communication.

b) Interactions during structured informal activities

Structured and informal activities (i.e., writing work) occurred after each lesson, and pupils worked at their group tables on their workbooks. Paul did not have an apparent curriculum differentiation, and he joined the task with his peers with the support of the SNA. Towards the end of the task and before moving up to the next lesson, pupils' work was reviewed by their teacher at their group tables. The impression gathered in the observation of these activities was that Paul was always unhappy and unsettled. He refused to work on the workbooks, particularly in maths and English, and it was common to see his SNA asking him questions and completing the workbooks herself. Throughout these writing activities, the SNA worked on her own accord with Paul, without input from the classroom teacher. In most cases, Paul was allowed to do other activities of his interest (i.e., drawing on his whiteboard) instead of focusing on the writing tasks. Throughout writing tasks, the teacher's support was absent, and Paul's teaching and learning seemed to rest entirely on the SNA, with limited input and communication between the teacher and SNA, despite Paul's refusal and lack of interest in writing activities. Conversely, Paul's interest in artwork differed from writing activities, and he was proactive and engaged throughout the lesson. The interactions between Paul and his SNA were fluid and calm but absent from his teacher and peers.

Exhibit 2

During writing work, Paul seems unsettled and he refuses to work on the workbook, he does not like it he says. The SNA attempts to help Paul to complete the workbook but he gets very upset. Then the SNA suggests him that he gives the answers, and she writes them down. Paul likes the idea and seems more relaxed now with the activity. The SNA is asking Paul the questions on the workbook, and she is writing the answers while Paul is colouring his notepad. The classroom noise begins to rise with the pupils talking as they are finalising their tasks. Paul is getting anxious and begins to throw his colour pencils on the table. At this point the teacher who is reviewing all pupils' progress approaches Paul's table. The teacher is not happy with the SNA for completing the workbook and she gets uneasy with her. The tension is palpable, and Paul gets more agitated and anxious moving around his table. The teacher asks Paul to complete the workbook, she informs Paul that he has to do the work, but Paul gets frustrated refusing to do any work on the book. Paul does not like the book, he does not want to work with the book, he says. The teacher leaves the group table and returns to her desk to continue with the next lesson. Paul as well as the SNA seemed upset.

c) Interactions during unstructured activities

Unstructured activities in the classroom occurred upon arrival in the morning, at lunch and in the transition between the lessons. Due to the classroom size and limited room, interactions between peers took place mainly at their group tables. During unstructured activities, Paul's interactions with his classmates and peers at the group table were absent. Most of Paul's interactions in the classroom occurred around his

SNA, who focused on maintaining Paul distracted with Lego and other games until lessons were resumed.

Additionally, the interactions between Paul and his teacher during unstructured activities were limited and focused mainly on addressing Paul's behaviour. For example, before commencing the lessons in the morning, Paul was asked to tidy his desk and put the Lego away, which he would refuse most of the time. Consequently, the interactions became negative between Paul, his teacher and SNA, and Paul's behaviour became a problem in the classroom generating negative tensions among the actors. Additionally, the interactions between Paul and his peers during lunch remained absent. It is important to reiterate that Paul's position in the classroom did not enable interactions with his classmates, which also transferred to his group table since the SNA's position on the table acted as a physical barrier between Paul and his peers for both the table and the rest of the classroom.

5.7.3. Interactions between Paul, his teachers, SNA and peers in the playground

Paul's journey to the playground could be a frustrating experience, mainly when he walked to the playground with the rest of the pupils in the school. In most cases, the journey to the playground was characterised by Paul's anger and frustration, requiring the support of more than one adult to help him to the playground. Once in the playground, Paul's interactions with his peers and SNA were absent, and generally, he would hide in a corner away from the busy environment.

Exhibit 3

Going out to the yard with all other peers from other classes is a bad experience for Paul. While all pupils are getting ready to go out to the yard, Paul is waiting at the door with his SNA. Miss Teacher did not follow the alarm that she had set to go to recess ten minutes earlier. As a result, all students are now on their way to the yard, and the noise outside the classroom could be heard from inside the room. Paul is getting agitated, moving and kicking Miss SNA, in anticipation of what is coming once the door is opened. Miss SNA tries to calm Paul by telling him what is going to happen and how good he is going to be walking to the yard. However, Paul is nervous and hits his SNA telling her he does not want to go. In response to his behaviour, Paul is reprimanded by Miss Teacher and Miss SNA, who are encouraging him to behave correctly.

Paul's anxiety is palpable, despite his distress the door opens, and Paul goes out to the corridor with Miss SNA holding his hand. In this journey to the yard, Paul struggles walking in the corridor, he tries to walk free from Miss SNA's hand, he covers his ears with his free hand, he screams, and he kicks until they arrive to the yard. Once in the playing area, Miss SNA sets Paul free, and he runs away hiding in a corner while covering his head. Paul spends his recess in that corner while Miss SNA is guarding the door to avoid Paul from running back inside.

Nevertheless, on a couple of occasions, Paul and his classmates joined the playground five minutes before rush hour, and the journey on an empty corridor was smooth and calm. Paul walked along with his SNA, and he seemed comfortable and relaxed. Once in the yard, Paul would join his classmates, and he would remain around them for the duration of the recess. Meanwhile, the SNA would adopt a distant position without interference in Paul's interactions with his peers. Despite Paul's interest in joining

his peers, he was placed on the periphery of the group with limited inclusion in their peers' network of friends.

Exhibit 4

Miss Teacher interrupts the class ten minutes before recess and instructs her pupils to get their coats and line up on the front of the door. The second yard happens around midday. Children spend their free time outside playing freely, and as a result, the excitement is palpable in the classroom. The students follow the instruction of their teacher. While they are getting ready, Miss SNA and Paul stand in front of the main door waiting to go. Paul is moving around Miss SNA reflecting his anxiety. When the door opens, the corridor is empty, and they walk along in silence. Paul walks beside his teacher and his SNA who is holding his hand. He is calm and in good form while he attempts to interact with his peers talking and laughing. During the journey to the yard, all peers remain in silence following the norms with limited interaction with Paul. Once in the yard, Paul approaches his peers and tries to play with them, and his peers don't oppose him being there with the group. However, it is obvious that Paul is not part of the gang.

5.7.4. Interactions between Paul and his support teacher in the support classroom

Paul joined his support teacher every day for 45 minutes in the support classroom between 9:30 am and 10:15 am. The support teacher collected Paul every day from his classroom and walked with him to the room where the sessions were held. The interactions between Paul and his SNA seemed fluid, and the relationship was positive, as seen in the good camaraderie between the support teacher and pupil. In the support classroom, Paul's work was structured and highlighted on his small whiteboard, along with rewards he would get upon completing each task. He completed his writing

work and maths on the small whiteboard, and the activities were crafted and tailored according to how Paul engaged with each activity. For example, Paul seemed to struggle with some spellings on one occasion, and the support teacher instructed him to draw the word before the spelling. The strategy worked well with Paul, and he was happy to achieve well on the task. At the end of his work, Paul chose an educational game of his choice and played it with the support teacher. It was noticed that Paul followed the rules of the game well and respected his turn-taking, enabling his teacher to have her turn when required.

The interactions during these activities showed engagement and participation from Paul's side. In addition, the behaviour observed in the classroom (i.e., frustration at times) was never replicated in the support classroom during the observation period. Paul and his support teacher were chatty during their sessions, and it was common to see Paul laughing and sharing his news with the teacher. From the observations, it seemed that Paul was behaving differently in the support classroom. He appeared relaxed and happy, contrarily to his behaviour in the main classroom, which frequently appeared unsettled.

Exhibit 5

The support teacher arrives to the classroom to collect Paul, he is happy to see her and gets ready to go. In their walk to the support classroom, they show their camaraderie and good relationship. In the support classroom Paul knows the routine and follows his teacher's direction well. He loves colouring and as part of his reward he is allowed to colour his favourite cartoons. His support teacher prints them specially for Paul and she makes sure she gets the most updated cartoons. Paul is very cooperative and engaging, he does not show any signs of frustration, meltdown and behaviour that challenges. The interactions with his support teacher are positive and the tailored support is crafted and changes according to Paul's mood allowing him to accomplish the tasks. After the activities are finished Paul plays an educational game with his support teacher.

5.7.5. Analysis and Concluding Comments

The case study revealed Paul's limited interactions and participation in all activities in the classroom and the playground, which seemed to place Paul on the periphery of the group. The interactions between Paul and his teacher were characterised by a lack of interpersonal contact and reduced support. It seemed that Paul's behaviour acted as a barrier between Paul and his teacher, which seemed to interfere with how the interactions between Paul and his teacher materialised. The teacher seemed to approach Paul mostly in connection with his behaviour and lack of engagement in classroom activities, which limited his support in the classroom. This limited support also influenced Paul's participation in classroom activities despite his interest in participating in some activities.

The case study outlined Paul's dependency on his SNA to navigate his classroom and playground. It seemed that Paul was always under his SNA care, and constant proximity could prevent Paul from interacting with his peers freely, creating a physical barrier that could influence the interactions between Paul and his peers. Additionally, the SNA seemed to adopt certain responsibilities concerning Paul's academic support in the classroom, which seemed to limit his teacher's support and interactions with him.

Paul's case study also revealed a lack of interactions between the classroom teacher and the SNA. The tension in the classroom among the two adults was palpable, particularly in relation to Paul's behaviour. Their relationship lacked support and reflected poor communication, which became more evident when Paul interrupted the classroom routine and during writing work. The SNA ensured that Paul was focused on the lessons and accomplished his tasks and activities in the classroom. However, his teacher support was absent, and in many cases, the strategies put in place by the SNA were criticised and overruled by the teacher, generating further tension. In addition, the transfer of responsibilities from the teacher to the SNA seemed to isolate the SNA and Paul from the group, influencing the interactions between Paul and his peers as well as his meaningful participation in school activities.

Concerning the interactions between Paul, his support teacher and the classroom teacher, this case study revealed the two sides of the coin. Two different scenarios reflected that when Paul received tailored support and positive interactions from his support teacher, this approach positively influenced further interactions between Paul and the group. For example, Paul was engaged and participative in the support classroom, where he had one-on-one assistance with tailored support and a good relationship with his support teacher. However, Paul received limited teacher support in the general classroom, and he did not participate alongside his peers in classroom activities spending most of his time with his SNA.

In relation to the context, Paul's position in the classroom could act as a barrier to his interactions with the group (teacher and peers). Although the classroom size did not allow for much movement, placing Paul at the front of the classroom on a desk with other children with disabilities and the SNA could send the wrong message to the group. The position had the potential risk of differentiating these children from the group, which could influence their peers' perceptions and place them on the periphery of their classroom community. Furthermore, the interactions between the actors (teacher and SNA, Teacher and Paul, Paul and SNA) and the context (deployment of space) seemed to generate a domino effect that could influence how peers interacted with Paul.

Additionally, the interactions between Paul and his peers were non-reciprocal all the time, despite Paul's attempts of initiation on some occasions. Paul's physical position and classroom size acted as a barrier to the interactions between Paul and his peers in the classroom. Additionally, the constant presence of the SNA in the classroom and the negative interactions between the adults and Paul could also negatively influence how his peers interacted with Paul.

The context did not pose any restrictions in the playground, and the SNA took a distant position allowing Paul to be at his own pace. However, Paul's attempts to initiate contact with his peers were not reciprocated, which could place Paul on the periphery of his peers' network of friends. In conclusion, Paul's limited support and participation in the classroom during activities, the proximity of his SNA and her close support could act as a barrier preventing the interactions between Paul, his teachers and his peers.

5.8. CARL

5.8.1. Contextual Background

Carl was a seven years old boy attending first class in his local regular primary school. The classroom was spacious and bright, with 28 pupils distributed around the classroom around six tables with 5 to 6 pupils. Carl sat at the front of the classroom besides a girl (Anna) with whom he was always paired to work in group activities. Carl also sat in front of the interactive board and beside his teacher's desk. The researcher sat away from the pupils, avoiding any interference with the classroom routine.

During the academic year, the support provided to Carl involved part-time support in the classroom from a Special Needs Assistant and extra hours with the support teacher outside the classroom. The SNA was placed in the classroom for two hours every day, and her job was shared with other SNAs. The SNA support happened during core lessons (i.e., literacy, numeracy and Irish), and their responsibilities comprised assisting all pupils in general, focusing on Carl. The extra support hours took place daily in two slots of 30 minutes each. In addition, Carl shared his support hours with another three pupils with disabilities, and their teaching and learning focused on social and academic learning, prioritising social interactions to facilitate Carl's speech. Carl's speech was affected due to some difficulties in his palate interfering with the quality of his speech.

5.8.2. Interactions between Carl, his teachers, SNA, and peers in the classroom

a) Interactions during structured formal activities

Structured and formal activities involved instruction with the support of the interactive board and assessment of learning with questions. During instruction, it was common to see the teacher walking around Carl's group table and repeating his

instruction each time he was beside Carl. Additionally, the teacher asked Carl small questions to ensure he understood the material before moving forward with the lesson. This strategy was embedded in the teacher's instruction and seemed unnoticed. Carl's participation and interactions with the group during instruction were positive, and he was attentive and eager to answer his teacher's questions.

After instruction, the teacher began to question all students about the material previously presented with the support of the interactive board. Some questions were posed individually, and others were problem-solving questions that required group work. The atmosphere in the classroom was lively during this activity, and Carl appeared eager to take part, putting his hand up and accepting his turn without any problem. It was noticed that the teacher's approach to Carl differed from the rest of the pupils during individual questioning. For example, the teacher posed questions to Carl, requiring a short answer, facilitating his participation. The child's participation during these activities was positive, and his interactions with his teacher and peers were reciprocal and based on support and camaraderie. During group activities, peers formed pairs to resolve the activity, and Carl was always paired with a bright girl (Anna) with whom he appeared comfortable and friendly. Carl and Anna were focused and communicated well during these tasks. However, the teacher ensured Carl understood the activity when reviewing the progress of the group table.

Carl's participation during the assessment of learning was positive and engaging. He enjoyed completing activities on the interactive board, appeared confident and showed great excitement when it was his turn to take part. During the observation, it was common to see Carl on the interactive board completing literacy and numeracy exercises, always accompanied by Anna. Group task was commonly presented and resolved in front of the class. Carl and Anna were generally engaging and eager to present to the class putting themselves forward. However, when presenting to the group, the teacher provided succinct support that enabled Carl to participate. The support

provided in the classroom ensured Carl participated with his peers in all activities, including structured and informal activities.

Exhibit 1

During a lesson in mathematics the teacher instructs the students to complete a large sum. He provides different options to get to the result. Carl pairs with the girl beside him on the table (Anna), and for this particular activity, the teacher informs them they have to present to the class after completion. When Carl and Anna are presenting their rationale for resolving the sum, with the support of the interactive board, their teacher instructs Carl and Anna on their roles. This time, Carl is going to explain their problem resolution while Anna is going to write the answers on the interactive board. The teacher is in charge of guiding their presentation. First, he asks Anna to read the problem aloud. Then, he encourages Carl to provide the resolution step by step by following his questions, allowing Carl to provide short answers. After their presentation, both pupils are very happy and excited about their work and celebrate with a 'high five'. Their peers also join them on their celebration.

b) Interactions during structured informal activities

Structured and informal activities comprised physical education, artwork, relaxation time and writing work after instruction and assessment of learning. Carl participated and was involved in these activities alongside his peers with appropriate support. For example, in writing work, it was noticed that Carl found writing difficult, and he appeared unsettled with writing activities most days. In these cases, his teacher provided Carl with direct support for the duration of the activities while the SNA supervised the pupils' progress. In general, the interactions between Carl, his teacher, peers and SNA were positive for the duration of the writing activities.

Exhibit 2

Mr teacher instructs all table captains to distribute the workbooks to their group tables. Pupils begin their work in silence, but Carl is nervous and moving on his chair, unsettled without paying attention to his work. Anna gets Carl's workbook and shows him the exercises requested by their teacher. However, Carl is not with it until his teacher approaches his group table and directs Carl on the task. The interactions are positive, and Carl seems to relax in the presence of his teacher. Despite showing some degree of stress, he works on his writing activity.

Before the end of the task, the teacher approaches Carl again, corrects his work, and praises Carl for his excellent work. Carl is calmer and happier after Mister Teacher's intervention. For the duration of the activity, the SNA ensures pupils were working in silence and approaches each group table to prompt the students on the task. She assists them with any other non-academic matter (i.e., book page, pairing pencils, missing rubbers...). Concerning Carl's support, the SNA approaches his group table similarly to the rest of the students in the classroom and provides assistance when required under the teacher's guidance.

Additionally, the teacher ensured Carl acquired roles of responsibility among his peers. For example, before sports day, the class went to the playground to practice their games and select the teams and captains. When the teacher appointed Carl as team captain, he was very excited, and with confidence, he selected his team among his classmates. As a result, the atmosphere was lively, and the pupils were excited about their games. When the practice ended, the class returned to their classroom to continue reading before going home. However, once in the classroom, Carl was overexcited and

became unsettled at his table. In this particular case, the teacher re-arranged the classroom schedule and instructed his pupils to go to the relaxation room.

This room was used once a week to teach pupils relaxation techniques and meditation, a popular activity among all pupils. On their journey to the relaxation room, Carl walked beside his teacher, and the interactions between Carl, his teacher and his peers appeared positive. Carl was involved in their conversations and seemed happy among the group. Once in the room, Carl seemed to know the routine well and sat in his spot, following his teacher's instructions. After their session, the interactions between Carl and the group were positive, and he appeared happy and chatty with his teacher and peers. Once in the classroom, Mister Teacher instructed his pupils to pack their bags and get ready to go home. Carl organised his bag and sat in his chair, waiting for his time to go home.

c) Interactions during unstructured activities

Carl participated and was involved and engaged in all classroom activities. Additionally, the interactions between Carl and the group were mostly positive, and there was no apparent difference in the interactions between all classmates and Carl. However, Carl's relationship with Anna differed from the rest of his peers at the group table; he seemed more comfortable with Anna than the rest of his peers. Contrarily Anna was more proactive and interactive with all her peers, particularly at her group table during free time. Carl and his peers' interactions were reciprocal and friendly during classroom activities in the adult's presence. However, these interactions changed during unstructured activities and free time.

Free time occurred in the transition between lessons and when arriving in the classroom in the morning. In the morning, all pupils gathered around their cloaks, and the atmosphere in this area was lively, with pupils chatting and laughing. However, Carl was normally less interactive in these situations, and it was common to see him placing

his coat and returning to his group table, where he would initiate a conversation with Anna. Similarly, during their lunch break, Carl ate at his group table, but the interactions were minimal and, in some cases, absent, except with Anna. For the duration of the interactions, Carl and his peers lacked initiation and reciprocal interactions in both directions during unstructured activities. Particularly in the absence of adult supervision, contrarily to the interactions between Carl and his peers during structured activities.

5.8.3. Interactions between Carl, his teachers, SNA and peers in the playground

The second recess of the morning occurred in the afternoon. The classroom atmosphere around this time was busy, and all pupils seemed excited while getting ready for their recess. Because Carl's group table was beside his teacher's desk, it was common to see Carl chatting with his teacher and joking during free time between lessons and before going out to the playground. In the line, the interactions between Carl and his peers varied; there were days the interactions were friendly. While other days, Carl remained silent, and initiations between Carl and his peers were absent. It was common to see Carl running around on his own in the playground. Nonetheless, he approached other pupils from other classrooms and attempted to play with them, most of the time unsuccessfully. Along the same line, when he approached his classmates, his initiation was not reciprocated, and it was common to see Carl playing on his own.

Exhibit 3

Carl and Anna walk together in the line to the playground, but Anna joins the girls on the bench, while Carl goes off on his own. He runs around the yard for a while and tries unsuccessfully to join a group of pupils playing catch. When Carl approaches his classmates, they are gathering in different groups, some are playing football, and others are playing with cards. However, his attempts to join the group are also unsuccessful, and despite his interest in the games his peers are playing, he is not included in their network. For the duration of the recess, Carl approaches different groups unsuccessfully, and in the end, he goes with his SNA (who is supervising another child in the playground). The SNA and Carl seem happy in each other's company and they are engaging in a friendly and relaxed conversation.

5.8.4. Interactions between Carl, his support teacher, and peers in the support classroom

Carl had external support every day with his support teacher for two separate slots of 30 minutes each. The support teacher collected Carl every day from the classroom, and they walked together along with three other students with disabilities who shared support with Carl. The interactions between Carl, his support teacher and his peers, were fluid and friendly, he was happy and comfortable with the group, and they talked and made jokes on their journey to the support classroom. The support classroom was small and bright, with shelves full of books and educational games, posters and two desks. The group sat at one of the tables where their work was already displayed and arranged for each pupil. The sessions involved all pupils in order to facilitate their social interactions and their academic learning at the same time. His participation and interactions with the support teacher and peers are positive and engaging, and he shows

confidence with his peers in the support classroom, a confidence that was missed in the classroom.

Exhibit 4

In the support classroom, the activity involves children reading aloud and taking turns to explain their understanding of the story. The story has a missing section for the children to project what is happening next. Carl is very engaged and interacting with his peers on the activity. He appears in charge of the task showing his leadership, chatty and confident. In return, his peers engage with him in their work, following their lead and adding their input according to their ability, with their teacher acting as a moderator.

The sessions are very interactive, and Carl is always the leader in the conversation. He is eager to show his knowledge and is not shy to speak up. Carl finds it hard to allow others to input at times. However, he follows his teacher's instruction well, and despite showing some disappointment, he passes the turn to others.

It seemed that in the support classroom, Carl was not afraid to talk with his peers; the conversations seemed natural and effortless for Carl, similar to his interactions with Anna in the classroom. However, Carl's naturality seemed absent from his peers in the classroom, particularly in the absence of the educator. Additionally, the interactions between the teacher and the support teacher seemed fluid. After each session, they shared information related to Carl's support and areas of need.

5.8.5. Analysis and Concluding Comments

This case study showed two scenarios concerning the interactions between Carl, his teacher, peers and SNAs in the classroom and the playground. How the interactions

occurred in these two settings placed Carl central or in the group's periphery. It seemed that the teacher's role in the classroom positively influenced the interactions between Carl and his peers. However, this positive influence did not transfer to the playground showing a disconnection between both settings concerning peer interactions.

In the classroom, Carl participated and engaged in all structured and unstructured activities with the support of his teacher. The strategies used by the teacher involved direct and indirect support throughout all activities facilitating his engagement, participation and interactions with his teacher and peers. Additionally, this support appeared to be embedded in the classroom teaching and learning plan, enabling positive contact and interactions between Carl, his teacher, and his peers. The SNA support in the classroom was indirect and complementary to the teacher's support. This form of support outlined the teacher as the main responsible actor for Carl's education and enabled Carl to participate in all activities with his peers. For example, the SNA supervised all pupils during writing tasks while the teacher ensured Carl was confident with his writing instructions.

Throughout structured activities, the interactions (verbal and non-verbal communication, play) between peers and Carl were fluid and friendly but only under their teacher's guidance and supervision. However, these interactions varied during unstructured classroom and playground activities, particularly in the teacher's absence. The teacher's guidance and supervision appeared to facilitate Carl's interactions with his peers. Nevertheless, his peers did not interact the same way during lunch or on the playground. Although Carl attempted to interact with his peers in the playground (i.e., to play with them), these attempts were not reciprocated, leaving Carl playing alone.

Moreover, it was noticed that despite Carl and Anna's relationship in the classroom, their interactions were absent in the playground, as they neither talked nor played together. This finding outlines the importance of tackling inclusion in all in-school settings and implementing strategies to promote classroom and playground interactions.

The next chapter presents the cross-case analysis of the primary and recurrent themes that resonate across all cases.

CHAPTER 6 - CROSS CASE ANALYSIS

6.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the recurrent themes identified from the cross-case analysis of each individual case study. In a multiple case study, each case is considered a complex entity on its own. Therefore, individually and in-depth analysis enabled the researcher to understand each case independently before engaging in the analysis across cases. In addition, the cross-case analysis involved a dynamic process where the researcher moved back and forth between the individual cases to systematically compare the data across the cases. The final thematic categories were identified from the uniqueness of each case study and their engagement in the cross-case analysis, resulting in six overarching themes;

1. Teachers' interactions: the bridge to support and participation.
2. Support, the two sides of the coin.
3. Participation at the core of interactions.
4. The lack of peers' reciprocal interactions, a block to inclusion.
5. The context as a bridge to interactions.
6. Lessons learned from the support classroom.

The following sections present these overarching themes, connecting with the recurring themes identified in each case study findings.

6.2. Themes from the cross-case analysis

Cross-case analysis had the distinct advantage of providing compelling evidence concerning the role of interactions in the inclusion of children with Autism in the early years of regular primary school. Six cases were identified from the analysis across cases involving the essence of this research findings. The first case refers to the invisible hand

of the teacher, outlining their relevant role in the interactions between the education actors in the classroom and the playground.

6.2.1. Teachers' interactions, the bridge to support and participation

The analysis across cases identified the importance of the interactions between children with Autism and teachers in schools, placing teachers' interactions at the top of the hierarchy in the classroom. As previously referred, interactions between teachers and students (i.e., pupils with Autism) are understood as a dynamic process involving contact that includes emotional, instructional and organisational support (Hamre et al., 2013). The cross-case analysis identified different scenarios in the classroom with regard to teachers' interactions and their support towards the participation of children with Autism alongside their peers. The interactions between teachers and children with Autism in the study seemed to vary depending on the level of support required by the children with Autism in their classrooms and the type of activity.

It appeared that teachers' interactions were more limited with children with Autism who required more support (e.g., full-time SNA), particularly during structured-formal activities (e.g., literacy and numeracy). The lack of interactions was accompanied by a lack of contact with the child with Autism during classroom activities and involved limited individual and direct support. In addition, teachers seemed to transfer their responsibilities to the SNA, and their management of the SNA support promoted practices that separated these children with Autism from the group. This form of interaction and deployment of support seemed to limit further interactions between children with Autism and their teachers, acting as a barrier to further interactions between children with Autism, their teachers and peers. In addition, it limited the opportunities for children with Autism to participate with their peers in classroom activities.

For example, in Artwork, Peter joined his group table without the close support of his SNA. During the activity, it was noticed that the interactions between Peter, his teacher, and his peers were limited and nonreciprocal, regardless of Peter's intentions to initiate contact with the group. To begin with, Peter did not seem to understand the teacher's instructions, and while his classmates began to work on their projects, he stood beside his peers with no engagement in the task. When the teacher approached the group table to supervise their progress, he did not interact with Peter to support him (despite Peter's lack of progress on the project). Peter remained beside his peers during the activity, but they made no further reciprocal initiation or contact. It seemed that Peter reduced engagement in the task was accepted, implying that no further interactions to provide Peter with support from his teacher and peers were required. In the end, Peter finished the project when the SNA approached his group table and provided him with appropriate and tailored instruction. Overall, Peter's lack of participation in the activity and his need for tailored support (i.e., Peter did not seem to understand his teacher's instruction when it was provided to the class) were unacknowledged by his teacher and peers, and he remained physically placed in the classroom but symbolically located in the periphery of the group.

Similarly to Paul, although he was physically placed in the classroom, he was never involved in classroom activities with his peers. He was present during instruction, assessment of learning and writing work with limited interactions with his teacher, but he was not included with his peers in any activity. In some cases, Paul was disengaged from the activities, but his teacher did not acknowledge when he showed interest in participating. Additionally, his teacher's interactions occurred when she asked Paul to remain seated or silent or reprimanded him when he did not follow her instructions. In addition, the management of support in the classroom involved separating practices that inhibited Paul's participation alongside his peers.

Additionally, teachers' interactions with children with Autism who required more support differed depending on the activity. For example, it was common to see teachers interacting and supporting children with Autism during structured-informal (i.e., physical education) and unstructured activities (i.e., transitions), with interactions that involved tailored support enabling these children with Autism to participate in the same activities with their peers. Nevertheless, teachers' interactions and support were absent in structured and formal activities and the participation of children with Autism throughout these tasks.

For example, Laura joined her peers to practice the nativity show, where she played the role of the Angel. For the duration of the activity, the teacher's interactions involved tailored support and succinct instruction facilitating Laura's performance with her peers. The teacher praised Laura at each step which seemed to motivate Laura, as reflected in her engagement with the task. Laura's participation during the nativity show practice was excellent, and the interactions between Laura, her teachers, and her peers appeared fluid and relaxed.

Contrarily, the interactions between Laura, her teachers and her peers were different during structured and formal activities, such as literacy and numeracy. Moreover, Laura's involvement and participation during instruction, questioning and writing work were absent. It was common to see Laura putting her hand up to answer her teacher's questions without success. In addition, during group activities, Laura's participation with her peers was limited, and her involvement in the task was disengaged. It was common to see Laura physically placed with her peers, engaging with them and attempting to get their attention.

Nevertheless, Laura seemed lost concerning the requirements of the group project, which appeared to limit her participation alongside their peers. Despite her limited participation. Laura was not provided extra support and clarification from her

teacher to enable her to participate in the task. In addition, her peers' interactions were limited, with no support to ensure Laura's involvement in the project.

Furthermore, the analysis across cases also revealed some scenarios where the interactions between teachers and children with Autism involved tailored support from the teacher (emotional, instructional, and organisational) and management of support (i.e., SNA) that enabled children with Autism to participate in all activities (i.e., structured and unstructured) with their peers. In these cases, teachers' interactions and negotiation of support were not influenced by the level of support required by these children and the type of activity. Contrarily, their interactions through close contact involved direct support through verbal communication focused on enabling these children's participation with their peers in all activities. In addition, these children's teaching and learning were embedded within the classroom teaching and learning plan, avoiding separated practices that appeared to facilitate their participation with their peers and interactions between children with Autism, teachers, and peers.

For example, the teacher appointed Joe as table captain and instructed him to distribute the workbooks to his peers. This task gave Joe the opportunity to interact with his teacher when collecting the books from her table and with his peers when distributing the books. Joe was instructed to call out his peers' names from the books enabling his reading and personal contact with his peers. In addition, the activity provided Joe with a leading role, allowing Joe to gain certain status among his peers, which could lead to further interactions.

Similarly, Carl's teacher promoted his participation in classroom activities by providing succinct support through small questions during instruction and assessment of learning. The teacher's interactions and the level of support provided enabled Carl to participate in classroom activities with his peers, favouring his interactions with his teachers and peers. In addition, Carl's teacher sat him near his desk and the interactive board. This type of accommodation facilitated the teacher's access to Carl during

instruction and writing work, ensuring his complete understanding of the concepts instructed. In addition, Carl was always paired with Ana, with whom he worked in group activities, enabling his participation with his peers. The support implemented with Carl enabled his interactions with the teachers and peers and enhanced his participation.

A similar example occurred with Joe when his teacher changed the classroom routine (support without interaction) to allow him to share the story behind his toy on the “show and tell” activity (interaction between Joe and others and meaningful participation in the classroom). Additionally, the teacher subtly adapted her questions to Joe, allowing him to participate in questions with the interactive board.

The findings revealed the important role of teachers’ interactions with children with Autism and their support (teachers’ support and management of external support) towards the participation of children with Autism alongside their peers. Participation is at the heart of inclusion; thus, the hand of the teacher appears at the top of the hierarchy as an essential bridge toward inclusion. However, teachers’ interactions with children with Autism involving support for their learning is not their only support in schools. Teachers are responsible for all students learning in their classrooms, including children with Autism (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). Therefore, as directors of their classroom, they manage the deployment of support in the classroom to facilitate children with Autism to learn. The next theme focuses on the interactions between children with Autism and SNAs. It outlines how these interactions enable or inhibit participation and interactions among the education actors.

6.2.2. The SNA support: the two sides of the same coin

The extra support provided to enable children with Autism to learn in primary schools was identified in the cross-case analysis as critical to facilitate the participation and further interactions between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers. In the current study, schools provided different types of support to facilitate the academic,

social, and emotional development of children with Autism (Table 13). For example, children with Autism received support from a Support Teacher for 45 minutes each day. In addition, they availed of the support of an SNA who was responsible for looking after these children's care needs and ensured they followed the classroom and playground routine. In addition, contextual and structural accommodations were provided for some children with Autism in the classroom (i.e., working stations, libraries, break movements), intending to facilitate their teaching and learning. The current theme relates to the interactions between children with Autism and SNAs.

Table 13. Schools provision of support

SCHOOL No.	CHILD	ACCOMMODATION
1	MAX	Full-Time SNA and Support Teacher (ST) Arriving late in the morning Secluded working station Break movements Sensory room
2	JOHN	Part-Time SNA and Full-Time ST
	LAURA	Part-Time SNA and Full-Time ST Working station
3	PETER	Full-Time SNA and ST Working station Library Break movements Outside room
4	SEAN	Full-Time SNA and ST
	JOE	Full-Time SNA and ST Working station Library Break movements
	PAUL	Full-Time SNA and ST
5	CARL	Part-Time SNA and Full-Time ST

The current study findings revealed that the interactions between some children with Autism and their SNAs could negatively influence their participation and the interactions between children with Autism with the education actors. In particular, children who availed full-time support from their SNAs. Therefore, providing children with Autism with SNA support may not be sufficient to facilitate their inclusive education if this support prevents them from participating and interacting with the group. In addition, the

study findings revealed that teaching practices that isolated children with Autism from their peers in the classroom appeared to act as a barrier preventing their participation with their peers and the interactions between children with Autism, their teachers and peers. Separating practices involved the use of working stations, in some cases, and the close support of the SNA. Their support involved sitting beside these children with Autism in the classroom (sometimes on their own, sometimes at the group table with their peers) to ensure their focus in the lessons and support them in completing their workbooks. Nevertheless, it appeared that this form of interaction (SNA and Children with Autism) and the support involved (isolating practices) acted as a barrier that inhibited their opportunity to have further interactions with teachers and peers and to participate with their peers in the classroom and the playground. Thus, this form of support placed them on the periphery of their classrooms and playground communities.

In the case of Sean, for example, the full support of the SNA in the classroom seemed to act as a barrier between Sean, his teacher, and his peers. Sean's SNA was responsible for his well-being and learning in the classroom, which seemed to prevent Sean's participation with his peers. It also acted as a barrier to the interactions between Sean, his teacher and his peers. Moreover, the SNA support prevented Sean's teacher from interacting with him and providing direct support to Sean in activities such as spelling. It was common to see Sean delayed in completing the spelling at the same speed as his peers, which seemed to upset him. In these situations, the teacher continued the activity relying on the SNA support to assist Sean with spelling. It seemed that the presence and support of the SNA inhibited the interactions between Sean and his teacher, resulting in Sean missing the opportunity to receive appropriate and tailored support.

Similarly, with Paul, the close support of the SNA acted as a barrier to the interactions between Paul and his teacher, limiting her level of support. Paul's support in the classroom comprised a full-time SNA whose responsibilities involved supporting him

in adjusting to the classroom routine and focusing on the lessons. In addition, the SNA supported Paul in his writing work during lessons and in the playground. She sat by his side for the day, and when she was on her break, another SNA substituted her to avoid leaving Paul on his own. Unfortunately, this form of support seemed to form a physical barrier between Paul, his teacher and his peers and prevented Paul from participating in classroom activities alongside their peers.

Additionally, the close interactions between children with Autism and SNAs aligned with their constant support appeared to generate dependency in some children with Autism, which seemed more evident in those children with full-time SNAs. In the absence of the SNA⁷, these children seemed lost in the classroom. In addition, their dependency on their SNAs to navigate the school environment (i.e., classroom, playground, and support classroom) seemed to influence their interactions with teachers and peers.

For example, in the case of Peter, the presence and support of the SNA were constant, they worked together at the back of the classroom, and his SNA sat by his side, providing constant support. Peter seemed happy and calm around his SNA, but he appeared lost when she was not around, wandering around the classroom and hiding in the library at the back of the room or in the restroom.

Similarly, Max seemed happy and more focused when his SNA was with him in the classroom, but he tended to wander around and play at the back of the classroom when she was on her break, absent from classroom activities. It seemed that the support of the SNA maintained these children focused on their classrooms but also limited their independence in navigating the context and interacting with others.

In addition, in the absence of the SNA, the interactions between children with Autism and their teachers were minimal and involved limited support. As it happened

⁷ They were always accompanied by their SNA in the playground for safety reasons.

with Peter and Max, their disengagement from classroom activities when their SNAs were absent seemed accepted by their teachers, who lacked interactions to support these children to engage in the activities in the classroom.

Moreover, some children with Autism appeared to reject the support of their SNAs. On these occasions, the SNA support was allocated part-time and occurred only in certain activities. Although these children seemed to have a good relationship with their SNAs, they rejected any support (e.g., assisting them to focus on the lesson and the writing work), particularly in front of their peers in the classroom and the playground. For example, Laura always refused her SNA support; their interactions were fluid and involved rewards for working at the back of the classroom, but Laura was unhappy most of the time, and her time working with the SNA was always cut short by Laura's decision who returned to her group table. Similarly, John, who seemed to have a friendly relationship with his SNA, kindly refused her support when she approached him. It is important to note that the SNA was allocated full time in the classroom and divided her time between John and another child with disabilities.

The analysis across cases also revealed that close cooperation between teachers and SNAs through their interactions facilitated the provision of support to enhance the participation of children with Autism in classroom and playground activities. It also enabled these children to interact with teachers and peers. For example, the interactions between Joe and his SNA involved support supervised and guided by the classroom teacher to facilitate Joe's participation with his peers in the classroom and the playground. Although the SNA sat beside Joe all the time, her support followed the teacher's indications; for example, Joe scribbled on the whiteboard in between lessons (i.e., transition) to facilitate him to relax. The SNA's role was to ensure that Joe followed this routine during transitions only, and she guided him to return to his table before the next lesson. The SNA also ensured that the teacher was informed when Joe required her direct assistance with pedagogical matters. For example, when Joe struggled with some

areas of mathematics, the SNA informed the teacher, who provided him with one-on-one support.

The strategies in place in the classroom and the playground involved the teacher and SNA's close interaction with the child with Autism, aimed to understand their needs and what was required to support their participation. For example, with Carl, the SNA support was provided indirectly and only when requested by the classroom teacher. Nevertheless, it was evident in the classroom that the teacher guided Carl's teaching and learning, and the SNA collaborated toward Carl's participation in classroom activities. Moreover, accommodations were deployed in the classroom to enable these children to participate with their peers. For example, Joe scribbled on the whiteboard between transitions to help him to relax. In addition, he was appointed group captain, guiding his peers to the playground, allowing Joe to be placed first in the line avoiding the noise and excitement in the line before the playground. The strategies and accommodations were discussed between the teacher and the SNA and were implemented in collaboration.

Therefore, the cross-case analysis outlined the two sides of the coin concerning the interactions between children with Autism and their SNAs. It appeared that the interactions between children with Autism and SNAs that involved tailored support under the guidance and supervision of the classroom teachers to facilitate their participation seemed to facilitate further interactions and participation. Therefore, the interactions between teachers and SNAs when working in collaboration towards these children's participation enriched the interactions between children with Autism and SNAs. Nevertheless, when the interactions between children with Autism and SNAs involved support that isolated them from their teachers and peers, it acted as a barrier to their interactions with their teachers and peers and prevented their participation alongside their peers.

Participation is at the heart of inclusive education. If children with Autism are placed in regular schools but are not allowed to participate in the same activities as their

peers, inclusive education is not happening. The next section outlines the critical role played by the participation of children with Autism alongside their peers.

6.2.3. Participation at the core of interactions

The cross-case analysis identified participation as critical in the interactions between the school actors and the support provided to children with Autism in the classroom. It seemed that when children with Autism participated in all activities, it enhanced further interactions and favoured their inclusion. Conversely, when children with Autism did not fully participate in all classroom activities, but some activities such as structured/informal and unstructured activities, the interactions between children with Autism, their teachers, and peers were limited, and the provision of support (e.g., SNA, working station), in some cases, tended to isolate these children further from the group.

In other words, engaging children with Autism in some activities in the classroom (e.g., structured and informal: artwork and unstructured: physical education) did not seem to facilitate further interactions between children with Autism, teachers and peers in all activities and settings (i.e., classroom and playground). For example, Laura and Max worked separately with their SNAs during literacy and numeracy, with limited interactions with teachers and peers and no participation alongside them. However, during physical education, artwork, and singing, they participated with their peers with close teachers' interactions involving tailored support and fluid interactions with their peers. Nevertheless, despite the fluid interactions between children with Autism, teachers and peers during these activities, they were not fully included as members of the group, as reflected in the lack of reciprocal interactions from their peers during free time (lunch and transitions).

The following theme outlines the lack of peers' reciprocal interactions as a potential roadblock in successfully including children with Autism in regular primary schools.

6.2.4. The lack of peers' reciprocal interactions, a block to inclusion

The analysis across the eight cases outlined that children with Autism were mostly placed on the periphery of their peers' social networks. Despite the intention of these children to interact with their peers, their interactions appeared limited compared with those occurring among pupils with no disabilities. The limited reciprocal interactions from peers to children with Autism happened in different scenarios throughout the study.

Overall, interactions between children with Autism and peers tended to be fluid when they were given the opportunity to interact and participate with their peers in all classroom activities (i.e., structured and unstructured). Moreover, positive interactions between teachers and children with Autism seemed to favour positive interactions between children with Autism and peers.

However, positive interactions between peers and children with Autism that occurred under the guidance of the adult in some but not all activities did not translate into fluid interactions in their absence. For example, in the case of Laura, her interactions with her peers seemed fluid in the classroom in activities where her teacher promoted her participation in activities during non-core lessons (i.e., music, drama). However, her peers' interactions during group activities were limited despite Laura's lack of participation; they did not provide her with support to facilitate her participation within the group.

Additionally, peers' interactions with children with Autism tended to fade away when the provision of support for children with Autism isolated them from their peers. It appeared that peers' reciprocal interactions were more limited with children with Autism who worked in isolation with their SNAs. In addition, peer interactions were limited when the support and presence of the SNA with the child with Autism were constant throughout the school day. Moreover, peers' reciprocal interactions were limited with children with Autism with limited interaction and a lack of support from their teachers.

The lack of reciprocal interactions was evident in the playground. For example, it was common to see Paul attempting to get close to his peers with no success; as a result, he spent most of the time in the playground on his own. In addition, Peter did not experience reciprocal interactions with his peers in the classroom or the playground. The lack of reciprocity was recurrent for Peter, particularly in the playground during the “group of four” (a strategy put in place to allow peers to mix). Peter was seen trying to engage and play with the allocated team of peers, he followed them around the yard and smiled at them when talking, but his peers did not seem to reciprocate Peter’s attempts to interact with them.

In some cases, peers’ lack of reciprocal interaction with children with Autism showed an apparent disconnection between the settings (interactions in the classroom vs interactions in the playground). For example, in the case of Carl, he appeared fully included in the classroom, with positive interactions with his teacher and peers, involving tailored support towards his participation. Nevertheless, in the playground, any attempt to interact with his peers appeared unsuccessful, and Carl played on his own most days, placing him in the periphery of his peers’ network.

Additionally, the context and boundaries were revealed in the analysis across cases as relevant in the interactions between children with Autism and the education actors. The following theme outlines the potential influence of the context in these interactions.

6.2.5. The context as a bridge to interactions

An important aspect that was identified in the cross-case analysis concerns the potential influence that the context and its boundaries could have on the interactions between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers. In the present study, the context is understood as the environment in which interactions occur. Therefore, it refers to the physical structure, such as the classroom size, the decoration surrounding the

room, and the furniture. Additionally, the context is also defined by other factors, such as the physical position taken by children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers in the different settings (i.e., where they sit). Moreover, the context also involves physical accommodations implemented within the settings to support the learning of children with Autism, such as libraries/chill-out areas and working stations. Finally, concerning the playground, the context is understood as an open and unstructured area, with limited intervention from the adult, where the interactions between children with Autism and peers occur freely. In the current study, interactions occurred in three different in-school settings (the classroom, the playground and the support classroom), which formed the context in which the interactions between the education actors took place.

The analysis across cases revealed that the physical position of children with Autism in the classroom and the physical accommodations implemented to help them adjust played an essential role in facilitating or inhibiting their interactions with their teachers and peers. In addition, it could act as a barrier to their teacher's support and their participation in classroom activities.

On the one hand, the context where the interactions took place in the classroom could inhibit further interactions with teachers and peers, placing children with Autism in the periphery of the classroom. For example, Paul sat beside his support teacher in the corner of the classroom, beside the exit door and the wall. It was a position that did not enable Paul to interact with his peers and teacher and receive support from his teacher when necessary due to the physical distance between them.

In addition, Max's working station allowed him to work on his differentiated curriculum for half of his school day. Nevertheless, this accommodation prevented Max from interacting and participating with his peers during lessons. Moreover, it was a barrier to Max's interactions with his teacher. In the case of Laura, Sean, and Peter, they sat in the outskirts of their classrooms, away from their teachers and near the back of the room. Although their position intended to give them space to enable break movements

and work separated from the group. It also placed them on the periphery limiting their interactions with their teachers and peers.

The study findings also revealed that the classroom context (i.e., position, physical accommodations) could also be conducive to interactions with peers and teachers, acting as a form of support promoting participation in classroom activities. For example, Carl sat in the front row beside his teacher's desk and his peers who helped him when working in group activities. Moreover, his teacher explained the lessons, always standing beside Carl, which helped him to be focused. Similarly, Joe's position in the classroom and the arrangement of accommodations (e.g., scribbling on the whiteboard, seating near the library and the wall to rest his chair) and strategies (e.g., the wording of questions to ease his answers, nominating Joe leader in the line) around him seemed to facilitate his interactions with teacher and peers and enabled his participation in classroom activities and the playground. For example, Joe sat near the whiteboard to scribble without being disturbed by his classmates, which enabled him to relax every day during transitions.

Additionally, his teacher often asked Joe to resolve her questions using the whiteboard to scribble the answers. In addition, Joe was allowed to be the group leader in the line, going to the playground, which enabled him to go out and return to his classroom first, allowing him to relax in the playground and during the transition. The accommodations put in place and his position in the classroom created a context that enabled the interactions between Joe, his teacher, SNA and peers and his participation in classroom and playground activities.

It appeared that managing the context (as a form of support that is put in practice throughout teachers' and SNAs' interactions with children with Autism) to facilitate their participation alongside their peers promoted positive interactions and participation in the classroom. Therefore, it could be inferred that the contextual structure and arrangements of the settings could enable or inhibit the interactions between children with Autism, their

teachers, SNAs and peers. In addition, the context could influence the support received and children's participation alongside their peers. Therefore, the next section focuses on the findings related to the interactions among the actors in the support classroom.

6.2.6. Lessons to learn from the support classroom

In the present study, the cross-case analysis concerning the interactions between children with Autism and support teachers revealed that the interactions were primarily positive. The support classrooms were small and overcrowded, with furniture and colourful posters on the wall. Children with Autism taking part in this research mainly appeared relaxed and engaged in the support classroom, a behaviour that differed from the regular classroom.

In the support classroom, a close relationship between children with Autism and support teachers framed their interactions, which were positive. Children with Autism appeared motivated, engaged, and participative in classroom activities. For example, in the case of Sean and Paul, they engaged in positive conversations with their support teacher in their walk from the classroom to the support classroom. Once in the support classroom, they were provided with tailored support (e.g. schedule and reward cards, interactive computer) that were adjusted in situ to enable their learning and completion of the task. Sean and Paul had a good relationship with their support teacher and seemed comfortable in her presence, which enabled casual conversation and participation in activities. Conversely, Max often refused to complete the activities accepted by the support teacher, who allowed him to play on his iPad, limiting further interactions between them. Max's withdrawal from the support classroom activities prevented him from enjoying the benefits of the extra support.

An important aspect highlighted in the study is the fluid interactions between children with Autism and their support teacher, which differed from their interactions with the classroom teacher for some of the children in the study. This dichotomy between the

general classroom and the support classroom revealed a disconnection between some education actors' interactions (general teachers vs support teachers) and the settings (general vs support classroom). For example, Paul, Sean and Peter had very limited interactions with their teachers in the classroom, which were accompanied by a lack of support and limited participation in classroom activities. However, in the support classroom, their interactions with the support teacher and peers were reciprocal and fluid, and these children were participative, engaged and motivated during support classroom activities. Taking Carl and Joe's example to the classroom, it could also be understood that close interactions between teachers and children with Autism, with appropriate and tailored support towards their participation alongside their peers, could enable their inclusive education.

6.3. Concluding remarks

The cross-case analysis of eight children with Autism in the early years of regular primary schools presented different scenarios that varied according to the level of interactions among the actors, the negotiation of support, and how these influenced the participation and future interactions of these children with Autism with their peers. In the present study, the interactions between teachers and children with Autism seemed to define the deployment of support (i.e., teacher, SNAs and Accommodations). The support provided to children with Autism (i.e., support embedded within the classroom teaching and learning or separated from the group) could enable or not their participation in the classroom and the playground. In addition, positive interactions between teachers and peers seemed to positively influence the interactions between children with Autism and the education actors.

It appeared that placing children with Autism in schools with support to facilitate their adjustment was insufficient if the support (i.e., teachers' lack of support, SNAs, accommodations) isolated them from their teachers and peers, limiting their interactions.

In addition, this form of support seemed to prevent their participation in activities with their peers and the opportunity for further interactions with teachers and peers, which could enable them to build social relationships.

In the present study, participation in all activities in the classroom (instead of working at the workstation) appeared to facilitate interactions with peers and the provision of teachers' support. Nevertheless, enabling the participation of children with Autism in some activities (and not all) did not favour the interactions between children with Autism and peers in the classroom and the playground. Moreover, the study reveals that interactions (i.e., teachers, SNAs and peers) aligned with support tailored to participation in all activities promoted further interactions and reinforced children's participation and support provided, a finding replicated in the support classroom.

Furthermore, the study findings emphasise the limited reciprocal interactions between children with Autism and their peers, regardless of the attempts to join in by children with Autism. With a particular emphasis on the different interactions taking place in the classroom and the playground. The social interaction between peers is relevant to their academic, emotional and social development (Cameron et al., 2012; Robertson et al., 2003). In addition, peers' interactions set the basis for future relationships in school and the community (Pennings et al., 2014). However, the study findings reveal that interactions between peers and children with Autism seemed to materialise under the guidance of the teacher and the SNA but faded away in their absence, particularly in the playground, limiting the opportunities to develop solid relationships.

Concluding, the analysis across cases reveals the critical role played by the interactions in the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools. It also reveals the barriers and inhibitors of these interactions that could, in turn, enable or inhibit the inclusion of these children in regular schools. The next chapter discusses these findings in line with the current literature.

CHAPTER 7 - DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

7.1. Introduction

The current research aimed to gain knowledge on the inclusion of children with Autism in the early years of regular primary schools in Ireland. Given that schools are part of the broader educational system, inclusion needs to account for the differing levels of that system to ensure equality of opportunities and equity in educational outcomes for children with autism (Rose & Shevlin, 2014). However, the factors operating at the micro-level (interactions in the classroom, the playground, and the support classroom) have not been sufficiently studied to draw a conclusion concerning the inclusion of children with Autism in regular primary schools. Understanding how the inclusion of children with Autism occurs in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom can define the inflexion point between being included as a member of the school community or being placed in its periphery (Roberts & Simpson, 2016; Simpson et al., 2003). In addition, it can help to shorten the gap between policy and practice.

In the current study, the interactions between teachers and children with Autism and the interactions between SNAs and children with Autism were guided by Hamre et al. (2007) domains which establish that the interactions between teachers and students and SNAs and students involve emotional, organisational, and instructional support (Hamre et al., 2013). In addition, the operationalisation of the interactions between children with Autism and peers was guided by Koster et al. (2009) in their conceptualisation of social inclusion, social integration, and social participation. The operationalisation of the interactions between children with Autism and peers in the current study involves a) playing together, b) working together on tasks, c) Participation in group activities, d) (Un)acknowledged initiations, and Social isolation (Koster et al., 2009).

This research explored the inclusion of children with Autism in primary schools with a focus on interactions, which are considered the basic building block of relationships, hence their relevance in the inclusion of children with Autism in schools and society. The study findings revealed that the ways in which participants interacted and support was negotiated (sometimes is provided, sometimes is offered, sometimes is rejected, sometimes is imposed) led to different scenarios and levels of participation. Therefore, the interconnection between interactions, provision of support, and the level of participation of children with Autism with their teachers, SNAs, and peers could inhibit or enable further interactions.

The author acknowledges that the exploratory nature of this research provides an exemplar of the day-to-day of eight children with Autism in the early years of primary school. The interactions in the classrooms, the playgrounds and support classrooms between these children with Autism, their teachers, SNAs and peers provide an insight into how the inclusion of the eight children with Autism occurred in their regular schools. In addition, what it was also highlighted is what constituted barriers and facilitators to interactions and, therefore, inclusive education. The study presented three different scenarios that revealed how the interactions taking place among the different actors facilitated or not the inclusion of these children in their schools.

Although the findings refer only to the experiences of eight children with Autism, they revealed their limited inclusion, as stated in the context of the CRPD, article 24, and confirmed the gap between policy and practice concerning the inclusion of these children in their schools. It is understood that the findings can not be generalised to other children with Autism due to the nature of this research (i.e., interpretivist, qualitative study) which sought to provide an in-depth understanding of these children's inclusive education. However, the author believes that the findings can stimulate further research concerning how interactions promote inclusive education in schools, what factors influence positive interactions, what teaching strategies and support facilitate the participation of children

with Autism in schools, and what are the outcomes of these strategies and/or support concerning these children's interactions with their teachers, SNAs and peers.

In line with current literature, the following sections of this chapter discuss the barriers and facilitators to interactions and inclusion highlighted in the research findings concerning the eight children with Autism taking part in the early years of primary school.

7.2. Facilitators to the interactions between children with Autism and the relevant actors in the classroom, the playground, and the support classroom.

The findings of this study revealed that those interactions between children with Autism and teachers involving a) close contact, b) tailored support (embedded within the group teaching and learning), and c) collaborative support between teachers, SNAs and STs, enabled the participation of children with Autism in regular schools. In addition, it was observed that when these facilitators were present (i.e., tailored support, direct communication, collaborative work with SNAs), it facilitated future interactions between the actors and the participation of children with Autism with their peers. However, when these facilitators were absent, interactions leading to participation appeared to be scarce. In the next sections, the study findings related to facilitators of interactions are discussed in relation to current and past literature.

7.2.1. Teachers' positive interactions underpinned by tailored support and participation in the classroom

The study findings revealed the important role of the teacher in the interactions taking place in the classroom. It appeared that positive interactions involving close contact, tailored support, and collaborative support with SNAs enabled the participation of children with Autism alongside their peers and favoured the interactions between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers. The findings concur with previous literature confirming that positive interactions between students and teachers promote students' academic, emotional, and social development in school (Cook & Cameron,

2010; Pianta et al., 2008; Santos et al., 2016). Other studies found that positive teacher-student interactions facilitate relationships and enable the achievement and motivation of students in schools (Pianta et al., 2012). It has also been demonstrated the importance of teachers' positive interactions in the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools (Longobardi et al., 2012; Prino et al., 2016).

Additionally, research pointed to the influence of tailored support in the inclusion of children with Autism in schools. According to Black-Hawkins and Florian (2012), the key to facilitating the participation of children with disabilities, and Autism, in regular schools is linked to the use of appropriate inclusive strategies. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2012) contend that inclusive teaching requires "crafting" strategies tailored to children's needs from the knowledge teachers already have in teaching and learning. The authors argue that for these crafted strategies to work, teachers must consider these children's needs (academic, social, and emotional) in each situation (i.e., classroom questioning, group activities, transitions, and going to the playground). In addition, inclusive strategies must favour the participation of children with disabilities within the group. Moreover, crafting strategies ought to depart from the belief that segregated practices inhibit inclusive education. The conclusions from Florian and colleagues' study emphasised that providing differentiated activities that isolate children with disabilities from their peers and teachers is a form of exclusion (Black-Hawkins et al., 2008; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

In the present research, when teachers provided support tailored to the needs of children with Autism, it promoted their participation in classroom activities. In addition, tailored support provided by teachers to some children with Autism was also complemented by an adjustment of the context (i.e., classroom positions and accommodations). Thus, the combination of support (i.e., strategies and accommodations) seemed to enable further interactions and participation of these children in classroom activities. This finding concurs with further evidence suggesting

that when teacher support is provided directly and without differentiating and separating the child with Autism from the group, it allows space for these children to interact and participate within the group (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Rix et al., 2009).

The study findings also highlighted that embedding the support of children with Autism within their daily teaching and learning schedule in the classroom promoted interactions among the actors and the participation of children with Autism alongside their peers. This form of education facilitated their participation without direct differentiation (i.e., separating the child from the group and allocating different activities). For example, one of the children with Autism sat beside another friendly peer who (embedded support) helped him when completing tasks on the interactive board (interaction with peers). In this case, the child with Autism, with the assistance of the teacher and Anna (his peer), presented the resolution of one of the problems posed by the teacher to the class (participation in the classroom).

This form of education resonated with Spratt and Florian, who confirmed that the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools materialises when all children learn together (Spratt & Florian, 2015). Furthermore, it appeared that embedded support and interactions with their peers without apparent differentiation favoured the meaningful participation of these children in classroom activities and, therefore, their inclusion alongside peers. In support of this finding, previous studies also confirmed that children with Autism considered a school inclusive when teachers understood their difficulties and provided support in a way that did not highlight the differences compared to the rest of their peers (Cunningham, 2020).

Previous research indicated a link between teachers' perception of disability and the implementation of specific and tailored support for children with Autism and other disabilities in schools. These studies revealed how teachers perceived the unique characteristics of children with Autism and their understanding of disability could guide their interactions with children in the classroom. Moreover, their perception of the

capacity of these children to fit in with their peers could influence the level and quality of the support they provide to these children in schools (Adderley et al., 2015; Conn, 2019).

For example, a child was appointed as the classroom captain in the current study. In this role, the child was placed first in the line to guide his classmates to the playground. The strategy allowed the child to gain a higher position in the social status of the classroom, and it afforded the child with Autism the opportunity to be first in the line, which reduced his anxiety going to the playground⁸. In this case, anxiety was not seen as a problem that impeded the child's ability to go to the playground with his peers. Contrarily, it was acknowledged and resolved by implementing a tailored strategy that eased the transition of the child to the playground. In doing so, the child was able to participate in the activity while enabling positive interactions with his peers who were also in the line and with his teacher and SNA as the child happily accepted their support.

This finding concurs with previous research by Carmel Conn (2019) examining inclusive pedagogies for autistic children. She confirmed that the management of diversity in the classroom reveals how teachers understand the unique characteristics of children with Autism either as “problematic” or not (Conn, 2019). The author highlighted that celebrating difference, instead of interpreting difference as an “impairment” and a “barrier” for learning, plays an essential role in the interactions between teachers and children with Autism. Teachers in Conn's study did not emphasise the unique characteristics of children with Autism as a problem; on the contrary, they seemed to focus on how best to support these children with Autism to participate with their peers, thereby facilitating their learning in school (Conn, 2019).

For some of the children in the study, the support provided to facilitate their participation also involved adjusting the context where the learning was taking place (i.e.,

⁸ When the child was not first in the line, he used to get agitated and nervous (see Case study chapter for reference).

classroom position, teacher position, contextual accommodations). It appeared that adjusting the context to support children with Autism in activities favoured further interactions and participation. Studies showed that separating children with Autism in the classroom to enable their learning acts as a barrier preventing their learning alongside their peers. More importantly, it is a form of exclusion that contravene the fundamentals of inclusive education. (Florian & Beaton, 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Spratt & Florian, 2015). These findings outline the importance of the context in the interactions between children with Autism and the group. It also revealed the teachers' important role in managing the context to support these children's participation.

In the present study, the adjustment of the context involved seating these children near their teachers and in the front row, an approach that enabled teachers to support children with Autism directly during instructions. Additionally, the use of physical accommodations such as working stations and libraries for children with Autism, during transitions or in situations where the child with Autism needed a break, allowed participation and interactions between children with Autism and peers. The adjustment of the context towards the participation of these children with their peers also enabled interactions among the actors and placed children with Autism central to the classroom. This was demonstrated when children with Autism were seated in the first row beside the teacher's desk, which avoided the alienation of these children with Autism and promoted interactions with peers, teachers, and support staff. Moreover, using accommodations such as libraries to provide children with Autism with time off only during transitions, instead of using the library throughout lessons, enabled interactions and participation in classroom activities.

In summary, the findings revealed that for some children in the study, the interconnection between a) positive interactions between children with Autism and their teachers, b) tailored support, and c) participation alongside their peers placed children with Autism as part of their classroom's communities influencing their inclusion as

members of the group. Support plays an important role in the interactions, in particular, support deployed and managed by the classroom teachers to promote the participation of children with Autism with their peers. The next section discusses the collaborative support between teachers and SNAs as facilitators of the actors' interactions.

7.2.2. Collaborative support in the classroom between teachers and Special Needs Assistants

Research confirmed educators consider Special Needs Assistants (SNA) an essential asset in regular schools to support the inclusion of children with disabilities (Rose, 2000; Hemmingsson et al., 2003; Rose, 2001). The interactions between SNAs and children with Autism are also relevant because SNAs assist these children in navigating the academic and social context of the school (Blatchford et al., 2009). However, various studies have also demonstrated that the presence and role of the SNA could have negative consequences on the interaction between children with Autism, teachers and peers (Giangreco, 2009; Rubie-Davies et al., 2010). It could also affect the independence of these children (Symes & Humphrey, 2011) and their academic achievement (Fletcher-Campbell, 2010) in regular schools.

The current study findings showed that for some children with Autism, the collaborative support between teachers and SNAs towards the participation of these children with Autism with their peers prompted further interactions within the group and favoured their inclusion. It appeared that placing the SNA support complementary to the teacher instead of running parallel enabled participation and interactions. For example, one child seemed to scribble on the school table when he felt anxious. In this case, the teacher instructed the child to scribble on the whiteboard, while the SNA was instructed to ensure the strategy was put in practice during transitions only. After the scribbling, the child sat at his table and remained calm, participative and engaging during lessons. It was noticed that when the child could not finish drawing the pattern as accustomed, he remained unsettled and distracted during lessons.

This finding concurs with Feldman and Farrell, who demonstrated the important role of the teacher in guiding and training SNAs to facilitate the learning of children with disabilities in schools (Farrell et al., 2010; Feldman & Matos, 2013). Other studies also confirmed that managing the support of the SNA to enable children with disabilities to participate with their peers facilitates the inclusion of children with disabilities and Autism in regular schools (Roberts & Simpson, 2016; Symes & Humphrey, 2011). As Giangreco and colleagues contended, the collaboration between SNAs, teachers and support teachers is relevant when addressing the teaching and learning of children with disabilities. However, as the authors emphasised, despite the support, the pedagogical responsibilities should always rest on the teacher and the support teacher (Giangreco et al., 2014).

In the current research, in one case, the collaborative support between the teacher and the full-time SNA allocated to the classroom involved them working together on the best way to support this child with Autism in the classroom and the playground during the school day. Their collaboration created a positive interaction between teachers and SNAs which was reflected in the classroom environment. In this line, Roberts and colleagues demonstrated that when SNAs are placed in the classroom full time, it enables SNAs and teachers to build rapport and facilitates the supervision and feedback between teachers and SNAs (Roberts & Simpson, 2016).

In conclusion, the research findings, supported by earlier research, confirmed the important role of the SNA in the inclusion of children with Autism when this support occurs in collaboration and with the assistance of the classroom teacher. In the current study, the collaboration between teachers and SNAs to facilitate the participation of children with Autism in classroom activities enabled further interactions and appeared to favour the inclusion of children with Autism. Furthermore, the interconnection between interactions, support and participation seemed to influence reciprocal interactions for some children with Autism and peers in the study. Therefore, the following section

discusses this interconnection as a facilitator of further reciprocal interactions between children with Autism and their peers.

7.2.3. Participation, support, and reciprocal interactions between children with Autism and peers

Many studies have demonstrated that the interaction between children with Autism and other students in schools is not smooth as it will occur between pupils with no disabilities (Humphrey et al., 2008; Humphrey & Symes, 2010). These studies highlighted that children with Autism tend to be isolated from their peers in primary and secondary schools. Moreover, they are also at risk of bullying and being excluded from their peers' social networks (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Frederickson et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the conclusions from these studies relate these children's limited interactions and relationships with their peers in terms of their unique characteristics and "difficulties" in social interactions and communication (Humphrey et al., 2008; Keenan et al., 2017; Koegel et al., 2012; Murray et al., 2009).

In the present research findings, interactions between children with Autism and peers occurred when they participated in classroom activities guided by their teachers. The teacher's interactions in the classroom with these children aligned with support towards their participation appeared to favour the interactions among the students. A potential explanation for the fluid interactions between some children with Autism and their fellow students in the classroom could rest on the "invisible hand of the teacher". A metaphor that regards the role model of the teacher as influential in the interactions between children with disabilities and peers (Farmer et al., 2011).

As found in previous studies, teachers play an essential role in the classroom, and their interaction, behaviours and teaching approach shape the classroom environment and the interaction taking place in the classroom (Blatchford et al., 2016; Pianta et al., 2016; Rix et al., 2009a; Spencer, 2014; Webb & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2011).

Therefore, these interactions could act as an example for the rest of the students in the classroom. In addition, teachers' approach to their instruction to their pupils and their organisation of the context could positively or negatively influence the social interaction between children with disabilities, including children with Autism, and peers (Audley-Piotrowski et al., 2015; Rix et al., 2009).

The study findings supported by the literature outline the teacher's role in promoting interactions between children with Autism and peers when their support and interactions promote the participation of children with Autism with their peers. This finding supports the potential connection between positive interactions, support, and participation with the positive inclusion of some of these children with Autism in their schools. Furthermore, the interconnection between positive interactions and provision of support towards participation also emerged in the support classroom, facilitating the interactions between children with Autism, teachers and peers. The next section discusses this finding and outlines its potential equilibrium toward the inclusion of children with Autism in schools.

7.2.4. The support classroom: A potential equilibrium towards inclusion

The interactions between children with Autism, their teachers and peers appeared positive for most of the children. These interactions involved close contact and the deployment of tailored and focused one-on-one support with rewards of their interest. While in the main classroom, the interactions between teachers and children with Autism varied depending on the type and level of support required to participate in classroom activities with their peers.

The different educational approaches between classroom teachers and support teachers in relation to educating children with Autism outlined that classroom teachers tend to focus on the whole class, while support teachers work with students individually or in small groups (Brown & McIntosh, 2012; Cameron, 2014). However, the benefits of

one-on-one support have been highlighted (Rose et al., 2012; Rose & Shevlin, 2020). Some authors argue that separating children with disabilities from the main classroom to provide extra support could negatively affect their perception of ability from teachers and peers (Cook & Cameron, 2010; Nel et al., 2014; Soodak & McCarthy, 2015).

What can be learned from these findings is that good interaction is the basis of close relationships, and the use of tailored support to facilitate and promote participation in classroom activities promotes the inclusion of children with Autism. In addition, when a similar approach (good interactions, tailored support towards participation) was implemented in the main classroom with some of the children, the outcomes promoted the participation and interactions between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers. Therefore, these similarities between both settings (support and main classroom) must be considered and further investigated.

In conclusion, positive interactions between teachers and children with Autism, underpinned by support towards participation with the collaboration of the SNA, seem to foster further interactions and participation between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers. Nevertheless, the study findings also revealed a series of barriers that inhibited interactions among the actors and, thus the inclusion of children with Autism in their schools.

7.3. Barriers to the interactions between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers in the classroom, support classroom and the playground.

The current research findings outlined that when the interactions between teachers and children with Autism were disconnected in the classroom, with limited support and limited participation, it seemed to negatively influence further interactions. It appeared that the type of interactions, the negotiation of support and the limited participation of these children placed them in the periphery of their classrooms and

playground, limiting their inclusive education. The next sections discuss these barriers concerning current and past literature.

7.3.1. Teachers' limited interactions and support in the classroom

In the current study, there were situations where the interactions between teachers and children with Autism in the classroom were limited and disconnected. Previous studies exploring the relationship⁹ between teachers and children with Autism demonstrated that teachers tend to have poorer relationships with these children compared with pupils with other disabilities and typically developing peers (Blacher et al., 2014). Moreover, it appears that poor relationships between teachers and children with disabilities could prevail over time and be transferred from teacher to teacher over the years (Blacher et al., 2009).

However, the study findings revealed that the disconnection between teachers and children with Autism was more evident, with children with Autism receiving more support (i.e., full-time SNA, accommodations, ST) and during structured and formal activities such as literacy and numeracy. Some researchers contended that the explanation for the limited relationship (and therefore interactions) between teachers and students with Autism could rest on these children's unique characteristics (Blacher et al., 2009, 2014; Longobardi et al., 2012). However, other authors argued that the intertwining of personal and environmental factors should be considered when examining the potential reasons behind these limited relationships (and interactions) between teachers and students (Eisenhower, & Blacher, 2016; Eisenhower et al., 2015a; Santos et al., 2016; Spörer et al., 2021).

⁹It has been found in the literature that despite the important role played by interactions and relationships, research examining interactions between teachers and children with Autism are scarce in the literature. For that reason, previous studies examining relationships have been considered for the purpose of this discussion in relation to this finding.

In the present study, the limited contact between teachers and children with Autism was accompanied by a lack of support and passing of effective responsibility for these children to the SNA. This finding echoed those of other studies, which concluded that teachers tend to spend less time with children with Autism in the classroom, particularly during structured activities, and that children with Autism spend most of their time with the SNA (Butt, 2016; Emam & Farrell, 2009; Webster et al., 2015; Cameron, 2014).

Nevertheless, this form of support seemed to isolate these children from their teachers' support limiting their participation with their fellow students. It has been demonstrated that teachers' interactions potentially affect the teaching and learning of pupils, particularly those with disabilities (Rix et al., 2009). In addition, the lack of interactions between teachers and pupils has been confirmed as negatively influencing the academic, social and emotional learning and development of students, including those with disabilities (Goodall, 2018; Hamre et al., 2014; Nepi et al., 2013; Prince & Hadwin, 2013; Rose & Shevlin, 2017). Therefore, a provision of support (i.e., SNAs, accommodations) that isolates children with Autism from their teachers and peers seems to need urgent review.

Therefore, in accordance with previous research and as outlined in the study findings, teachers' interactions with children with Autism could define their responsiveness to the needs of children with Autism and their organisation of instruction and support (Allen et al., 2013; Cameron, 2014; Caplan, 2016; Hamre et al., 2012). For example, for some of the children with Autism in the study, the support provided by the SNA comprised working separately from the group and being isolated from the teacher's direct support. This form of education appeared to limit the interactions and participation of these children with their teachers and fellow students. As it occurred with Peter, who worked at the back of the classroom with his SNA for structured and formal activities; when he joined his group table for activities such as Art, he was not embraced and

supported by his teacher and peers when he seemed lost. It took the SNA to provide him with the appropriate support that assisted him in accomplishing the task. Peter finished the artwork once he was told what he had to do. However, his teacher did not provide support and seemed to rely on the SNA support for this matter. In summary, Peter stood beside his peers during the activity with limited interactions, support and participation despite his attempts to initiate contact with his peers.

The study found that the interactions between children with Autism and peers were less reciprocal for children with limited contact with their teachers, lack of support and limited participation with their peers. This finding is also supported by other studies stating that the disconnection between teachers and children with Autism in the classroom (i.e., limited support and interpersonal interactions) could influence their academic and social learning (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Longobardi et al., 2016; Robertson et al., 2003).

As confirmed by previous research, the interactions between teachers and children with Autism play an important role in the inclusion of children with Autism. It appears that teachers' interactions could lead to their management of support which could influence these children's participation and further interactions with teachers and peers. The study findings emphasise the SNA support as relevant in promoting further interactions and the participation of children with Autism with the group. However, their deployment and management of support seemed to have different consequences on the interactions and inclusive education of children with Autism. The negative consequences of the SNA support in the interactions among the actors are discussed in the next section along with current literature.

7.3.2. The unintended negative consequences of the SNA support

Studies concerning the role and presence of the (SNA) confirmed that their support facilitates the navigation of children with Autism in regular schools. SNAs are

considered relevant by parents and educators to enable the inclusion of children with Autism in schools, particularly in their early years (Rose, 2000). The deployment of SNAs ensures children with Autism continuity and facilitates their engagement and focus in the classroom (Blatchford et al., 2009). Additionally, they reduce tensions between children with Autism and their fellow students (Blatchford et al., 2009; Emam & Farrell, 2009).

However, as outlined in the current research findings, the role and presence of the SNA could imply unintended negative consequences. It appeared that the closer the interactions between children with Autism and the SNAs, the more disengaged the interactions between children with Autism, teachers, and peers. The support and presence of the SNA seemed to be linked with some of these children's isolation, dependency, and fear of stigma. The following section discusses these findings in relation to previous literature.

a) SNA Support and isolation

The current research revealed that for some children with Autism, the SNA support seemed to isolate them from their teachers and peers. The isolation appeared more evident in children with Autism with full-time support, in particular those whose teaching and learning occurred in the classroom but separated from their teachers and peers. This finding concurs with previous studies outlining the unintended negative consequences of the SNA support in the achievements and developments of children with Autism in school. For example, Blatchford and Webster (2013) confirmed that the support of the SNA acted as a barrier to the interaction between children with disabilities, teachers and peers (Webster et al., 2013). Other studies demonstrated that the role of the SNA influences the social and academic achievement of children with Autism in schools, their independence and interactions (Blatchford et al., 2009; Blatchford et al., 2011; Butt, 2016; Giangreco & Doyle, 2007b; Webster & Blatchford, 2019).

In addition, the study revealed that separating children with Autism from their teachers and peers for their teaching and learning appeared to act as a barrier to their interactions, support and participation with the group. In the present study, alongside the support provided during classroom activities, SNAs encouraged pupils and these children to play in the playground. However, as seen with Peter and Max, when the SNA was absent, the interactions between these children with their peers were absent. In most cases, these children's attempts to initiate contact were missed by their peers, placing those with Autism in the periphery of their peers' network. This finding has been replicated in other studies demonstrating that the SNA presence and support can have a negative impact on the social participation of children with disabilities in regular schools (Alborz et al., 2009). Malmgren supported the assertion that the proximity of paraprofessionals (i.e., SNAs) negatively impacts children with emotional and behavioural difficulties and their interactions with peers in regular schools (Malmgren & Causton-Theoharis, 2006).

Furthermore, the research findings outlined that isolation also occurred when the presence and support of the SNA adopted a pedagogical role, in other words, when the SNA assisted these children in their teaching and learning. For example, in the case of Max, it was common to see the SNA outside the classroom going through the classroom lesson with Max, who was unsettled to remain inside the room. Similarly, Paul's SNA wrote in the workbook Paul's verbal answers. A strategy that was scrapped by the teacher when she was reviewing Paul's performance. In most cases, the SNAs helped these children complete their workbooks without the supervision of the classroom teachers by applying strategies that could negatively influence their learning.

Some researchers contend that when the SNA support adopts a teaching role, it influences the quality of children with disabilities' teaching and learning because SNAs are not qualified teachers. Additionally, it seems to act as a barrier to the support and interactions between children with Autism and teachers due to the reliance and

dependency of teachers on SNA support (Butt, 2016; Giangreco et al., 2014; Webster et al., 2013). Further studies also suggested that the pedagogical support of the SNA interfered with the achievements and interactions of children with Autism (Fletcher-Campbell et al., 2010; Webster et al., 2011; Webster & Blatchford, 2015; Giangreco & Doyle, 2007; Webster & Blatchford, 2013, Symes & Humphrey, 2012).

As Webster and colleagues confirm, the SNA support needs further consideration, particularly when undertaking responsibilities they are not equipped to perform (Webster & Blatchford, 2015). As Giangreco asserted, children with no disabilities would not be supported academically by SNAs in the classroom and the playground. Therefore it should not be acceptable that those with more difficulties are taught by less qualified personnel (Giangreco, 2010; Giangreco et al., 1997 & 2014).

The support of the SNA can also generate dependency on children with Autism which could influence their interactions and participation. The role of the SNA can also generate dependency on their support (Giangreco et al., 2010).

b) Dependency on the SNA support

The current research findings revealed that children with full-time SNA support developed close and dependent interactions with their SNAs. In addition, the closer their interactions, the greater the disconnection between children with Autism, teachers, and fellow students. For example, Max and Peter seemed lost when their SNAs were absent from the classroom. In addition, despite their presence in the classroom, they did not seem to receive any support from their teachers, as occurred with Peter in Artwork and Max during a mathematics lesson.

This finding concurs with previous studies confirming the potential dependency acquired by children with Autism who spend most of their time in schools with the support of the SNA. It appears that their constant prompts and cues and close support in navigating the school environment could be detrimental to the academic and social

development and independence of children with Autism in schools (Blatchford et al., 2011; Giangreco, 2010). Furthermore, the SNA support seems to generate an imaginary bubble that isolates children with Autism and SNAs from teachers and peers (Butt, 2016; Symes & Humphrey, 2012).

The present study findings revealed that children with Autism with full-time SNA support were closer and more dependent on their SNA support, for example, Max, Sean and Peter. In these cases, the almost motherly support seemed to influence these children's interactions and participation in the classroom. It appeared that their SNAs always supported these children, but in their absence, they seemed lost. More importantly, the support from teachers and peers seemed limited and, in some cases, absent when the SNA was not around, despite the intention of these children with Autism to take part. For example, Peter would hide in the library and the restroom when his SNA was absent without encouragement from his teacher to return with his peers.

This finding concurs with previous studies demonstrating the unintended negative consequences of children with disabilities' dependency on their SNAs' support. In addition, it is suggested from these studies that the close presence and support of the SNA, along with these children's dependency, can interfere with the interactions between children with Autism teachers and peers (Symes & Humphrey, 2012; de Boer & Pijl, 2016; Leonard & Smyth, 2020). However, there were also scenarios in the current research where the presence and support of the SNA were rejected, which could be interpreted as a fear of being seen different from their peers due to the support of the SNA.

c) Fear of stigma

Some of the children with Autism taking part in the study rejected the support of the SNA. Although these children seemed to have a good relationship with their SNAs and engaged well with them in conversation, they rejected their support and presence in

the classroom and the playground. The negative impact of the SNA support on children with disabilities in primary school and children with Autism in secondary school has been confirmed in previous research (Webster & Blatchford, 2013; Symes & Humphrey, 2012). Moreover, Hamre and colleagues argued that children with disabilities might feel embarrassed by the presence of the SNA because they associate their support with weakness and differentiation (Giangreco & Broer, 2005).

In conclusion, the study findings, strongly supported by previous research, suggest that the support of the SNA needs to be revised due to the likely link between the SNA support and the limited interactions between children with Autism, teachers and peers in the classroom and the playground. The support of the SNA is relevant to assist children with Autism in navigating the school context, particularly in the early years of their schooling (Abbott et al., 2011; Farrell et al., 2010; Rose, 2000). However, when the support provided alienates the child with Autism from the group and negatively influences the interactions between children with Autism, teachers and peers, this form of support is not working (UNESCO, 2016). Consequently, the support of the SNA in the classroom and the playground ought to ensure these children are included as members of the group, which is achieved when they participate with peers in all classroom activities. Thus support that does not promote participation and further interactions with all the members of the group, act as a barrier to inclusive education.

It is important to reiterate that the current research results do not imply that the SNA support is unnecessary or obsolete. Instead, when appropriately managed, the support provided to children with Autism is beneficial, as confirmed in previous research examining the benefits gained by children with disabilities and Autism with interventions implemented by SNAs (Camargo et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2020).

Despite the negative influence of the SNA support in the interactions between children with Autism and peers, the study shows that teachers' disconnection and lack of

participation acted as a barrier in the interactions between children with Autism and peers.

7.3.3. Teachers' disconnection, close SNA support and lack of participation as an inhibitor of the interactions between peers and Children with Autism

In regular schools, the social inclusion of children with Autism is considered an essential benefit and a key aspect for parents when deciding on the form of education for their children (Falkmer et al., 2015; Humphrey & Lewis, 2015; Jones & Frederickson, 2010). Furthermore, researchers have emphasised the importance of placing children with Autism among their peers, conveying that including children with Autism in regular schools enhances their social skills (Boutot & Bryant, 2005; Jones & Frederickson, 2010; Kasari et al., 2011). Additionally, it facilitates peers' understanding of diversity and acceptance of others regardless of race, sex and disability (Calder et al., 2013; Pellicano et al., 2018; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2019).

According to the study findings, some children with Autism had limited reciprocal interactions with their peers, which occurred in different scenarios throughout the study. For example, peers' non-reciprocal interactions seemed evident for children with full-time SNA support who worked with their SNAs separated from their peers while getting limited support from their teachers and limited participation in classroom activities. In addition, reciprocal interactions appeared evident under the teacher's guidance but were limited or absent without their support.

The finding concurs with previous studies concluding that children with Autism tend to have fewer reciprocal relationships in school and lower peer acceptance which places them at higher risk of bullying and exclusion from their peers' social networks. However, the focus of these studies placed the unique characteristics of children with Autism as the potential barrier to their limited interactions with their peers (Anderson et

al., 2016; Humphrey & Symes, 2011; Jones & Frederickson, 2010; Locke et al., 2016; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010; Symes & Humphrey, 2010).

Moreover, the current study revealed that in the playground, peers' reciprocal interactions did not occur naturally for some children with Autism, regardless of their attempts to initiate contact with their peers. For example, Laura's attempts to initiate contact with her peers in the playground and the classroom without the teacher's presence were always unsuccessful. Similarly, with Peter in the playground, when playing in the group of fours¹⁰. Peter's attempts to play with his peers (i.e., running beside them and smiling at them) did not translate into his embracement and full participation in the game. It is essential to highlight that all children with Autism participating in the study seemed happy when involved in the same activities with their peers in the classroom and the playground. Moreover, initiations and attempts to be included in their classmates' networks of friends occurred mostly from children with Autism, unsuccessful in some cases but successful in others. It was observed that children with Autism with more support and less participation alongside peers experienced less reciprocal interactions with their peers. Despite the lack of reciprocal interactions, children with Autism were eager to be with their peers, as shown by their proximity to peers and the smiles and laughter even when placed in the periphery of their peers' network of friends.

It has been demonstrated in previous studies that it is in the playground where children with Autism often experience more difficulties interacting with their fellow students (Couper et al., 2013; Kasari et al., 2011). In addition, these children are often placed on the periphery of their peers' games (Kasari et al., 2011) and may tend to engage more in solitary play and less time with peers (Locke et al., 2016). However, it is important to reiterate that these studies understood the unique characteristics of children with Autism as the potential reason for their lack of social contact. Nevertheless,

¹⁰ Strategy applied in the playground where four peers already assigned to play together for the duration of recess.

interactions are dyadic in that it involves more than one person. Therefore it cannot be inferred that the lack of interactions between children with Autism and peers is always due to the unique characteristics of children with Autism (Morton & Campbell, 2008). Furthermore, it has been suggested that some children with Autism have successful social interactions with their peers in the classroom and on the playground (Gilmore et al., 2019; Kasari et al., 2011; Santillan et al., 2019).

To conclude, the research's key messages, strongly supported by previous research, outline that the interconnection between interactions and support towards participation appears as a strong candidate to enable the inclusion of children with Autism in all in-school settings. It seems that to enable inclusive education, children with Autism must be fully placed in schools with appropriate interactions and support for their full participation. The following section further develops on these three dimensions (i.e., interactions, support and participation).

7.4. The research key message

Interactions between pupils, educators, SNAs and the context (i.e., the environment where interactions occur within the settings) occur in the day to day in schools and are the basic blocks that form the relationships between pupils and between pupils and educators (Blatchford et al., 2015). Previous studies outlined that students' learning in school walks alongside the relationships between teachers and students and between students (Blatchford et al., 2015; Pianta & Hamre, 2009; Wentzel, 2009). In addition, previous research confirmed the importance of exploring interactions to examine the inclusion of children with Autism in schools (Cameron et al., 2012; Robertson et al., 2003).

In the present study, interactions between children with Autism and teachers involve personal contacts in combination with instructional and organisational support, which are considered the basis of learning and development in schools (Hamre et al., 2013). In addition, it is understood that the interactions between children with Autism and

their peers involve playing together in the classroom and the playground, working together on tasks, participating in group activities, and (un) acknowledging initiations and social isolation (Koster et al., 2009).

The study findings reveal the critical role of the interactions between the different actors in the inclusion of children with Autism in schools. At the top of the hierarchy emerge the interactions between teachers and children with Autism. As directors of their classrooms, teachers regulated the provision of support to children with Autism. It appears that the interactions (at a personal, instructional, and organisational level) between teachers and children with Autism seemed to influence the deployment and management of support in the classroom (i.e., SNAs, STs, and Accommodations). In addition, the interactions and negotiation of support defined the level of participation of these children with their fellow students.

The present study outlined three different scenarios (see table 14) that varied according to the interconnection between three key dimensions: interactions, support and participation. The interconnection of these dimensions positioned children with Autism either central or in the periphery of the group. For example, children with Autism who required more support tended to have disconnected interactions with their teachers, resulting in a lack of support. In addition, teachers' management of support in the classroom involved the support of an SNA and accommodations that placed children with Autism to work in the classroom but separated from their teachers and peers. Separating practices occurred mainly during structured and formal activities, such as literacy and numeracy.

Nevertheless, for those children requiring more support (i.e., full-time SNA), the SNA support was constant throughout the school day. (e.g., SNA sitting beside children with Autism during lessons) (Scenario 2).

Table 14. Interactions, negotiation of support and participation

Children are in the periphery		Children are central to the group
Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher positive <u>interactions</u> ONLY during structured-informal and unstructured activities. • Teacher tailored <u>support</u> ONLY during structured-informal and unstructured activities. • Children with Autism <u>participate</u> with their peers ONLY during structured-informal and unstructured activities under teachers' guidance. • No <u>interactions</u> between children with Autism, teachers and peers. No participation among peers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers' <u>interactions</u> are disconnected during structured-formal activities • Teachers' interactions involve a lack of <u>support</u>. • Children with Autism do not <u>participate</u> with their peers. • SNA <u>support</u> children parallel to the group. Separating practices to learning • No <u>interactions</u> between children with Autism, teachers and peers. No participation among peers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers positive <u>interactions</u> • Teachers' interactions involve tailored <u>support</u>. (<u>emotional, instructional and organisational</u>) • SNA interactions involve <u>support</u> in collaboration with teachers' classroom teaching plan. • Children with Autism <u>participate</u> with their peers. • SNAs and Teachers have positive interactions to enable the participation of children with Autism. • Support Classroom, teachers' positive interactions, involved in tailored support which seemed to enable engagement and participation in classroom activities. • Teachers, Peers and SNAs have positive <u>interactions</u> with Children with Autism. Children with Autism participate in activities and interact positively with teachers, SNAs and peers.

Although aimed to assist the learning of children with Autism in school, the support provided by the SNA (through interactions) and the accommodations in the classroom appeared to inhibit further interactions with teachers and peers. In addition, it limited these children's direct support from their teachers and participation in classroom activities. It can be argued that differentiated support seems an acceptable option to enable children with Autism to access the curriculum in regular schools. Nevertheless, if the support provided inhibits the interactions between children with Autism, their

teachers, and peers and places them on the periphery of the group, this form of education requires consideration.

Consequently, the dimension of participation is identified in the study as key to promoting interactions between children with Autism, teachers, and peers. Nevertheless, participating in some activities with support did not guarantee further interactions between children with Autism, teachers and peers (Scenario 1). For example, the study outlined a lack of reciprocal interactions, mainly from peers towards children with Autism, which appeared to occur despite the intention of children with Autism to contact their classmates. The non-reciprocal interactions (from peers) were more evident in the absence of the adult and more predominant in the playground (Scenarios 1 and 2). However, when interactions between teachers and children with Autism occurred in all activities, and the support from the SNA, STs and accommodations were managed to guarantee the inclusion of children with Autism with their peers, it favoured further interactions, support and participation. More importantly, it enabled further contact between children with Autism and peers, placing them central to the group (scenario 3).

The study highlighted the differences between the general and support classrooms. Support teachers, in general, had positive interactions that led to support and participation in the support classroom for almost all children with Autism taking part in the study except for Max. The support provided by the support teacher and the promotion of participation was accompanied by these children's engagement and positive interactions, a scenario less common in the general classroom. It was also noticed that the behaviour experienced in the general classroom was different in the support classroom. As if the tailored attention and support provided by the support teacher to facilitate these children's learning through participation enhanced positive interactions among the education actors and engagement from children with Autism in activities in the support classroom.

A primary reason for parents to place their children with Autism in regular schools is to facilitate their interactions with other classmates (De Boer et al., 2010; De Boer et al., 2013; Rix et al., 2013). The development of friendships not only helps children with Autism to acquire social skills, but it allows them to develop friendships with children in their local area, thereby building interactions outside the school (Bossaert et al., 2011; Garrote et al., 2017; Koster et al., 2009, 2010; Parsons et al., 2009). For that reason, facilitating the participation of children with Autism in all activities with their peers could enable further interactions and friendships to facilitate the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools (Blatchford et al., 2016; Bossaert et al., 2013). This research revealed an important aspect that relates to the different interactions between children with Autism and peers in the playground and the classroom. This finding highlights that inclusive education is a work in progress that requires close review at each level of the school microsystem, especially concerning the interactions between children with Autism and peers and the potential negative consequences that the lack of interaction between peers and children with Autism in some or all settings could have in their inclusive education as a whole in school.

The research findings contribute to the field of inclusive education and the inclusion of children with Autism in the early years of regular primary schools in several areas. First, it reveals the important role played by the interactions among all participants in facilitating or inhibiting the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools. In particular, it emphasises the interactions between teachers and children with Autism as the bridge for further interactions. It also revealed the important modelling role with peers and other professionals linked with teachers' positive interactions with children with Autism. Second, it highlights that for participation to be successful and inclusive, it must be underpinned by appropriate support and embedded within the teaching plan of the classroom. In addition, it must promote participation in all activities, avoiding practices that separate children with Autism from teachers and peers. Third, it demonstrates that

the participation of children with Autism with their classmates is key for further interactions and necessary to promote inclusive education. Fourth, it outlines that the lack of reciprocal interactions from peers toward children with Autism is an area of concern since it inhibits further interactions and the inclusion of children with Autism among their peers. To finalise, it reveals the essential role of the context as a bridge to facilitate interactions, participation and support. The next chapter provides an overall overview of the current research, focusing on the study's contribution to knowledge.

CHAPTER 8 - RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

8.1. Introduction

The chapter presents the overall conclusions from this exploratory research concerning the interactions between eight children with Autism, their teachers, SNAs and peers in the classroom, the playground, and the support classroom. The structure of the chapter outlines first an overview of the study, including the rationale, literature review and methodology. The study findings are introduced by a metaphor, *the inclusive education dance*, intending to guide the reader on the essence of the research findings and the study contribution to knowledge. Finally, the chapter ends with a review of the research strengths and limitations and the researcher's journey.

8.2. Research overview

The current research is a small-scale, child-centred, qualitative, exploratory, multiple and embedded case study research underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm. The study involved five schools and eight children with autism, their classroom teachers, support teachers (ST), Special Needs Assistants (SNA), and peers in three in-school settings, the classroom, the playground and the support classroom.

For the last thirty years, the education of children with disabilities, including those with Autism, has been taking place in national schools. Their placement in those schools follows developments in international and national conventions, agreements and legislation advocating for the education of all children, regardless of their disability, in the same schools as their non-disabled peers (UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, 2006). Nevertheless, despite the advances, in policy and research in the field of inclusive education, children with Autism are still experiencing difficulties in regular schools. Moreover, they are excluded because they are not fit to adjust to the school system

(Florian, 2007; Frederickson et al., 2010; Goodall, 2015; Hornby, 2014; Lewis & Norwich, 2004).

It appears that the gap between policy and practice is still a work in progress in the inclusion of children with Autism in schools. For that reason, the present research investigated how the inclusion of children with Autism occurred in regular primary schools, focusing on the interactions between the different education actors in three in-school settings. The research aimed to shed light on the interactions and how they enabled or inhibited the inclusion of children with Autism in the early years of primary school.

According to the UNCRPD fundamentals, inclusive education involves a series of parameters reflected in the present research. Inclusion requires access, presence, participation and achievement (UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, 2006). Moreover, all pupils, including those with disabilities, should feel they belong to their school communities. Therefore, placing children with Autism in regular schools with accommodations to support their learning is insufficient if they are not involved in activities as active group members (Ainscow, 2020; Schuelka et al., 2020; Slee, 2013, 2019). In other words, if children with Autism dance in the corner of the classroom but not with their classmates, they do not belong to the group as active members. Moreover, inclusive education is successful to the extent to which it promotes full interactions and participation with peers (UNESCO, 2016). If children with Autism in school can not participate with their peers in the same activities and can not interact with teachers and peers, then inclusive education is not happening.

In general terms, interactions are conceptualised as communication and direct involvement with someone (Koegel et al., 2012; Luckner & Pianta, 2011). In the context of school, interactions are relevant since they are the basic blocks of relationships, which are central to the academic, social, and emotional development of all students in schools (Arbeau et al., 2010; Hamre et al., 2013; Henricsson & Rydell, 2004). In addition, within

the school micro-level (i.e., classroom, playground, and support classrooms), interactions involve communication and involvement between pupils, educators, and SNAs. Positive relationships between students and teachers and among students have been demonstrated in previous research as positive and determinant in students' academic, social, and emotional development. Previous studies with students with no disabilities outlined that the relationship between teachers and students emerged as pivotal in the classroom and a contributing factor for the optimal development of students in school. Moreover, studies also confirmed the influence of positive relationships on the motivation and engagement of pupils in school activities. Conversely, negative relationships between teachers and students have been shown as detrimental to pupils' development and progress in schools (Braaten, 2018; Farmer et al., 2011; Feldman et al., 2019; Hughes, 2012; Kaweski, 2011; Sointu et al., 2017; Walker & Graham, 2019). In addition, previous studies on children with Autism highlighted the importance of interactions in studying the inclusion of children with Autism in schools (Cameron, 2014; Robertson et al., 2003).

Previous Research exploring the interactions and relationships between teachers and children with Autism is scarce. In addition, research examining the relationship between children with Autism and teachers highlighted their negative relationships due to the different social and academic styles associated with children with Autism (Longobardi et al., 2012). Furthermore, the relationship between students has been confirmed relevant in setting the basis for friendships and determinants in students' academic, social, and emotional development in primary and secondary schools. On the contrary, social interactions and relationships, if not experienced as positive (i.e., leading to bullying and victimisation), can be detrimental to the engagement, motivation, and development of students in schools (Hebron et al., 2015, 2017; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Hebron & Humphrey, 2015; Koster et al., 2010; Macintosh & Dissanayake, 2006).

Additionally, research exploring interactions between teachers and children with Autism and SNAs and children with Autism focused on interactions as verbal communications related to teachers' instruction in the classroom. The studies failed to include other aspects such as personal contact, contextual organisation (e.g., classroom), and instructional support (Hamre et al., 2014). Consequently, in the present study, the operationalisation of interactions between teachers and children with Autism and between SNAs and children with Autism is guided by Hanre and Pianta (2013)'s understanding of interactions. The authors proposed that interactions between pupils and teachers are guided by three broad domains: a) emotional support, b) classroom organization, and c) instructional support. In addition, the interactions between children with Autism and peers are guided by Koster et al. (2009) conceptualisation. The Authors acknowledged five key themes related to interactions/contact, a) playing together, b) working together on tasks, c) Participation in group activities, d) (un)acknowledged initiations, and e) Social isolation (Koster et al., 2009).

Overall, the literature review confirmed that most research concerning student-teacher interactions focused on children without disabilities, with a small number of studies examining relationships between teachers and children with Autism (Blacher et al., 2009, 2014; Brown & McIntosh, 2012; Caplan, 2016; Feldman et al., 2019; Longobardi et al., 2016). In addition, studies of the interactions between children with Autism and classroom assistants are scarce. Moreover, previous research revealed a lack of qualitative studies examining the interactions between children with Autism, educators and peers (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Kasari et al., 2011; Robertson et al., 2003; Santillan et al., 2019). Most of these studies used a mixed-methods approach, which involved the educators' views. In addition, these studies viewed the different social and cognitive styles of children with Autism as the main barrier to their relationships and interactions with others in school (Anderson et al., 2016; Bossaert et al., 2011; Kasari et al., 2011; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010; Sterrett et al., 2017). Consequently,

understanding how interactions occurred in schools for children with Autism could shed light on how they are included within their schools' communities.

The gap in the literature directed the researcher to explore the interactions between children with Autism with all relevant participants at the school microlevel (Cameron, 2014; Emam & Farrell, 2009; Symes & Humphrey, 2012; Symes & Humphrey, 2012). This approach, which had not been taken before, to the researcher's knowledge, provided a robust and rich understanding of the nuances and difficulties of the interactions. In addition, the involvement of different participants and settings illuminated similarities and differences in these interactions. It also provided knowledge on the barriers and inhibitors to these interactions and the extent to which interactions favoured and inhibited the inclusion of children with Autism in the early years of regular primary schools in Ireland.

An exploratory involving education actors and settings required a qualitative approach that could provide rich and holistic data on the nuances of these interactions. Additionally, the context was essential to this research since these contexts bound the interactions. Therefore the best methodology for this type of research was a multiple-embedded case study design to explore holistically, and in-depth a real-life problem bounded within the context (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). In addition, the methodology was supported by a non-participatory observation as the most appropriate method of data collection.

Semi-structured, non-participant observations enabled the gathering of holistically, in-depth descriptive data concerning the naturally occurring interactions between the actors in different contexts (Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell, 2014). Although using other methods of data collection, such as interviews, could have provided richer data, it was agreed that this information did not tackle the main aim of this research, which was to explore how the interactions among the actors took place. In other words, the purpose of the study was to understand what was happening at the school micro

level, instead of gaining knowledge on why it was occurring, which has been more profusely reported in the literature (Silverman, 2013). It was understood that in gathering knowledge about the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools, the focus should be on the day to day in the classrooms, the playground and the support classroom. Searching to understand what happened at the school micro level led the researcher to focus on the interactions gathered through observations rather than interviews or other documents, providing an original contribution to knowledge.

However, adjusting the approach in the course of the research process entailed ethical and integrity considerations due to the participants' agreement to take part in a study that, although it kept the original aim, adjusted the design after the data had been collected. It is important to reiterate that transparency and clarity must be exercised at all times during research, and any changes during the research process must be presented with clarity and transparency.

The data gathered was analysed following a thematic analysis from the eight case studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, each case study was analysed individually, followed by the analysis across cases, identifying the six overarching themes that comprise the essence of the present research (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2011).

1. Teachers' interactions: the bridge to support and participation.
2. Support: the two sides of the coin.
3. Participation at the core of interactions.
4. The lack of peers' reciprocal interactions, a block to inclusion.
5. The context as a bridge to interactions.
6. Lessons learned from the support classroom.

The next section presents the metaphor of *the inclusive education dance* as an introduction to the study findings

8.3. The inclusive education dance

The *inclusive education dance* is a metaphor comprising the essence of this research findings. The analogy represents schools that have been assigned a dance for the end of the school year. One of the schools appointed two classrooms to represent the school in the show finale, Classroom A and Classroom B. The dance routine involved a series of steps that required the dancers to dance individually and in interaction.

In Classroom A, the choreographer (teacher) prepared for the show by assessing all dancers' strengths throughout individual interactions. One of the dancers (the child with Autism) struggled to follow the group; thus, the choreographer arranged tailored support with the assistants' help and input (SNA and ST). Every day, all dancers practised their steps and routine together with the choreographer and assistant support. The choreographer and assistants provided help in situ and succinctly to the dancer who required support, enabling this dancer to practice along with the group. On the day of the show, Classroom A performance was well structured, and the group danced in coordination, following the routine smoothly and interacting with each other accordingly. The dancer who had struggled at the start of the practice performed well with the group without any support.

In Classroom B, the choreographer (i.e., the Teacher) informed all dancers about the show and the dance routine and arranged the practice schedule. On the first day of practice, one of the dancers had trouble following the group and the choreographer, who was under pressure to have the show ready on time, arranged for the assistants to help the dancer by allocating the dancer's practice separated from the group. The schedule of the group involved the same routine every day; the dancer (child with Autism) practised with the assistants, while the rest of the dancers (peers) practised with the choreographer. On the day of the show, Classroom B performance was well structured, and the group danced well-coordinated, interacting while following the routine. However, one of the dancers (the child with Autism) was on the periphery. Every time the dancer

attempted to join in, the group refused to accept the dancer because they were unsure about the dancer's position within the dance routine. In the end, the assistants and the choreographer asked the dancer (a child with Autism) to leave the stage because the behaviour interfered with the group performance.

In conclusion, the inclusive education dance for children with Autism in school requires that all children have access, presence, participation, and achievement (Ainscow et al., 2006; Azorín & Ainscow, 2020; Slee, 2018, 2019). Classroom teachers are the choreographers in charge of coordinating the "inclusive education dance". While the Support teachers, Special Needs Assistants, and school accommodations (i.e., electronic equipment, calming areas, retreat areas in the classroom, to mention some) are the support provided to help all children who may require support learning the routine of the dance. When children with Autism interacted and practised the dance routine with their peers, with support when required, the group performance was congruent with the inclusive education dance. However, when children with Autism learn their dance routine separated from their peers, children with Autism, teachers, SNAs, and peers miss the opportunity to interact and learn the inclusive education dance together.

8.4. Research findings

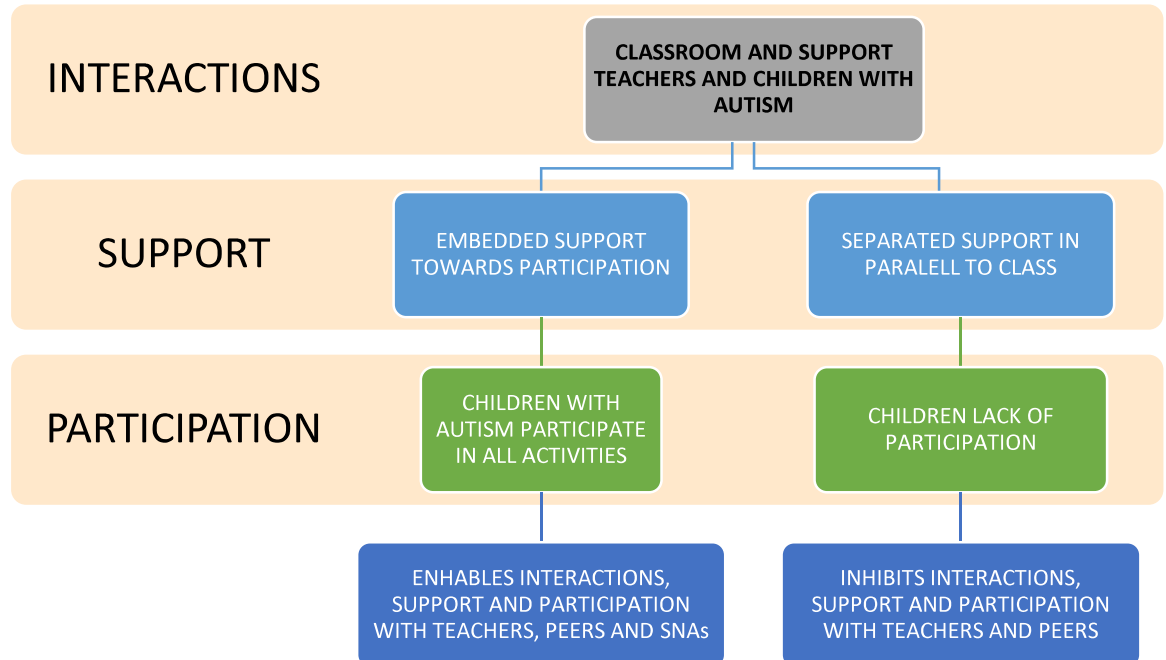
The research findings highlighted the complexities of the interactions between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers in the classroom, the playground, and the support classroom. It was evident that exploring dyadic interactions (i.e., children with Autism and peers, teachers, or SNAs) was insufficient to understand how interactions occurred. In the findings, interactions emerged as a complex concept beyond communication and direct involvement with someone. Interactions within the school context comprised personal contact between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers, as well as comprised teacher-students interactions involving emotional support, instructional support (i.e., teachers and SNAs) and the organisation of the context (i.e., accommodation). Consequently, interactions between children with Autism,

teachers, SNAs and peers were associated with personal contact (e.g., working together, playing together) but also with support for their learning.

The support in the classroom came from the hand of the teacher who managed and deployed her support and the support from other sources (i.e., SNA and accommodations) to enable the teaching and learning of children with Autism. The interactions between teachers and children with Autism involved personal contact but also the teachers' support to facilitate the child's participation and learning. As it occurred in the metaphor, their interactions between teachers and children with Autism defined the deployment of support (teacher and SNA, accommodations) in the classroom and thus these children's participation.

An important aspect revealed in the study findings is the interconnection between interactions, support and participation. These three key dimensions are identified in the study as core in the promotion of further interactions which could enable or inhibit the inclusion of children with Autism in schools (see figure 1).

Figure 1. The dynamics of interactions, support, participation, and teacher practices



As it occurred in the dance metaphor, if we position children with Autism in the corner of the classroom with the constant support of the SNA, the message sent to these children, their peers, teachers and SNAs, is that they are different because they cannot dance at the same speed as their peers. Consequently, the interactions defined the support provided, which alienated these children from their teachers and peers, inhibiting further interactions and participation. Therefore, providing children with Autism with support to enable their learning in regular schools does not seem enough if it impedes further interactions and participation. Following the fundamentals of inclusive education, children with disabilities (and Autism) must be provided with appropriate support to help them achieve their full potential at their pace and with their classmates (UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, 2006).

Nevertheless, interactions between teachers and children with Autism embracing the diversity of these children within the classroom teaching and learning plan appeared to facilitate these children's participation and further interactions with teachers, SNAs and peers. Similar to the support classroom, the educators' interactions in the general classroom envisaged these children's needs, defining the support provided for the participation of children with Autism with their peers. For example, Joe needed to scribble on the whiteboard during transitions to remain calm and engaging during lessons. In addition, Carl benefited from having his teacher beside him during lessons to ensure his understanding before moving to the next topic. This form of interaction between teachers and children with Autism involving the deployment of support towards their participation in all activities appeared to favour further interactions.

Moreover, teachers positive interactions with children with Autism set an example of good practices to the other pupils and professionals. Therefore, children with Autism who are provided with support to learn their dance routine with their peers are given the opportunity to interact and learn with them. In addition, it provides them with the benefit of interacting and receiving support directly from their choreographers (i.e., their teachers). This finding concurs with the findings from the support classroom. The interactions between children with Autism and support teachers reflect positive interactions with support with the right approach towards the participation of children with Autism in the classroom. Thus, reinforcing that interaction and appropriate support towards participation favours further interactions and facilitates the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools.

Participation in classroom activities emerged in the study findings as a key dimension concerning the inclusion of children with Autism at the school micro level. It appeared that children who participated in classroom activities at their pace with tailored and succinct support were perceived as a member of the group, not only by the adults but, more importantly, by their peers. According to the fundamentals of inclusive

education, children with Autism should participate in classroom activities to develop academically, socially and emotionally (UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, 2006).

However, the study also revealed limited reciprocal interactions from peers in the classroom and, more importantly, in the playground, showing a potential disconnection between the actors' interactions and the settings. Overall, children with Autism seemed eager to participate and interact with their peers in the classroom and on the playground. However, in the absence of educators and their appropriate supportive practices, these children's attempts to initiate contact with their peers were misinterpreted. In line with the metaphor, when children with Autism are learning parallel to their peers, it could generate an understanding that these children are different and incapable of dancing with the group, potentially influencing how their peers perceive and interact with them. The study findings frequently reveal the lack of reciprocal interactions from peers with children with Autism, particularly in the playground, where they have more room to set friendships.

Reciprocal interactions between children with Autism and their peers in school are necessary to enable their inclusion. Therefore, if they are not included in their peers' network, this could exclude them from the classroom and playground communities. For example, if children with Autism are not learning the dance choreography with their peers, both miss the opportunity to interact and learn the routine dance together. More importantly, when they attempt to dance together, their dance is uncoordinated, and eventually, the child with Autism is removed from the show. The research findings outlined a series of areas where the study contributed to the knowledge of interactions and the inclusion of children with Autism in schools.

8.5. The study contribution to knowledge

Research in inclusive education needs to focus on the school micro level to understand the nuances and complexities of inclusion in practice. However, most research has concentrated on the challenges at the macro level (government, schools)

with a focus on educators' training and the allocation of support and provision of resources to schools. Arguably the focus on research has rested on providing support to the challenges experienced by those catering for the inclusion of children with Autism in schools, seemingly generated by the different academic, emotional and social styles associated with children with Autism (Azorín & Ainscow, 2020; Leonard & Smyth, 2022; Mamas et al., 2021; Messiou et al., 2016; Slee et al., 2019). The present study goes deeper in providing a novel approach to the study of inclusion in practice using a close perspective of the interactions among the education actors while also applying a systemic frame to the study by including three different school settings. This approach helps uncover a whole range of issues and insights, considering interactions, support, and participation, which can stimulate policy development and practice at the frontline of inclusive education.

The thesis contributes to the knowledge of inclusive education by outlining two important areas to consider when exploring the implementation of inclusive education in practice. In particular when searching for paths that will better enable the inclusion of children with Autism. These two areas refer to a) the research approach, which is related to a systemic approach to research at the school micro level (i.e., different settings and actors), and b) the content focus, which acknowledges interactions, support and participation as three intertwined dimensions. The systemic approach involving the education actors in different settings facilitates gaining knowledge about the school dynamics and the nuances and complexities arising in practice. In addition, the interactions among all participants in all settings reveal different paths that appear to be associated with the level of support and participation, which at the same time shed light on paths that enable and inhibit inclusion. Overall, the study findings highlight the importance of the different actors in the inclusion 'project' and how interactions between the actors in different formats (dyadic or groups) influence the performance and

experience (or not) of inclusion. Some examples of how this study contributes to the inclusive education discourse are outlined next.

1. Interactions as a research focus to enhance inclusive education

Interactions, in the study, emerged as a powerful research focus in the inclusion of eight children with Autism in their schools. The research outlined the importance of involving all education actors at the school microlevel framed within a systemic approach to explore the dynamics of inclusive education in different school settings. The systemic approach implemented in the study (i.e., the interactions between all education actors in three in-school settings) shed light on practices that enabled or inhibited the inclusion of these children with Autism in their schools. More specifically, by observing how the interactions happened among the education actors in the three in-school settings, support and participation became apparent to understand inclusive education in practice. Support emerged as a facilitator or inhibitor of inclusion, and participation was revealed as the outcome of positive, inclusive education for the children with Autism taking part in the study.

Research taking into consideration all education actors in different settings from a qualitative approach to research is scarce. Most research explored interventions, strategies, attitudes and potential factors that could interfere with or enhance the inclusion of children with Autism in schools (Anglim et al., 2018; Chamberlain et al., 2007; Devecchi & Rouse, 2010; Garrad et al., 2019). However, these studies failed to consider that inclusive education formed a system with interrelated parts. Thus, previous research has focused on the parts on their own, as opposed to acknowledging how the whole (i.e., education actors and settings), from a close perspective, can contribute to the knowledge of better paths to enhance the inclusion of children with Autism in schools.

Consequently, translating this novel approach to the school microlevel can enable gaining knowledge and understanding about all different parts and how they

operate on their own and as a whole. In other words, it acknowledges the importance of the education actors and the context, as well as their interrelations and interactions, as the way forward to understanding the practicalities in the inclusion of children with Autism at the school micro level. In the current study, interactions are portrayed as a research focus, a tool to explore inclusive education in practice at the school micro level. In particular when the interactions among the education actors in the different settings are linked with support (personal, instructional, and organisational) to promote the participation of all children with Autism alongside their peers. Thus, the interrelation between interactions, support, and participation, can shed light on the nuances and complexities of inclusion in practice at the school micro level.

2. Interactions, Support and Participation; key concepts in the inclusion of children with Autism

The study highlights the importance of understanding inclusive education as an evolving process framing interactions, support and participation together as a path to enable the inclusion of children with Autism alongside their peers (Ainscow, 2020). Interactions, support and participation are three concepts or dimensions that have not been considered together in previous research exploring the inclusion of children with Autism (Pennings et al., 2014). The study highlights that the interactions, which are the focus of this study, appeared to be linked with support, which enabled further interactions when the support facilitated children with Autism in the study to participate alongside their peers. In addition, these children's participation in structured and unstructured activities in the classroom and the playground was closely related to how their interactions materialised with their teachers and peers.

For example, the study revealed that when children with Autism interacted directly with their teachers and received tailored support to enable their participation in all school activities, the interactions among all education actors in the three settings seemed fluid. In addition, these children contributed and participated in school activities

alongside their peers. Conversely, when the interactions between children with Autism and their teachers were disconnected, (in some or all of the activities in the classroom), the allocation of support (i.e., SNA and accommodations) seemed to separate these children from their peers. This form of interaction and support resulted in their lack of participation, as evidenced by a limited contribution to the learning process and a reduced number of interactions from teachers and peers with these children with Autism. Therefore, acknowledging the interactions among all actors in different settings, and considering how support is navigated to enable the participation of these eight children with Autism, highlights the practicalities of inclusive education.

The study reveals the important role of these three dimensions when acknowledging their interconnection in the inclusion of children with Autism. An important aspect revealed in the study, considering interactions, support, and participation, relates to the role of the SNA and their relevancy as potential bridges in the inclusion of children with Autism in the classroom and the playground. Next, an example of SNA support being a facilitator or inhibitor of participation follows.

3. The SNA role as a path to enable inclusive education

The two sides of the coin emerged in this study, highlighting the important role of the SNA and how the interactions between SNAs and the different education actors in the three settings promoted (or not) an inclusive experience (i.e., participation alongside their peers). Most of the results from previous research outline the negative consequences associated with SNA support in schools (Butt, 2016; Sharma & Salend, 2016; Webster & Blatchford, 2013). Some of the present study findings feed and add to these results from previous studies. However, the study contributes to the knowledge of inclusive education and children with Autism concerning the positive outcomes of SNA support when their interactions and support are aligned to enable children with Autism to participate with their peers.

For example, an important aspect revealed in the study is the positive impact that collaborative support between teachers and SNAs had on the inclusion of some children with Autism (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010). In particular, the SNA supporting role to teachers enabled them to implement practices that facilitated further interactions and the participation and contribution of children with Autism alongside their peers (Simpson et al., 2018). Inclusive education is about dismantling barriers to facilitate the participation and learning of all children (Ainscow, 2005; Schuelka & Johnstone, 2012). Therefore, it must be clear that the basics must rest on ensuring the role of the SNA enables the participation of children with Autism with their peers instead of using the role of the SNA to implement practices that separate them from the group, which could interfere with the interactions between children with Autism and peers.

4. Children with Autism and their journey in regular schools

The current study reveals an area of concern regarding the inclusion of children with Autism taking part in the study. It highlights the limited interactions between peers and children with Autism and the loneliness that some children with Autism could experience in regular schools as a result. The study findings revealed that peers had limited interactions with children with Autism in the classroom and, more evidently, in the playground. This disconnection was more apparent with children with Autism with full-time SNA support and accommodations that separated their teaching and learning from their teachers and peers.

According to Ainscow (2016), children with disabilities and Autism should be included equitably in schools. This form of inclusion enables their academic, social and emotional development through participation alongside their peers with appropriate support (Ainscow, 2016). However, as Slee (2019) confirmed, without tailored support to enable their participation, the inclusion of children with disabilities can not materialise (Slee, 2019). Previous research has outlined the social and communication difficulties encountered by children with Autism in schools and the potential relationship between

their lack of social relationships and their different social styles (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Locke et al., 2016). Furthermore, research has also highlighted that the lack of social interactions seems to be related to the medical understanding of Autism (Hebron et al., 2015; Rotheram-Fuller, 2010; Symes & Humphrey, 2010). In addition, previous research confirmed that peers' acceptance could be associated with different factors such as the hand of the teacher (Farmer et al., 2018), the behaviour of pupils with and without disabilities (Bacete et al., 2017), and the group's acceptance (Luísa & Pereira, 2016; Chang, 2014).

Although this study findings resonate with previous research and emphasise the lack of interactions between peers and children with Autism, it outlines the importance of acknowledging the interactions between peers with children with Autism, taking into consideration factors other than children with Autism's different social styles. In this line, the findings of this study highlight the relevance of acknowledging the interactions among all education actors, including teachers and SNAs' negotiation of support to promote these children's participation in understanding paths to inclusive education.

In order for children with Autism to be fully included in their classrooms and playgrounds, they must be able to interact socially, which may result in the development of friendships with their peers (Gilmore et al., 2019). In addition, any pupil's academic and social development in the school is closely related to their interactions which are the building blocks of relationships, in their classrooms and playground (Koster et al., 2009, 2010). Therefore, promoting social interactions is key to implementing inclusive education, particularly for children with Autism.

In conclusion, this study contributed to the understanding of inclusive education in relation to children with Autism in the early years of regular primary schools by highlighting the importance that the different education actors have in the inclusion 'project'. In addition, it zooms into the interactions between the actors in different formats

(dyadic and group) and settings and their influence on the performance and experience (or not) of inclusion. Despite the limitations of the study, which are inevitable in small-scale PhD research, the research has opened up a fruitful area of exploration to understand inclusion in practice.

8.6. Research Strengths and Limitations

8.6.1. Research Strengths

One of the main strengths of this study rest in the methodology. A qualitative multiple-embedded case study research provided a meaningful, rich, detailed, and in-depth account of data concerning different interactions between the different actors in each setting. In addition, it added confidence to the findings since the evidence gathered from multiple cases is regarded as more compelling (Silverman, 2013; Yin, 2014).

Another strength rests in the method of data collection. The semi-structured non-participant observations provided first-hand rich and descriptive information concerning the interactions between the different actors in the settings without mediating their perceptions, beliefs, and experiences (Silverman, 2013). The study findings that flow from the observations and the research questions offer fresh insights and evidence about the micro-level realities of school life as they support or hinder the dynamic of inclusion for children with Autism (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Observation as a method of data gathering is highly recommended when exploring behaviours in natural settings (Blatchford & Webster, 2018; Cameron, 2014; Emam & Farrell, 2009) (Finkelstein et al., 2021). The literature is populated with research using observation as a method to explore interaction in natural settings involving children with Autism (Blatchford et al., 2015; Symes & Humphrey, 2011b, 2012). Nevertheless, previous research has relied on different quantitative and qualitative methods combined with observations to explore the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools (Blatchford et al., 2009; Moores, 2008; Symes & Humphrey,

2012; Webster & Blatchford, 2013). However, the data gathered with multiple methods that include the actors' views can unbalance the results, influenced by the actors' beliefs, attitudes, and wishes towards inclusion, contrasting with how they are implementing inclusion in practice (Ingleby, 2012; Silverman, 2013). However, despite the strengths of this research, it is not exempt from limitations. The following section outlines these research limitations.

8.6.2. Research Limitations

Qualitative studies can be criticised for being overly subjective, and the present study relies entirely on the researcher's observation as a form of data gathering. Two aspects should be taken into consideration in this case as potential limitations in the data. One is the presence of the researcher in the different settings and the potential influence on all actors' behaviour. The second is the potential bias that the researcher will add to organising and interpreting the data due to experience and personal and professional background. Acknowledging the research limitations enabled the researcher to prepare the approach to schools concerning the observations. In this line, the researcher always sat away from the rest of the class, providing distance from the participants and avoiding distracting pupils and educators. In addition, rapport was built with teachers and classroom assistants in advance, and interactions with children with Autism and peers were fluid when required, always under the presence of an adult and during free time. In addition, the researcher adopted a reflective approach and a reflexive stance through self-reflexivity and discussions with the supervisors during her work in the field and the data analysis, actively combating the risk of bias while remaining aware of the danger of the same.

In addition, when using direct non-participant observations with no other methods of data collection, such as interviews, the participants' perspective is missing. Other researchers have confirmed naturalistic observations as the best method to understand how inclusive education is implemented in practice (Finkelstein et al., 2021). Therefore, It

could be argued that it is a justified sacrifice to provide a first-hand account of what is happening in the field with observations as the only method of data collection. However, it is important to understand that adding the participants' perspectives can provide a more holistic understanding of what is done, why, and how it is perceived as being done. In addition, information on this line can provide insight into behavioural and practical patterns that could be seen as a barrier to the correct implementation of inclusive education (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013).

Issues in gaining access to children with Autism in schools and the resources in place can also be considered a limitation of the study. The sample was purposively selected following a series of criteria. Nevertheless, the time and budget constraints and difficulty accessing children with Autism in regular schools due to decisions by their stakeholders limited the number of children taking part in the study and the time spent in schools.

Another limitation concerns the variability of the sample and its size. The selection of the sample from a determined geographical and socioeconomic background aimed to have schools and families with children with Autism with similar resources concerning the support of children with Autism inside and outside the school. However, it limited the variability and size of the sample. It is acknowledged that desired samples are broader with a greater diversity of school types and community contexts. Nevertheless, this is, fundamentally, a small study designed to accommodate the realities of a PhD.

The generalisability of the findings can also be considered a limitation. Generalising findings from qualitative studies, in particular with children and schools, is complex. The sample in the present research was sufficient to provide relevant information on the complexities and nuances of the interactions between the different actors in three in-school settings. Nevertheless, it comports a challenge to generalisability, which is common in qualitative studies.

The key messages from the research findings concern the interconnection between interactions and support for participation. These three key dimensions appear as a strong candidate to enable the inclusion of children with Autism in all in-school settings. It seems that to facilitate a meaningful, inclusive education, children with Autism must be fully placed in schools with appropriate interactions and support for their full participation. The review of the school microlevel related to the classroom, playground and support classroom in this study has opened up a space for extending scholarship in the area of inclusive education for children with Autism. This approach could help uncover a range of issues and insights that stimulate research, policy, and practice.

8.7. Implications for research, policy and practice

8.7.1. Implication for research

This thesis raises further questions providing scope for future research to understand best practices to implement inclusive education and ensure participation in schools. In addition, the thesis highlights the power of interactions between the different education actors in different settings and how the provision of support can enable or limit the participation of children with Autism alongside their peers. This study included a small sample of children; therefore, the first recommendation is to further expand this research with a larger and more heterogeneous sample and incorporate different data collection methods. In addition, it is recommended that future research focuses on understanding better the paths to inclusion by paying attention to the type and level of support provided. In particular, how it is put into practice and whether it promotes or inhibits inclusive education.

1) Research including variability in the sample

The current research has answered the study questions related to how interactions took place and whether they acted as barriers or facilitators of participation. However, this research is small in scope, and thus further research is recommended to

forge studies to include, on the one hand, a more varied sample of children with Autism taking into account gender, age, and the support provided. On the other hand, this variability requires including different settings and education actors from different schools and countries to explore comparatively the practicalities (i.e., what happens and how) of inclusion at the school micro level. This research must consider all education actors and settings and the practices and strategies favouring participation. Further research in this line can provide knowledge on what enables and inhibits inclusive education, promoting at the same time further research on the positive paths to meaningful inclusion.

2) Research with different methods of data collection

Direct naturalistic observations have been accepted as the best form of data collection to capture the nuances and complexities related to the practicalities of inclusive education first-hand (Finkelstein et al., 2021; Gray, 2017). However, further research is recommended using qualitative observations, including a more significant number of children with Autism in different academic years. In addition, further research should include a variety of methods of data collection, such as interviews and focus groups. The aim of adding more methods of data collection can provide, on the one hand, the different perspectives and opinions of other education actors. However, on the other hand, it can help understand discrepancies between the information provided by interviews and the information collected with observations. As Gray acknowledged, 'observation provides an opportunity to get beyond people's opinions and self-interpretations of their attitudes and behaviours, towards an evaluation of their actions in practice'(Gray, 2017, pg 466). In addition, observations can reveal discrepancies between what the participants think they do and how they do it in practice (Gray, 2017).

3) Research exploring positive strategies for inclusion

As outlined previously in the study findings and contribution to knowledge, some teachers put into practice pedagogical strategies enabling the participation of some

children with Autism alongside their peers. These strategies took place during instruction and in the day-to-day dynamics of the school and provided tools to the children with Autism to learn and interact with all education actors. Positive strategies are relevant to ensure a meaningful, inclusive education. Therefore, further research could be conducted to gain knowledge on the different strategies put in place at the school micro level considering personal interactions, instruction, and structural accommodations (i.e., location in the classroom and use of buddy friends). The aim should rest on finding paths to move the inclusion project forward, focusing on the strategies that enable participation.

4) Research exploring the role of the SNA as a path to inclusion

The research findings outlined the positive outcomes in the inclusion of children with Autism associated with practices involving the SNA that facilitated the participation of children with Autism alongside their peers. However, further research is required to explore deeper the role of the SNA in relation to how their role supports inclusive education. For example, further research on how the role of the SNA when working under the guidance of teachers and support teachers to facilitate the participation and learning of children with Autism in schools would facilitate the implementation of inclusive education in schools.

5) Research exploring inclusion from peers' perspectives

The belonging of all pupils in schools is relevant for their academic, social and emotional development. Problems with belonging affect children with Autism and other pupils, and it is an area that requires constant review in schools to ensure the progress and development of all students (Bacete et al., 2017). In the case of children with Autism, their different social styles and approach to friendship may act as a barrier to their social inclusion and belonging to schools (Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010).

The current research findings outlined the difficulty encountered by some of the children participating in the study in their interactions with peers. Therefore, further research is required to learn about potential factors that could influence how children with Autism are included by their peers. For example, research about peers' understanding of Autism and how this influences their interactions with children with Autism could shed light on factors that could potentially interfere with their interactions and belonging to school (Garrote et al., 2020).

8.7.1. Implications for Policy

According to Article 24 of the CRPD, the state is obliged *inter alia* to provide access to children with disabilities with free and compulsory education at all levels that are equal to those living in the same community. Additionally, the state is obliged to provide children with disabilities with the appropriate accommodation and support in regular schools to enable their effective education, which ought to facilitate these children's participation alongside their peers (United Nations, 2006). Furthermore, having an equitable and participatory learning experience in a regular school is a *conditio sine qua non* for children with disabilities, including those with Autism. Inclusive Education requires access to and progress in high-quality formal and informal education with appropriate support (UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, 2006). Therefore, children with disabilities, including those with Autism, are entitled to have access, presence, participation, and achievement (with support if required) in schools alongside their peers. In this line, education is considered the bridge that should enable children with Autism to effectively participate in society (UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, 2006). In Ireland, the United Nations Convention on the Right for Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was ratified in Ireland on the 8th of March 2018; thus, the country ought to follow these fundamentals.

The implications for policy from the current research findings outlined the role of the teacher as relevant in the interactions, support, and participation of these children

with Autism in the study. It appeared that the level and type of interactions from teachers with children with Autism involving their management and deployment of support towards their participation could enable or inhibit further interactions. The study revealed that disconnected interactions, with limited teachers' direct support and the deployment of support (i.e., SNA) separating children with Autism from their peers, did not favour inclusive education.

Consequently, policymakers ought to consider teachers as the bridge for inclusion at the school microlevel, emphasising their interactions, role models, and allocation of support to promote these children's participation with their peers. Therefore, teachers' training focusing on the role of interactions to promote the participation of children with Autism in all activities could enhance the understanding of inclusive education in practice. In addition, site resources and training on how to adapt already known pedagogical strategies to suit the needs of children with Autism in the classroom could facilitate the participation of children with Autism alongside their peers.

The provision of appropriate support appeared to facilitate their inclusion in the classroom and the playground. Nevertheless, providing support is insufficient if it does not enable children with Autism to participate and interact with their teachers and peers. It seemed that separating children with Autism from their peers for their teaching and learning during classroom activities inhibited their interactions with the group, limited the support perceived by their teachers and interrupted their participation with their peers. Therefore for support to be meaningful and inclusive (i.e., enabling participation and further interactions), it should be embedded within the classroom teaching and learning plan instead of separating these children from their peers to facilitate their learning. Consequently, policymakers need to ensure that the deployment of support from SNAs, STs and Accommodations are revised and monitored to ensure that their support strengthens these children's participation and interactions with their peers instead of marginalising them. It is important to acknowledge that the support of the SNA deployed

to separate children with Autism from their teachers and peers can act as a major roadblock to inclusion. Therefore consideration must be given to how their support is deployed in schools.

The study highlighted that collaborative work between teachers and SNAs to support the participation of children with Autism with their peers enhanced the interactions between the actors. Therefore to reduce the gap between policy and practice, policymakers need to ensure that practices are put in place to guarantee that the support provided to children with Autism in schools ensures their participation in all activities. An essential component of inclusive education entails active participation and interactions with classmates as pivotal for their social and emotional development. Furthermore, appropriate interactions between pupils in school enable them to form connections and friendships with pupils from their community. Therefore, promoting positive interactions in the classroom and playground is relevant to ensure that children with Autism develop contacts that will connect them to their community and, ultimately, society (UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, 2006).

Furthermore, the study findings highlighted the lack of reciprocal interactions from peers with children with Autism, particularly in the playground. The interactions between pupils with Autism and their peers are important to consider in their inclusion in regular schools. Positive interactions among students enhance their academic, social and emotional development (Couper et al., 2013; Kasari et al., 2011; Koster et al., 2009; Locke et al., 2012). However, the rationale behind these limited interactions requires further research since various factors could influence peer interactions with children with Autism, which are beyond the scope of this research. An important aspect to consider from the study findings is that peers appeared more engaging with those children with Autism who had close interactions with their teachers involving tailored support embedded within the classroom teaching practice and those who participated fully in classroom activities. Therefore, policymakers ought to ensure that schools and

educators understand that the inclusion of children with Autism can be empowered with positive interactions with the right approach to support, aiming to enable their participation alongside their peers.

In sum, if interactions and support do not facilitate the participation of children with Autism alongside their peers, then inclusive education is not happening. Therefore, it is imperative to understand that children with Autism must be placed in regular schools, interact with all education actors, and participate and learn in all activities with their peers with the right support approach (no separating practices). Failing to do so implies that children with Autism are not included but integrated into schools, which does not follow the fundamentals of the UNCRPD (UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, 2006). The implications for policy also have implications for practice, in particular practices that could enable further interactions among the education actors, involving support, that would enhance the participation of children with Autism with their peers.

8.7.2. Implications for practice

The study revealed that positive interactions could favour the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools. In particular, interactions associated with tailored and appropriate support enable children with Autism to participate in classroom activities. Therefore, the implications for practice focus on the type of interactions and the negotiation of support for the participation of children with Autism in regular primary schools.

a) The central role of the teacher

Teachers are responsible for managing the classroom organisation (i.e., classroom management), which also involves arranging the context to promote learning and social interactions among pupils. Teachers are also responsible for enhancing all pupils' social and emotional development by implementing appropriate and tailored support in the classroom and the playground (Hamre et al., 2013). In addition, their

interactions and their management and deployment of support (classroom strategies, accommodations, SNAs, STs) influence further interactions among children with Autism and the different actors in the classroom and the playground (Farmer et al., 2011, 2018; Rix et al., 2009).

Consequently, implementing strategies through their interaction with children with Autism in schools that enable them to participate and learn equitably and equally as their peers appear to be a good practice to facilitate their interactions and inclusion in regular schools. Nevertheless, the support provided by the teacher and the SNA ought to contain tailored instructional support from teachers, environmental adjustments in the classroom (i.e., seating children beside the teacher, one on one support), and collaborative work with the SNA and ST to enhance the participation of children with Autism in classroom activities.

This approach to teaching and learning requires teachers to understand the needs of children with Autism and embed those in their teaching and learning plan in the classroom. In order to facilitate this approach to learning, classroom teachers and support teachers could work collaboratively with the support of Individual Educational Plans to implement embedded strategies that will enhance the participation of children with Autism with their peers. In addition, the possibility of working collaboratively with the support teacher in the same classroom could be explored by dividing the classroom into two groups for core activities (i.e., literacy and numeracy) with the support of an SNA.

b) Managing the SNA support

It is important to acknowledge that SNAs' support can act as a major roadblock to inclusion if their support is not managed and deployed to enable the participation of children with Autism alongside their peers. The SNA role ought to be deployed and managed to envisage inclusive practices that will embrace children with Autism as part of the whole group (UNESCO, 2016). If SNAs are glued to children with Autism from their

first day in school, educators and children can become dependent on the support of the SNA (Giangreco, 2013). This dependency could negatively impact the academic, social, and emotional development of children with Autism in schools (Symes & Humphrey, 2012). Nevertheless, collaborative work between teachers and SNAs appears to enable further interactions and participation when support is aimed to facilitate the participation of children with Autism in classroom activities. Therefore, this form of practice could be a way forward to support the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools.

The deployment of support in the classroom and the playground could determine the level of interactions and participation of children with Autism among their peers. The study findings confirmed that the support of the SNA enabled further interactions and participation for children with Autism when it was embedded within the teacher's teaching and learning plan. Therefore, deploying the SNA support as complementary to the teacher and working in conjunction to facilitate the participation of these children alongside peers could facilitate the inclusion of children alongside their peers. In any case, as highlighted in the present study, separating children with Autism from the group does not favour inclusion, and it should be avoided as it goes against the fundamentals of the UNCRPD (Shevlin & Banks, 2021; UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, 2006).

Thus, SNA support should always be deployed to facilitate the involvement and participation of children with Autism in classroom and playground activities with their peers. For this support to be effective, it should be provided from a helicopter view position to avoid differentiating children with Autism from their peers. Consequently, teachers and SNAs must collaborate under the teacher guide to guarantee that children with Autism participate in all classroom activities with their peers. Therefore, classroom teachers must define and guide the provision of support, while the SNA assists in implementing this support in the classroom and the playground. In addition, teachers should be trained in managing the provision of support to facilitate the participation of children with Autism alongside their peers (i.e., SNA support and accommodations). The

support of the SNA deployed to work with children with Autism separated from their peers must be avoided due to the detrimental consequences of isolating children with Autism from their peers in their interactions, support and participation.

c) Educating peers towards reciprocal interactions with children with Autism

An important aspect outlined in the current research is the limited reciprocal interactions between peers to children with Autism in the classroom and the playground for most children participating in the study. Interaction from peers with children with Autism was scarce, and there seemed to be a lack of reciprocity among peers toward children with Autism which was more evident in the absence of the adult in the classroom and the playground. Promoting social interactions among children with Autism and peers is relevant to these children's social development and well-being (Chamberlain et al., 2007). In addition, respecting and understanding the diversity and independence of children with Autism is also pivotal to facilitating meaningful interactions (Pellicano et al., 2018). Consequently, to promote the inclusion of children with Autism alongside their fellow students, it is important to understand what these children want and how they interact with others.

In the current study, most children with Autism attempted to initiate reciprocal interactions with their peers, but in some cases (in the classroom and the playground), these initiations were not reciprocated by their peers. Therefore, educating everyone in the early years of primary schools on diversity and differences could promote awareness and facilitate the interactions between peers and children with Autism.

Furthermore, implementing tailored interventions a la carte involving peers, for example, using a buddy, could enhance and facilitate the interactions between children with Autism and peers. In addition to supporting programmes where peers are involved in mentoring younger pupils with Autism enabling them to create relationships based on their mentoring support (Dillenburger et al., 2017; Mavropoulou & Sideridis, 2014).

Overall, the study revealed that the interconnection between interactions, support and participation promoted interactions between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers. Thus, the model could help education authorities and schools to enhance the interactions between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers at the school micro level. In addition, it could help to shorten the gap between policy and practice concerning the inclusion of children with Autism in primary schools.

8.8. Reflections on the journey

The current research journey encountered challenges and difficulties from a personal and research level. Attempting to balance the responsibilities of three small children, away from family support, with the demands of a PhD proved challenging at times, but it was also energising. Every step on the research journey encouraged and motivated the researcher to continue further, and the challenges only strengthened the researcher's determination to accomplish the task. This research journey adopted Friedrich Nietzsche's adage, "what does not kill me makes me stronger," from the start, and this motto guided the researcher along the way, overcoming all the challenges that emerged in each stage of this thesis.

The researcher's personal and professional background and experiences are relevant to understanding their study position. The researcher in this study comes from a quantitative and positivist position based on a background in psychology and eleven years of working as a clinical research manager in clinical trials within the medical and pharmaceutical field. Thus, the preliminary approach to this study came from a pure positivist stance and understanding of Autism from a medical and psychological view. Although this project began with a positivist lens, the researcher soon acknowledged the need for a qualitative approach to gain insight into the complexities beyond including children with Autism in regular schools. The journey re-shaped the researcher, and this position evolved to an understanding that education is a human right. For that reason, the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools should not be understood as a utopia,

the ideal imprinted in some international conventions and national legislation that, in reality, is more than challenging to implement. Including children with Autism and all children with disabilities in regular schools requires further consideration and planning, and their exclusion from schools under the premise that they cannot adapt to the system is insufficient.

The fieldwork was an important stage of this research that marked the inflexion point. Getting to know the participants, particularly the eight children with Autism that are the centre of this research, and sharing their day to day in schools, encouraged and strengthened the researcher's determination. However, the fieldwork presented a discouraging reality concerning the inclusion of children with Autism in classrooms and playgrounds, often but not always far from the fundamentals of inclusive education. It was disappointing to learn that most of the children with Autism in the study were integrated into their classrooms and playgrounds but with only limited interactions with teachers and peers. Nevertheless, the study findings were also encouraging, revealing that some interactions between children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers could enable these children's participation and contribution in the classroom and the playground, placing them central to their school community.

As revealed in the inclusive education dance metaphor, when children with Autism were allowed with appropriate support to learn the dance steps alongside their peers, the final show revealed a well-coordinated, well-structured performance where all dancers danced, interacting while following the routine. However, when children with Autism did not learn with their peers, the final performance revealed that all dancers danced well-coordinated and interacted without including the child with Autism.

It is believed that the information that emerged from this exploratory research opens a door in the inclusive education discourse that leads to acknowledging the power of interactions in the inclusion of children with Autism. This power puts the human right to

education upfront and acknowledges that interactions place children with Autism central to their schools' communities, promoting participation, presence, achievement and belonging to the group. This research journey began a few years ago, intending to find a path to better implement inclusive education for children with Autism, a way to shorten the gap between policy and practice. Today, the study findings contribute to this knowledge and inspire the researcher to continue working towards inclusive education in harmony with a social and human rights model.