education sciences

# Respecting the Voices of Individuals from Marginalised Communities in Research

Edited by
Michael Shevlin and Richard Rose

Printed Edition of the Special Issue Published in *Education Sciences*

www.mdpi.com/journal/education

MDPI

# Respecting the Voices of Individuals from Marginalised Communities in Research

# Respecting the Voices of Individuals from Marginalised Communities in Research

Editors

**Michael Shevlin**
**Richard Rose**

MDPI • Basel • Beijing • Wuhan • Barcelona • Belgrade • Manchester • Tokyo • Cluj • Tianjin

*Editors*

| | |
|---|---|
| Michael Shevlin | Richard Rose |
| The University of Dublin | University of Northampton |
| Ireland | UK |

*Editorial Office*
MDPI
St. Alban-Anlage 66
4052 Basel, Switzerland

This is a reprint of articles from the Special Issue published online in the open access journal *Education Sciences* (ISSN 2227-7102) (available at: https://www.mdpi.com/journal/education/special_issues/Respecting_Voices_Marginalised).

For citation purposes, cite each article independently as indicated on the article page online and as indicated below:

LastName, A.A.; LastName, B.B.; LastName, C.C. Article Title. *Journal Name* **Year**, *Volume Number*, Page Range.

**ISBN 978-3-0365-4181-5 (Hbk)**
**ISBN 978-3-0365-4182-2 (PDF)**

# Contents

# About the Editors

**Michael Shevlin**

Michael is a Professor in Inclusive Education and Director of the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities at Trinity College Dublin. His teaching and research focus on facilitating the inclusion of children and young people with special educational needs within mainstream schools, promoting the voice of marginalised people within decision-making processes that affect their lives and addressing access issues for young people with disabilities within compulsory and higher education. He has completed longitudinal national studies investigating the provision of inclusive education in the Republic of Ireland. Michael is involved in policy-making initiatives within Irish education in relation to the development of inclusive learning environments in schools and higher education. As Director of the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, he manages the delivery of an accredited education into an employment transition programme for young people with intellectual disabilities.

**Richard Rose**

Richard Rose is Emeritus Professor of Inclusive Education at the University of Northampton, UK. He has previously held posts as a teacher, school principal and education inspector in several parts of England and was visiting professor at the Hong Kong Education University. Richard has conducted research and consultancy in several parts of the world, including India, Cambodia, Ireland, Armenia, Georgia, Malta and Hong Kong. This included projects for UNICEF, The Commonwealth Commission, ACCESS Australia, NCSE Ireland and a number of national governments and NGOs. He is the author of more than 100 academic publications and has presented keynote papers at many international conferences. His current research focus is social and educational inclusion and children's rights.

education sciences

MDPI

Editorial

# Respecting the Voices of Individuals from Marginalised Communities in Research—“Who Is Listening and Who Isn’t?”

**Michael Shevlin [1,*] and Richard Rose [2,*]**

[1] Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, School of Education, 4th Floor, 3 College Green, Trinity College Dublin, D02 PN40 Dublin, Ireland
[2] Special Education Needs & Inclusion, University of Northampton, Waterside Campus, University Drive, Northampton NN1 5PH, UK
* Correspondence: mshevlin@tcd.ie (M.S.); richard.rose@northampton.ac.uk (R.R.)

**Citation:** Shevlin, M.; Rose, R. Respecting the Voices of Individuals from Marginalised Communities in Research—“Who Is Listening and Who Isn’t?” *Educ. Sci.* **2022**, *12*, 304. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12050304

Received: 21 February 2022
Accepted: 6 April 2022
Published: 27 April 2022

Internationally, Governments have signed up to the principles of ensuring that they support the development of greater equity and inclusion in education. However, despite some progress many individuals and communities continue to face discrimination and remain on the margins of society. This collection of papers draws attention to the many challenges faced by persons who are perceived to be different from the majority population in their communities. This labelling of individuals has served to exclude many from engaging fully with those social and educational opportunities that the majority take for granted.

A focus upon those characteristics associated with disability, gender or culture that emphasises difference in the eyes of those in authority without understanding the lived experiences of individuals has been a major inhibiting factor in the movement towards inclusion. The authors who have contributed to this Special Edition have all challenged the stereotypical views of such individuals. They have done so by ensuring that the voices of those who best understand the experience of living with discrimination can be heard.

The examples provided within these papers demonstrate how a range of influences from policy makers and teachers to the wider public have determined the opportunities available to individuals. While discriminatory attitudes and practices persist, these papers demonstrate examples of resistance and resilience in the face of continued oppression. In this Special Edition, authors from several countries have highlighted how, by listening to and respecting the voices of marginalised individuals, we can support them in taking greater control of their lives and challenge those who seek to exclude them.

Discrimination can take many forms. This edition, for example, shows how the cultural limitations placed upon women in a community in India and the traveller community in Ireland has resulted in low expectations for academic and social achievements. Similarly, negative attitudes towards members of the transgender community or students with intellectual disabilities leads to increased marginalisation and limited life opportunities.

A commitment to democratic principles requires that the voices of all individuals should be listened to and respected. A failure to do so will invariably lead to greater dissatisfaction, alienation and a perpetuation of the very marginalisation that we are seeking to address. At times this process may be uncomfortable, particularly for those within authority who are unprepared to change and who may feel threatened by such actions.

These papers demonstrate how listening to the voices of marginalised individuals can become an important first step towards a process of change. Such an action fundamentally challenges established procedures, where opportunities to learn from the experiences of marginalised individuals have been neglected. We acknowledge that listening is only the starting point for a radical re-engagement that enables marginalised individuals to participate fully in society. However, several of the authors who have contributed their research to this Special Edition have provided an indication of how the movement towards equity and inclusion may be advanced.

The international policy imperative to listen to the voices of children and young people is eloquently expressed by Mangiaracina and her colleagues. Stressing the need to move beyond policy to ensure that the voices of previously marginalised populations are not only heard but achieve a level of authority and influence, they provide examples from the work of a European agency committed to the promotion of inclusion. In stating that "learners could and should be able to bring new perspectives and determine more adapted solutions to current educational realities," these authors go directly to the crux of the argument for greater student involvement that has been a driving force beyond this collection of papers.

While there is often positive intent in government policies there is also evidence that there is a considerable divergence in how this is experienced by children and their families within marginalised communities. Malmqvist, for example, examines the operation of pupil referral units (PRUs) in Sweden, ostensibly designed to enable young people experiencing difficulties in learning to catch up with their peers. However, the PRUs tended to be characterised by low academic outcomes and persistent behaviour difficulties, the very outcomes PRUs were intended to address. The pupils were disappointed by these experiences and felt disempowered as a result. Increased educational provision for young people from the Travelling community and recent migrants was a policy initiative within the Irish context. However, a school catering for these two groups of young people was characterised by low expectations and poor academic outcomes, an example that the authors McGinley and Keane argue of an increasingly segregated system of provision for Travelers and recent migrants. Within the Austrian context, the intersectionality between disability and forced migration has been overlooked in government policies that essentially treat disability and forced migration as separate entities with no visible connections. Singh and colleagues report that forced migrants who have a disability experience severe difficulties in accessing appropriate services. The authors recommend that accessible information is vital for parents and that increased collaboration between government departments is required to provide customised services for forced migrants who have a disability. Banks and Smyth examine how school level factors can play a central role in student disengagement and early school leaving. They focused on two government initiatives designed to address these issues. It was observed that these initiatives were characterised by caring and respectful teacher–student relationships that were central to addressing student disengagement and early school leaving. However, despite the evident success of these initiatives, the authors make the pertinent observation that both initiatives operate outside the mainstream education system and as a result have little impact or influence in addressing student disengagement and early school leaving within the broader context of mainstream schools.

Women in the Devanga community in India are subject to gender discrimination and a dominant male patriarchy, as reported by Haridarshan. The voices of women from this traditional weaving community have rarely been heard and are routinely suppressed. The oppression experienced by women in this community is a product of a variety of factors including the predominance of orthodox beliefs and practices that reinforce male dominance combined with the traditions of early marriage and domestic responsibilities. Evidence suggests that incidents of domestic violence have increased significantly through the period of the COVID-19 pandemic [1,2] and this has inevitably impacted the mental health of both adults and children. Norah Sweetman, in a paper that draws upon research from Ireland, demonstrates how listening to the voices of both parents and young people not only elicits pertinent research evidence but may also prove cathartic. This can only be achieved when both the instruments for field work and the quality of intervention are assured, a fact that is further recognised in the work of John Kubiak and his colleagues. In their study, a critical appraisal of the experiences of young adults with learning disabilities provides important insights into the effectiveness of provisions being made within a higher education establishment. These researchers describe the transformative effect of encouraging young people to voice their experiences while enabling them to develop new competencies and confidence in planning their own futures. A fine example is given of the ways in which power is transferred from the traditional voice of authority to that of the individual who has a lived experience of disability.

Parents and families play a critical role in supporting children who have disabilities and/or experience difficulties in learning. Twomey draws on the metaphor of parent as nomad in the search for appropriate services for their child. Parents often experience isolation as this journey continues over an extended period and their identity shifts as this quest continues to ensure that their child is included in society. Preece and colleagues examine the experiences of families who have children with autism in coastal communities in England. They highlight the intersectionality between the autism-specific needs of children and the lack of specialised services available in coastal regions. This situation is further complicated by a coastal region characterised by poor infrastructure, lack of trained professionals and limited autism awareness. In Pakistan, Hammad reports on the educational experiences of children who have a hearing impairment. Strong family support for the child can result in limited opportunities to access meaningful employment outside the family. As Hammad comments, the child is a product of the family rather than society. Where the opposite occurs and there is weak family support the child is almost totally dependent on society and limited resources result in few opportunities to attain meaningful employment. Hammad highlights the importance of technology as an enabler to empower children with a hearing impairment and lessen dependence on the family.

As we write this chapter, the war in Ukraine, following the invasion of a sovereign state by Russian troops, has led to the forced migration of many families from that devastated country. McGillicuddy and her colleagues, well versed in their appreciation of the challenges created by forced migration, provide significant advice to those who work with such populations. The voices presented in their work are urgent and powerful and provide a clear justification for conducting research that is both respectful and empathetic to those who experience marginalisation within our societies. As in all of the papers presented in this collection, the need to challenge traditional power relationships that have resulted in actions being undertaken on behalf of excluded individuals and communities, often with an inadequate understanding of their lived experiences, is evident.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Berniell, I.; Facchini, G. COVID-19 lockdown and domestic violence: Evidence from internet-search behaviour in 11 countries. *Eur. Econ. Rev.* **2021**, *136*, 103775. [CrossRef]
2. Boxhall, H.; Morgan, A.; Brown, R. The prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Australas. Polic.* **2020**, *12*, 38–46.

education sciences

MDPI

*Article*

# Parents as Nomads: Journeys, In-Betweenness and Identity

**Miriam Twomey**

Trinity College Dublin, The University of Dublin, D02 PN40 Dublin, Ireland; twomeym6@tcd.ie

**Abstract:** When considering the parent voice as an individual subjective reality, it is observed as unique to the parent and not shared by others. This research sought to explore if parent voices could constitute intersubjective realities; inviting narratives from parents and professionals that may reveal a shared existence. The first theme explored the journeys of the parent as a nomad in their search for services to support their children. The second theme describes the position of the parent during the period of their child's assessment, diagnosis and intervention, as that of 'in-betweenness'. The third theme describes parents' experiences as those of journeys, during which their identities change. Qualitative, in-depth, longitudinal case studies were undertaken with parents of young children with ASD and professionals over eighteen months. Semi-structured interviews (n-83) were conducted. Autoethnography was critical as a methodological tenet in defense of a position that states that research is an extension of our lives. The findings of this research show evidence of parental isolation and marginalization when procuring services for their children or when children failed to experience inclusion. This research suggests that nomads navigate (difficult) ways of forming new multiple selves and identities.

**Keywords:** Early Childhood Intervention; children's assessment; education; inclusion; parents' journeys; in-betweenness and identity

**Citation:** Twomey, M. Parents as Nomads: Journeys, In-Betweenness and Identity. *Educ. Sci.* **2022**, *12*, 130. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12020130

Academic Editors: Michael Shevlin, Richard Rose and James Albright

Received: 22 October 2021
Accepted: 12 February 2022
Published: 16 February 2022

## 1. Introduction

Ireland reflects international trends witnessing significant developments relating to educational provision for children with disabilities at early childhood, primary and post-primary education levels. While education is considered an inalienable human right, children with disabilities may not be able to realize this right in the absence of health-related, therapeutic support and Early Intervention. Early Intervention therefore can be considered a necessary precursor to children's participation in inclusive education. Irish policy relating to children with disabilities is education and health focused. While the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, (2004) [1] is child focused, it is not rights based, insofar as it does not recognize the right of children with disabilities to therapy or supports to enhance their participation [2]. The Disability Act, enacted in 2005, did [3] not make specific provision for children and thus the only legislative instrument of importance in this area focuses on the rights of disabled children to and in education. In 2007 the Disability Act had commenced with the under 5 age group; however, sections 3–13 of the EPSEN Act, concerned with assessment and furtherance of a child's education plan, has not commenced. This was of critical importance as the EPSEN Act and the Disability Act were designed to work in concert with each other. The pausing of the EPSEN Act has had detrimental effects [4]. Children with disabilities have rights that the Government has an obligation to uphold and enforce, however, there is no comprehensive statutory framework to ensure that children with disabilities have the right to access and enjoy a full range of health, social and educational services, in line with Articles 3 and 23 of the CRC and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Articles 3 and 7).

This paper will outline current issues relating to context and policy of Early Intervention in Ireland. It will explore themes in the literature relative to the challenges encountered by parents when advocating for their children and engaging with incoherent services.

The paper will present findings from a research project eliciting authentic parental and professional voices to describe issues relating to the challenges young children with autism and their parents experience in Early Intervention and early education settings.

### *1.1. Current Issues*

Early Intervention services for young children with additional needs in Ireland are fragmented. This fragmentation is mirrored in an underdeveloped pre-school sector. The Department of Health, and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth are currently responsible for a significant proportion of existing provision, while the Department of Education and Science also plays a role in the establishment of special classes and units [5]. Difficulties are posed by the fact that work relating to provision is contracted out by the Health Service Executive (HSE) to voluntary bodies. Occasionally the HSE provides services directly. Services vary dramatically from one geographical region to another, even within (former) Health Board areas. Noted concerns include the implementation and pausing of the Education of Persons with Special Needs (EPSEN) Act [1]. While the EPSEN Act focuses on addressing children's needs within the education system, the Disability Act [3] published in 2005 does not address the specific needs of children, therefore legislation fails to ensure that children with disabilities have rights to a range of required health services. The Disability Act proposed a statutory right for children to an independent assessment of needs (AON). This should take place within a specified time period, resulting in a service statement outlining the services required for the child. Critiques of this process are ongoing and children remain on lengthy waiting lists. While some of these issues have been attributed to the pandemic, the operation of the Act was ineffectual in the period prior to the pandemic, resulting in inadequate services and few resources available. At the time of writing this paper, contemporary services remain underresourced.

The HSE initiated a program in 2010 on Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People (PDSCYP), supported by a National Coordinating Group with representation from the then Department of Health, and Department of Education and Skills. The overall vision was to provide one clear pathway to services for all children with disabilities, according to need, with the health and education sectors collaborating to support children to achieve their full potential. This program was launched in 2011; its aims were to deliver disability services in line with a primary care model, where disability services would be geographically based and where health and education sectors would work in partnership. Despite this development, children with additional needs are subject to lengthy waiting lists for supports such as speech and language therapy and occupational therapy. More recent work on a reconfiguration of the PDSCYP supports implementation of proximal, collaborative family-centered services providing appropriate and timely service in the child's community. Notwithstanding these developments, the current situation comprises long waiting lists and more recently the Ombudsman for Children presented the conundrum: "If children have not been assessed, how will they receive the services they need?" [6]. What is notable here is that not only are children waiting to be assessed, but a further lengthy wait for intervention will ensue after assessment.

There is a failure at policy level, therefore, to acknowledge that Early Intervention for children with disabilities is foundational to meeting their health and their education requirements (Article 23 [7]).

Recently the detrimental effects of the pandemic have exacerbated these needs [8]. While telehealth has had some positive outcomes regarding increased accessibility and the ability to see children in their natural environment, Rosenbaum et al. [9] caution that childhood rehabilitation in the digital space should not simply go back to normal or its existence pre-pandemic; rather, it should expand the range, nature and location of services for children with neurodevelopmental disorders and their families. While some children clearly benefitted from virtual support, children with autism and their parents lacked socialization as a key factor during public health restrictions enforced during the pandemic [10]. Healthcare providers and institutions were challenged in providing services for children with autism and their families. King et al. [11] emphasize parent engagement and that service providers can encourage their collaboration in planning, fostering a sense of partnership and conveying a sense of hope. Camden and Silva [12] note caution relating to professional expectations that do not translate well virtually; issues arise relating to the timing and pacing of interventions online and the determination of which goals of telehealth are effective for whom and under what circumstances.

Internationally, family-centered approaches to Early Intervention are well established [13]. Family-centered approaches emphasize the importance of relationships with families but also the need to empower the family. However, Twomey and Shevlin [14] noted the challenges and complexities associated with children's and families' needs. The authors acknowledged the inner journeys of parents who experienced uncertainty while awaiting their children's assessment and diagnosis. Their study witnessed parents emerging as pathfinders through a morass of incoherent policy, seeking and finding new paths through State initiatives. While legislation is ineffectual, parents have to act as duty bearers; they have to bear duties and obligations to respect, protect and fulfill children's rights. Parents' roles and identities therefore endow them with a duty to enable their children as rights holders to participate in educational and society. While O'Connor, Carpenter and Barry's [15] research proposes that parents develop "confident championing" as a way of adjusting when a child has a disability, they also note the fulfillment and sense of purpose that parents achieve. However, less attention is dedicated to supporting these parents' during these processes [14,16].

Despite advances in research into effective approaches for children with autism, little is known about parents' understandings and interpretations of experiences surrounding their children's assessment and diagnosis. When considering the parent voice as an individual subjective reality, it is usually observed as unique to the parent and not shared by others. This research sought to explore if the parent voice could constitute an element of a shared intersubjective reality; inviting narratives from parents and professionals that may reveal a collective existence.

Research denoting the life of the parent is presented utilizing the metaphor of the nomad (Greek: νομάς, nomas, plural νομάδες, nomads) adopting three themes.

The first theme describes the parent as nomad; a dynamic and evolving character who travels from place to place with an awareness of tracks, plants and nourishment, finding themselves in different lands (clinics, classrooms and schoolyards).

The second theme describes the position of the parent during the period of their child's assessment, diagnosis and intervention as that of 'in-betweenness' which signifies that the parent is neither here nor there. In-betweenness can pertain to the emergence of new voices symbolizing positionality that resists binaries where new understandings occur. According to Deleuze and Guattari [17], "the life of the nomad is the intermezzo", (p. 380) allowing us to think that though an in-between space is characterized by movement and change, it may also achieve significance.

The third theme describes parents' experiences as those of journeys, during which their identities change. Flows, energies and movement defy the subject becoming a fixed identity [17]. Early Intervention and early education experiences are examined as a locus of identity formation for the parent.

### *1.2. Nomadic Journeys*

Historically regarded as a central focus in anthropology, an interest in nomadic people, or nomadism, was founded on ideas of mobility and movement frequently relating to colonialism [18]. The nomad as a metaphor in philosophy and education presents an ontology of becoming and development, not heroism. It is apt to symbolize the parent in Early Intervention and early education in that it challenges existing State-like structures. Deleuze and Guattari's [17] philosophy of difference and becoming is often utilized to conceptualize State policy and incoherent State systems where difference is acknowledged as embracing transformation. The metaphor of the nomad has become celebrated in Europe and has become associated with interpretations of the 'other' [18]. In this research, the nomad epitomizes the parent who, while being part of the State, exists and moves outside of it. The nomad challenges the order of things and movement, therefore his/her modus operandi is to enculturate him/herself, but also to move past State or policy strictures. At the time of children's assessment and diagnosis, parents' requirements include services but also information and knowledge about their child's disability. Deleuze and Guattari [17] used the concept of the rhizome to exemplify nomadic movements across space extending in different directions rather than following one path; multiplying and creating new lines of thinking. The 'rhizome' as a non-hierarchical symbol conceptualizes learning where "the rhizome has no beginning and no end, it is always in the middle, or between things, interbeing, intermezzo . . . " [17] (p. 25). The concept of the rhizome in education challenges linear thought. Learning is generally constructed hierarchically as arborescent or tree-like. The rhizome is suitable to a broader conceptualization of Early Intervention which combines health and education philosophies and practices. For the parent and the child with autism, the rhizome provides conceptualizations of learning comprising mutually dependent roots and shoots, that are dynamic and flexible, encompassing complexity and heterogeneity [19]. Pursuing the metaphor of the nomad, and faced with institutional and provisional barriers, the parent as nomad travels from place to place in search of food, nourishment and sustenance. The nomad in this research signifies the parent and their quest to precure services, resources and educational provision for their child.

### 1.3. In-Betweenness

In-betweenness draws on anthropology to describe a liminal, interstitial, or transitory space that occurs during rites of passage or transitional experiences [20,21] (p. 3). It challenges binaries and "shines a light on transitional spaces where a multiplicity of roles is negotiated and assimilated" [21] (p. 3). The theme of in-betweenness signifies that the parent is neither here nor there. "The life of the nomad is the intermezzo" [17] (p. 380) allows us to think that an in-between space is characterized by transversal movement. Transversal movement, a concept developed by Deleuze and Guattari to describe movement along different axes and intersections, extends both vertically and horizontally, moving across space, aligning with the needs of the individual parent, but also emphasizing a collective approach. Transversal movement allows us to open up previously closed avenues of movement and perception to produce new groups or collectives. Movement aptly denotes perception, and due to movement, we may lose sight of the river when we focus on its banks [22]. To refocus on the river, we need to become aware of our changing relationship with objects caused by transversal movement and shift our perspective to longitudinal issues and trajectories. This research suggests that the in-between space that parents inhabit becomes increasingly transversal and constitutes their very flows, energies and movement, defying them from becoming a fixed identity [17]. In-between space therefore may serve as an actual strength. In Deleuzo-Guattarian terms it describes where "things pick up speed" [17] (p. 25). To extend the water metaphor, the position of in-betweenness may be like a stream without a beginning or end. In-betweenness can also describe the potential for ambivalence, losing and finding oneself and the elusiveness of the role of the parent when faced with a medicalized or pathologised approach to their child's diagnosis. Increasingly, there is more emphasis on the integration of the parental experience of parenting a child with a disability. This research takes on board this in-betweenness and seeks to examine it interpretively by incorporating the lived experience of the parent and the challenges associated with procuring services.

### 1.4. Identities

The third theme, also linked to the central metaphor of the nomad, describes parents' experiences as those of journeys, during which their identities change. This research sought to understand how parents' evolving identities were impacted during the trajectory of their child's assessment, diagnosis and Early Intervention and education experiences. Education is explored as a locus of identity formation for the parent where parents may develop new social competence and belonging. Twomey and Shevlin [2] suggest that we need to understand the nature of the parents' inner journeys through their child's assessment and diagnosis, where systems and services can empower or disempower them. If a child fails to experience inclusion or is unable to remain within a mainstream (pre)school setting, this can have a negative effect on parents' identities [23]. Territories of failure are described by Julie Allan [24] as the frustration, guilt and exhaustion experienced by those attempting and failing to be included. Hodge and Runswick-Cole [25] identify further issues when they consider how medical and professional discourses are more highly valued than those of parents, in school settings. Sustaining the metaphor of the nomad, this research suggests that considering these challenges, parents navigate (difficult) ways of forming new multiple selves and so they are opening up new life worlds. In terms of identity, Braidotti [26] (p. 35) describes the function of the nomadic subject as that of a relay team:

> "S/he connects, circulates, moves on; s/he does not form identifications but keeps on coming back at regular intervals. [ . . . ] Identity is retrospective; representing it entails that we can draw accurate maps, indeed, but only of where we have already been and consequently no longer are. Nomadic cartographies need to be redrafted constantly."

Braidotti claims that the point is not to know who we are but, rather, what we want to become [27]. McLaughlin and Goodley [28] suggest that parents of disabled children are nomads but are also settlers with their children in their research, recounting the impact of diagnosis on parents.

### *1.5. Contextual Frame*

Intersubjectivity is a concept relative to parent and professional interactions. It was first a concept developed by Husserl (1859–1938) to explain the conscious and unconscious interchange of thoughts and ideas between two persons or subjects, which could be facilitated by empathy [3]. Its usage in social science may suggest cognitive agreement between different groups, or simultaneous relationships from diverging positions. Cooper-White [29] explains that in order to understand intersubjectivity, it is first useful to understand the concept of subjectivity, which is the perception or appearance of reality from one's own point of view. However, our perceptions may be limited or biased by our world views or by our own limitations. For the purposes of this paper, intersubjectivity will be interpreted as the possible convergence of two worldviews; put simply, a coming together, which may ultimately contribute to socially constructed worlds where reality is created by participations through their shared social interactions. The self is considered a fluid, movable entity subject to influence outside the self, whereas intersubjectivity is created through reciprocal social interaction and is influenced by the dynamics of multiple selves [29].

A disjuncture or rupture in parent professional interactions therefore may become the parent's point of departure. Broomhead [7] refers to a clash of two worlds in her exploration of differing values between parents and professionals. The events of flow and rupture in a destabilizing world with no sense of continuity beckon the need for intersubjectivity in Early Intervention so that professionals can see themselves in the parents' situation and where it becomes a shared experience or worlds. The usefulness of thinking that embraces intersubjectivity could be a nexus point between professional and parent in the problematic field of Early Intervention and education.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

This research sought to explore the narratives of parents of children with autism for insight into disability. Kelly's [30] concept of disability as a materially and socially constructed phenomenon is relevant. Drawing from a narrative approach, in-depth interviews with parents were employed to explore the ambiguities of parenthood and childhood impairment as experienced by an intimate other [30]. The objective of interviewing was to explore parents' experiences and challenges when procuring services for their child. Areas focused on in interviews included: the period before assessment, the assessment and diagnostic processes and the supports received by parents and children in Early Intervention and early education settings. Parents' perspectives were also elicited in relation to their own roles, the challenges they faced as parents of a disabled child and their needs in terms of their children's education. Questions posed to professionals sought their views on policy and provision, their experience as professionals providing services to children with autism and their families and the challenges faced when dealing with inadequate and deficient systems and resources.

Tracing the journeys of parents of children with disabilities suggested a need for an epistemological reformation and parity of subject and other. The author's positionality as parent and academic was embodied in a living autoethnographical approach. Living autoethnography provides a window through which the internal world of the parent can be interpreted and understood [31]. As parent, I was well positioned to conduct this research, which involved focusing on intimate details of first-hand accounts as well as relying on (auto) biographical accounts examining how human subjects constitute themselves through narrative [32,33]. Searching for new ways of knowing, I had an awareness of parenting adaptations, contradictions and resources created and used to meet the challenges of disability parenting. The existence of heterogeneity in how disability research is viewed makes triangulation necessary; there was a need for many perspectives beyond my own.

Through qualitative, longitudinal, in-depth case studies, parents and professionals participated in semi-structured interviews ($n$ = 83) over an eighteen-month period in the Republic of Ireland. Parents and professionals were interviewed to gain their perspectives of assessment, diagnosis and early education experiences. I was aware of the danger of preparation for a stylized interview response, in that these narratives become organized and ordered, obscuring lived experiences, and are not congruent with the normal experiences of parenthood.

Observations of intervention and education encounters were also undertaken. Observations focused on the inclusion of children with autism in preschool, Early Intervention and early primary school settings. Children's ability to engage and participate in classroom activities and their interaction with peers were prioritized. However, this paper will focus on the qualitative interviews undertaken with parents and professionals.

A major point of difference in this research was the presence of the parent voice. Accessing parents of children undergoing assessment and diagnosis can present significant ethical and methodological challenges for researchers. Providing information and negotiating consent presented the need for reassurance regarding confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were recruited primarily through purposive sampling based on the researcher's practitioner knowledge in the area of Early Intervention, as well as the parents' willingness to become involved in the research.

After the research procedures were explained to the parents, parents were reassured that their names would be anonymized and any distinguishing features would be dealt with confidentially. Anonymization in the form of removing names and any other characteristic features was explained. Pseudonyms were assigned to each parent. The researcher was sensitive to the fact that parents had recently experienced significant challenges during assessment and diagnostic processes. The researcher was also aware that some of their children were experiencing difficulties in their educational settings. Designing the research process sensitively was of the outmost importance.

While the parent voice was a key focus of this research, professionals were also included. Professional multi-disciplinary teams associated with each child in the research representing urban and rural parts of Ireland were interviewed. These teams included psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, play therapists, and physiotherapists.

The research was analyzed interpretively, incorporating the data and participants' interpretations of the data [34]. Member checking was adopted with parents and professionals following interviews. The researcher wished to overcome any potential bias associated with the autoethnographic stance. Tiered layers of open, axial and selective coding of data were undertaken. In relation to the parent interviews, codes were also derived from critical events in the child's and parents' lives. Analysis of these narratives involved researcher sensitivity and scrutiny acknowledging the complexity of the relationship and responses of the researcher. Narrative approaches can involve a distance between the researcher and those being researched. In this sense, autoethnography reduced the interpretation gap and brought valuable epistemic reflexivity between the researcher, participants' stories and the text [35].

## 3. Results

The findings will be presented according to the themes arising: parents' experiences as nomadic journeys, parent positioning and in-betweenness and parents' changing identities.

### *3.1. Parents Experiences as Nomadic Journeys*

Parents frequently referred to difficulty accessing services and the lack of availability of services. One parent, Helen (chairperson of the local autism support group) was adamant that "there was no help forthcoming from the government". While for some parents, services were haphazard, other parents received no service. Describing the early days after her son's diagnosis, Kate explained that "we were left high and dry. We've never had speech therapy, we've never really had occupational therapy, and we've never seen a physio". This quest for services precipitated the nomadic experience. Helen who occupied the position of chairperson of the local autism support group and is mother to four children identified with additional needs, described her perceptions of access to support and services: "Luckily for parents receiving support, they've been in it—the [EI] system." Otherwise, she explained, they didn't know "where to go and who to talk to. If you were living in an area where you didn't know anybody, you would be lost, completely lost". This epitomized the inadequacy of planning in Early Intervention. Another parent mentioned the lack of continuity, referring to the "stop, start aspect of assessment . . . " Parents described long and enduring battles in the procurement of assessments, diagnoses and services. Parents frequently personified themselves as warriors, crusaders and pathfinders in their procurement of support and resources. Parent voice provided a glimpse of the lived experience of the parent of a child with additional needs. While parents were intrinsically motivated to advocate for their young children in the quest for services, they were also exhausted. One father (Dave, Adam's father) described his situation: "I gave up work to look after my son . . . it's like constantly having to travel; being so incredibly tired; not enough time in the day . . . "

Parents felt that while they were procuring and waiting for services, the process of assessment was a minefield with little guidance or support:

> "Very little contact with any member of the team since the last assessment period . . . There's no sense of what will happen next. He's got a diagnosis of mild autism, but what will happen next?" (Becky, Jack's mum)

Professional voices shed some light on provision of services for children being assessed or already in receipt of a diagnosis. They identified policy as ineffective and assessment focused.

> "*Right now, with regard to the purpose of the services we provide, physio, OT, speech and language, psychology, we all provide what we can within the resources that we have, and my particular role as an occupational therapist would be to provide . . . generally is . . . talking to the parents around their anxieties, so there's no point in me doing an assessment and finding ten things wrong . . .* " (occupational therapist, EI Team)

One psychologist expressed his dissatisfaction with policy lead processes that were not family-centered: "There's no holistic view of an IEP, families' priorities, or the families' needs, which are, in Early Intervention, paramount!" (lead psychologist, EI Team).

Professionals also disparaged an overreliance on the 2005 Disability Act:

> “*It has put a lot of emphasis on assessment and has pulled intervention out of it. Professionals would have been doing a lot more intervention-based work in the early days based on the child’s needs. The Act is a deficit model really, and intervention is based on that*”
>
> (home visiting educational therapist, EI Team)

Professionals in one of the HSE regions referred to isolatory, domain-specific practices involved in unidisciplinary professional approaches to assessment. Teams in this region showed dedicated efforts to reduce the number of clinic attendances for parents during their child’s assessment period. Dave, (Adam’s father) described the impact of unidisciplinary clinical assessment:

> “*Having visited umpteen professionals; I quit my job so as to provide a parental presence in my son’s newly pathologised life*”. Another parent agreed that the number of professional visits were overwhelming in describing her overwhelming journey: “*You had speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, psychology. We were on a never-ending treadmill.*” (Jack’s mum)

Commenting on the challenges, Cathy mentioned that “the low points were many. Every time we took a step forward, we took ten or twenty back. So many times, I thought am I ever, ever, going to get off this? We thought that this would never stop . . . ”

One father in the early parent focus group described his early experience: “*We were literally, as a family, at breaking point.*”

Amy and her husband referred to the need for information and parent training on their journey. They felt that professional input was scarce and inadequate at the time of their child’s assessment. Increasingly their son’s behaviour become more challenging: “*A lot of the behaviours came from frustration.*” Jenny also had difficulties with her son’s behaviours: “Yeah, you see the whole thing is—with Daniel particularly—is you couldn’t see the child for all the behaviours and all the layers that they had.”

In the absence of professional information, researching on the internet was the predominant mode of inquiry during the assessment and diagnostic periods. Non-specific and indiscriminate information was generalized and not always relevant to parents’ children: “You pick up so much information and in some cases it’s too much information, you know, you have to sort of—in the initial stage you go on the internet and then you steer yourself away from it because you just get blown away with too much information” (Jenny, Daniel’s mum). Amy and Kate reported how their own research added to their fears and that they sought guidance and support from their general practitioner who was not familiar with “the ‘A’ word.” While they were procuring services and advocating for their children, these parents wanted to know: “What is autism?”

### *3.2. Parents Positioning and In-Betweenness*

Rob, Simon’s father, described his liminal position when his child started having difficulties at his local preschool. Simon was also experiencing behaviour and communication issues at home: “We were at the end of our tether, we didn’t know where to go, what to do and thank God we found this place here.” Describing her son’s negative experience at his local preschool, Jenny explained her in-between position: the ‘wait and see’ approach being adopted:

> “And this sort of carried on, it was all very informal with the preschool, no formal meeting . . . you know, ‘He’ll catch up’ . . . and the same thing with the G.P., and I wasn’t happy with that . . . ” (Jenny, Simon’s mum)

Jenny and Rob shared a similar experience describing their liminal spaces of assessment:

> “And, as I say, they assessed him and they said, ‘Yeah, nothing really to worry about but we’ll see him again in six months.’ So, they saw him again in six months and that’s when they did proper assessment.” (Jenny)

One parent in the focus groups was told that the professional was not available from one discipline and that her son instead would be provided with therapy from a different discipline when this had not been prioritized. This was incongruent with information she had read about autism and addressing a child's individual developmental needs. It also resonated with critiques of the Disability Act in relation to the ineffectiveness of policy's emphasis on the practicability and availability of resources. It was only if resources were available and practicable that children would receive them.

With regard to assessment, a National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologist who previously worked as a diagnostic Early Intervention professional explained her thoughts:

> *"I'm not sure how effective assessment is. Assessment may not always be the best starting point. It shouldn't be the focus. You're starting off with a label and then the label will attract . . . if you start labeling children, you put them into a cycle of resource teaching . . . a stuck cycle. It should be a continuum—in and out—where you might need extra help and then back in the mainstream classroom; the child is stuck in a cycle of extra support. Descending circles as opposed to a continuum."*

This research confirmed that children were waiting on assessment processes; waiting to become labeled in order to receive intervention. Parents meanwhile felt that assessment itself was an in-between space. Waiting lists lacked any embodiment of the interstitial stage where something might occur between the present and the future.

Stephen (EI Team psychologist) identified a dilemma. His question relating to accessibility represented the views of many professionals interviewed:

> *"Why can't we treat all children the same? In relation to autism, the assessment of need (AON) is a problem. It's an assessment only. Because of the stipulations of the AON, the team do the assessment and see what will happen later."*

Support received from private therapists proved invaluable to parents. When children's names were placed on lengthy public waiting lists, parents procured assessment and intervention from private therapists. Cathy mentioned the strategies that she learned to deal with her son's tantrums. She recounted how the therapist gave her strategies firstly to calm his sensory system and then help him to communicate. Cathy mentioned that in her case, de-escalation was key. Her therapist was Floortime-trained. The strategies were developmental in nature and suited Cathy and Alex in the home environment. Emphasizing the developmental nature of her son's needs Cathy underlined the need for ongoing guidance regarding intervention. Alex's needs were neither static nor consistent and varied in different environments. "His needs change and just when I think I have a handle on them . . . they change again."

In the absence of a counselling or coaching service, parents articulated how their psychological and emotional needs were not addressed. They had developed a peer-to-peer counselling and mentoring service. Some parents were attending peer counselling during the research. A dichotomy of needs was apparent; on the one hand parents' needs for psycho-emotional support were evident, and on the other parents did not wish to endanger their child's access to services by prioritizing their own needs. All parents affirmed that they did not receive counselling from State services at any time during their journeys. Parents as sentient beings continuously occupied liminal physical and emotional spaces.

While stage-based or grief theories were not referred to in this research, parents were asked about their experiences and if their journeys had changed over time. Kate, whose son was progressing well in mainstream primary school, offered information on the stages that emerged in her journey. This awareness of stages was retrospective:

> "I think there're probably three stages; there was the stage prior to his assessment where we were literally at our wits end because we were struggling to cope with this child, we didn't know what was wrong . . . That middle period is like the information overload. Where you've got all of this information coming at you, yes there's a huge relief that it's been diagnosed but then you've got speech therapists coming at you, one-way, occupational therapists coming another way,

> and school visits ... And now we're in the stage where it's just become a part of life and everything is a lot calmer—it's the calm, sort of, after the storm".

### *3.3. Parents' Changing Identities*

In this research parents felt that their identities were put on hold; with the potential of becoming pathologised. Parents initially assumed a passive role, waiting for information and services that did not materialize. This research situated the professional voice as representative of policy and provision; what parents considered a proxy for the State. Parents themselves felt that they were policing the professionals through their reactions and transgressions towards inadequate services. Parents' experienced levels of 'loss' of their former identity as parent and professional, but in some cases parents flourished in their advocacy for their child. A number of parents had worked professionally and gave up their roles to support their children. In some instances, parents felt that there were disadvantages both personally and professionally to embarking on these new journeys.

Adam's father initially was hesitant to become involved in the research. Redolent of the nomad, he explained that his experience of assessment involved "travelling for yet another appointment" and that travel for interviewing would be a deterrent to his involvement.

John, an E.I. team occupational therapist, also referred to the role of parent as advocate, where the parent assumes responsibility to procure resources. His opinion on this role was that it detached the parent from the child further, especially within an impoverished health system: "I feel that it is ... spending time advocating to get other people to come in and make contact ... to try and fix something that's broken?"

Parents were in inequitable positions. A central theme underpinning accounts of professional involvement was the perception that parents were forced into unsolicited relationships with professionals, which did not bear the hallmarks of typical relationships. Parents felt that these relationships exerted an imbalance of power and were based on assumptions that professionals were the gatekeepers of knowledge and more importantly, services.

When asked for her opinion on what presented as the greatest need for parents, support, training, or counselling, a female senior EI occupational therapist reiterated "empowerment". When asked what constitutes empowerment, a play therapist supporting parents in the home responded, "giving parents confidence and skills, and making them well-informed. Resourcing and access." Empowerment and capacity building in families are key principles of family-centered approaches to EI.

Regarding identities, professionals saw their role as critical in the support around individual children's transition to (pre)school. Embodying a collaborative, synergistic approach, one team leader emphasized that: "Teachers aren't trained therapists. In reality the curriculum should aim to deliver therapeutic goals" (Paul, senior EI psychologist). These professionals emphasized the centrality of relationships and inclusion of parents in their children's services.

In terms of how EI could support parental identities, Paul emphasized the importance of "family-centeredness and inclusive education. Therapists are no longer the 'treaters' of the child. The consultancy role of EI professionals will make sure that" Explaining this further, Paul suggested that the philosophy underpinning the direct or consultative approach to intervention aligned with his beliefs. "My particular feeling with regard to children is the fact that you are really facilitating an environment whereby you don't have a whole lot of professionals coming in and out short-time." Direct input from team members or a consultative model mediated through education staff in schools, was agreed by the majority of the professionals to benefit the child, parent and teachers. When asked what family-centered intervention looks like, John, an educational play therapist supporting families in the home, asserted that:

> "*It's about getting to know you ... A relationship might have developed with a team member, where there is cognizance of stages of parents' responses and engagement around the time of a diagnosis. This is the difficult part of this job; it's like losing a child. This*

> *loss might affect parents; therefore, relationships are key . . . without the trust piece with the service provider, the child may not have their needs met."*

Intersubjectivity was considered a cross-cutting theme in this research. John succinctly acknowledged this when he highlighted the need for relationships with parents and the possible benefits accrued to those relationships.

> *"The other thing I find is trying to have a relationship where if parents have a particular concern they can ring up and have a conversation with you. I find that sometimes because you are an outlet for that stress, they don't actually end up contacting you that much because what happens is they know they can if they want to."* (John, educational play therapist)

Meghan, a senior speech and language therapist, emphasized the importance of the role of the parent and that that the parent–professional relationship starts at the time of assessment:

> *"From the play-based team assessment, involve the parent in the play, look at the dynamics in a number of settings, not just in preschool or clinic but also the home environment. We skill-share, work on a goal together, including the SLT and the OT who will also work on this. We goal-set together, the parent decides what the goals are. Family-centered team based goals are established for the child. They can be time saving or time intense . . . in a smooth, more coordinated way, the family is the main liaison between the professionals."*

In a number of parent narratives, there was very little evidence of parent representation in the goal setting or formal decision-making during assessment and diagnosis processes. A tokenistic presence may have been evident; in many cases parents reported that they were not involved.

In one of the five Early Intervention teams interviewed, close alliances and consultation between therapists, educators, parents and professionals demonstrated evidence of effective team philosophies and processes, but these were the exception. However, parental, peer alliances supported parents through the in-betweenness of assessment when they felt at sea, waiting for elusive supports; advocating, lobbying, struggling.

## 4. Discussion

Themes arising from analysis of the findings are described using the metaphor of the nomad. Parents' journeys comprised uncertainty, vulnerability and need. However, they also provided evidence of inner resourcefulness, and potential for insightful support. The themes arising in the findings will be discussed in relation to the conceptual frame.

### *4.1. Nomadism*

Similar to nomads in anthropology, nomads are key figures of mobility but are also metaphors for ways of being outside the confines of territory or State strictures. This paper proposes the use of the concept of the 'nomad' as a central tenet which draws threads from multiple literature sources, paradigms and ideologies. A central metaphor of the nomad therefore provides validity and relevance to triangulated accounts but also a conceptualization which integrates the State and the individual.

This research is congruent with that of Engebrigsten [18], who refers to the use of the nomad to describe social organization and power relations, as well as a form of contrast between the individual and the State. Engebrigsten [18] notes that the nomad portrays European perspectives on the 'other' but that this nomenclature may also serve parent identity construction as 'other-becoming' in order to displace binaries. Nomadism usefully identifies boundaries between sedentarism and movement, which is apt for the parents in this research who through their movement constantly searched, strived and tried to locate and procure services and resources, all the while being the constant in their children's lives. This research also identifies the nomad as a fitting term when used to describe the life world of the parents who do not fit the trope of being settled, or settling (for less), rather settled like McLaughlin and Goodley's [28] parents, with their disabled children.

Deleuze and Guattari's [17] postmodern embodiment of the nomad is also congruent with the parents in this research, who through their journeying have become stateless, where their identities are unformed or continuously reforming. As the philosophers of difference suggest, parents acknowledge and embrace their difference in their quest. This adoption of difference becomes transformative. An openness to difference therefore positions the nomad in a state of becoming, or as a war machine against the State. While State policies are inadequate, parents seek something beyond these limitations and locate new resources and provisions; defying State-like restrictions or hierarchical learning concepts.

### *4.2. In-Betweenness*

Through their vicarious experiences—acting or doing for another—parents occupied liminal positions and in-between spaces. What reinforced their liminality was their perception of hegemony, where potential dominance by the State or professional discourse dominated or silenced them [25]. Similar to Twomey and Shevlin's [14] findings, parents occupied different positions and were on different journeys. Journeys both inner and external were epitomized by in-betweenness.

Tensions with the 'would-be collaborators' existed at various levels of different and incoherent educational and health systems. Evidence of inconsistent service provision at a national level was apparent in the narratives of Early Intervention professional teams. These narratives manifested incoherency of practices of education and care.

Parents wandering on uncharted nomadic journeys lacked certainty and appropriate support. They existed liminally outside of the organizational State but with a sense of autonomy and a direction of their own [21]. While many professionals in this research were family-centered, EI systems were ad hoc and inconsistent, where children's assessment and diagnosis were prioritized over intervention. The concept developed by O'Connor, Carpenter and Barry [15] of "confident championing" was evident in many cases, but this was an individual endeavour on the part of the resilient parent. Occasional evidence of Deleuze and Guattari's [17] becoming was evidenced when parents felt a sense of achievement in procuring services for their children or when they developed competence in terms of peer-to-peer support.

Many parents revealed an ability to survive and flourish; looking for what more is there and what more can be created similar to the theory of Braidotti [27]. However, their perceptions and understandings of service provision and access to practical resources to support their children were ambiguous, reflecting a sense of disconnection and in-betweenness. Twomey and Shevlin [14] have acknowledged parents' role as pathfinders and creators as resonant of journeys that are emotional, physical and intellectual. The majority of parents in this research expressed the need for a strong State support system where resources were accessible and available to support their children's communicative, behavioural and developmental needs as well as the possibility of their inclusion in mainstream (pre)school. This study highlighted the importance of positive collaborative relationships between parents and professionals and the need for support and guidance during nomadic journeys of uncertainty and in-betweenness. Intersubjectivity was a key subtheme; parents' needs and desires did not differ greatly from the desires and wishes of the professionals. Unwitting consensus revealed a collective view centered on the child but also on the family. This highlights the need to forefront family-centered practices in Early Intervention and early education.

### *4.3. Identities*

This research proposes that parents were (re)forming identities in their quests for their children's services. EI practices were fluid and dynamic, reflecting the individual needs of the child and family in one setting. Evidence in this setting subscribed to family-centered approaches proposed by Dunst and Espe-Scherwindt [13]. In contrast, when parents perceived power imbalances or that professional discourses were prioritized [25], they felt disempowered. What was of particular interest were the processes of engagement and interaction during parental identity development, in what appeared as the vague, unwitting constructions of intersubjectivity. Occasionally the individual quest of the parent became the collective goal agreed upon by both parent and professional [13]. This research investigated the changing identities of the parent, where identities varied across contexts (clinics, classrooms and school years). Identity was negotiated and shaped by statutory inadequacy but also by intersubjective encounters; with core revelations that identity is not fixed and is subject to multiplicitous representations. Interpretation of the data evidenced that parents, like their children, valued belonging and inclusion. Children whose disabilities occasionally remained invisible and unvoiced, mirrored their parents' early inarticulate state when they felt pathologised and their trajectories medicalized.

Following austerity, the pandemic and its strictures have negatively affected the life course of the child with autism and their parents and have entrenched a deficit orientation resonant of the charity model. While an increased number of EI classes and inclusive environments have been provided, inclusion of children with more complex needs is not always evident.

## 5. Conclusions

### *Concluding Thoughts*

This paper provides a discussion of parental experiences during their journeys when seeking to advocate for their children. The research highlights the challenges parents experience as they navigate and engage with incoherent services. The nomad as metaphor provides a central tenet to draw together different conceptualizing of parents on uncharted journeys. Nomadic journeying occupying in-between and liminal spaces sometimes revealed that, in the absence of a coherent or structured pathway towards resources and services, the journey becomes the identity. Journeying allowed parents to deal with fragmented and inadequate supports, displacing the hegemony of the State, by creating something new for and by themselves. Parents as nomads engaged in rhizomatic thinking; the learning captured on their journeys was transformative. Rhizomatic thinking and learning allowed parents to send out shoots and roots, through transversal movement, into their communities. Parents as nomads engaged in multiplicitous, transversal activities creating arable points of nourishment in what were formerly karst and desert-like lands.

In order to improve EI services, in-between time/space could be used optimally to implement family-centered practices. This in-between time/space—the period of waiting (for their child's assessment and diagnosis)—could provide opportunities for the engagement and participation of the parent. Without this engagement, parents experienced ambiguity and uncertainty; interpreting the professional role as a proxy for the State. In a sense, the professionals personified what parents were resisting, when in fact they were only the purveyors of policy and provision services, if available. In the absence of appropriate State resources and supports, rhizomatic thinking by the professionals could have transformed the parent experience, if intersubjectivity was prioritized and in-betweenness evolved into something more manifest and real. Therefore, temporal and tangible support and resources must be provided at the appropriate time.

It is also worth noting that services are not always concrete and tangible; the offer and reassurance of a phone call by a professional was comfort in itself for a vulnerable parent. Some professionals viewed relationships as key. This could be a starting point for intersubjectivity or the development of shared worlds.

This research proposes that both parents and EI professionals embodied the nomad. Parents wandered from home, to clinic and schoolyard, seeking support and help. Professionals purposefully strayed outside of State-defined processes and limitations in seeking to help families who were struggling. When parents and professionals engaged optimally, children's and families' needs were addressed. Parent professional intersubjectivity was sometimes apparent in this research, however, it occurred less by design and more so by happenstance.

This research proposes that parent professional intersubjectivity should be integral to future planning, research and practice. While parents' perceptions and understandings of EI philosophy and practice were negative and deficit orientated, parent professional intersubjectivity could have displaced uncertainty and liminality. Impoverished State provision and denial of access to resources did not dampen the human condition in this research, rather it precipitated nomadic journeys and states of in-betweenness, where parents' transversal movements reinforced their ability to reimagine EI services. This research had limitations that were for the most part due to the geographical features of the sample. It would be highly advantageous if the sample were more representative of the country as a whole. Data were representative of a sample group based on convenience sampling and accessibility to the researcher. A second limitation was the presence of insider research. In order to address this unduly criticized approach, the positioning of the insider was made explicit at the outcome.

In terms of improving practice, pedagogical innovation should be prioritized. A synergistic approach to interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary learning has to be adopted in the education and training of Early Intervention professionals. All professionals supporting children with additional needs or disabilities should share knowledge and move past their discipline-specific boundaries.

On this continuous process of journeying in the face of inadequate policies, practice and services, parent voice illuminates the complex navigation required. This research recommends therefore that increased parental involvement occupy a centerpiece in the future planning of Early Intervention philosophies, provision and services in an effort to improve the human condition for all.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of The School of Education, Trinity College Dublin in 2011).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Government of Ireland. *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act*; The Stationery Office: Dublin, Ireland, 2004.
2. O'Mahony, C. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004: A New(ish) Beginning. *Ir. Law Times* **2004**, *22*, 301–304.
3. Government of Ireland. *The Disability Act*; The Stationery Office: Dublin, Ireland, 2005.
4. Office of the Ombudsman for Children. *Unmet Needs. A Report by the Ombudsman for Children's Office on the Challenges Faced by Children in Ireland Who Require an Assessment of Their Needs*; Ombudsman for Children: Dublin, Ireland, 2020.
5. Shevlin, M.; Banks, J. Inclusion at a Crossroads: Dismantling Ireland's System of Special Education. *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 161. [CrossRef]
6. Hilliard, M. *Call for HSE to Explain Thousands of Young People with Disabilities on Waiting Lists*; Irish Times: Dublin, Ireland, 2021.
7. United Nations General Assembly. *Convention on the Rights of the Child*; Treaty Series; United Nations: New York, NY, USA, 1989; Volume 1577, pp. 1–23. Available online: https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b38f0.html (accessed on 11 February 2022).
8. Abdelfattah, F.; Rababah, A.; Alqaryouti, I.; Alsartawi, Z.; Khlaifat, D.; Awamleh, A. Exploring Feelings of Worry and Sources of Stress during COVID-19 Pandemic among Parents of Children with Disability: A Sample from Arab Countries. *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 216. [CrossRef]
9. Rosenbaum, P.L.; Silva, M.; Camden, C. Let's not go back to "normal"! lessons from COVID-19 for professionals working in childhood disability. *Disabil. Rehabil.* **2021**, *43*, 1022–1028. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
10. Jacques, C.; Saulnier, G.; Éthier, A.; Soulières, I. Experience of Autistic Children and Their Families During the Pandemic: From Distress to Coping Strategies. *J. Autism Dev. Disord.* **2021**, *1*, 1–13. [CrossRef]
11. King, G.; Chiarello, L.A.; Mclarnon, M.J.W.; Ziviani, J.; Pinto, M.; Wright, F.V.; Phoenix, M. A measure of parent engagement: Plan appropriateness, partnering, and positive outcome expectancy in pediatric rehabilitation sessions. *Disabil. Rehabil.* **2021**, *1*, 1–10. [CrossRef]

12. Camden, C.; Silva, M. Pediatric Teleheath: Opportunities Created by the COVID-19 and Suggestions to Sustain Its Use to Support Families of Children with Disabilities. *Phys. Occup. Ther. Pediatr.* **2021**, *41*, 1–17. [CrossRef]
13. Dunst, C.J.; Espe-Sherwindt, M. Family-Centered Practices in Early Childhood Intervention. In *Early Childhood Intervention: Working with Families of Young Children with Special Needs*, 1st ed.; Sukkar, H., Dunst, C., Kirkby, J., Eds.; Routledge: London, UK, 2016. [CrossRef]
14. Twomey, M.; Shevlin, M. Parenting, autism spectrum disorders and inner journeys. *J. Res. Spec. Educ. Needs* **2017**, *17*, 157–167. [CrossRef]
15. O'Connor, A.B.; Carpenter, B.; Coughlan, B. Confident championing: A grounded theory of parental adjustment following a child's diagnosis of developmental disability. *Br. J. Learn. Disabil.* **2021**, *49*, 247–258. [CrossRef]
16. Callanan, J.; Signal, T.; McAdie, T. What is my child telling me? Reducing stress, increasing competence and improving psychological well-being in parents of children with a developmental disability. *Res. Dev. Disabil.* **2021**, *114*, 103984. [CrossRef]
17. Deleuze, G.; Guattari, F. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*; University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, USA, 1987; Volume 2.
18. Engebrigtsen, A.I. Key figure of mobility: The nomad. *Soc. Anthropol.* **2017**, *25*, 42–54. [CrossRef]
19. MacNaughton, G. The politics of logic in early childhood research: A case of the brain, hard facts, trees and rhizomes. *Aust. Educ. Res.* **2004**, *31*, 87–104. [CrossRef]
20. MacNaughton, G.; Hughes, P.; Smith, K. Young Children's Rights and Public Policy: Practices and Possibilities for Citizenship in the Early Years. *Child. Soc.* **2007**, *21*, 458–469. [CrossRef]
21. Summers, F.; Clarke, A. In-betweenness: Being mother, academic and artist. *J. Fam. Stud.* **2015**, *21*, 235–247. [CrossRef]
22. Timingold, T. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, 1st ed.; Routledge: London, UK, 2011. [CrossRef]
23. Rogers, C. Experiencing an "inclusive" education: Parents and their children with "special educational needs". *Br. J. Sociol. Educ.* **2007**, *28*, 55–68. [CrossRef]
24. Allan, J.; Slee, R. *Doing Inclusive Education Research*; Rotterdam Sense Publishers: Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 2008.
25. Hodge, N.; Runswick-Cole, K. Problematising parent–Professional partnerships in education. *Disabil. Soc.* **2008**, *23*, 637–647. [CrossRef]
26. Braidotti, R. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*; Columbia: New York, NY, USA, 1994.
27. Braidotti, R. *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*; Polity Press in Association with Blackwell Publishers: New Jersey, NJ, USA, 2002.
28. McLaughlin, J.; Goodley, D. Seeking and Rejecting Certainty: Exposing the Sophisticated Lifeworlds of Parents of Disabled Babies. *Sociology* **2008**, *42*, 317–335. [CrossRef]
29. Cooper-White, C. Intersubjectivity. *Encycl. Psychol. Relig.* **2014**, 882–886.
30. Kelly, B. "Chocolate . . . makes you autism": Impairment, disability and childhood identities. *Disabil. Soc.* **2005**, *20*, 261–275. [CrossRef]
31. Ngunjiri, F.W.; Hernandez, K.C.; Chang, H. Living Autoethnography: Connecting Life and Research. *J. Res. Pract.* **2010**, *6*, E1.
32. Polkinghorne, D.E. *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*; State University of New York Press: New York, NY, USA, 1988.
33. Trahar, S. Beyond the Story Itself: Narrative Inquiry and Autoethnography in Intercultural Research in Higher Education. *Forum Qual. Soz. Forum Qual. Soc. Res.* **2009**, *10*. [CrossRef]
34. Strauss, A.; Corbin, J. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*; Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 1998.
35. Ploder, A.; Stadlbauer, J. Strong Reflexivity and Its Critics: Responses to Autoethnography in the German-Speaking Cultural and Social Sciences. *Qual. Inq.* **2016**, *22*, 753–765. [CrossRef]

education sciences

MDPI

*Article*

# “I Thought It Was My Fault Just for Being Born”. A Review of an SEL Programme for Teenage Victims of Domestic Violence

**Norah Sweetman**

School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, D02 PN40 Dublin, Ireland; sweetman@tcd.ie

**Abstract:** Research has established the life-altering effects of living with domestic violence on young people. Traumatic experiences negatively impact their education, leisure activities, and social-emotional learning (SEL). The secrecy concerning domestic violence means young people suffer self-blame, shame, fear of disclosure and family separation. The researcher designed a 12-week multimedia programme, ‘up2talk’, to enhance the communications skills and emotional literacy of the participants. Parents and teenagers were fully informed of the aims and previously attended the family service hosting the programme. Domestic violence was identified as a core issue, without the expectation of personal disclosure. This approach enabled young people to voice and explore the effects of domestic violence on their lives. Participants developed the elements of the programme and a family worker co-facilitated the groups. The third-party approaches: ‘how would a teenager feel?’, artistic expression, assertiveness, debates and videoing drama increased SEL and generated discussion, while protecting privacy. Parents provided two interviews concerning their children, and teenagers provided three individual interviews and ongoing group reviews. A thematic analysis showed a reduction in shame and self-blame, enhanced self-esteem and self-efficacy, increased engagement in education and recreation and improved family relationships. Themes were triangulated by facilitators’ observations, interview data, artefacts, group reviews and parental feedback. All families were offered follow-up support. The effectiveness of the interactive group indicates opportunities for its development in educational and youth settings.

**Keywords:** domestic violence; adolescence; teenage; Adverse Childhood Experience; social-emotional learning; voice; interventions; group supports

**Citation:** Sweetman, N. “I Thought It Was My Fault Just for Being Born”. A Review of an SEL Programme for Teenage Victims of Domestic Violence. *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 784. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11120784

Academic Editors: Michael Shevlin, Richard Rose and Randall S. Davies

Received: 20 April 2021
Accepted: 11 November 2021
Published: 1 December 2021

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background to Silence, Prevalence and ACEs

This paper explores the impact of domestic violence on teenage victims through the lens of social-emotional learning (SEL). The researcher designed and ran a 12-week interactive programme called ‘up2talk’ for five teenage participants affected by domestic violence. The programme was hosted in a family services centre and a family worker co-facilitated sessions with the researcher.

The prevalence of domestic and family violence remains uncertain due to the hidden nature of the issue, particularly for young victims who may fear being taken into care. Øverlien and Holt [1], writing for a Special Issue in the *Journal of Family Violence*, noted the ongoing difficulty in establishing prevalence figures internationally. The World Health Organization declared gender-based and family violence an international epidemic [2].

The Irish figures are based on police reports, which were themselves challenged for how they were compiled [3]. Community-based research such as SAVI, Ireland [4] and the work of Radford et al. [5] in the UK, show levels of reporting as low as 5% among victims of domestic and sexual violence. Domestic violence and child sexual abuse were found to be frequently concurrent by Edleson [6].

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) research internationally highlighted the fundamental impact of childhood trauma throughout one’s lifetime. Poor health, education and employment, chronic illness and a shorter life expectancy are results of early trauma, with domestic violence being a significant factor [7,8]. Challenging behaviour in a school context and lower academic performance are significantly associated with victims of domestic violence and other traumatic ACEs, as noted by Gordon [9] (p. 11).

ACEs significantly impact learning as they can compromise a learner's ability to benefit from education. These learners frequently have trouble trusting teachers and other adults, and difficulty creating and maintaining relationships with their classmates [7–9].

### *1.2. Context for Research*

Young victims of domestic violence are marginalised as individuals and as a group. The higher rate of domestic violence associated with extreme poverty is observed in many people in underserved communities [10]. The effects of living with domestic violence include physical neglect or injury, sleep disruption and emotional trauma [11]. These cognitive and emotional impacts on concentration, combined with the lack of resources for study, negatively affect a young person's education [12]. A United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) report noted that children affected by family violence had up to a 40% lower reading ability than children from non-violent homes [13]. Leisure and extracurricular activities are restricted by lack of money, the keeping of the 'secret' of violence in the home, and teenagers having to care for siblings or the non-abusing parent [14]. The resulting isolation leads to shame and self-blame, as well as the belief that their situation is unique.

The aim of this research study was to design and deliver the specially tailored SEL programme 'up2talk' for young people affected by domestic violence. The model which was used drew on the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning [15] model and specifically included elements that addressed the established negative effects of domestic violence on teenagers SEL. These included the loss of confidence, self-blame, isolation, and academic underachievement [16]. In light of the concerns around direct research within this group and the needs of young victims to manage their engagement [17], a social skills enhancement approach was chosen. As the sole researcher in this study, the term 'the researcher' is interchangeable with my personal identification in this paper.

### *1.3. Research Focus*

The need to hear the voices of young people was the primary research focus. As research identified the benefits for custodial parents (mothers in this case) of understanding the processes that young people are engaged in [18], and due to the opportunities to gain support and understanding of their own experiences, mothers' voices were included in the study [19]. As the sole researcher, I designed and facilitated the group but also participated in the games and activities. Therefore, this qualitative study used an active practitioner approach in line with the dual aims of action research [20]: learning from participants and aiming to enhance the relevant service [21]. The notion of the re-traumatisation of victims as a result of participation in the study, is a barrier to active research into domestic violence, although data from participants suggest this is unfounded if principles of respect and effective communication are maintained [17]. The work of Houghton and Youth Advisors [19] in Scotland culminated in young survivors making direct submissions to Parliament concerning the effective support and interventions as part of designing materials and building networks. However, the voices of young survivors are rarely heard, and they are seldom consulted in the design of interventions that address their needs [11].

Thus, the interactive group programme, 'up2talk' was devised to enhance SEL skills, in order to facilitate the discussion and understanding of domestic violence without the necessity of sharing individual traumatic stories. The domestic violence focus of the group was discussed in the initial interviews with the parents and children. They were informed it was not a therapy group, although support was available on site weekly or in the long-term through the family services. The young people, who participated in the study, developed social and emotional skills and effective communications through a variety of media. The choice around their depth of engagement and the activities remained with them. This programme aimed to enhance emotional literacy and communication skills [22]. The need for nurturing activities and relationships in the recovery from trauma is vital [23].

Lundy [24] stresses the need for children to have the ability to speak out, a platform to do so and an audience to hear them, otherwise the right to a voice is ineffective:

An important first step is that children are asked which matters they consider impact them, and how (or indeed whether) they would like to be involved in influencing the outcome of the decision. Children complain that the issues which they are allowed to influence are predetermined (p. 934).

The original research questions of the study proposed that the ‘up2talk’ could enhance SEL, the awareness of the effects of domestic violence among participants and generate materials for other groups:

1. How can a specially tailored SEL programme positively affect social-emotional skills in 12–14-year-olds impacted by domestic violence?
2. How can such a group help participants to develop an awareness of how domestic violence in their families affects their SEL skills?
3. How can a small-scale programme generate themes, ideas and instruments to develop SEL programmes for other young people affected by domestic violence? [22] (p. 9).

The efficacy of the programme was evidenced in the increased confidence and enhanced SEL skills in the behaviour and expressions of young people in the activities, processes and reviews. Their expanded skill sets were also reviewed and exemplified in their individual interviews. The time frame proved too short for initiating designs for further programmes, although transferable elements were developed.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Preliminary Investigations

The literature review generated an extensive understanding of the sociological complexity of young peoples’ experiences of family violence. I consulted family support workers, women’s domestic violence refuge workers, social workers, local victim support agencies and several young adults who had left a violent home situation, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of young people and families. Frontline workers in addiction services and youth services were also consulted [22] (p. 128). The initial proposal was to run the group in a youth service. I attended the youth service for three weeks and had informal conversations with workers and club members. Secrecy around the issue was mentioned when a young volunteer insisted that the posters for ‘up2talk’ be put up in the toilets as nobody would pause and read them in the hall.

The second proposal to work with Poplaville family services centre was successful and meetings with the coordinator, the co-facilitator, Luke (a family worker) and the team followed. Luke had an extensive local trust and genuine empathy for young people which guided the recruitment process. He believed that families involved with the services had answered many intrusive questions to access income and other supports. Therefore, the paperwork should be simple and personal interaction should be the preferred method of working [22]. This view was supported by UK research suggesting that social workers spend the majority of their time on paperwork rather than with clients [25].

### 2.2. Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was obtained from Trinity College Dublin. Each participant and parent completed an informed consent form including the permission to publish materials generated by the programme. A commitment to complete anonymity concerning all identifying names and details was given to participants. This was maintained with the final data set involving numbers and pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of families. The option to leave the programme at any time without explanation was included.

### *2.3. Designing the Programme*

Action research was the approach chosen, as the aim was an increased understanding of the issue informing an enhanced practice in the field. A review in a Canadian journal [20] found that:

For example, action research is recursive: It starts out from experience or practical problems, but when findings are determined to lead to improved practice, the process begins anew. It is a field-intensive process in which the researcher acts as a participant observer, often working in collaboration with colleagues. (p.64)

The model of change for the 'up2talk' programme was informed by Wight et al. [26] using a phased approach:

- Definition of the problem: the effects of domestic violence on teenage SEL
- Factors receptive to change: enhanced levels of SEL skills in participants
- Mechanism of change: interactive SEL peer group
- Delivered by means of a structured group SEL skills programme

The instruments were used successfully by the researcher and were trialled specifically for this programme. The data were generated directly by the participants.

### *2.4. Recruitment*

The family centre contacted 21 families with teenagers aged 12–14 who had experienced domestic violence and invited the parent/guardian and young person to a meeting to explain the programme. Six families responded and five continued to participate in the group. This initial meeting involved a parent and child meeting both individually and together, with myself as the researcher and the family worker, Luke. Young people filled out a short cartoon-based sheet of seven questions, 'the feelings chart', and their mothers completed the same chart concerning their child [22] (p. 320). This colour chart is listed as Appendix A, Figure A1. Parents and young people were asked about their queries and hopes for the programme.

### *2.5. The Process of the Programme 'up2talk'*

The programme ran for 12 consecutive weeks for two and a half hours every Wednesday afternoon. The five participants, two girls and three boys, all aged 13, completed the programmes with an absentee rate of one session each. All participants and parents attended the final exhibition on the celebration day.

The key principles of the 'up2talk' programme included providing a safe, supportive atmosphere and building trusting, respectful relationships between facilitators and young people, and among the entire group. The research indicates that understanding relationships and participants maintaining a choice over their engagement levels and activities are prioritised by young people in such groups [27,28]. This emerged in the participant reviews of 'up2talk', discussed in the Findings section.

### *2.6. Approaches to Weekly Sessions 'up2talk'*

The use of third-party approaches, both in discussion and activity, allowed for 'what if' scenarios and questions which did not request personal disclosure. The use of multimedia and sensorial activity aligned with an understanding that *"children who experience violence in their homes experience it with all their senses"* [29] (p. 181). An ongoing review of the activities and the process of 'up2talk' was combined with an opt-in or opt-out to any activity, question or debate. Theron et al. [29] emphasise the value of visual arts in working with young people, but urged caution against applying an adult interpretation of the participant's art.

As participants' SEL skills developed, their engagement and confidence in planning and reviewing activities increased. The plan-do-review model enhanced their skills and these developments were noted, reviewed weekly with the group and further analysed by the facilitator. The programme was structured to develop group trust and SEL skills, build on successes and expand the range of activities and depth of engagement in line with participants' choices and the ongoing review.

### *2.7. Instruments*

The activities of 'up2talk', such as the assertiveness games used in the programme, were piloted in the youth service groups. Key instruments such as the 'feelings chart' were trialled on a mixed group of eleven young people aged 10–14. Tape recorders for interviewing were previously successful in numerous youth groups and were used for individual interviews.

### *2.8. Individual Interviews—Parents and Young People*

The interviews were conducted on the first meeting and the last week of the programme for the five participants and mothers. A group review was held midway through the programme for mothers. Follow up interviews, four months later, were attended by three young people. Feelings charts were used each time as a reference point and questions around specific developments and changes were included. (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Interview schedule. [22] (p. 173).

| Interviews | Participants | Parents | Purpose | Approach | Time |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Initial** | Young people Individually w/ researcher | | To explain the programme | 'Feelings chart' and follow up questions | Day 1<br>15 min. |
| **Initial** | Young people Individually w/family worker | | To explain the programme and take questions | Explain context-support of family centre | Day 1<br>15 min. |
| **Initial** | Young person (5 duos) | Child parent researcher and family worker (5 duos) | To ensure clarity between family members and facilitators | Discussion of hopes for the programme | Day 1<br>15 min. |
| **Initial** | | Individually with researcher | To build trust and answer queries | Parent filled 'Feelings chart' re. their view of their child | Day 1<br>15 min. |
| **Initial** | | Individually with family worker | To answer queries/explain support role of family centre | | Day 1<br>15 min. |
| **Interviews** | **Participants** | **Parents** | **Purpose** | **Approach** | **Time** |
| **Four-week review** | Researcher and family worker | Three out of five mothers attended | To inform Parents + check for queries/ concerns. | Group review by mothers.<br>Peer discussion. | Week 4<br>30 min. |
| **Final week review** | Each participant (5) had an individual interview with researcher | | to explore changes in understanding and actions. Reflect on the programme process | To revisit the 'Feelings Chart'. To review the programme from participant's view | Wk. 12<br>20 min. |
| **Final week review** | | Four mothers had an individual interview with the researcher | to discuss observed changes in child's understanding and actions. | To explore parent observations of the young person's responses to the programme | Wk. 12<br>20 min. |
| **Follow up review—4 months** | participants individual interview with the researcher. | | to explore the long-term view of the programme. | Revisit the 'Feelings Chart'. A discussion of effects observed. | Wk. 27<br>20 min. |

Feelings chart: cartoons not shown (see Appendix A for illustrated colour chart).

### 2.9. *Young People Interviewed Each Other, the Facilitator and Parents*

These interviews were initiated by the young people in the final weeks, their questions reflected their new understanding.

### 2.10. *Group Review for Parents Mid-Point, and Young People—Ongoing*

These group reviews used unfinished sentences, art materials and wooden puzzles to generate ideas. The group feedback informed the media and methods used in the weekly group sessions.

The following table offers examples of the core elements of the programme contained within the materials and media chosen and developed by the participants. (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Instruments for data collection. [22], (p. 153).

| **Application Instrument** | | | | **Method of Use Participants** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Instrument** | **Application** | **Purpose** | **Activity** | **Participants** |
| **Group games** | Practice social emotional skills weekly | Relax and bond. Build skills and confidence | Communication and listening games | Young people researcher + Family worker |
| **Assertiveness cartoons** | Introduce concept visually | Learn the skills in action | Cartoons and games about life situations | Young people |
| **Drama** | Developed from assertiveness games | Express issues and dilemmasof life | Young people wrote, acted and filmed short pieces | Young people researcher + Family worker |
| **Visual charts of life issues** | Express emotion/ideas visually | Develop Emotional literacy | Concept + materials supplied | Young people |
| **Debates** | Express + listen to opinions. Explore difference in key issues | Expand empathy and understanding | Walking debate. Place yourself on a spectrum of opinion in room | Young people |
| **Clay pieces** | Creating a clay piece for a chosen emotion | Name and represent an emotion | Each one selects an emotion card and creates in clay. | Young people |
| **Cookery** | Bond and enjoy. Teamwork | Provide lunch each week | Participants prepared lunch and snacks | Young people researcher + Family worker |
| **Domestic violence story and response 'Amanda's story'** | Group listen to story. Express emotion by pouring water individually | Safe to express emotions and discuss at a remove. | Family worker reads. Participants listen and respond. Discuss | Young people researcher + Family worker |
| **Instrument** | **Application** | **Purpose** | **Method of use** | **Participant** |
| **Celebration Day Event** | Group prepare art work exhibit. Drama, song and video for families | Share success and display work to family | Participants design and deliver entire event. | Group (5)<br>Families (5)<br>Staff of centre (10)<br>Facilitator and family worker |

### 2.11. *Assertiveness Cartoons, Games and Activities*

Assertiveness skills began with creating cartoons of 'happy head', 'sad head' and 'aggro head' and attributing thoughts, words and feelings to each 'head', as they represent an emotional state. This progressed to games and quizzes, example below:

Sample early question game of Assertiveness [22] (p. 320):

| **A friend asks you to lend them money, you can't do it, and they pressurize you by saying . . . .** | **A little boy on your road is stealing a lot in the shop, his mum works very hard and doesn't know, his sister asks you to keep the secret.** | **Your friends are going to . . . ? IT'S TROUBLE you don't really want to and you will get in loads of hassle but they are all going?** | **A school mate calls your family names and says mean stuff about them. You hear about it AND . . .** |
|---|---|---|---|

### *2.12. Drama and Filming Vignettes Written by the Group*

The sketches originated from the Assertiveness programme and were written, acted and filmed by the group drawing on their ongoing concerns. Several sketches included heated scenes in the school principal's office with an angry and defiant young person shouting and nobody listening to their point of view.

### *2.13. Group Games, Discussions*

These exercises graduated from switching, guessing and counting games to exploring beliefs and experiences.

### *2.14. Walking Debates*

Topics began with general viewpoint questions such as:

"should we have to wear school uniforms?"

The questions progressed to topics such as:

"what makes a happy family?" "Would you accept a gay sibling in your family?"

### Team Building

Cookery challenges led to requests for an evening mountain hike with team challenges.

### *2.15. Emotional Literacy*

Emotional literacy was developed in the programme from games that matched the names of emotions to a more complex interpretation of the deeper emotions associated with domestic violence effects.

### *2.16. Art and Clay—Individual and Group Expressions*

Participants created clay pieces expressing an emotion or thought, either random or self-selected.

Charts and drawings were used to express relationships and their importance in young people's lives.

### *2.17. Empathy with Others' Feelings*

In week four a small bird got tangled in security wire and the group became very upset when it was attacked by a larger bird. They wanted to get ladders and save it; further discussion followed.

### Debates—Relationship with Fathers (in this Group, Fathers Were the Absent Abusive Parents)

A debate arose about the role of fathers. The idealised father figure and the reality of family difficulties, including violence and separation, was discussed.

### *2.18. Releasing Feelings through Pouring Water, and Painting over Old Feelings with New Hopes*

'Sam's story', in week three, described a bad day. Participants were asked to pour water if they felt concerned for him as the story was read aloud. Later, 'Amanda's story' recounted a domestic violence incident.

### *2.19. Celebration Day*

This day was entirely designed and delivered by the group, from the invitations to the entertainment. On this final day, their work was displayed with explanatory posters and families were invited. Refreshments were served, guests were shown around the work and encouraged to ask questions.

Each young person gave a short unscripted speech.

They were asked individually what they had gained from the programme when receiving their certificate, and each one chose to speak. This exercise melds a public speaking challenge with an internal reflection.

This complete set of exercises, activities and experiences of the participants generated the data sets and enhanced their practical social-emotional skills, as well as understanding of the effects of domestic violence in their lives.

## **3. Findings/Results**

The interpretation of the participants' art, artefacts and dramatic materials was checked with the participants in the weekly sessions of 'up2talk' and their statements were recorded without challenge. If a young person produced a distraught face in clay, gave it a comic name and stated that it meant nothing, this was recorded. In some instances, when member checking, participants revised the original interpretations, but this was at their own volition. The interviews were semi structured and used visual aids and prompts, with the choice of using the third person responses available.

The findings consisted of the young participants' and mothers' voices, and all originated in their materials generated during the programme. The materials included the interviews, charts and drawings, and the drama recorded and discussed. The interviews with teenagers and parents, as well as the group discussions, formed the majority of the data.

### *3.1. Data Analysis*

The data were analysed thematically according to the method of Braun and Clarke [30], and themes were coded using the Saldaña [31] method. Weekly reviews of the sessions, materials and observations with the co-facilitator, Luke, the use of a reflexive journal and a critical friend were employed to reduce bias on the part of the researcher. The semi structured interviews (ssitv) were all conducted by the researcher, and were all individual and private, with the feelings chart used as a discussion point. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo software.

### *3.2. Triangulation of the Data*

The facilitator and family worker recorded their observations in a weekly review. The participants member-checked their expressions for accuracy in all media. The role of the mothers was vital in validating both the opinions of young people on change, and observations of new behaviour by the researcher and family worker. Examples are provided in the findings of this vital element.

### *3.3. Central Themes of the Findings*

This section explores the overarching themes emerging in the participants' direct voice. This approach aligns with the aim of the study to enhance the SEL skills of participants to enable their unique voice to be heard. The involvement in and evaluation of such a programme by the practitioner is a key element of action research [18,32].

This is followed by a review of the findings in relation to the research questions regarding the enhancement of social skills and emotional literacy, and the possibility of generating materials for other groups from this study 'up2talk'.

### *3.4. Silence*

The culture of silence, which blankets the issue of domestic violence, was prominent from the preliminary investigations through to the final interviews with participants. This increased anxiety and isolation. The issue remained unspoken, even in family therapy by participants:

> "*I don't really remember, a lot happened outside the house*" (Linda: ssitv 3)
>
> and:
>
> "*I don't know, I just never really . . . dunno . . . didn't talk about it*." (Jack: ssitv 3)

Mothers also struggled with secrecy within the family; two of the mothers had never directly discussed the violent events with their children and expressed fears of

> "*upsetting the kids, bringing it all up again, just when we are settled*" (Ruth: ssitv 2)
>
> and debated the reasons for their silence:
>
> "*I don't know why I never talked about it (in therapy), I thought they were over it, didn't want to drag it up again. I've never really gone into the ins and outs and talked properly. I either think, well he doesn't remember, or it might affect him if I bring it up.*" (Sara: ssitv. 2) [22] (pp. 197–198)

A lack of voice for two participants meant that they asked privately '*what does domestic violence mean*?' This occurred in a programme addressing the issue with information and consent supplied before and during the programme.

### *3.5. Self-Blame*

Self-blame was another important issue where confusion about the reason for the violence was expressed:

> "*I didn't know what my mam and dad were arguing about so I would have thought . . . is it because of me? Something I did . . . ?*" (Linda: ssitv 2) [22] (p. 220)
>
> Self-blame was part of a struggle to make sense of the violence, and Jamie questioned it:
>
> "*You wonder if it's your fault, like for being born?*" (Jamie: ssitv 2) [22] (p. 219)
>
> In their final interviews, the mothers expressed regrets about the situation:
>
> Researcher: Do you think maybe one of the reasons you take it (negative behaviour from children) is because you feel guilty?
>
> Mother: *Yeah, because it was going on for a long time, and was very hard on the kids, but I didn't see that for a long time.*
>
> Researcher: So you feel guilty you didn't do it early enough. However, you were hoping one day he would get better?
>
> Mother: *I did, I think I got blinded by that, one day he will get better*. (Betty: mother ssitv) [22] (p. 220)

### *3.6. Relationship with Father*

The debates about family and art pieces called 'closest to my heart' initiated conversations about fathers.

Love and complex emotions surrounding the participants' missing fathers were expressed, from happy memories to the anger and helplessness that emerged in response to '*Amanda's story*'. The confusion between a father being kind and fun and feelings of yearning for this were expressed in comments by participants, such as: "*this is the Dad we want*". This was mixed with anger and futility at a man who is violent towards women and frightens his children:

> "*she* (the child, Amanda) *can't put a gun up to her Dad's head and tell him stop, can she?*" (group debate after '*Amanda's story*' of violence) [22] (p. 218)

The views of mothers were often in conflict with the teenager's positive view of the relationship, with mothers expressing much fear regarding access times because of previous instabilities and substance abuse. One mother felt that:

> "*He'll (son) say you're always giving Dad a hard time but my view is that no, when he's with you he should be sober, but he seems to be very loyal to his dad in a way, even though he (Dad) doesn't do a lot for him, or when he's with him, he's bored a lot of the time*." (Sara: ssitv 2) [22] (p. 238)

The ambivalence present in the ongoing relationships with a separated father was expressed:

> "*you probably think it's hypocritical after what he did; but he really helped me*",

and another teenager found that:

> "*he's just always there for me*."

The difficulty in accepting the reality of a father's behaviour was mentioned in attempts to repair relationships with him:

> "*we tried but it all kicked off*." (ssitv 2) [22] (p. 238)

### 3.7. The Ability to Regulate Disclosure by Participants

The participants consistently benefited from the indirect third-party approach. Phrases such as 'a teenager might feel this or think that' were used to explore sensitive topics. In the second interview at the end of the programme, as the interviewer, I asked individually if the participants were comfortable enough to discuss the effects of living with domestic violence more directly. Four agreed and one participant responded as follows:

> Researcher: So, are you OK with talking more directly about the domestic violence now we know each other better?
>
> Dylan: *Yeah* . . .
>
> Researcher: If it's too nosey like, would you tell me to stop?
>
> Dylan: *Yeah, sure, assertiveness and all that!* (ssitv 2) [22] (p. 227)

Another participant corrected their first response, which presupposed a group view:

> Researcher: Additionally, when we did the clay pots, did you feel it was a bit too serious when we asked people about effects of violence and things like that?
>
> Linda: *No, if it was a bit too serious, we would have said that we didn't like it.*
>
> Researcher: OK, that's good. Additionally, do you think all the group could have said 'oh no, I don't like that' or just you?
>
> Linda: *I don't know about the rest of them. I just know I could have said out straight, it's making me feel uncomfortable or whatever*. (Linda: ssitv 2)
>
> Researcher: Now that we have worked together and know each other, do you think you would be comfortable to talk more personally with me about the effects of living with domestic violence? If you find it too nosey or you want to change the subject . . . It's up to you, same as always.
>
> Jamie: *Well . . . I just call that a nuisance . . . it just went right over my head* (makes a sweeping gesture over his head with his hand and pauses) *(silence)*.
>
> Researcher: Ok. So, would you like to review the feelings chart and the other things we did?
>
> Jamie: *Yeah* . . . (ssitv 2) [22] (pp. 227–228)

The latter participant chose an indirect review, and then provided a detailed summary including the possible feelings and effects of living with domestic violence.

### *3.8. Improved Family Relationships*

Mothers mentioned more affectionate exchanges:

> *When I came in from work yesterday, he gave me a hug, which is now—that's not very unusual, but he is doing it more frequently now*. (Ruth: ssitv 2)

Unexpected acts of generosity were very touching for a parent, where a young person returned shopping money for clothes, while saying

> "*thank you for taking care of me all these years*." (Mother 3: ssitv 2)

Others noted that

> "*we are having a laugh again*", (Liz)

and

> "*we are closer, I thought that was gone for good*." (Sara) [22] (pp. 238,239)

### *3.9. Review of the Findings in Relation to the Research Questions*

The analysis aligned with the research questions of the thesis is as follows:

1. How can a specially tailored SEL programme positively affect social-emotional skills in 12–14-year-olds impacted by domestic violence?
2. How can such a group help participants to develop an awareness of how domestic violence in their families affects their SEL skills?
3. How can a small-scale programme generate themes, ideas and instruments to develop SEL programmes for other young people affected by domestic violence? [22] (p. 9).

In the 'up2talk' programme, social skills and emotional literacy were woven through the research but, for clarity of analysis, they are presented separately.

### *3.10. Social Skills—Positive Effects for Participants*

The weekly attendance and participation in the programme demonstrated commitment and achievement of goals at each phase of the research. Individuals who had initially avoided drama became involved in it and engaged fully. The exhibition of work on the celebration day and all the planning and hosting of the day were organised by the group. The singing and acting were initiated by two teenagers who originally stated an inability to speak in public at any time. The team challenges in the house and on the mountain hike involved cooperation and planning to solve team puzzles.

More confidence was apparent, according to several mothers. Liz had definite examples of this increased confidence in daily life:

> Researcher: He had said, and you had said from the start that what you would like to see for him is more confidence. Do you see any changes in that department?
>
> Liz: *All the different friends coming to the house, going to more sleepovers . . . a different variety of people he's interacting with . . . he's more confident . . . in front of everyone, in front of the class . . . People he knows, before he would have been nervous . . .* (ssitv 2)
>
> Researcher: What did you think was the best part of this for your child?
>
> Angie: *Definitely the confidence, I see a big change that way. She's definitely more settled and outgoing* (celebration day).

Another change was that young people appeared less anxious about leaving their mothers alone:

> "*yeah, used to be always hanging around me, now it's: 'I'm off'*" (Betty: ssitv 2) [22] (p. 237)

### *3.11. New Goals Regarding Commitment to School*

> Participant 1: *Well, I don't know if the course helped me but I've started putting my head down in school a lot more.*
>
> Researcher: Yeah?
>
> Participant 1: *100% a lot more, and I find myself in less trouble . . . like they are speaking to me, like how good I'm doing and that I should get A grades in exams*. (ssitv 3) [22] (p. 204)

### *3.12. Assertiveness Was Put into Action*

> Participant 4: *I know one thing that's changed. Assertiveness, when the computer game was broken, well I just said, like real calmly, no, it was broken when I got it . . . That's not right! And they gave me the money back*. (partcpt 4: ssitv 2.) [22] (p. 235)

### *3.13. Luke (Co-Facilitator) Review*

> Luke: Yeah, definitely the acting and the role playing of different situations, whether it be in the home or whether it be damaging situations in life; it was brilliant them being able to voice thoughts, feelings; challenge, develop their own life skills, build them as people, you know. [22] (p. 233)

### *3.14. Developing Listening Skills and Expressing Opinions*

The ability to empathise with the position of others while expressing personal reservations was shown in the debate on: "*should gay marriage be legal*". A range of views were expressed including:

> "*well, I wouldn't stop anyone but I wouldn't like it in my own family*",
>
> while others felt:
>
> "*you would have to stand up for your family*" (walking debate) [22] (p. 211)
>
> When participating in activities with the group, a preference could change, as one remarked:
>
> "*Some people didn't like to do acting but everyone wanted to do it in the end, it was fun*." (p. 226)

### *3.15. Emotional Literacy: Positive Effects for Participants*

The reflexive abilities of the participants affected the understanding of domestic violence and wider issues in their lives.

> *Loved the clay . . . it was very inspiring looking at what everyone else was doing and calling their pieces. You could just tell that it made sense. Like the spine of anger—I get a shiver in my spine when I'm angry*. (partcpt 2: ssitv 2) [22] (p. 216).

### *3.16. Naming the Issue*

Researcher: Like, I would call it domestic violence, 'course that's kind of the formal word but in your mind what do you think of it as . . . when people are just . . . Very violent at home, behaving badly, would you have had a name for it?

> Dylan: *No, I don't know . . . I never . . . actually had a name for it*
>
> Researcher: Would you have ever talked to anyone?
>
> Dylan: Shakes his head.
>
> Researcher: So . . . be like a big secret?
>
> Dylan: *Yeah.*
>
> (Dylan: ssitv 2) [22] (p. 198)

### *3.17. Expressing Emotions*

The clay pots were painted with negative emotions about family violence and then decorated, planted and watered during the reading of Amanda's story. A participant made the card for this display: "*We realised bad feelings don't have to last forever*".

### *3.18. Awareness of Domestic Violence Effects on SEL*

The extremes of behaviour regarding the effects of domestic violence could be heard in one participant's response:

> Researcher: How do you think that could affect how you behave at school?
>
> Jack: *Being really bold*.
>
> Researcher: Additionally, your work?
>
> Jack: *Either good, expressing it through art or just being really … not want to do anything and be really upset in school*. (ssitv 2)

### *3.19. Enhanced Self-Esteem*

More confidence in practice and reduced self-blame enabled more self-esteem, and the ability to reach out to:

> "*tell someone you really trust, like family*"
>
> and that you should
>
> "*just talk to someone*." (ssitv 2) [22] (p. 215)

### Empathy

Concern for others who might be suffering domestic violence demonstrated high levels of empathy:

> Researcher: So they could be a bit nervous about relationships, you mean?
>
> Jack: *Yeah, and they could maybe feel a bit guilty, is it happening to anyone else that I don't know about?* (ssitv 2) [22] (p. 219)

The third aspect concerning the development of materials for other groups could not be explored in depth due to time constraints, but transferable approaches and guidelines are indicated, and the participants displayed empathy and concern for others who might be suffering violence.

## **4. Discussion**

The central theme of the secrecy around domestic violence and how this constitutes young people as hidden victims was established in international research [5,33–36].

The resulting difficulties in conducting research with young victims were highlighted in the 2021 review of Elliffe et al. [36]. This silence denies their right to a voice and to be participants in research, according to a European review [1]. The research into children's voices highlights the need for preparatory work to develop necessary skills [37–40]. The shift in attitude reflects that in policy terms, there is a growing emphasis on children's rights and the importance and understanding of children's perspectives on their own lives [41].

The need for a rights-based approach to research with children is developing but the need for a change in practitioners' attitudes and training is apparent; a gap exists between the adult view of how a child's voice is heard and the child's own experience [40–42].

The approach of this study (up2talk) was to build SEL skills in a multimedia interactive programme. The five participants managed their level of engagement and chose the activities. The growth in skills and trusting supportive relationships enabled a deeper discussion of domestic violence and its effects on families and children. Personal reflections in individual interviews were beneficial to some participants, while third-party approaches maintained boundaries in the group setting. The behaviour and attitudes in the group evidenced the growth in self-confidence, reflexivity and decision making. The reduction in shame, secrecy and self-blame was significant in all five teenagers, an element noted in reviews of effective support groups [42–44]. The self-reported SEL changes in this study were confirmed by participants' mothers and behaviour in the group, and improved family relationships were reported in line with reviews by Barnardos [18]. The ability of the young people to manage their level of engagement was notable, as was the importance of trusting relationships; this is in accordance with international research of support groups [27,43,44]. The value the participants placed on speaking for themselves runs through all their reviews, in line with the research of groups such as 'young experts' of Voice against Violence [19].

### *4.1. Limitations*

The study was a small-scale qualitative study. The recruitment was limited by all of the difficulties identified in research- secrecy, shame, lack of awareness and fear of disclosure leading to more violence and gatekeeper issues [36]. The degree of silence on the topic meant that the pace of engagement was slow in the group, and thus the aim of creating new materials was only briefly addressed. The transferable elements of the programme are the use of indirect third-party discussion, multimedia methods informed by participant choice and the support of a local, trusted organisation and representative (Luke). During the ongoing and detailed review of the process it was essential to remain cognisant of the participants' experiences and preferences, which developed as the awareness of the effects of domestic violence grew among the group. The contribution of the mothers was invaluable in grounding and triangulating the data and supporting the changes in the participants.

### *4.2. Recommendations*

The level of isolation and secrecy shown in this particular group is validated in international research. The value of SEL programmes as a universal, mainstreamed element was established in the work of 'CASEL' [45]. The use of SEL material for targeted interventions in schools is a developing field [46]. The reviews conducted with Irish students in Social Personal Health Education (SPHE) programmes in second-level schools [47] found that students wanted more information on sensitive topics such as sexual and domestic violence, addictions and mental health [48]. There is a need to mainstream these issues [49], and this could range from information/discussion sessions to the development of groups focused on issues such as domestic violence. SPHE on sensitive topics and trauma-informed approaches in education are often resisted by teachers who feel they lack training [48]. Durlak et al. [49] found that cooperation between agencies and schools was the best practice.The role of siblings in supporting each other is a key factor [50]. The pathologising of young people affected by trauma can lead to an emphasis on 'diagnosis' rather than an active engagement with the individual child and their experiences [51]. An active engagement allows the young person to explore their feelings and options and find a voice for their needs to access support. This was the theoretical model implemented in this action research project 'up2talk'.

## **5. Conclusions**

Prevalence studies indicate that a significant proportion of children are affected by family violence [33–35]. The need to empower the voice of young victims through direct research, and to develop relevant supports, is urgent [1,19]. This requires the cooperation of specialist professionals, community experts, education services and, most importantly, the young people who suffer, quite literally, in silence. The ongoing difficulties in contacting young victims of domestic violence, issues with gatekeepers, and the obtaining of parental permission, are detailed in the recent Irish study of young victims' experiences [36]. The growing understanding of children's abilities to participate in research can be hindered in practice by 'protection'-based thinking towards children, which positions them as helpless [40,41]. The use of social skills programmes to enhance the understanding of domestic violence can be included at the mainstream level in schools, and focused interventions can be developed to meet specific issues [47,52]. Irish second-level students requested such programmes, around domestic and sexual violence and addiction in reviews of the SPHE programme [52]. The Cosc (2012) review of the SPHE programme in Ireland [53] found that the issue of domestic violence was inadequately covered in many schools, as was information about consent. The development of issue-based SEL is essential. The positive impact on the participants of 'up2talk' suggests that such an intervention approach could be more widely studied and developed.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of Trinity College Dublin in June 2014.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Acknowledgments:** The support of the staff of the family centre, especially the commitment of Luke, made the study possible. Many thanks are especially due to the young people and their mothers, for all the time and effort they put into the programme.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Appendix A

The feelings chart. Figure A1. The amateur appearance produced laughter and a relaxed approach to sharing emotional states with graphics-aided understanding.

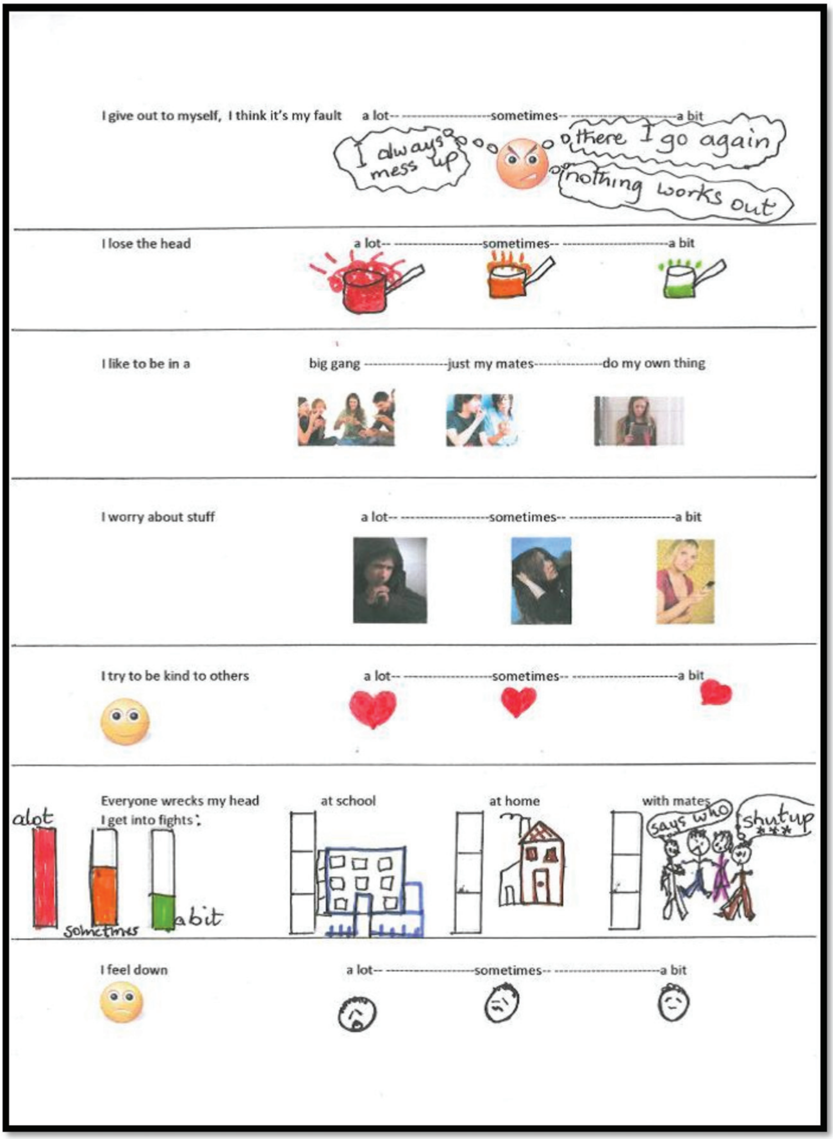


**Figure A1.** The feelings chart.

## References

1. Øverlien, C.; Holt, S. European Research on Children, Adolescents and Domestic Violence: Impact, Interventions and Innovations. *J. Fam. Violence* **2019**, *34*, 365–369. [CrossRef]
2. WHO; LSHTM; SAMRA. *Global and Regional Estimates of Violence Against Women: Prevalence and Health Effects of Intimate Partner Violence and Non-Partner Sexual Violence*; UNICEF: Geneva, Switzerland, 2013.

3. Shannon, G. *Audit of the Exercise by An Garda Síochána of the Provisions of Section 12 of the Child Care Act 1991*; An Garda Síochána: Dublin, Ireland, 2017.
4. Watson, D.; Parsons, S. *Domestic Abuse of Women and Men in Ireland: Report on the National Study of Domestic Abuse*; National Crime Council: Dublin, Ireland, 2005.
5. Radford, L.; Corral, S.; Bradley, C.; Fisher, H.L. The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment and other types of victimization in the UK: Findings from a population survey of caregivers, children and young people and young adults. *Child Abuse Negl.* **2013**, *37*, 801–813. [CrossRef]
6. Edleson, J. Overlap between child maltreatment and woman battering. *Violence Against Women* **1999**, *5*, 134–154. [CrossRef]
7. Bellis, M.A.; Ashton, K.; Hughes, K.; Ford, K.; Bishop, J.; Paranjothy, S. *Welsh Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)*; Public Health Wales: Cardiff, Wales; Centre for Public Health: Liverpool, UK, 2016.
8. Anda, R.F.; Felitti, V.J.; Bremner, J.D.; Walker, J.D.; Whitfield, C.; Perry, B.D.; Dube, S.R.; Giles, W.H. The enduring effects of abuse and related adverse experiences in childhood. *Eur. Arch. Psychiatry Clin. Neurosci.* **2006**, *256*, 174–186. [CrossRef]
9. Gordon, M. *A Profile of Learners in Youthreach: Research Study Report*; National Educational Psychological Service: Dublin, Ireland, 2017.
10. Devaney, J. Chronic child abuse and domestic violence: Children and families with long-term and complex needs. *Child Fam. Soc. Work* **2008**, *13*, 443–453. [CrossRef]
11. Buckley, H.; Holt, S.; Whelan, S. *Listen to Me! Children's Experience of Domestic Violence*; Trinity College: Dublin, Ireland, 2006.
12. Holt, S.; Buckley, H.; Whelan, S. The impact of exposure to domestic violence on children and young people: A review of the literature. *Child Abuse Negl.* **2008**, *32*, 797–810. [CrossRef]
13. United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund. *Behind Closed Doors*; UNICEF: New York, NY, USA, 2006.
14. Moylan, C.; Herrenkohl, T.; Sousa, C.; Tajima, E.; Herrenkohl, R.; Russo, M. The effects of child abuse and exposure to domestic violence on adolescent internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. *J. Fam. Violence* **2010**, *25*, 53–63. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
15. Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning. What Is Social and Emotional Learning. Available online: www.casel.org (accessed on 26 May 2015).
16. Stanley, N. *Children Experiencing Domestic Violence: A Research Review*; Research in Practice: Dartington, UK, 2011.
17. Cater, Å.; Øverlien, C. Children exposed to domestic violence: A discussion about research ethics and researchers' responsibilities. *Nord. Soc. Work. Res.* **2014**, *4*, 67–79. [CrossRef]
18. Furlong, M.; Lecky, Y.; O'Connor, S.; McMahon, K. *Evaluation of the TLC Kidz Programme for Children and Mothers Recovering from Domestic Abuse*; Barnardos: Dublin, Ireland, 2018.
19. Houghton, C.; Youth Advisors. *Justice Committee: Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill: Written Submission from the IMPACT Project-Young Survivors*; Edinburgh University: Edinburgh, UK, 2017.
20. Li, Q. Review Essay: Craig, D.V. (2009). Action research essentials (1st Ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. Pp.248. *Can. J. Action Res.* **2012**, *13*, 63–66. [CrossRef]
21. Bradbury, H. (Ed.) *The Sage Handbook of Action Research*, 3rd ed.; Sage: London, UK, 2015.
22. Sweetman, N. A Culture of Silence—A Study of a Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Intervention for Teenagers Affected by Domestic Violence. Ph.D. Thesis, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland, 2019.
23. van der Kolk, B.A. The developmental impact of childhood trauma. In *Understanding Trauma: Integrating Biological, Clinical, and Cultural Perspectives*; Kirmayer, L.J., Lemelson, R., Barad, M., Eds.; Cambridge University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2007.
24. Lundy, L. 'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Br. Educ. Res. J.* **2007**, *33*, 927–942. [CrossRef]
25. Featherstone, B.; White, S.; Morris, K. *Re-Imagining Child Protection: Towards Humane Social Work with Families*; Policy Press, University of Bristol: Bristol, UK, 2014.
26. Wight, D.; Wimbush, E.; Jepson, R.; Doi, L. Six steps in quality intervention development (6SQuID). *J. Epidemiol. Community Health* **2016**, *70*, 520–525. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
27. Coburn, A.; Gormally, S. 'They know what you are going through': A service response to young people who have experienced the impact of domestic abuse. *J. Youth Stud.* **2014**, *17*, 642–663. [CrossRef]
28. Øverlien, C.; Hydén, M. Children's actions when experiencing domestic violence. *Childhood* **2009**, *16*, 479–496. [CrossRef]
29. Theron, L.C.; Mitchell, C.; Stuart, J.; Smith, A. (Eds.) *Picturing Research: Drawings as Visual Methodology*; Sense Publishers: Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 2011.
30. Braun, V.; Clarke, V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qual. Res. Psychol.* **2006**, *3*, 77–101. [CrossRef]
31. Saldaña, J. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*; Sage: London, UK, 2013.
32. Stake, R. *Qualitative Research: Studying How Things Work*; Guildford Press: New York, NY, USA, 2010.
33. Hutton, B. Scale of violence against Irish children hidden, claims EU: Report says 3500 child sexual abuse cases should be investigated or prosecuted a year. In *The Irish Times*; The Irish Times: Dublin, Ireland, 2018.
34. FRA European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. *Violence against Women: An EU-Wide Survey*; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights Luxembourg: Luxembourg, 2014; ISBN 978-92-9239-379-3. [CrossRef]
35. World Health Organization. *World Report on Violence and Health*; Krug, E.G., Dahlberg, L.L., Mercy, J.A., Zwi, A.B., Lozano, R., Eds.; World Health Organization: Geneva, Switzerland, 2002.

36. Elliffe, R.; Holt, S.; Øverlien, C. Hiding and being hidden: The marginalisation of children's participation in research and practice responses to domestic violence and abuse. *Soc. Work. Soc. Sci. Rev.* **2021**, *22*, 5–24. [CrossRef]
37. Lundy, L.; McEvoy, L.; Byrne, B. Working with young children as co-researchers: An approach informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Early Educ. Dev.* **2011**, *22*, 714–736. [CrossRef]
38. Lundy, L. Children's rights and educational policy in Europe: The implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Oxf. Rev. Educ.* **2012**, *38*, 393–411. [CrossRef]
39. Emerson, L.; Lloyd, K. *Developing a Rights-Based Measure of Children's Participation Rights in School and in Their Communities*; Queen's University Belfast: Belfast, UK; University of Ulster: Ulster, UK, 2014.
40. Clarke, A.; Wydall, S. From 'rights to action': Practitioners' perceptions of the needs of children experiencing domestic violence. *Child Fam. Soc. Work.* **2015**, *20*, 181–190. [CrossRef]
41. Woodman, E.; Roche, S.; McArthur, M.; Moore, T. Child protection practitioners: Including children in decision making. *Child Fam. Soc. Work.* **2018**, *23*, 475–484. [CrossRef]
42. McManus, E.; Belton, E.; Barnard, M.; Cotmore, R.; Taylor, J. Recovering from domestic abuse, strengthening the mother–child relationship: Mothers' and children's perspectives of a new intervention. *Child Care Pract.* **2013**, *19*, 291–310. [CrossRef]
43. Howarth, E.; Moore, T.H.M.; Shaw, A.R.G.; Welton, N.J.; Feder, G.S.; Hester, M.; MacMillan, H.L.; Stanley, N. The effectiveness of targeted interventions for children exposed to domestic violence: Measuring success in ways that matter to children, parents and professionals. *Child Abus. Rev.* **2015**, *24*, 297–310. [CrossRef]
44. Cater, Å. Children's descriptions of participation processes in interventions for children exposed to intimate partner violence. *Child Adolesc. Soc. Work. J.* **2014**, *31*, 455–473. [CrossRef]
45. Durlak, J.A.; Weissberg, R.P. *The Impact of After-School Programs That Promote Personal and Social Skills*; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning: Chicago, IL, USA, 2007.
46. Greenberg, M.T.; Domitrovich, C.E.; Weissberg, R.P.; Durlak, J.A. Social and Emotional Learning as a public health approach to education. *Futur. Child.* **2017**, *13*. [CrossRef]
47. Roe, S. *Life Skills Matter, Not Just Points*; Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs: Dublin, Ireland, 2010.
48. O'Sullivan, C.; Moynihan, S.; Collins, B.; Hayes, G.; Titley, A. (Eds.) *The Future of SPHE: Problems and Possibilities: Proceedings from SPHE Network Conference 29th September, 2012*; SPHE Network; DICE: Dublin, Ireland, 2014.
49. Durlak, J.A.; Weissberg, R.P.; Dymnicki, A.B.; Taylor, R.D.; Schellinger, K.B. The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school based universal interventions. *Child Dev.* **2011**, *82*, 405–432. [CrossRef]
50. Callaghan, J.E.M.; Alexander, J.H.; Sixsmith, J.; Fellin, L.C. Children's experiences of domestic violence and abuse: Siblings' accounts of relational coping. *Clin. Child Psychol. Psychiatry* **2016**, *21*, 649–668. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
51. Jones, D.E.; Greenberg, M.; Crowley, M. Early social-emotional functioning and public health: The relationship between kindergarten social competence and future wellness. *Am. J. Public Health* **2015**, *105*, 2283–2290. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
52. National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. *Social, Personal and Health Education Curriculum Framework for Senior Cycle: Report on Consultation*; NCCA: Dublin, Ireland, 2006.
53. Cosc: The National Office for the Prevention of Domestic Sexual and Gender-based Violence. *Awareness Raising of Domestic and Sexual Violence: A Survey of Post-Primary Schools in Ireland*; Department of Justice and Equality: Dublin, Ireland, 2012.

*education sciences*

*Article*

# “The School for the Travellers and the Blacks”: Student and Teacher Perspectives on “Choosing” a Post-Primary School with a High Concentration of Disadvantage

**Hannagh Mc Ginley * and Elaine Keane ***

School of Education, National University of Ireland, Galway, H91TK33 Galway, Ireland
* Correspondence: h.mcginley1@nuigalway.ie (H.M.G.); elaine.keane@nuigalway.ie (E.K.)

**Abstract:** Since the formation of the Irish State, the participation and attainment in education of members of the Irish Traveller community have been low. In terms of school-related factors, research points to Travellers perceiving the curriculum as irrelevant, experiencing problematic relationships with peers and teachers, a strong sense of not belonging, and low teacher expectations. This paper draws on the findings of a wider study which explored how an intercultural approach to education was conceptualised and enacted, with particular reference to Travellers, in one urban DEIS (disadvantaged) post-primary school in the West of Ireland (St. Greg’s) with a highly diverse student population. Located in the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm, and informed by critical race theory, an in-depth qualitative case study research design was employed. Data collection involved twenty-eight semi-structured interviews with teacher and student participants, including Traveller and “other” minority ethnic students, as well as White settled Irish students. Data analysis involved several coding stages, and the development of categories. In this paper, we examine one of the categories, the participants’ perceptions of the school as being a school “for the Travellers and the Blacks” and its “reputation” in this regard, as well as the factors impacting the “choice” of the school by different groups of students. Both teacher and student participants were aware of the school’s negative reputation and how this was associated with the socio-demographic composition of its student population. Regarded as the school “for the Travellers and the Blacks”, it was seen as a “tough” school and one in which academic expectations were low. Choosing St. Greg’s was perceived as being related to having a family history of attending the school, not being able to access other schools, and the school providing supports and “freebies”. The findings are discussed in the context of previous research, focusing in particular on critical issues of school socio-demographics, reputation, and choice. The paper concludes with observations about the problematic nature of Ireland’s increasingly segregated schooling system and recommendations about how the education system might better work to include and support Traveller and other minority ethnic students in post-primary education.

**Keywords:** Travellers in education; school choice; intercultural education; disadvantaged schools; segregated schools

**Citation:** Mc Ginley, H.; Keane, E. “The School for the Travellers and the Blacks”: Student and Teacher Perspectives on “Choosing” a Post-Primary School with a High Concentration of Disadvantage. *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 777. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11120777

Academic Editors: Michael Shevlin, Richard Rose and Eleni Andreou

Received: 20 June 2021
Accepted: 17 November 2021
Published: 30 November 2021

## 1. Introduction

Irish Travellers are an indigenous ethnic minority who fare poorly on every indicator used to measure poverty. They make up less than 1 percent of the Irish population. The Equal Status Act 2000 (Section 2.1) defines the Traveller community as “a community of people who are commonly called Travellers and who are identified (both by themselves and by others) as people with a shared history, culture, and traditions including, historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland” [1]. Research has consistently shown that anti-Traveller racism is rife in Irish society and is regarded as an almost “acceptable” form of racism [2,3]. This reality also pertains to schools, where Traveller students report high levels of racial bullying and discrimination, as well as a lack of a sense of belonging and connection to non-Traveller peers [2,4,5].

Research examining the experiences of Travellers in education has found that Travellers report finding the current curriculum irrelevant [6] and that they perceive that they are treated unfairly by their teachers [7]. In spite of this context, and despite their own reported negative experiences of school, Boyle, Flynn, and Hanafin [5] found that Traveller parents in their study were considerably optimistic about their children's education. However, since the formation of the Irish State, educational participation and attainment for members of the Irish Traveller community have been low [8]. In Ireland, despite very little data on achievement by ethnicity, research shows that Traveller students attendingDelivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) [9] schools have very low scores in English, Reading, and Maths standardised tests in comparison with the general population and "other" minority ethnic groups [10]. (DEIS forms part of the Department of Education and Skills' social inclusion strategy to support children and young people experiencing educational disadvantage in Ireland. Schools included in the DEIS programme receive additional supports in recognition of the proportion of their students from marginalised backgrounds.) While there is almost full participation by Traveller children in primary schools, and a high transfer rate of Travellers to post-primary education, attendance and retention rates remain poor [11]. Data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) show that Travellers cease their education on average 4.7 years earlier than the general population [12]. Watson et al. [11] reported that only eight percent of Travellers in Ireland had completed their education to Leaving Certificate level in comparison to 73 percent of the general population. Very low numbers completed higher education (115 Travellers by 2011 [13] and 167 by 2016 [12]). In the latest review of the National Access Plan (2015–2019) to widen participation in higher education (HE), it was noted that the target set for Travellers (of 80 Travellers in HE by 2019) had been unmet [14] resulting in Travellers being a central focus of the extended National Access Plan (into 2021) [15].

While diversity has always existed within Ireland, the past three decades have brought rapid social change because of unprecedented inward migration [16]. Consequently, the student population in Irish schools has diversified significantly in this time [17]. However, while the Irish school population has diversified, not all schools have experienced significant changes in their socio-demographic composition. There is a disproportionate number of students from minority and disadvantaged populations in some schools, particularly in DEIS schools [10].

This paper draws on some of the findings of a doctoral study [18] which explored how an intercultural approach to education was conceptualised and enacted, with particular reference to Travellers, in an urban DEIS post-primary school (St. Greg's) in the West of Ireland with a highly diverse student population. There are five sections in this paper. Following this introduction, the literature review examines the nature of marginalisation experienced by Traveller and other minority ethnic students, with a specific focus on schooling. In Section 3, the methodological approach adopted in the study is outlined and information on the research participants is provided. Section 4 presents key findings relating to how the school was perceived by staff and students, and the factors influencing the students in their choice of this school. Finally, in Section 5, the findings are discussed in the context of previous research and the paper concludes with observations about the problematic nature of Ireland's increasingly segregated schooling system.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. Minority Ethnic Students' Experiences of Schooling*

Research internationally points to several key themes in the experiences of minority ethnic students in schooling. These include teachers' deficit views and low expectations about certain student groups, and minority ethnic students' experiences of racism in schools.

Deficit racialized constructions of minority ethnic students are commonly reported in Ireland [19–21] and internationally [22,23]. Research from the international context has shown teachers frequently view students from marginalised and minority groups through a "cultural deficit lens" [24] often perceiving minority students to be weaker students [23], and holding low expectations based upon assumptions of Black inferiority [22]. Further, minority students are viewed by teachers as "undesirable" learners [25], including in relation to their behaviour [26–28]. In Ireland, Devine's [29] study demonstrated teachers' particularly negative view of Roma and African students with respect to their academic ability and behaviour in school (see also [30]). Frequently, such negative constructions of minority ethnic students' ability are related to perceptions of English language proficiency and (perceived) related language support needs [31,32], as for many students of immigrant "origin" in schools, English is an additional language. For example, Ní Dhuinn and Keane [19] reported that their (migrant) minority ethnic participants' academic ability was constructed by their teachers in deficit terms, connected to (usually incorrect) assumptions about their proficiency in English. Further, many of the participants reported not being encouraged to progress to higher education.

In the socio-relational realm, research is clear that minority ethnic students experience problematic peer relationships. This is evidenced in a lack of mixing between groups [33,34], and in majority group students' deficit views of their minority peers' academic ability [22]. Racism, discrimination, and harassment in schools is also evident in peer interactions [35], although it is frequently downplayed or denied [36]. Similarly, research in Ireland has found evidence of a lack of meaningful mixing between student groups, as well as forms of inter-ethnic conflict [4]. Further, it has been found that minority students are viewed as undesirable learners by their peers [21], resulting from their construction as "other" with respect to their skin colour, cultural background, and/or first language and related perceived language "deficits" [3,17,21]. Additionally, students of migrant origin frequently have their "Irishness" questioned and experience challenges in their understanding and presentation of self in terms of their identity [19,21,37]. Ní Dhuinn and Keane [19] found that despite explicitly self-identifying as Irish (and in some cases having Irish citizenship), their migrant minority ethnic participants were positioned by their White Irish peers as not Irish, particularly where their skin colour was other than White. In this regard, they emphasised (White) Irish students' exclusionary constructions of Irish identity.

In terms of Travellers specifically, in the UK, "Gypsy and Traveller" (GRT) students have been identified as "the group most deprived of formal education in the country" [38] p. 265. Similar to Ireland, where only 13 percent of Traveller children complete their post-primary school education in comparison with 92 percent of the general population [11], early school leaving among Travellers remains high. Explanations for early school leaving are usually framed within the context of "push" and "pull" factors [39]. Push factors identified in the literature include being subjected to racism and racially motivated bullying from both students and teachers; the irrelevance of the curriculum; low teacher expectations; and exclusion [40,41]. The pull factors usually identified reference "cultural norms", such as the tendency to marry young and the lure of the Traveller economy (i.e., the economic activities in which Travellers have traditionally engaged, which are "'outside' dominant or 'mainstream' economic activity that is based on sedentary modes of production" [27,42] p. 13. Additionally, nomadism has been identified as one of the key reasons for Travellers' poor attendance at school and low achievement levels [43]. While some of the reasons why Travellers leave school early may be linked to pull factors, research has found that it is more likely due to push factors, "such as exposure to racist bullying, social disengagement, educational policy and low teacher expectations" [39] p. 360 as well as isolation, poor relationships with their teachers and peers, low teacher expectations, and an overall lack of support [39,44]. Kavanagh [45] found that while teachers were empathetic towards Travellers, they tended to adopt a cultural deficit lens and blamed Travellers for the inequalities that they experienced. Research also points to the "White racism" [41] experienced by GRT groups, including racist bullying [44,46]. It has also been found that teachers do not always believe GRT students when they report racist bullying [47], and Traveller parents' concerns in this regard often underpin their reasons for not sending their children to school [39].

Research also has found that teachers frequently view Traveller students as unruly and disruptive and frame Traveller culture as abnormal [41]. According to Derrington [39] p. 357, Traveller students rely "on maladaptive coping strategies to deal with psychosocial stress associated with cultural dissonance and social exclusion", including fight (physical and verbal retaliation), flight (leaving school), and "playing white" (hiding identity). Playing white or wearing "white masks" [48] (i.e., hiding their ethnic identity) is a common tactic employed by children from minority groups to deal with the impact of racism.

Research in Ireland has demonstrated that negative attitudes toward minority ethnic groups are prevalent among the Irish public, most especially towards Travellers [3,29,49]. For example, Tormey and Gleeson [3] found that 42 percent of the 4970 post-primary school students that took part in their study reported high or very high levels of "social distance" from Travellers. Lynch and Lodge [49] reported that three-quarters of the post-primary school students participating in their study believed that Travellers would not fit in to their school. Kavanagh [45] points out that teachers often fail to recognise the inherent racism in non-Traveller parents asking teachers to move their children away from Traveller children. This is perhaps unsurprising when one considers that Travellers were not recognised as an ethnic group in the Republic of Ireland until 2017, instead, being viewed as a "sub-culture" within Irish society. In this regard, Kitching [50] p. 177, uses the lens of critical race theory (CRT) to explain the educational inequalities experienced by Travellers, and criticises liberal anti-racist discourse for "failing to meaningfully interrogate race and racism in globalised Ireland beyond a white/non-white binary".

The absence of Traveller history and culture in the school curriculum is also a factor in Traveller students' perceptions of curriculum irrelevance and in feelings of not belonging [46,51]. Following the recognition of the Traveller community as a distinct ethnic group in March 2017 by the Irish State, the "Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill 2018" aims to provide for the inclusion of Traveller culture and history in the curriculum in State schools within the framework of the 1998 Education Act. While this is an important development, Kavanagh and Dupont [52] rightly note the difficulties associated with "additive" curricular amendments, including, for example, issues of tokenism, and the danger of not critically attending to the role of teachers (including in terms of their positionalities) in perpetuating inequities. Further, it is clear that careful and critical continuous professional development for teachers will be required to ensure that Traveller culture and history are taught in an appropriate and sensitive manner [18].

### *2.2. School "Choice" and Access to Schools*

There are three types of post-primary schools in Ireland: voluntary secondary schools (mainly founded by religious orders), vocational schools, and community/comprehensive schools. Additionally, there are a small number of private fee-paying schools [53]. Vocational schools were established to cater for the perceived needs of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and in that context, they have provided a broad curriculum with a more practical than academic focus [53]. The different school types vary greatly in terms of the socio-economic composition of their student populations. While there tends to be a higher concentration of working class and "lower ability" students in vocational schools, middle class and "higher ability" students are over-represented in voluntary secondary schools [16]. Indeed, there is evidence of segregated schooling in Ireland, with Black and other ethnic minority students, including Travellers, over-represented in larger, urban DEIS schools [16]. Typically, these schools are under-subscribed and have a significant concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds [10]. As noted by Ní Dhuinn and Keane [19], in part this is a result of school enrolment policies which disadvantage newly arrived and Traveller families with respect to access to schools.

The right to choose a school is enshrined in the Irish constitution; however, the extent to which families can "choose" a school to attend is mediated by their socio-demographic positionality. Not everyone can engage in the same way with choice processes [16,49]. Indeed, for Skeggs [54] p. 139, "choice is a particularly middle-class way of operating in the world", and middle-class parents are found to possess "greater insider knowledge of the education system" [55] p. 59 which inevitably impacts their ability to navigate the education system and decision-making therein. For many—especially for some minority and lower socio-economic groups—educational and schooling pathway choices are highly constrained [49,55,56]. Travellers frequently encounter difficulties when attempting to enrol their children in certain mainstream schools. In the UK, admissions criteria for entry to post-primary level can be based on primary school attendance [57], which results in some Traveller children being denied access. Bhopal [41] found that some schools are reluctant to admit students that they perceive to be disruptive and aggressive because they may affect the schools' position in league tables, or in the case of Traveller students, the school's "reputation". Levinson [58] has reported that some parents boycott schools that admit Traveller students.

In Ireland, admission policies often serve to exclude Travellers [2] and other minority and disadvantaged students. Under the Education Act, 1998, and the Equality Acts 2000–2004, schools are required to have a school admissions policy that respects the principle of equality and provides for maximum accessibility to the school; schools may not discriminate in relation to admission, access, participation, or expulsion. Despite these policies, schools have been found to employ discriminatory practices in terms of their enrolment policies, including the requirement to be from a particular religious background or catchment area, the length of time on the waiting list, or the "sibling clause", which allows for the prioritisation on waiting lists of children who have a brother or sister already enrolled in the school [2]. In the recent past, the "Catholic first" clause meant that schools could prioritise students from Catholic backgrounds [59]. In July 2018, the Equal Status Act (2000) was amended, and schools were prohibited from using religion as a barrier in over-subscribed schools. While the Education (Admission Policy) Act (2018) prohibited schools from charging fees (except in the case of fee-paying schools), related legislation has done nothing to address the "hidden" monetary barriers such as the requirement for expensive equipment, uniforms, or financial contributions from parents [60]. Because of the segregated model of education for Travellers that existed in the past in Ireland, Traveller children are often automatically excluded because they cannot meet the family history criterion [61]. Children from working class and immigrant backgrounds are also excluded from certain schools because their families would not have had a "tradition" of attending the more prestigious schools. Challenging such exclusionary policies is exceptionally difficult as was discovered by the Irish Traveller family who took a case against a school that would not enrol their son in 2010 [61]. In 2020, new school admission policies were announced by the Minister of Education, which require that schools accept all applicants, where schools are not over-subscribed, and that schools no longer employ waiting lists past a certain amount of time.

Research suggests that there are "good" schools and "bad" schools, at least in the public's perception [62]. As "places also mean people" [63] p. 160, students attending bad schools become labelled accordingly. In Ireland, the media fuels public perceptions of schools by publishing detailed accounts of which schools (and therefore, which students) are "succeeding" and "failing" via the "league tables" which provide information on the "best" and "worst" performing schools in terms of their students' Leaving Certificate results and progression rates to higher education. Many DEIS schools feature towards the bottom of such tables, and in spite of some improvements over time on certain markers of achievement, research has consistently pointed to the significant achievement gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools [64,65]. This paper examines issues pertinent to the above discussion of the literature, examining teacher and student perceptions of a highly diverse urban DEIS school as being a school "for the Travellers and the Blacks", along with issues concerning the school's reputation and the role of Traveller students therein, and factors impacting the "choice" of St. Greg's by different categories of students.

## 3. Methodology

There has been relatively little research in Ireland examining Travellers' experiences of education. While two qualitative studies are notable [5,7], the former focused on Traveller parents' involvement in Traveller pre-schools and the latter explored adult Travellers' reflections on their past experiences of education. This paper draws on data collected as part of a wider in-depth qualitative research project [18], which adopted a case study approach in one urban, DEIS post-primary school in the west of Ireland (St. Greg's), with a high concentration of disadvantage in terms of its highly diverse student population. The objective of the study was to examine how an intercultural approach to education was conceptualised and enacted in an urban, DEIS post-primary school context, with particular reference to Traveller students and their experiences.

Methodologically, the study was located in the constructivist/interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises participants' understandings and meanings, and the socially constructed nature of "reality". From this paradigmatic standpoint, there is a concern with the individual and subjective experience; therefore, understanding the social world from participants' perspective is emphasised [66]. Additionally, the role of the researcher in the research, their interaction with participants and data, and the need for significant reflexivity in this regard is highlighted [67]. However, the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm has been criticised for not adequately addressing issues of social justice [68], with critics emphasising the need for research to transform "the lives of the participants, the institutions in which people work or live, and the researcher's life" (ibid. p. 9). In this context, the study also drew significantly on critical race theory (CRT) [69–71], which offers new and radical ways to conceptualise the role of racism in education and provides a framework for challenging the embeddedness of racial inequity [72]. Key tenets of CRT include the centring of racism as a unit of analysis, and the belief that racism is "normal" and not aberrational in society [73]. CRT stresses the need to understand racism within its social, economic, and historical context [41]. Bell's [69] theory of "interest convergence" is another hallmark of CRT; it is argued that Whites will only advance the cause of racial justice when doing so coincides with their own self-interest and is of benefit to them [74]. White privilege and supremacy are core foci in relation to how structural and institutional systems of superiority and subordination are created and maintained [72,75]. CRT emphasises storytelling and counter storytelling, which is regarded as having the potential to disrupt hegemonic "taken-for-granted" myths and assumptions, by presenting analyses from the perspective of minority group members [73].

CRT informed this study from the outset in terms of the focus of the research and various aspects of the methodological approach employed. CRT understands that there are many ways of interpreting the world [76] and calls for the inclusion of minority perspectives to challenge hegemonic taken-for-granted myths and assumptions about what is considered normal [73]. Presenting stories about discrimination from minority perspectives is a primary objective of CRT [77]. In this regard, minority students from diverse backgrounds, as well as teachers, were included and prioritised in the study. Additionally, by using critical autobiography and reflexive journaling as a form of counter-storytelling, researcher identity and positionality, and their impact on the research process and data, were key foci throughout the research [18].

The study was conducted in an urban DEIS post-primary school in the West of Ireland with a highly diverse student population and a significant concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While initially a comparative study was planned to examine the ways in which an intercultural approach was being implemented in different school contexts, for example in DEIS vs. non-DEIS school contexts, access to schools proved highly problematic—particularly as a Traveller researcher [18]—and ultimately the research was conducted as part of a case study design in one school. Following several meetings between the Traveller researcher and the school Principal and teaching staff, gatekeeper (Principal) consent to conduct the study in the school was obtained.

All staff were invited to participate and provided with information sheets and consent forms. In terms of student participant recruitment, the Traveller researcher visited classes in the school to explain the study, and relevant groups were invited to participate, with letters of invitation, information sheets, and consent forms sent to their parents. As anticipated, due to low literacy rates among the Traveller community, additional measures were needed to recruit students, including relaying information about the study to Traveller parents through researcher contacts in the Traveller Movement and Primary Health Care in the community. In such contexts, where literacy is an issue and potential participants may not have the skills to engage with documentation, researchers must find other ways of ensuring that potential participants understand what they are being asked to consent to [78]. Additionally, the presence of a Traveller researcher in the school generated a lot of attention from Traveller students, who approached the researcher and expressed interest in participating. The researcher also visited classes in the school to explain the study and invite participation. The children whose parents returned signed consent forms were included in the study.

Data collection involved 28 semi-structured interviews, 9 with staff participants (SPs), including the principal, deputy principal, and 7 teachers; and 19 with student participants, including 9 Traveller student participants (TSPs), 6 non-Traveller minority student participants (MSPs), and 4 white Irish student participants (WISPs). Full ethical approval was provided by the Research Ethics Committee at NUI Galway. Table 1 provides details of the study's participants.

**Table 1.** The study's participants.

| | **Pseudonym** | **Sex** | **Participant Group** |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Barry | Male | Principal |
| 2 | Caroline | Female | Teacher |
| 3 | Clodagh | Female | Teacher |
| 4 | Padraic | Male | Vice-Principal |
| 5 | John | Male | Teacher |
| 6 | Kathy | Female | Teacher |
| 7 | Ruth | Female | Teacher |
| 8 | Sarah | Female | Teacher |
| 9 | Sean | Male | Teacher |
| 10 | Jennifer | Female | Traveller Student (5th Year) |
| 11 | Connie | Male | Traveller Student (5th Year) |
| 12 | Mickey | Male | Traveller Student (2nd Year) |
| 13 | Richard | Male | Traveller Student (2nd Year) |
| 14 | Celine | Female | Traveller Student (3rd Year) |
| 15 | Rosa | Female | Traveller Student (2nd Year) |
| 16 | Serena | Female | Traveller Student (3rd Year) |
| 17 | Paddy | Male | Traveller Student (1st Year) |
| 18 | Theresa | Female | Traveller Student (5th Year) |
| 19 | Johnathan | Male | White Irish Settled Student (6th Year) |
| 20 | Hayden | Male | White Irish Settled Student (5th Year) |
| 21 | Jason | Male | White Irish Settled Student (2nd Year) |
| 22 | Connor | Male | White Irish Settled Student (3rd year) |
| 23 | Victoria | Female | (Non-Traveller) Minority Student (5th Year) |
| 24 | Josef | Male | (Non-Traveller) Minority Student (5th Year) |
| 25 | Christiano | Male | (Non-Traveller) Minority Student (6th Year) |
| 26 | Marian | Female | (Non-Traveller) Minority Student (3rd Year) |
| 27 | Natalia | Female | (Non-Traveller) Minority Student (2nd Year) |
| 28 | Holly | Female | (Non-Traveller) Minority Student (5th Year) |

The student interviews were approximately 30–45 min in duration. Interviews with staff participants were approximately one hour in duration. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Soft copies were emailed to the teacher participants for their review. Given the sensitive nature of the data generated, and the low literacy levels of some of the student participants, those who wished to review their transcripts were offered an opportunity to meet with the researcher to read the document together at a time and in a venue that suited them. Five of the nineteen student participants (three of the nine TSPs and two of the six MSPs) took up this offer to meet and all meetings took place in the school. All the staff and student participants who reviewed their transcripts subsequently agreed that the transcripts accurately reflected their interviews and only very minor changes were requested.

Data were analysed through a series of stages, which commenced with immersion in the data by reading and re-reading transcripts, and re-listening to the audio-recordings. Next, the transcripts were coded line by line, using Charmaz's [79] "open coding" approach, before progressing to more focussed coding which involved reviewing all the initial codes and bringing forward the most significant and/or frequent ones (ibid.). Following the lengthy initial coding process, provisional categories were developed by grouping together similar codes, and subsequently refined through mapping exercises and elements of thematic analysis [80]. From the perspective of CRT, attention was paid to the intersectionality of class and gender with race, whilst maintaining the central focus on race and ethnicity, and on how racism shaped the experiences of Traveller students.

Four major categories were developed [18], and this paper focuses on one, the participants' perceptions of the school as being a school "for the Travellers and the Blacks" and its reputation in this regard, as well as the factors impacting the choice of St. Greg's by different categories of students.

## 4. Findings: The School for the Travellers and the Blacks: Reputation, Lived Realities, and "Choosing" St. Greg's

In this section, we discuss the reasons influencing school choice from the perspectives of the student participants, examining how they viewed their school, and their beliefs about how their school was perceived by the wider community. Students' perspectives on "choosing" to attend St. Greg's are compared to teacher participants' views on the school's socio-demographic context.

### *4.1. Reputation' and Lived Realities*

The staff participants (SPs) and the student participants from the different groups all mentioned that St. Greg's had a bad reputation. However, there was some variation between the participants from different groups regarding the reasons for the school's negative reputation. Many of the SPs believed that there was "a stigma attached to the school" (Barry, SP) because of its diverse student population. John (SP) believed that St. Greg's was seen locally as "the school for the Travellers and the Blacks".

> Like if you talk to any [locals] . . . they say this school is for Travellers and Blacks and that is the stigma we have. It is very hard to change it. (John, SP)

The MSPs and TSPs believed that having a large Traveller population was the main reason for the school's bad reputation. The MSPs recalled being told negative stories about the school and hearing that it was "really rough" (Marian, MSP). As a result, they expected to "get beat up" (Joseph, MSP) and were nervous about attending the school:

> Yeah, a lot of Travellers come here, so they would kind of be thinking, this school must be bad. That is what I heard anyway. But I never thought it was that bad to be honest. I really like the school. (Christiano, MSP)

> I think because a lot of Traveller people come here. And they [Travellers] have a bad reputation for lots of fighting and stuff, but I think within every culture there

> is going to be people like that, in every school there is people like that. (Holly, MSP)

> Anyways, people were saying, 'oh that that school, like ehm, that school is full of Travellers, you get beat up, First Year is that bad'. (Joseph, MSP)

Some of the MSPs talked about being warned about the school being "rough", and some felt "fearful" (Natalia, MSP) of encountering Travellers. However, after joining the school, they described it as being a "really nice place" (Marian, MSP) and "not as bad as everybody says" (Josef, MSP), and they were glad to discover that Travellers were "not that scary" (Marian, MSP).

While the WISPs did not mention being fearful about attending St. Greg's, they did hint at it having a reputation for being a bit of "a hard school" (Johnathan, WISP) and some indicated that they also blamed Travellers for the school's negative reputation. Hayden (WISP), for example, was clear that he had "learned to avoid them [Travellers]".

> I don't know, you have some kids that you stick away from because trouble starts and stuff like that. That is about it really ... Mostly Travellers, who start everything. Anything they can start on they will just start on. I have learned to avoid them. (Hayden, WISP)

Two of TSPs also highlighted issues to do with the school's reputation. Both Rosa and Richard mentioned that their parents were worried about them attending St. Greg's because of its reputation in relation to students smoking or having boyfriends or girlfriends. While Rosa did not link Travellers to St. Greg's poor reputation to Travellers, she was conscious of the negative ways in which Travellers were perceived in society:

> ... they view Travellers ... how would I say, me, always in trouble, always drinking, robbing, stealing, dressed naked, wearing a lot less clothes like, and mean to people ... You don't learn that you just know that, like. The way people look at you, like. (Rosa, TSP)

Some of the MSPs opined that St. Greg's had a bad reputation because it was "full of dummies" (Josef, MSP) and did not score high on the league tables.

> And some people were like, that is a school full of dummies, they don't really go to school, they just go dossing, and it is really not all of us who go dossing. (Josef, MSP)

> ... if you went there, you would never do well, that you would never go to university. Ehm, you wouldn't progress in life. You would just stay at the same level, and you would become the same as everybody else who went there, supposedly. (Holly, MSP)

The SPs believed that the students at St. Greg's were "a lot tougher" (Sarah, SP) to teach because they "came from very difficult backgrounds" (Ruth, SP), had "genuine problems" (Sarah, SP), and "much more challenges" (John, SP) than students in "most other schools" (Sarah, SP). The SPs identified poverty, addiction, homelessness, and domestic violence as issues affecting the students at St. Greg's.

> ... a lot of our students come from very difficult backgrounds ... a lot of them might not even have had breakfast in the morning ... there are a lot of underlying factors there. (Ruth, SP)

> ... it depends on the home. It can be problems with alcohol, problems with drugs, can be members of families in prison, parents can be in the shelter, because of domestic violence, quite regularly, and sometimes for long periods of time ... we would have several parents that would have experienced homelessness ... there may be even queries about neglect. (Kathy, SP)

The SPs described the young people at St. Greg's as "just living day to day" (John, SP) compared to students in other schools who came from homes where "they are fed and watered" (John, SP), were "motivated" (Barry, SP), and had "aspirations" (John, SP):

> . . . But they [students in other schools] are motivated. They have aspirations. They know where they want to go to. Some of our kids are just living day to day and going from week to week. They don't think about the future . . . (John, SP)

For the SPs, St. Greg's was an enjoyable though often quite challenging school in which to work. As John (SP) remarked, "some days it is a really great place to work and other days you are going home saying 'Jesus, I need to get some place else'". They explained how they had learnt "to readjust" their "expectations" and to stop "driving beyond what the kids were willing to put up with" (Barry, SP). John explained further, noting that he "had to adapt to the school and environment" and suggested that you could not be too "heavily academic" if you wanted to "survive" as a teacher in a school like St. Greg's.

> I found it harder to readjust my expectations . . . I kept driving beyond what the kids were willing to put up with . . . I went straight into a classroom expecting, look at, these are all going to be Engineers and Doctors . . . That didn't go down well at all . . . I suppose my expectation came down a small bit, I became more realistic . . . You are not dealing with the same thing at all here. You have to be more open minded about the difficulties with these kids. They are great to be coming in at all, some of them. That is a reality. (Barry, SP)

> In here, we have the laugh with them all of the time you know. There is give and take. There is a lot of joking and banter all of the time, but you have to otherwise you are not going to survive in here. Not a notion . . . If it is too heavily academic and you take yourself too seriously you will struggle . . . You know you adapt to the school and the environment that you are in. (John, SP)

### *4.2. Choosing St. Greg's*

Given St. Greg's 'rough' and challenging reputation, what were the student participants' reasons for choosing this school? Three main reasons were offered by the student and staff participants: (1) family history of attending St. Greg's, (2) not being accepted by other schools, and (3) the availability of supports and "freebies".

#### 4.2.1. Family History of Attending St. Greg's

Both the SPs and the TSPs highlighted a family history of attending the school as being a key factor for Travellers deciding on St Greg's. Clodagh (SP) pointed out that Traveller students felt "very safe" and "comfortable" in the school as they were surrounded by members of their own community:

> They come, they come, they come, they are surrounded by their friends, their neighbours, or whatever cousins they have, it is very safe for them, it is very comfortable. (Clodagh, SP)

Mickey (TSP) pointed out that having a family history of attending St. Greg's meant that he "didn't really choose" the school in any active sense:

> This school? I didn't really choose because all my cousins were coming here and everything and my uncles came here. (Mickey, TSP)

Family history was also a factor for some of the non-Traveller student participants. Johnathan (WISP) said that the "only reason" he attended St. Greg's was "because [his] my brother was in there". Jason (WISP) indicated that having a history of family attending St. Greg's also influenced his choice because it made him believe he "had a better chance of getting in". Jason's cousin attended one of the more affluent non-DEIS schools for a time but had been expelled.

#### 4.2.2. Not Being Able to Access, or Not Being Accepted by, Other Schools

Several of the student participants reported that they had not been accepted by other schools, or else had felt that they could not apply. Christiano (MSP) had applied to two other schools that he would have preferred to attend and did not know why he had been rejected: "I don't know what the problem was, I just got rejected, I don't know what the reason was". He went on to say that his Irish-born stepfather knew why he was rejected but he did not elaborate when probed and observed that "it doesn't really matter, because I didn't get in there" (Christiano, MSP).

Having to be "smarter" to get into other schools was something that several of the student participants believed to be an issue. For example, Marian (MSP) believed that other schools did not accept the "people that are stupid":

> Oh yeah, because maybe they don't accept all of the other children, but like St. Greg's do because there is a lot of people in [other school] and they don't accept most of the people that are stupid. (Marian, MSP)

Similarly, Jason (WISP) cited not being "that smart" as the reason why he had not applied elsewhere. He also remarked that "there is not that many coloured people" in other schools and believed that for a "coloured" person to be accepted into other schools they would have to be "really smart".

Three of the WISP student participants expressed a preference to attend another school and felt they would leave St. Greg's given the opportunity. While Jason (WISP) believed that he did not stand a chance of being accepted into a specific other school, he emphasised that he would "love to go to that school now" because he believed it was a better school where "they actually have to try to educate you".

> When I was younger, I thought it was all gay and all that but now I just want to go to it because most people I know had to get a better education to get in, to get a job and all that . . . because it is like, they are stricter and everyone says, 'oh it is better, they have to actually try to educate you'. (Jason, WISP)

Both the MSPs and TSPs seemed satisfied, indeed happy, with being at St. Greg's and none of them expressed a desire to leave. Indeed, some of the TSPs had left what would be considered "better" schools to attend St. Greg's. For example, Theresa (TSP) decided to leave the better school because she preferred to be amongst more Travellers:

> [re. old school] It is a good school, but just I would prefer to be around more people, more Travellers. There was only the one Traveller in the school, like, that I really talked to. There was more Travellers in St. Greg's. (Theresa, TSP)

The students were also conscious of the role of waiting lists in being able to access certain over-subscribed schools. For example, Johnathan (WISP) believed he would not have been accepted in the school that he wanted to attend because "a load of people try and get into that school, so like . . . you would have to sign up like in 5th class". In the same way, the student participants were conscious of schools' admissions policies. On this issue, Jason (WISP) praised St. Greg's approach to enrolment, noting that they "let everyone into the school . . . no matter where they are from, their race or anything", because he did not feel other schools took the same approach.

> The SPs felt that "academic performance" was considered something that was "not top of the list" (Roisin, SP) for Traveller parents, or the "number one priority" for parents of students in St. Greg's in general, when it came to school choice. The SPs were also very aware of schools' differing approaches to enrolment. For Padraic, school admission policies were being used "to protect the standard of education" . . . the other side is they are really protecting is the standard of education and the standard of the system . . . I don't like it, the elitism that goes on in some schools . . . they just pick the best 150, so why wouldn't they be at the . . . top of the league. If they said, right pick the first 150 that comes in, that would be a different story. (Padraic, SP)

Some of the SPs felt that it was unfair and elitist that other schools were not being made to "take their fair share" (John, SP) of students from diverse backgrounds. Similarly, Clodagh (SP) felt that "the ground needs to be levelled there completely to be fair to everybody's needs". For the staff, St. Greg's abided by its mission statement of inclusivity and did not "cherry pick" (Padraic, SP) like other schools which they felt often paid "lip service to open door policies" (Clodagh, SP).

> But I do think what tends to happen is our school is the school in . . . that takes the vast majority of them [students from diverse backgrounds]. We don't cherry pick. We abide by our mission statement. We are probably the most inclusive school within the area so we can never be accused of being discriminatory. (John, SP)

> People pay lip service to open door policies, we don't. We have an admissions policy and it is crystal clear and it always has been. You know, we don't refuse anybody . . . But there are others who say they have open door policies, in Christian schools as I call them, and the opposite is true. (Clodagh, SP)

Some of the SPs mentioned that "other schools use money as a barrier" (Clodagh, SP) to access, requiring parents to pay large amounts for resources and/or extra-curricular activities: "if you enrol here, we want 300 pounds for photo-copying and we need it for sport". John (SP) suggested that a "new school" that had recently opened in the area was "redirecting students" to St. Greg's and "telling any Traveller that rings up 'no, we are not a DEIS school, and we don't offer free books and we don't do free lunches'".

#### 4.2.3. Extra Supports, Subject Choice, and Freebies

While not mentioned by any of the student participants, some of the SPs suggested that students from minority groups attended St. Greg's because of the wide subject choice and extra supports available to them. Sean (SP), for example, argued that the "international students" preferred attending St. Greg's because of all the support that was available in the school.

> International students come here because we have a lot of support for international students . . . In terms of extra English, languages, there is a tradition of being able to sit the Leaving Cert in your own traditional language through Polish or whatever. (Sean, SP)

Not all the SPs, however, were convinced that the extra supports or subject availability were motivating factors for school choice. Barry (SP), for example, pointed out that many schools offered the same range of subjects as St. Greg's:

> I mean some people will say, look it, we want to come to the school because of the subject choice. Well, look it, at the end of the day, we are traditionally a vocational school, and we do have a heavy practical background, but all the schools offer Woodwork and Technical Drawing. And Art, and any of these anymore. So that is not going to . . . We are not going to stand out just for doing those subjects. (Barry, SP)

Some of the SPs cited "getting freebies" as a motivating factor for parents in deciding on St. Greg's. It was evident that some of them believed this to be the case particularly for the parents of Traveller children. Caroline (SP), for example, specifically mentioned that Travellers attended the school because "they get everything for free".

> Because we are a DEIS school, everything is free. We have the book scheme and the lunches, and all the resources are free. We don't have to pay for anything. They [Travellers] get all of these trips and everything. (Caroline, SP)

> Well, I would say that the biggest issue is the whole financial side of it. I know the new school that has opened above is . . . they are telling any Traveller that rings up 'No, we are not a DEIS school, and we don't offer free books and we don't do free lunches'. (John, SP)

While all the student participants mentioned that they got a lot of things for free, such as trips and lunches, only one of them, Josef (MSP), mentioned hearing about getting "free lunches" in St. Greg's before he had joined the school. However, he was more concerned about the school being a "rough" place than getting stuff for free.

> . . . But [friend], he actually went to this school. Like and other people who weren't in the school were like, 'Oh yeah, this is going to happen, this is going to happen' but [friend] he just, he made loads of friends here and I was, like, 'I thought this school was meant to be rough?' and he was like, 'no, it is not that bad, if you do your own good, like, you will be fine. The teachers' pay attention to you, you get free lunches, it is a really nice place, like'. (Josef, MSP)

The other student participants did not mention being motivated to attend the school because of its DEIS status and the expectation of 'freebies'. Indeed, many of them complained about the quality of the food on offer and tended to bring in their own food or buy lunch from the local shops.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Both staff and student participant groups from St. Greg's were aware of the school's bad reputation and how this was associated with the socio-demographic composition of its student population. Regarded as the school "for the Travellers and the Blacks", it was seen as a tough school and one in which academic expectations were low. Choosing St. Greg's was perceived as being related to having family history of attending the school, not being able to access other schools, and St. Greg's providing supports and freebies.

### *5.1. School Socio-Demographics, Reputation, and Academic Expectations*

In the UK, urban schools are often assigned inferior status because of their high concentration of minorities [81]. Similarly, now in Ireland it seems that some DEIS schools are perceived as "inferior" because of a high concentration of "Travellers and the Blacks" (John, SP) and other minorities and marginalised groups. While one-third of St. Greg's student population was made up of White settled Irish students from disadvantaged backgrounds, one third comprised (non-Traveller) minority ethnic students, and one third Traveller students, an unusually high number. While high levels of diversity are not unusual in DEIS schools [82,83], some DEIS schools are more diverse than others.

Research has suggested that a school with a diverse student population may be viewed in a negative light by teachers, parents, and students, if the diverse students are also from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds [84,85]. While none of the student participants from the different participant groups attributed the school's negative reputation to their own socio-economic or ethnic group, they were acutely aware that their school was positioned within a "demonised school" discourse ([86]; see also [82]). Hollingworth and Archer [81] found that demonised school discourses are often resisted and contested by young people, and in this study, some of the student participants resisted the stigmatised view of their school. Students from certain backgrounds are seen as a "risk" to the reputation of a school [87] and this study found that Traveller students posed a risk from the perspective of all participant groups, except the Traveller participants themselves, although they were aware of how, as a group, they were perceived in society. As Bryan [87] argues, macro processes and discourses impact negatively at the school level and upon ethnic minority students, and this was seen in the current study with some of the non-Traveller minority ethnic student participants being "fearful" (Natalia, MSP) of encountering Travellers, although they subsequently found that they were "not that scary" (Marian, MSP). In a sense, what is described here is a process of "demystification" of this negatively stereotyped group through "the figured world" of the school ([86] p. 386). Research suggests that when groups encounter each other, relationships improve [11] because myths are dispelled and the "other" becomes more familiar. While the WISPs referenced the school's reputation as a "hard school" (Johnathan, WISP) being linked to its large Traveller population, they did not report feeling fearful. This is likely because they had grown up in areas where there was a high concentration of Travellers, so they had "real world" experiences with the community.

Both staff and student participants viewed their school as one in which academic expectations were low, with the student participants very conscious of what was thought about students who attended this school, and that it was “full of dummies” (Josef, MSP). Many of the student participants seemed to have internalised these negative and deficit perceptions of their academic ability; for example, Marian (MSP) and Jason (WISP) displayed a concerning lack of confidence in their own ability and believed that they were “not smart”. Similarly, Holly (MSP) and Josef (MSP) had been forced to confront issues of being considered inferior, and while they challenged the negative stereotypes ascribed to them, their level of critical insight was limited as they both indicated that they saw themselves as “exceptions”. For example, Josef (MSP) remarked that while some of the students in St. Greg’s fit the stereotypes ascribed to them, he stated that it was “not all of them”. When certain groups are pathologized, they may internalise the dominant narrative as the “truth” and these internalised negative beliefs often result in self-fulfilling prophecies of failure [88]. Hollingworth and Archer [81] found that minority students must negotiate their identities when they are associated with a school labelled negatively. They remind us that the pathologisation of urban schools can have damaging effects on the students that attend them, including on the ways in which students see themselves (ibid.). Reay [89] explains that there is a painful struggle involved in trying to separate out from the “demonised other” because it is so tied up with the self.

Research has found that teachers generally tend to underestimate the academic ability of certain minority student groups [90]. The literature highlights how some teachers understand educational disadvantage through a cultural deficit lens, tending to blame them and/or their parents for their low levels of educational attainment [91]. Such deficit views lead to lowered teacher expectations and the pathologisation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds [92]. This was evident in the current study with the SPs explaining that as a teacher in St. Greg’s, one had to lower one’s expectations. The SPs were aware that in urban DEIS schools like St. Greg’s, many of the students come from communities experiencing significant socio-economic disadvantage [10]. Indeed, the staff highlighted that many of the students at St. Greg’s had experienced adverse childhood experiences, such as witnessing domestic violence, addiction, and substance abuse, having family members incarcerated, homelessness, and experiencing neglect. Although the SPs understood that many of St. Greg’s students had had such experiences, they still attributed their poor engagement to a lack of motivation or “aspirations” (John, SP). Yet, research has found that having to deal with such significant and ongoing life challenges inevitably results in education being less prioritised. As Doyle and Keane ([93], p. 83) found, for those from marginalised backgrounds, “having to cope with frequent and significant life traumas and fighting to survive everyday life in their lived realities, seriously constrained educational engagement”.

The SPs negatively compared Travellers to “most parents” (Sarah, SP), positioning them as “different” in terms of the value that they attached to education. While the belief that Travellers do not value education or promote it in the home is generally accepted in Irish society, research has found that Traveller parents are very receptive to their children’s education [5]. Myers, McGhee, and Bhopal [94] found that changing social circumstances had led to Traveller parents increasingly seeing the importance of formal education for their children in terms of them being able to make a living in the modern world. While some Traveller parents may have low expectations for their children [39], this needs to be understood in the context of the structural inequalities pervasive in society in relation to poverty and racism, and the major barriers within the education system and labour market, which understandably frame Traveller parents’ perspectives [39].

### 5.2. Issues of School “Choice”

From the participants’ perspectives, choosing St. Greg’s was related to having a family history of attending the school, not being able to access other schools, and the school providing supports and ‘freebies’. There were differences between the student participant groups regarding their "choice" of St. Greg's. School choice was influenced and constrained by students' (and their families') perceptions of where they would "have a better chance of getting in" (Jason, WISP). In their discussion about "choosing" St. Greg's, many of the (non-Traveller) minority ethnic and White Irish student participants noted that they had not been able to access other schools. Indeed, most of the latter group expressed a desire to attend different schools, somewhere that "they actually have to try to educate you" (Jason, WISP), demonstrating a belief that the standard of education at St. Greg's was inferior to that in other schools.

Not being able to access other schools needs to be considered in the context of schools' admissions policies in Ireland, and staff and student participants were clear that schools had different approaches. St. Greg's was reported by staff and student participants as having an inclusive policy and practice compared to other schools who "cherry- picked" (Padraic, SP), did not "take their fair share" (John, SP) of students from diverse backgrounds, and paid "lip service to open door policies" (Clodagh, SP). However, the school was in no position to be choosy: student enrolment had been declining for some years. Student enrolment in DEIS schools is often lower than enrolment in non-DEIS schools, which are often over-subscribed [83]. Some of the SPs felt some (particularly over-subscribed) schools employed certain "elitist" (Padraic, SP) practices (including the requirement of payment for certain extra-curricular activities) as an exclusive mechanism resulting in students from disadvantaged backgrounds being unable to access those schools. In this way, some schools are a "closed shop" and may covertly discriminate against certain groups [2]. As the current system is seen to be functional (for some), and serves the needs of the majority, such practices, which directly or indirectly result in the exclusion of minorities, are often unquestioned [95]. In such a climate, institutional racism is normalised and selection procedures which disadvantage ethnic minority students are considered acceptable [73].

In contrast to the other student participants, the Traveller student participants were clear that they preferred St. Greg's to other schools because of the high number of Travellers. Wanting to be around people like oneself is unsurprising; drawing on theories of social homophily [96], Keane [97] argued that homophilous groups facilitate an important self-protective function in the provision of a sense of comfort, security, and safety. Bhopal and Myers [27] also found that Travellers felt more comfortable in spaces where they were surrounded by their own. Similarly, Boyle et al. [5] found that the Traveller parents who participated in their study felt at ease in all-Traveller preschools because they felt a sense of belonging. This apparent self-segregation suggests that they would not have felt comfortable in spaces where they constituted a minority. However rational this inclination and behaviour may be on the part of Traveller families and students, what seems like choice here is an inevitability of living in a society where being different is viewed as an aberration and is met with hostility. It also clearly calls into question the inaction of the education system in making all schools comfortable and safe spaces for all students, including Traveller students.

The issue of access to additional supports and 'freebies' was also of note in the participants' discussions about students' reasons for choosing St. Greg's. Due to their designated disadvantaged status, DEIS schools are allocated additional resources and can offer additional supports for students and their families, including learning supports, free school meals, and free books [11]. In this study, the SPs assumed that these "advantages" were what motivated Traveller parents to choose St. Greg's, demonstrating the prevalent societal stereotype of Travellers as a group who prefer to live on state "hand-outs [98] and do not wish to work [99] among the teacher participants. Further, as over half of Traveller children attend non-DEIS schools [20], this assumption is clearly questionable. Teachers are rarely given the opportunity to interrogate their deeply ingrained beliefs about the Travelling community (or other marginalised communities), and therefore it is not surprising that negative stereotypes may be deeply ingrained within their psyche.

While previous research has highlighted the complexities of choice and decision-making for (non-Traveller) minority ethnic and lower socio-economic groups, this study contributes to our understanding of the complex factors impacting Traveller families and young people in this domain, as well as in comparison to those from other ethnic groups. As was shown, in this DEIS school, the student population was highly diverse, with very high concentrations of students from non-Traveller minority ethnic, Traveller, and lower socio-economic groups. High concentrations of disadvantage within school populations exacerbate patterns of inequality in education [83,100,101]. The segregation evident between DEIS and non-DEIS schools, and even amongst DEIS schools in relation to more concentrated levels of disadvantage, raises important questions about the extent to which the DEIS system is reproducing the existing social order rather than addressing educational disadvantage, which is purportedly the aim. While the system needs to seriously examine how less segregated schools may be facilitated, there is also a need to better support teachers to effectively teach in DEIS schools, so that they may better support students from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds. Additionally, DEIS schools need to be adequately resourced if they are to tackle, and indeed avoid perpetuating, educational disadvantage [82].

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, H.M.G. and E.K.; methodology, H.M.G. and E.K.; formal analysis, H.M.G. and E.K.; writing—original draft preparation, H.M.G. and E.K.; writing—review and editing, H.M.G. and E.K.; supervision, E.K.; project administration, H.M.G. and E.K.; funding acquisition, H.M.G. and E.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the Irish Research Council Postgraduate Scholarship Programme, the National University of Ireland, Galway Doctoral Fellowship, and the National University of Ireland, Mary L. Thornton Scholarship in Education.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Full ethical approval for the study was granted by the National University of Ireland, Galway Research Ethics Committee (REC).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

1. *Equal Status Act 2000*; Acts of the Oireachtas; Stationery Office: Dublin, Ireland, 2000.
2. Lodge, A.; Lynch, K. *Diversity at School*; Institute of Public Administration for the Equality Authority: Dublin, Ireland, 2004.
3. Tormey, T.; Gleeson, J. Irish post-primary students' attitudes towards ethnic minorities. *Ir. Educ. Stud.* **2012**, *31*, 157–173. [CrossRef]
4. Devine, D.; Kenny, M.; MacNeela, E. Naming the other—Children's construction and experience of racisms in Irish primary schools. *Race Ethn. Educ.* **2008**, *11*, 369–385. [CrossRef]
5. Boyle, A.; Flynn, M.; Hanafin, J. Optimism despite disappointment: Irish Traveller parents' reports of their own school experiences and their views on education. *Int. J. Incl. Educ.* **2018**, *24*, 1389–1409. [CrossRef]
6. Connolly, P.; Keenan, M. Racist Harassment in the White Hinterlands: Minority ethnic children and parents' experiences of schooling in Northern Ireland. *Br. J. Sociol. Educ.* **2002**, *23*, 341–355. [CrossRef]
7. Hourigan, N.; Campbell, M. *The TEACH Report: Traveller Education and Adults: Crisis Challenge and Change*; National Association of Travellers' Centres: Athlone, Ireland, 2010.
8. Weir, S.; Archer, P.; O'Flaherty, A.; Gilleece, L. *A Report on the First Phase of the Evaluation of DEIS*; Educational Research Centre: Dublin, Ireland, 2011.
9. Department of Education and Science. *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS): An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion*; DES: Dublin, Ireland, 2005.
10. Kavanagh, L.; Weir, S.; Moran, E. *The Evaluation of DEIS: Monitoring Achievement and Attitudes among Urban Primary School Pupils from 2007 to 2016*; Educational Research Centre: Dublin, Ireland, 2017.
11. Watson, D.; Kenny, O.; McGinnity, F.; Russell, H. *A Social Portrait of Travellers in Ireland, Research Series*; ESRI Publications: Dublin, Ireland, 2017; Volume 56, pp. 589–608.
12. Central Statistics Office. *Census of Population 2016: Profile 8 Irish Travellers, Ethnicity and Religion*; Central Statistics Office: Dublin, Ireland, 2017.
13. Central Statistics Office. *Profile 7, Religion, Ethnicity and Irish Travellers*; Stationery Office: Dublin, Ireland, 2012.

14. Department of Education and Skills (DES) and Higher Education Authority (HEA). *Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021*; HEA: Dublin, Ireland, 2018.
15. Department of Education and Skills (DES). *Action Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education 2019–2021*; Department of Education and Skills: Dublin, Ireland, 2019.
16. Byrne, D.; McGinnity, F.; Smyth, E.; Darmody, M. Immigration and school composition in Ireland. *Ir. Educ. Stud.* **2010**, *29*, 271–288. [CrossRef]
17. Devine, D. *Immigration and Schooling in the Republic of Ireland-Making a Difference?* Manchester University Press: Manchester, UK, 2011.
18. Mc Ginley, H. A Critical Exploration of Intercultural Education in a Post-primary School in Ireland with Particular Reference to Travellers. Ph.D. Thesis, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland, 2020.
19. Ní Dhuinn, M.; Keane, E. But you don't look Irish: Identity constructions of minority ethnic students as 'non-Irish' and deficient learners at school in Ireland. *Int. Stud. Sociol. Educ.* **2021**, 1–30. [CrossRef]
20. Darmody, M.; Byrne, D.; McGinnity, F. Cumulative disadvantage? Educational careers of migrant students in Irish secondary schools. *Race Ethn. Educ.* **2012**, *17*, 129–151. [CrossRef]
21. Kitching, K. Interrogating the changing inequalities constituting popular 'deviant' and ordinary subjects of school/subculture in Ireland: Moments of new migrant student recognition, resistance and recuperation. *Race Ethn. Educ.* **2011**, *14*, 293–311. [CrossRef]
22. Chapman, T.K.; Bhopal, K. The perils of integration: Exploring the experiences of African American and black Caribbean students in predominantly white secondary schools. *Ethn. Racial Stud.* **2019**, *42*, 1110–1129. [CrossRef]
23. Castro, A.J. Themes in the research on preservice teachers views of cultural diversity: Implications for researching millennial preservice teachers. *Educ. Res.* **2010**, *39*, 198–210. [CrossRef]
24. Troyna, B. Can you see the Join? An Historical Analysis of Multicultural and Antiracist Education Policies. In *'Race', Education and Society: Structures and Strategies*; Dawn, G., Mayor, B., Blair, M., Eds.; SAGE Publications: London, UK, 1992; pp. 63–91.
25. Youdell, D. Identity traps, or how black students fail: The interactions between biographical, sub-cultural and learner identities. *Br. J. Soc. Educ.* **2003**, *24*, 3–20. [CrossRef]
26. Peguero, A. Violence, schools, and dropping out: Racial and ethnic disparities in the educational consequence of student victimisation. *J. Interpers. Violence* **2011**, *26*, 3753–3772. [CrossRef]
27. Bhopal, K.; Myers, M. Marginal groups in marginal times: Gypsy and Traveller parents and home education in England, UK. *Br. Educ. Res. J.* **2015**, *42*, 5–20. [CrossRef]
28. Monroe, C.R. Why Are "Bad Boys" always Black? Causes of Disproportionality in School Discipline and Recommendations for Change. *Clear. House J. Educ. Strat. Issues Ideas* **2005**, *79*, 45–50. [CrossRef]
29. Devine, D. Welcome to the Celtic Tiger? Teacher responses to immigration and increasing ethnic diversity in Irish schools. *Int. Stud. Sociol. Educ.* **2005**, *15*, 49–69. [CrossRef]
30. Fine-Davis, M.; Faas, D. Equality and Diversity in the Classroom: A Comparison of Students' and Teachers' Attitudes in Six European Countries. *Soc. Indic. Res.* **2014**, *119*, 1319–1334. [CrossRef]
31. Darmody, M.; Smyth, E.; Byrne, D.; McGinnity, F. New School, New System: The Experiences of Immigrant Students in Irish Schools. In *International Handbook of Migration, Minorities and Education*; Springer: Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2012; pp. 283–299.
32. Nowlan, E. Underneath the Band-Aid: Supporting bilingual students in Irish schools. *Ir. Educ. Stud.* **2008**, *27*, 253–266. [CrossRef]
33. Tatum, B.D. *Why Are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations about Race*; Basic Books: New York, NY, USA, 2017.
34. Rhamie, J.; Bhopal, K.; Bhatti, G. Stick to your own kind: Pupils' Experiences of Identity and Diversity in Secondary Schools. *Br. J. Educ. Stud.* **2012**, *60*, 171–191. [CrossRef]
35. Peguero, A.; Jiang, X. Backlash for breaking racial and ethnic breaking stereotypes: Adolescent school victimization across contexts. *J. Interpers. Violence* **2016**, *31*, 1047–1073. [CrossRef]
36. Raby, R. There's no racism at my school, it's just joking around: Ramifications for anti-racist education. *Race Ethn. Educ.* **2004**, *7*, 367–383. [CrossRef]
37. Ní Laoire, C.; Bushin, N.; Carpena-Mendez., F.; White, A. *Tell Me about Yourself: Migrant Children's Experiences of Moving to and Living in Ireland*; University College Cork: Cork, Ireland, 2009.
38. Kiddle, C. Partnerships depend on power-sharing: An exploration of the relationships between Fairground and Gypsy Traveller parents and their children's teachers in England. *Int. J. Educ. Res.* **2000**, *33*, 265–274. [CrossRef]
39. Derrington, C. Fight, flight and playing white: An examination of coping strategies adopted by Gypsy Traveller Adolescents in English secondary schools. *Int. J. Educ. Res.* **2007**, *46*, 357–367. [CrossRef]
40. Bhopal, K.; Myers, M. *Insiders, Outsiders and Others: Gypsies and Identity*; University of Hertfordshire Press: Hatfield, UK, 2008.
41. Bhopal, K. This is a school, it's not a site: Teachers' attitudes towards Gypsy and Traveller pupils in schools in England, UK. *Br. Educ. Res. J.* **2011**, *37*, 465–483. [CrossRef]
42. Donahue, M.; McVeigh, R.; Ward, M. Misli, Crush, Mislì: Irish Travellers and Nomadism: A Research Report for the Irish Traveller Movement and Traveller Movement Northern Ireland. 2005. Available online: https://itmtrav.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/MISLI-CRUSH-MISLI-Irish-Travellers-and-Nomadism.pdf (accessed on 11 May 2021).
43. Cudworth, D. Gypsy/Traveller Culture and the Schooling Process. In *Schooling and Travelling Communities*; Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland, 2018; pp. 131–166. [CrossRef]

44. Derrington, C.; Kendall, S. *Gypsy Traveller Students in Secondary Schools: Culture, Identity and Achievement*; Trentham Books: Stoke-on-Trent, UK, 2004.
45. Kavanagh, A.M. Emerging Models of Intercultural Education in Irish Primary Schools: A Critical Case Study Analysis. Ph.D. Thesis, St. Patrick's College, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland, 2013.
46. Deuchar, R.; Bhopal, K. We're still human beings, we're not aliens: Promoting the citizenship rights and cultural diversity of Traveller children in schools: Scottish and English perspectives. *Br. Educ. Res. J.* **2013**, *39*, 733–750. [CrossRef]
47. Lloyd, G.; Stead, J. The boys and girls not calling me names and the teachers to believe me': Name calling and the experiences of Travellers in Scotland. *Child. Soc.* **2001**, *15*, 361–374. [CrossRef]
48. Helms, J.E. An Update of Helm's White and People of Color Racial Identity Models. In *Versions Were Presented at the Psychology and Societal Transformation Conference, U Western Cape, South Africa, Jan 1994, and at a Workshop Entitled "Helm's Racial Identity Theory," Annual Multicultural Winter Roundtable, Teachers Coll–Columbia U*; Sage Publications, Inc.: New York, NY, USA, 1995.
49. Lynch, K.; Lodge, A. *Equality and Power in Schools: Redistribution, Recognition and Representation*; Routledge/Falmer: London, UK, 2002.
50. Kitching, K. How the Irish became CRT'd? 'Greening' Critical Race Theory, and the pitfalls of a normative Atlantic state view. *Race Ethn. Educ.* **2015**, *18*, 163–182. [CrossRef]
51. Bryan, A. You've got to teach people that racism is wrong and then they won't be racist: Curricular representations and young people's understandings of race and racism. *J. Curric. Stud.* **2012**, *44*, 599–629. [CrossRef]
52. Kavanagh, A.M.; Dupont, M. Making the invisible visible: Managing tensions around including Traveller culture and history in the curriculum at primary and post-primary levels. *Ir. Educ. Stud.* **2021**, *40*, 553–569. [CrossRef]
53. Faas, D.; Sokolowska, B.; Darmody, M. Everybody is Available to Them: Support Measures for Migrant Students in Irish Secondary School. *Br. J. Educ. Stud.* **2015**, *63*, 447–466. [CrossRef]
54. Skeggs, B. Exchange, value and affect: Bourdieu and 'the self'. *Sociol. Rev.* **2004**, *52*, 75–95. [CrossRef]
55. Byrne, D.; Smyth, E. *No Way Back? The Dynamics of Early School Leaving*; The Liffey Press in Association with the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and Department of Education and Science (DES): Dublin, Ireland, 2010.
56. Ball, S.J.; Davies, J.; David, M.; Reay, D. "Classification" and "judgement": Social class and the "cognitive structures" of choice of higher education. *Br. J. Sociol. Educ.* **2002**, *23*, 51–72. [CrossRef]
57. Lundy, L. Human Rights and Equality Litigation in Northern Ireland's Schools. *Educ. Law J.* **2004**, *5*, 82.
58. Levinson, M.P. Literacy in English Gypsy Communities: Cultural Capital Manifested as Negative Assets. *Am. Educ. Res. J.* **2007**, *44*, 5–39. [CrossRef]
59. Parker-Jenkins, M.; Masterson, M. No longer 'Catholic, White and Gaelic': Schools in Ireland coming to terms with cultural diversity. *Ir. Educ. Stud.* **2013**, *32*, 477–492. [CrossRef]
60. Kelly, N.; Fleming, F.; Demirel, B.; O'Hara, J. *The Real Cost of School 2020: Back to School Survey Briefing Paper*; Barnardos: Dublin, Ireland, 2020.
61. Heffernan, B. Traveller Loses His Appeal over School's Preference for Past Pupils' Children. *Irish Independent*, 4 February 2012.
62. Ball, S.J.; Vincent, C. I Heard it on the Grapevine: 'Hot' knowledge and school choice. *Br. J. Sociol. Educ.* **1998**, *19*, 377–400. [CrossRef]
63. Thrift, N. *'Us' and 'Them': Re-Imagining Places, Re-Imagining Identities, in Consumption and Everyday Life*; MacKay, H., Ed.; Open University Press: Milton Keynes, UK, 1997; pp. 159–212.
64. McAvinue, L.; Weir, S. *The Evaluation of DEIS at Post-Primary Level: An Update on Trends over Time in Achievement and Retention*; Report to the Department of Education and Skills; Educational Research Centre: Dublin, Ireland, 2015.
65. Gilleece, L.; Nelis, S.M.; Fitzgerald, C.; Cosgrove, J. *Reading, Mathematics and Science Achievement in DEIS Schools: Evidence from PISA*; ERC: Dublin, Ireland, 2020.
66. Cohen, L.; Manion, L.; Morrison, K. *Research Methods in Education*, 8th ed.; Routledge: Abingdon, UK, 2018.
67. Guba, E.; Lincoln, Y. Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences. In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed.; Denzin, N., Lincoln, Y., Eds.; Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2005; pp. 191–216.
68. Creswell, W.J. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed.; Sage Publications: Sauzend Oaks, CA, USA, 2014.
69. Bell, D.A.; Brown, V. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma. *Harv. Law Rev.* **1980**, *93*, 518. [CrossRef]
70. Crenshaw, K. Race, reform, retrenchment: Transformation and legitimation in anti-discrimination law. *Harv. Law Rev.* **1988**, *101*, 1331–1387. [CrossRef]
71. Delgado, R. Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative. *Mich. Law Rev.* **1989**, *87*, 2411–2441. [CrossRef]
72. Ladson-Billings, G. The evolving role of critical race theory in educational scholarship. *Race Ethn. Educ.* **2005**, *8*, 115–119. [CrossRef]
73. Delgado, R.; Stefancic, J. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*; NYU Press: New York, NY, USA, 2001.
74. Bhopal, K. *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society*; Policy Press: Bristol, UK, 2018.
75. Gillborn, D. Critical Race Theory and Education: Racism and anti-racism in educational theory and praxis. *Discourse Stud. Cult. Politics Educ.* **2006**, *27*, 11–32. [CrossRef]
76. Calhoun, C. *Critical Social Theory: Culture, History and the Challenge of Difference*; Blackwell Publishing: Malden, MA, USA, 1995.

77. Parker, L.; Lynn, M. What's Race Got to Do with It? Critical Race Theory's Conflicts with and Connections to Qualitative Research Methodology and Epistemology. *Qual. Inq.* **2002**, *8*, 7–22. [CrossRef]
78. Bayoumi, A.; Hwang, S. Methodological, Practical, and Ethical Challenges to Inner-City Health Research. *J. Urban Health Bull. N. Y. Acad. Med.* **2003**, *79*, S35–S42. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
79. Charmaz, K. Grounded Theory Methods in Social Justice Research. In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th ed.; Denzin, L., Ed.; Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2011; pp. 359–380.
80. Petty, N.J.; Thomson, O.P.; Stew, G. Ready for a paradigm shift? Part 1: Introducing the philosophy of qualitative research. *Man. Ther.* **2012**, *17*, 267–274. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
81. Hollingworth, S.; Archer, L. Urban schools as urban places: School reputation, children's identities and engagement with education in London. *Urban Stud.* **2010**, *47*, 584–603. [CrossRef]
82. Fleming, B.; Harford, J. The DEIS programme as a policy aimed at combating educational disadvantage: Fit for purpose? *Ir. Educ. Stud.* **2021**, 1–19. [CrossRef]
83. Smyth, E.; McCoy, S.; Kingston, G. *Learning from the Evaluation of DEIS*; ESRI: Dublin, Ireland, 2015.
84. Devine, D. Valuing children differently? Migrant children in education. *Child. Soc.* **2013**, *27*, 282–294. [CrossRef]
85. Bryan, A.; Bracken, M. They Think the Book is Right and I am Wrong Intercultural Education and the Positioning of Ethnic Minority Students in the Formal and Informal Curriculum. In *Exploring the Lives of Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Children*; Darmody, M., Tyrrell, N., Song, S., Eds.; Sense Publications: Dublin, Ireland, 2011; pp. 105–123.
86. Cahill, K.; Hall, K. Choosing schools: Explorations in post-primary school choice in an urban Irish working class community. *Ir. Educ. Stud.* **2014**, *33*, 383–397. [CrossRef]
87. Bryan, A. Corporate multiculturalism, diversity management, and positive interculturalism in Irish schools and society. *Ir. Educ. Stud.* **2010**, *29*, 253–269. [CrossRef]
88. Herrnstein, R.J.; Murray, C.A. *The Bell Curve: Reshaping of American Life by Differences in Intelligence*; Free Press: New York, NY, USA; London, UK, 1994.
89. Reay, D. Mostly Roughs and Toughs: Social Class, Race and Representation in Inner City Schooling. *Sociology* **2004**, *38*, 1005–1023. [CrossRef]
90. Fine, M.; Weis, L. *Silenced Voices and Extraordinary Conversations: Re-Imagining Schools*; Teachers College Press: New York, NY, USA, 2004.
91. Cochran-Smith, M. Color blindness and basket making are not the answers: Confronting the dilemmas of race, culture, and language diversity in teacher education. *Am. Educ. Res. J.* **1995**, *32*, 493–522. [CrossRef]
92. White, C.M. Deficit thinking redux: Cultural deficit discourse and an urban community and school in Fiji. *Soc. Identities* **2014**, *20*, 155–170. [CrossRef]
93. Doyle, G.; Keane, E. 'Education comes second to surviving': Parental perspectives on their children's early school leaving in an area challenged by marginalisation. *Ir. Educ. Stud.* **2019**, *38*, 71–88. [CrossRef]
94. Myers, M.; McGhee, D.; Bhopal, K. At the crossroads: Gypsy and Traveller parents' perceptions of education, protection and social change. *Race Ethn. Educ.* **2010**, *13*, 533–548. [CrossRef]
95. O'Brien, S.; Fathaigh, M. Ideological challenges to the social inclusion agenda in the Republic of Ireland. *Int. J. Incl. Educ.* **2007**, *11*, 593–606. [CrossRef]
96. McPherson, M.; Smith-Lovin, L.; Cook, J. Birds of a feather: Homophily in social networks. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* **2001**, *27*, 415–444. [CrossRef]
97. Keane, E. Distancing to self-protect: The perpetuation of inequality in higher education through socio-relational dis/engagement. *Br. J. Sociol. Educ.* **2011**, *32*, 449–466. [CrossRef]
98. McGee, H. 'Daily Mail' Column on Travellers Criticised by Equality Authority. *The Irish Times*. 2014. Available online: https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/daily-mail-column-on-travellers-criticised-by-equality-authority-1.1754911 (accessed on 15 August 2017).
99. Mac Gréil, M. *Pluralism and Diversity in Ireland*; Columba Press: Dublin, Ireland, 2011.
100. Perry, L.B.; McConney, A. Does the SES of the school matter? An examination of socioeconomic status and student achievement using PISA 2003. *Teach. Coll. Rec.* **2010**, *112*, 1137–1162. [CrossRef]
101. Sofroniou, N.; Archer, P.; Weir, S. An Analysis of the Association between Socioeconomic Context, Gender, and Achievement. *Ir. J. Edu./Iris Eireannach Oideachais* **2004**, *35*, 58–72.

education sciences

Article

# "We Respect Them, and They Respect Us": The Value of Interpersonal Relationships in Enhancing Student Engagement

**Joanne Banks [1,*] and Emer Smyth [2]**

[1] School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, D02 PN40 Dublin, Ireland
[2] Economic and Social Research Institute, D02 K138 Dublin, Ireland; emer.smyth@esri.ie
* Correspondence: banksjo@tcd.ie

**Abstract:** Attempts to understand the patterns behind student disengagement and early school leaving have traditionally focussed on early school leavers' individual characteristics. More recently, however, studies have begun to focus on the extent to which early school leaving is shaped by school-level factors, and in particular the central role of teachers and pedagogy, in (dis)engaging students. Studies have consistently shown how negative teacher–student relations can dominate the lives of young people, leading to poor attendance and behavioural issues which often culminate in them disengaging, leaving or being expelled from school. Furthermore, there is a growing interest in the role of pedagogical strategies in enhancing teacher–student relations, increasing student engagement and bringing about more socially just systems of education. Using in-depth qualitative interviews with staff working in a school engagement programme aimed at preventing early school leaving (the School Completion Programme) and young people who have left school early and who are now participating in an alternative education setting in Ireland as well as staff in those settings (the National Youthreach Programme), this paper provides a unique comparison of two approaches to learner engagement. Findings highlight the centrality of caring and respectful relationships between teachers and students across the two programmes. This paper suggests that aspects of the 'productive pedagogies' framework are being used to overcome barriers by placing equal emphasis on student wellbeing and formal learning. However, both programmes operate outside 'mainstream' education, with little scope for integration with the mainstream system. This paper concludes that at the micro level, the programmes are effective in re-engaging young people with education but argues that this has little impact at a broader level, where mainstream school practices impacting on student disengagement and early school leaving remain unchanged.

**Keywords:** school engagement; early school leaving; alternative education; teacher–student relations; pedagogy

**Citation:** Banks, J.; Smyth, E. "We Respect Them, and They Respect Us": The Value of Interpersonal Relationships in Enhancing Student Engagement. *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 634. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11100634

Academic Editor: Eleanor Dommett

Received: 24 June 2021
Accepted: 6 October 2021
Published: 13 October 2021

## 1. Introduction

Early school leaving (ESL) remains a critical issue in education systems around the world. In the European Union, an average of 10 per cent of young people leave school early, with rates ranging from as low as 3 per cent in Croatia to as high as 17 per cent in Spain. Despite Europe 2020 strategy targets to reduce ESL in member states by 2020, ESL still remains above national targets in 11 countries [1]. Research in this area has sought to better understand the profile of early school leavers as well as their outcomes in adult life [2,3]. There is now a substantial amount of research on the characteristics of students at risk of disengagement and early school leavers which shows that they are more likely to be from socio-economically marginalised communities, have ongoing social, emotional or health issues, have additional learning needs, live in poverty and/or have experience of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) [4–6]. Studies show that young people with poor attendance in school and those who leave school early are more likely to be unemployed or have low-quality and low-paid employment, have poorer health and be involved in anti-social behaviour and crime [7–9]. Research in this area has moved on, however, from deficit perspectives which focus on aspects of individual student characteristics, willpower or effort [10]. There is increasing awareness of the impact of school processes and, in particular, the centrality of teachers in influencing student engagement and outcomes [11]. Developing upon a social reproduction perspective, Lingard (2005) argues that of all the factors influencing socially just educational outcomes, 'that teachers and their pedagogies contribute most to better learning outcomes' for all students but particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds [12]. Similarly, Crosnoe et al. (2004) highlight the impact of positive teacher–student relations (or what they refer to as 'intergenerational bonding') as a key factor in boosting student achievement and reducing disciplinary problems among students generally. For students that have experienced alienation in school, these relationships can have a greater impact compared to their peers (Muller, 2001 cited in Crosnoe et al., 2004) [13] with some studies showing a direct link between the quality of relations and school retention and the prevention of early school leaving [14–19]. These relationships can not only influence student attendance and retention, but also a student's sense of belonging in school [17,20–22] Where early school leavers are re-engaging with education in alternative settings, 'trust, recognition and acceptance' appear to be key elements in positive staff–learner relationships that can lead to (re)engagement in education and 'more positive and productive life choices' for young people (p. 6) [20].

In addition to meaningful relationships between teachers and students, research highlights the importance of focussing on aspects of school culture and pedagogical practices which influence student disengagement and early school leaving [23,24]. A number of studies have questioned the assumptions around how and what is taught with a focus on how pedagogy and authentic instruction can be used to help bring about more socially just systems of education [25]. Hayes et al. (2005), for example, use the idea of the instructional or pedagogical core in schools which they describe as a 'taken-for-granted part of schooling' (p. 33) [19]. This 'default mode' or values in schools has a particular relevance for students whose own cultural or social habitus and individual identities are not strongly matched to the dominant culture of the school [26]. Hayes et al. (2005) suggest that to improve the educational outcomes of these students, we need to challenge the pedagogical core of schooling. Lingard et al. (2003) and Hayes (2005) use the productive pedagogies framework as a way to challenge structural inequalities in our education systems [19,27]. Based on an Australian study from the early-2000s, this framework promotes the provision of a high-quality education for *all* students but especially students from disadvantaged backgrounds [28]. The productive pedagogies framework is based on four dimensions, namely intellectual quality, relevance, supportive classroom environment, and recognition of difference. These principles challenge conventional understandings of what is important and what should be emphasised in school [29]. The evidence suggests that these dimensions are necessary to achieve high-level outcomes for students and especially students 'who have been traditionally failed by the education system' [28] (p. 71). Where productive pedagogies are absent, it is argued that the culture of schools will continue to disadvantage some students over others and inequalities will be exacerbated [19,27]. It is noteworthy that the productive pedagogies framework has not had as much traction in recent years. This article therefore seeks to renew interest in the potential of this approach as a framework for addressing educational inequality.

One of the main elements of the productive pedagogies framework is that all students should be provided with intellectually challenging classrooms. Education that lacks intellectual challenge is considered socially unjust and often stems from the deficit perspective, where individual students or their families are blamed for their lack of academic success [18,23]. Challenging work and intellectual demand is particularly important for students from traditionally underachieving backgrounds [28]. Research studies have shown that where disadvantaged students have high levels of need in a school, school may become a habitus of 'care' rather than 'challenge', which can negatively impact students' academic progress [30,31]. Lingard and Keddie (2013) describe this as a trade-off between intellectual demand and 'an almost therapeutic culture of care' [32].

Why some students disengage from school remains a key policy challenge in education systems around the world. Policy responses tend to focus on either school prevention strategies or compensation approaches but rarely both. This paper provides a unique comparison between a school-based preventative programme (The School Completion Programme) and a compensatory alternative education programme (The National Youthreach Programme) in Ireland. Using qualitative data from interviews with staff working in the School Completion Programme and staff and young people participating in the National Youthreach Programme, this paper examines the role of relationships and pedagogical approaches in increasing student engagement in two programmes which operate outside mainstream education. Given that relationship building and the use of innovative pedagogical approaches are, more often, features of these types of interventions [17,33,34], this paper explores how these approaches can inform mainstream school culture by improving teacher–student relationships and addressing barriers to learning for students who experience marginalisation in school.

## 2. Context—The Irish System

Ireland has a high rate of secondary school completion by European standards, with 91 percent of those entering secondary school in 2013 completing upper secondary education (Department of Education, 2020). In Ireland, as elsewhere, early school leavers are more likely to come from less advantaged households and to have networks (siblings and friends) comprised of other early leavers. Finding school 'boring' or 'difficult' and not getting on with teachers emerge as important drivers of leaving school early [35]. Ireland's success in school retention has had two sets of consequences. Firstly, the small group who do leave school early are increasingly composed of young people who face multiple challenges, including mental health and other disabilities [17]. Secondly, policy focus has moved towards a broader idea of educational participation to encompass school attendance and engagement.

In Ireland, the dominant approach to addressing inequalities in educational engagement and participation has involved targeting additional resources and supports towards schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged populations. The approach is similar to the educational priority areas approach used in many European countries [36]. This Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme is multi-faceted in nature, facilitating smaller class sizes at the primary level, providing access to literacy and numeracy supports, and offering additional supports such as personnel to promote parental engagement [37]. The programme aims at 'closing the gap' in attendance, participation, and achievement between those attending more disadvantaged schools and those in other schools.

Interventions designed to promote participation more specifically fall into two categories: supports to retain children and young people at risk of school drop-out within full-time education (the School Completion Programme); and programmes to help re-engage early school leavers with education (the Youthreach programme). These programmes form the focus for this article. Table 1 provides an overview of some of the key features of the two programmes, highlighting important commonalities and differences in their approach and focus.

**Table 1.** Comparison of the School Completion and Youthreach programmes.

| | **School Completion Programme** | **Youthreach Programme** |
|---|---|---|
| Target group | Primary and secondary students at risk of early school leaving | Early school leavers (i.e., left school before the end of upper secondary education) |
| Basis for participation | Some discretion at school or cluster level to identify particular groups of students for involvement | Largely word-of-mouth or other informal methods; some centres engage in outreach |
| Location of provision | Clusters of primary and secondary schools | Stand-alone centres |
| Scale of provision | Variation across clusters—often combine large groups for some activities with one-to-one supports for students in crisis | Intensive supports for small groups of participants |
| Curriculum and learning | Some additional supports for learning (on a small group or one-to-one basis) and homework clubs but teaching and acquisition of qualifications mainly happen in mainstream classrooms | Smaller class sizes, focus on hands-on/practical approaches, variation in qualifications offered (further education v. traditional secondary qualifications) |
| Socio-emotional supports | Some personal development, therapeutic and behaviour supports; informal support important | Many centres are linked to local mental health services or provide counselling support in house; informal support important |

The two programmes have some similarities in that they target at-risk groups and provide supports that encompass learning as well as broader personal and social development. In both programmes, informal supports and relationships between staff and participants play a key role in the success of these interventions, a central theme of this article. However, the programmes also have important differences, which are important in understanding the context for the findings presented in the remainder of this article. Youthreach can be seen as providing more intensive support, taking a holistic approach to addressing the needs of participants and often offering counselling and other mental health supports. In contrast, the School Completion (SCP) programme operates alongside mainstream school provision. As a result, children and young people may take part in SCP activities before school (such as a breakfast club) or be withdrawn from class for more intensive supports on a one-to-one or small group basis. SCP staff are employed by the 'cluster' of schools and are not school staff. Furthermore, they are often not involved in broader school planning around the DEIS programme. This can result in SCP provision being somewhat 'siloed' within the school. The extent to which this can impact on the nature of provision and the relationships between staff and students is discussed in the remainder of the article.

A further difference relates to how children and young people are identified for programme participation. Clusters of schools set the criteria for identifying at-risk groups of students (within overall national guidelines) for participation within SCP and can then target specific students and their families to take part. Constraints on involving participants are therefore largely the result of the scale of funding. In contrast, referral to Youthreach largely involves informal sources, with young people hearing about the provision from family, friends or neighbours, and few being referred through formal (school-based or service-based) routes. Although some centres engage in active outreach, the programme may not be reaching the most vulnerable young people who do not have the networks to encourage them to take part in Youthreach.

## 3. Methodology

This paper draws on two mixed-methods studies, which combine survey data with in-depth case studies of practice at the local level. Both studies also involved interviews with key stakeholders who provided insights into the location of the two programmes within the broader education and training landscape.

The study of the School Completion programme involved a postal survey of all SCP coordinators and chairpersons of the school clusters, with a very high response rate of 95 per cent for coordinators and 77 per cent for chairpersons (for further details, see [38]). These survey data were used to identify ten clusters for case-study analysis. Within each of these clusters, interviews were conducted with school principals, SCP coordinators and chairpersons, and members of the SCP local management committee. A limitation of this study was that interviews were not conducted with children and young people themselves. This decision reflected budgetary constraints as well as the anticipated difficulty in interviewing students about a programme that was not clearly identifiable to them as such. For example, a student could attend an SCP-funded homework club without being aware of its funding source. The implications of this lacuna for the inferences drawn in this article are discussed in the concluding section.

The Youthreach study involved a postal survey of all Youthreach coordinators, with a high response rate of 86 percent 9 for further details, see [17]). These data were used to identify ten case-study sites where interviews were carried out with coordinators/managers, staff and young people themselves. The study placed a strong emphasis on capturing the voice of these marginalised young people, involving interviews with 94 current participants and 13 past participants.

This article draws mainly on the qualitative interviews conducted in the case-study sites, though reference is made to the survey data to give insights into the nature of each programme. Interviews with staff and students in Youthreach settings and staff in schools with the SCP were transcribed and coded using NVivo software. A grounded-theory approach [39] was used to create a series of themes or ‘nodes’ based on the observations of participants. In the interviews, Youthreach learners were asked broad questions about what they felt about the Youthreach setting compared to their experiences in mainstream education. Staff from both programmes were asked more specific questions about student experiences in the programme, the key challenges in their work and their relationships with learners. Analyses identified the main themes emerging from the interviews around the topics of ‘student circumstances’, ‘relationships’ and ‘ways of connecting’. The quotes presented in the following section are intended to illustrate the main issues raised by participants.

The two studies from which this article draws were designed to provide an overall evaluation of the two programmes, rather than to test a specific conceptual framework. While the emerging themes fit well within the productive pedagogies framework, the interview material provides a good deal of information on two aspects of the framework—relevance and supportive classroom environment—but data on teaching and learning were not sufficiently detailed to allow an assessment of the ‘intellectual quality’ of the provision. Recognition of difference was apparent within the case-study settings, in particular, in relation to Travellers. However, space does not permit an exploration of this theme here.

## 4. Findings

### *4.1. The School Completion Programme*

#### 4.1.1. The ‘Target’ Group

In interviews with SCP coordinators, they described how student engagement and attendance in school were often impacted by difficult family circumstances, marginalisation, poverty and socio-economic disadvantage in the homes of their ‘target’ students. Some felt that intergenerational poverty and negative experiences with education resulted in school not being valued in the home, making engagement more difficult for the children concerned.

> *There’s definitely a generation of disadvantage built in, you know and they’re coming from a background where education is not valued. And we’re definitely trying to break a cycle that is there.* (SCP Coordinator)

In some cases, the schools were the same schools that young people's siblings and parents had attended and often dropped out from. One SCP coordinator described how this often framed the child's view of school from the start:

> *There is a pattern, their siblings have dropped out or their parents have dropped out. And parents in particular having I suppose that negative vibe about school. And I find it difficult to get them to move on, you know they've had a really tough time themselves in school . . . that's very much there, you have students coming into our secondary schools, if their parents had been here, and they're coming in with that negative attitude straight away*. (SCP Coordinator)

One coordinator described the different emphases being placed on these students as they moved from school to home.

> *Nobody is asking how your day was, how did you get on in school, what did you do today in science or what, did you cook anything in home etc.? They're not going home to these kinds of conversations*. (SCP Coordinator)

In addition to cultural factors, students in the SCP programme would often be targeted for not having the bare essentials for school such as stationery, food or clothing.

> *Day-to-day things like if a child has no uniform or no books or down to no shoes, one child here had no glasses, the Mum couldn't afford to buy him glasses. Kind of school requisitions like swimming, like school tours, exam papers, little things, you know, that really hinder the child kind of participating day to day. But they're massive really, you know*. (SCP Coordinator)

Staff described a range of social issues including marriage breakups which would impact on how students engaged with school.

> *And you know different problems arise from that then with social issues and with the families themselves kind of you know one thing leads to another causing unhappiness in families and family break downs and break ups and the kids are badly affected from that*. (SCP Coordinator)

Students from families where illegal drugs, alcohol or crime were an issue would often be in the 'target' population of the SCP programme.

> *You know around here there'd be a huge problem with drugs you know so we would have a lot of, we would have a lot of children who their father could be in jail or the mothers in jail*. (SCP Chairperson)

#### 4.1.2. The Importance of Trusted Relationships

Interviews with SCP coordinators consistently highlighted the role of trusting, non-judgemental relationships in establishing and maintaining connections with students at risk of disengagement from school. Despite the resources and activities available to students in the programme, one SCP coordinator described the 'personal aspect' of the programme as its 'strongest' asset (SCP Coordinator). For many, their role was about creating a safe, welcome and caring environment for students where they could be a source of support if needed.

> *The staff are lovely and very welcoming, very homely. So that's nice for them too. You know they build relations with them and get to know them*. (SCP Coordinator)

Others described how students benefitted from having a constant, caring source of support in what was often a challenging school setting.

> *Well we're in the school nearly all the time. And we are a friendly face for them in the school. And we're always watching their back, that is our job and we let them know that, we're watching your back*. (SCP Coordinator)

Ensuring that these students felt valued by someone at school was achieved through, often quite subtle, daily contact and connection.

> *Where they feel, where they feel welcomed, and, and important and where they, where they achieve their best and where, and where they're valued you know. Like, like I think it's important for me to, to say hello to everybody every day you know*. (SCP Coordinator)

Trust appears to be an important aspect of this relationship, where information about students' home lives is known but not shared with the broader school community.

> *To be able to look at a student and just say hello to them and they know that there's somebody in the school who knows who they are, who knows where they come from, who knows about their problems you know. Doesn't necessarily have to be a whole class sharing of information. I think that is key you know. It's key to getting these kids through in my opinion*. (SCP Coordinator)

By not being in a teaching role, some SCP coordinators felt that they could work with the student in a difficult situation where they have broken school rules or not attended rather than adopt punitive approaches.

> *They might have had a bad morning at home or you know they were out the night before and they're just not able and they can't tell the teacher that they've got a hangover . . . But I mean I can take note of it and say listen if you come in tomorrow me and you will have a wee chat about, get them back on track like that*. (SCP Coordinator)

For some students, the SCP staff were viewed as a 'friend' compared to the 'enemy' that was school more generally.

> *I've met kids who have come up to me and said if you hadn't been there I wouldn't have stayed in school . . . think they see us, school sometimes for these kids is the enemy and they see us as the friend do you know*? (SCP Coordinator)

At the same time, however, the programme also appeared to break down some of the pre-existing barriers between teachers and their students outside the classroom context. In schools where the SCP programme was well integrated into the school, coordinators noted greater teacher involvement in SCP activities, which appeared to have a positive knock-on effect on teacher–student relations. Where teachers worked on the programme in, for example, breakfast clubs, homework clubs or other after-school activities, relationships between teachers and students seemed to become more 'friendly', which could have the effect of reducing 'tension' in class and increasing student engagement.

> *I like teachers running our programmes because once they're running the programmes they're not teaching anymore and it shows a more friendly side to them. And the kids see a different side and if there is tension it just reduces the tension . . . So it's a win, win*. (SCP Coordinator)

Homework clubs appear to have a positive practical impact on school for both students and their teachers as the task of homework could be completed and therefore issues around homework non-completion are avoided the following day.

> *Even the help with homework in the evening times, it ends that whole cycle of maybe going home. Not having an opportunity to get homework done. Coming into school the next morning, facing the teacher*. (SCP Coordinator)

More specific one-to-one 'diary time' or small group activities were made available to some students which sought to address any psychological or behavioural issues they had.

> *Something happens at home, there could be a suicide, and there could a bereavement of some sort, separation. Or bullying issues, or just low self-esteem could've come in and that they would need something like diary time to boost their confidence. Or deal with their anger management*. (SCP Coordinator)

#### 4.1.3. Using Food as a Way to Connect

Within the four pillars of the SCP, a broad range of supports is offered in schools as a way to overcome barriers to school engagement for children and young people. Despite cutbacks to the types of SCP supports on offer over the recession, many coordinators described the importance of maintaining the provision of food and in particular breakfast and lunch clubs. These clubs were viewed as essential in providing food to children and young people in the programme who may not have any breakfast before school or lunch while in school.

> *You'd have kids coming, they won't come to school because they don't have a lunch or you know so at least we feed them, we give them, you know we give them a good breakfast in the morning and a chat*. (SCP Coordinator)

In some cases, breakfast was seen as an incentive to come to school.

> *Well I suppose it's a mainstay in terms of ensuring that (A) the kids are coming in (B) that they are properly fed when they go into class do you know, and it's very much structured in now*. (SCP Coordinator)

However, the interviews also describe how food was used by SCP coordinators as a way in which to 'check-in' and connect with students on a daily basis. In some cases, the physical space of the canteen offered students somewhere different that they could be safe, get a hot drink and link in with someone.

> *They like going to a different place and you know then they can get a cup of tea or a hot chocolate or something like that and then you might do you know, try to talk to them about goal setting and about choices and you know, stuff like that*. (SCP Coordinator)

### *4.2. The Youthreach Programme*

As rates of school retention had declined significantly in Ireland, the profile of early school leavers was seen as an increasingly negatively selected one. In particular, Youthreach staff highlighted the increasing incidence of mental health difficulties among participants.

> *In the last number of years now, I think we're dealing a lot with mental health issues . . . Ten years ago it would be all kids that are being kicked out of school or about to be kicked out of school, but it is kids that are not going to school and the reasons that they are not going to school is because of bullying, you know, their own mental health issues that are happening in the home*. (Youthreach Coordinator)

> *A lot of the kids have issues around their . . . own selves. They have anxiety, they have panic attacks, they have depression . . . they have ADHD, we have, okay, dyslexia and things like that we have always had but it's people that don't seem to have coping skills*. (Youthreach Staff)

However, survey data from coordinators indicated the persistence of socio-economic disadvantage among the target group, with a high proportion from jobless households and a significant overrepresentation of young people from the Traveller ethnic minority group. While Youthreach staff did mention the family context of participants, they were less likely than SCP staff to frame educational disadvantage in terms of family issues alone and more likely to emphasise the complex interplay of socio-emotional difficulties, family and school in leading to educational disengagement and early school leaving.

Participants in the Youthreach programme were asked about their pathways into Youthreach, starting with their reasons for leaving school before the end of upper secondary education. Alongside difficulties with schoolwork and poor relations with classmates, poor relationships with teachers emerged as a central theme in the accounts of early school leavers, with many of the young people reporting a cycle of getting into trouble for misbehaviour and increasingly negative interactions with teachers leading to withdrawal from school.

> *I kept getting into trouble in school and stuff like and they [staff] basically just said like leave, like I was going to get expelled like, so I left . . . They just didn't like me that much*. (Youthreach learner)

> *I just didn't like the teachers; I couldn't get along with them*. (Youthreach learner)

Several of the participants felt that teachers labelled some students because of their background and consequently treated them unfairly or without respect.

> *I hated it, never got on with anyone in school: the students, the teachers. I always felt like they were looking down on me and I never got any respect so I was just sick of it*. (Youthreach learner)

> *Some of them just, they basically pick on you because of where you're from . . . the teachers didn't like me*. (Youthreach learner)

A number of the young people had experienced expulsion (permanent exclusion) from school rather than leaving voluntarily.

> *I didn't leave . . . I got kicked out like . . . in second year, just start of the second year*. (Youthreach learner)

In Ireland, expulsion can be appealed by the young person's parent(s) or on their own behalf (if they are aged 18 years or over) under Section 29 of the 1998 Education Act. Rather than being formally expelled, a number of young people reported a pattern of being 'managed out', whereby they were encouraged to leave school rather than being expelled.

> *Well, one of my teachers told me, like, my attendance was too bad, that I was gonna be expelled but I obviously didn't want to so I just left. "Go to a different school", they told me*. (Youthreach learner)

> *[They] just called me into the office and said, "We can either help you to get into Youthreach here, or you can leave on bad terms and have your name put in under Social Help" or whatever that is*. (Youthreach learner)

This approach meant that the young person had no formal rights to challenge the school's suggestion that they leave and that their leaving school did not have to be reported to educational welfare services for follow-up intervention (as would be the case with a formal expulsion).

Young people's pathway to reengage with learning was generally influenced by informal contacts—parents, family and friends—though referrals through school staff accounted for approximately one in six entrants [17]. The quality of relationships with Youthreach staff was highlighted as a central foundation for young people's successful reengagement with learning. Interviews with staff and learners indicated three factors that shaped the nature of these relationships: formal supports for learners, informal support from staff ('keeping an eye') and establishing mutually respectful and equitable interaction.

In the centres, each young person was assigned a mentor or key worker who maintained ongoing contact with them around learning and personal issues. *'where you link in with the students every week or every second week depending on what's gone on for them'* (Youthreach staff)

> *Mentoring covers such a wide range of things. So, it goes from like . . . maybe organising them to have dental checks and to get registered for their public service card. Really what maybe the parents aren't able to do or organise for them. Doctor's appointments. To them, it may be dealing with a particular issue that might be happening for them outside of the centre. To inside the centre, maybe they're struggling with some of their work and they need extra help there . . . So . . . there's quite a lot of stuff.* (Youthreach staff)

The learners interviewed spoke about the importance of their mentors as someone with whom they could discuss any issues or problems they might have.

> *We have mentoring programmes where, you know, a teacher would take you out of class and ask how like your home life is doing and how you feel about it, and then you know any problems you have in the centre or at the centre you can tell her and she like records it, and then you know that would also help with you know reasons why you wouldn't be in or you might be feeling too like shitty to come in*. (Youthreach learner)

Perhaps even more effective was the use of seemingly banal day-to-day interaction to identify potential difficulties experienced by the learners and help foster their motivation and self-confidence. Many of the staff interviewed described the importance of the first greeting with the learner in the morning which often flagged difficulties to them.

> *They come in. . . . Then you might have a little chat. You'll notice things about people. Some of them are coming in, great, all make up. Another person looks like they've slept in their clothes. These are little things that we would log, maybe check in with someone if, you know, if they're in good, bad form, whatever*. (Youthreach staff)

These informal supports were seen as very important in dealing with anxiety and other mental health difficulties and in de-escalating potential conflict between the young person and other learners or staff.

> *If someone comes in under high anxiety, rather than waiting for the panic attack and the big shouting in the hallway, we might pull them aside and just check in with them. Go down, play pool, give them a glass of water. I think that's where we've improved over the years too in terms of de-escalating*. (Youthreach coordinator/manager)

The fact that staff were 'keeping an eye out' for them was valued by the learners who felt that staff cared for them and were always willing to help.

> *I feel like they genuinely care and like they'll genuinely take the time out of the day to explain something to you*. (Youthreach learner)

Both staff and students emphasised the family-like atmosphere at the centres, an atmosphere fostered by the fact that both groups usually ate together.

> *Their lunch is provided downstairs. They can chat to staff all the time and young people do use that one-to-two times, sit beside you, have a cup of tea, chat about their issues, and chat about their problems*. (Youthreach staff)

> *I love the fact that we sit in there and eat with them in there and that kind of stuff. . . . It's much more respectful than any school situation they've experienced*. (Youthreach staff)

The term 'family' came up over and over again when interviewing staff and students.

> *In any home the kitchen's kind of the centre of the family and in here the kitchen's kind of the centre of the family in here as well, and they get, they get a good hot meal. But they learn how to prepare it, so they're getting life skills and that, and they're working as a little team*. (Youthreach coordinator/manager)

Mainstream secondary education in Ireland has been characterised as hierarchical in nature [40], with many students reporting little say in the day-to-day issues that affect their school lives [17]. In contrast, for many learners, entering the Youthreach programme offered them an opportunity, sometimes for the first time, to be treated as an equal by respected and trusted adults.

> *I care about them all. They're brilliant kids. And I think even that, positive adult responses, that they may not experience or may not have experienced, this may be the only place that that happens to them where they're spoken to respectfully and they're encouraged and liked*. (Youthreach instructor)

Even the fact that staff and students were on a first-name basis was seen as establishing a different dynamic to that experienced in mainstream education.

> *I can trust them more . . . I get to know them a bit more . . . we kind of, like you know, create relationships with them [staff], so that we respect them and they respect us. They treat us like adults*. (Youthreach learner)

Staff emphasised the importance of establishing trustful, mutually respectful relationships with learners, while at the same time, maintaining boundaries around behaviour.

> *I suppose the relationship is key because it's all based in trust . . . It's not about saying and telling them what you want it's about you hopefully rising to that and them following, you know, it's a two-way partnership*. (Youthreach staff)

The learners frequently emphasised the contrast between their experience of mainstream education and their relationships with staff in the centre. They saw their interactions with staff as characterised by care, unlike in their secondary school where relationships with teachers were viewed as, at best, impersonal and, at worst, conflictual.

> *I feel like in school the teachers are against you, where here they're kind with you like. They work with you like, rather than against you and stuff like. But they're very open-minded. They understand like. If you have a problem and you come to them like they like—they understand you like. They want to help you like and stuff*. (Youthreach learner)

The relationship with staff was seen as one of mutual respect and several learners reported feeling they were allowed an agency which reflected their maturational stage.

> *The difference between here and school is, as I was saying, you get much more freedom, you're not looked down on, you actually get the respect you deserve*. (Youthreach learner)

In sum, the quality of relationships emerged as a key factor in both the young person's departure from school and in their re-engagement in learning. Participants experienced a shift from learning in a more hierarchical and often conflictual setting towards one characterised by mutual respect and care.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

This article examines two approaches to promoting learner engagement in Ireland, one intended to prevent school drop-out (the School Completion Programme) and one designed to reengage early school leavers in second-chance education (the Youthreach programme). In doing so, it draws on two mixed-method studies, which combine survey information with in-depth interviews with staff and, in the case of Youthreach, learners. Previous research on such initiatives has tended to focus on either preventative or compensatory measures [13,32]. This article contributes to existing knowledge by highlighting commonalities in, and differences between, the two approaches, focusing in particular on the importance of staff–learner relationships in the success of such initiatives. The findings indicate that the two initiatives embody (at least) two of the dimensions of the productive pedagogies framework—relevance and supportive classroom environments. They differ somewhat in relation to 'intellectual challenge'. SCP provision largely focuses on non-pedagogical activities (although can be used to provide additional support for learning), leaving day-to-day teaching and learning in the mainstream classroom largely unaffected. Youthreach, on the other hand, provides relevant, engaging learning experiences and the evidence is suggestive of, though not definitive on, classes being intellectually challenging.

The early school leavers interviewed discussed the negative interaction they had experienced with their mainstream teachers and attributed their decision to leave school, at least in part, to this dynamic. In contrast, they reported very positive relationships with Youthreach staff, emphasising the respect and care with which they were treated and the mutual trust that had been established. The staff themselves placed a strong emphasis on 'checking in' with young people, using day-to-day activities, such as eating together, to build trusting relationships and reinforce the provision of support. SCP staff also discussed how breakfast and lunch clubs in schools could provide an opportunity for connection and positive reinforcement of children and young people experiencing difficulties or alienation at school. In both settings, support was on a continuum ranging from 'checking in' to providing access to specialist counselling or therapeutic supports, reflecting the complex needs of the learner groups. Such provision reflected the way in which both programmes regarded learning and wellbeing as fundamentally intertwined, with many learners needing socio-emotional support before they were in a position to engage in formal learning.

Despite some commonalities, the two case studies highlight important issues regarding the appropriate emphasis on prevention or amelioration in provision for at-risk children and young people. Preventative approaches facilitate intervention, at least potentially, with a wider group of learners, though in the case of SCP, staff in many schools operated largely independently of mainstream teachers, making it challenging to provide truly wrap-around supports for students. Waiting until young people have already left mainstream education to provide supports has its own challenges, with many reporting deteriorating mental health and wellbeing between the time they left school and when they reengaged with educational supports. Reaching these early leavers is also largely dependent on informal networks, creating difficulties in involving those in the most marginalised groups. Youthreach tended to provide a holistic, wrap-around set of learning and socio-emotional supports but, at the same time, could be regarded as siloed from mainstream education. There was clear evidence of innovative practice at centre level but no mechanism for the translation of such practice to other parts of the education system.

In the Youthreach programme, learners have flexible, individualised curricula in a socially supportive environment. Through this tailored approach, learners were encouraged to relate their work to their lives outside Youthreach and course work appeared to have sufficient levels of challenge. While social and emotional supports features strongly in the SCP programme, there is little scope for more supportive pedagogical approaches to be used as student learning remains the responsibility of the mainstream teacher.

While there was some evidence of a deficit view being held by some Youthreach staff about the learners and their home lives, this was in stark contrast to positive student perspectives about their 'new' educational experiences and post-school outcomes. This deficit view was, however, far more evident among SCP staff who often viewed the families as primarily responsible for student disengagement. Given the lack of educational focus within the SCP programme, the application of the productive pedagogies framework is, perhaps, more problematic. The findings do show, however, that staff sometimes overemphasised the socio-emotional needs of children and young people, focusing on making schools a 'safe space' compared to their academic requirements. The authors acknowledge, however, that this comparison is limited by not having the student perspective captured as part of the SCP study.

In sum, both programmes show the importance of caring and respectful staff–learner relationships in engaging and reengaging disaffected young people in learning. However, they appear to operate outside 'mainstream' education, with little evidence of good practice leading to change at a broader school or system level. This reflects, for Youthreach, provision taking place in separate centres to local schools or colleges, and, for SCP, variation in the integration between programme activities and day-to-day teaching and learning in the school. The findings echo previous research [17,40] which highlights the often hierarchical nature of teacher–student relations in Irish secondary schools and the significant consequences of negative teacher–student interaction for educational retention and academic performance among socio-economically disadvantaged young people. Both programmes offer lessons for mainstream educational provision around the importance of placing care and wellbeing at the heart of formal learning, though previous research cautions against an overemphasis on care as opposed to challenge [31]. In Ireland, wellbeing is being given renewed attention with a new wellbeing curriculum at lower secondary education but the strong orientation of the system towards preparation for high-stakes exams poses significant challenges to progressing a wellbeing agenda across the whole system. In the absence of broader reform, the embedding of a climate of care into formal learning may remain confined to separate activities within schools or separate learning settings altogether, thus restricting the potential to (re)engage young people.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, J.B. and E.S.; methodology, J.B. and E.S.; formal analysis, J.B. and E.S.; investigation, J.B. and E.S.; writing—original draft preparation, J.B. and E.S.; writing—

review and editing, J.B. and E.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research stems from two research projects funded by TUSLA (Review of the School Completion Programme and SOLAS (Evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The research reports of the School Completion Programme and the National Youth reach Programme can be found at https://www.esri.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2015-10/RS44.pdf and https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS82_1.pdf.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

1. EUROSTAT. *Early Leavers from Education and Training*; EUROSTAT Statistics Explained: Luxembourg, 2019.
2. Lőrinc, M.; Ryan, L.; D'Angelo, A.; Kaye, N. De-individualising the "NEET problem": An ecological systems analysis. *Eur. Educ. Res. J.* **2020**, *19*, 412–427. [CrossRef]
3. Coles, B.; Godfrey, C.; Keung, A.; Parrott, S.; Bradshaw, J. *Estimating the Life-Time Cost of NEET: 16–18 Year Olds Not in Education, Employment or Training*; University of York: York, UK, 2010.
4. Rumberger, R.W.; Sun, A.H. *Why Students Drop Out of School: A Review of 25 Years of Research*; University of California Press: Santa Barbara, CA, USA, 2008.
5. Rumberger, R.W. *Dropping Out: Why Students Drop Out of High School and What Can Be Done about It*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2011.
6. Traag, T.; van der Velden, R. Early school-leaving in the Netherlands: The role of family resources, school composition and background characteristics in early school-leaving in lower secondary education. *Ir. Educ. Stud.* **2011**, *30*, 45–62. [CrossRef]
7. Belfield, C.R.; Levin, H.M. *The Price We Pay: The Costs to the Nation of Inadequate Education*; Brookings Institution Press: Washington, DC, USA, 2007.
8. Smyth, E.; McCoy, S. *Investing in Education: Combating Educational Disadvantage*; ESRI: Dublin, Ireland, 2009.
9. NESSE. *Early School Leaving: Lessons from Research for Policy Makers*; European Commission Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and Training: Brussels, Belgium, 2010.
10. Tarabini, A.; Curran, M.; Montes, A.; Parcerisa, L. Can educational engagement prevent Early School Leaving? Unpacking the school's effect on educational success. *Educ. Stud.* **2019**, *45*, 226–241. [CrossRef]
11. Goss, P.; Sonnemann, J.; Griffiths, K. *Engaging Students: Creating Classrooms That Improve Learning*; Grattan Institute: Carlton, Australia, 2017.
12. Lingard, B. Socially just pedagogies in changing times. *Int. Stud. Sociol. Educ.* **2005**, *15*, 165–186. [CrossRef]
13. Crosnoe, R.; Kilpatrick Johnson, M.; Elder, G.L. Intergenerational Bonding in School: The behavioural and contextual correlates of student-teacher relationships. *Sociol. Educ.* **2004**, *77*, 60–81. [CrossRef]
14. Fredriksen, K.; Rhodes, J. The role of teacher relationships in the lives of students. *New Dir. Youth Dev.* **2004**, *103*, 45–54. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
15. Van Uden, J.; Ritzen, H.; Pieters, J. Engaging students: The role of teacher beliefs and interpersonal teacher behavior in fostering student engagement in vocational education. *Teach. Teach. Educ.* **2014**, *37*, 21–32. [CrossRef]
16. Downes, P.; Nairz-Wirth, E.; Rusinaite, V. *Structural Indicators for Inclusive Systems in and around Schools Analytical Report*; European Commission: Luxembourg, 2017.
17. Smyth, E.; Banks, J.; O'Sullivan, J.; McCoy, S.; Redmond, P.; McGuinness, S. *Evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme*; ESRI: Dublin, Ireland, 2019.
18. Byrne, D.; Smyth, E. *No Way Back? The Dynamics of Early School Leaving*; Liffey Press: Dublin, Ireland, 2010.
19. Hayes, D.; Mills, M.; Christie, P.; Lingard, B. Productive Pedagogies. In *Teachers and Schooling Making a Difference Productive Pedagogies, Assessment and Performance*; Allen and Unwin: Crows Nest, Australia, 2005; pp. 32–81.
20. Morgan, H.; Parker, A.; Marturano, N. Community-based intervention and marginalised youth: Inclusion, social mobility and life-course transition. *J. Educ. Work* **2020**, *33*, 327–342. [CrossRef]
21. Rose, H.; Daiches, A.; Potier, J. Meaning of Social Inclusion to Young People Not in Employment, Education or Training. *J. Community Appl. Soc. Psychol.* **2012**, *22*, 256–268. [CrossRef]
22. Pendergast, D.; Allen, J.; McGregor, G.; Ronksley-Pavia, M. Engaging Marginalized, "At-Risk" Middle-Level Students: A Focus on the Importance of a Sense of Belonging at School. *Educ. Sci.* **2018**, *8*, 138. [CrossRef]
23. Smyth, J. An Argument for New Understandings and Explanations of Early School Leaving that Go beyond the Conventional. *Lond. Rev. Educ.* **2005**, *3*, 117–130. [CrossRef]
24. Turcatti, D.; Montero-Sieburth, M. *An In-Depth Review of the Literature on "Best Practices" for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Schools with Intercultural Contexts*; International Association of Intercultural Education (IAIE): London, UK, 2020.

25. Hanesworth, P.; Bracken, S.; Elkington, S. A typology for a social justice approach to assessment: Learning from universal design and culturally sustaining pedagogy. *Teach. High. Educ.* **2019**, *24*, 98–114. [CrossRef]
26. Bourdieu, P.; Passeron, J.D. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*; Sage: London, UK, 1990.
27. Lingard, B.; Hayes, D.; Mills, M. Teachers and productive pedagogies: Contextualising, conceptualising, utilising. *Pedagog. Cult. Soc.* **2003**, *11*, 399–424. [CrossRef]
28. Mills, M.; Goos, M.; Keddie, A.; Honan, E.; Pendergast, D.; Gilbert, R.; Nichols, K.; Renshaw, P.; Wright, T. Productive Pedagogies: A Redefined Methodology for Analysing Quality Teacher Practice. *Aust. Educ. Res.* **2009**, *36*, 67–87. [CrossRef]
29. Gore, J.M.; Griffiths, T.; Ladwig, J.G. Towards better teaching: Productive pedagogy as a framework for teacher education. *Teach. Teach. Educ.* **2004**, *20*, 375–387. [CrossRef]
30. Darmanin, M. When students are failed: "love" as an alternative discourse? *Int. Stud. Sociol. Educ.* **2003**, *13*, 141–170. [CrossRef]
31. McCoy, S.; Quail, A.; Smyth, E. The effects of school social mix: Unpacking the differences. *Ir. Educ. Stud.* **2014**, *33*, 307–330. [CrossRef]
32. Lingard, B.; Keddie, A. Redistribution, recognition and representation: Working against pedagogies of indifference. *Pedagog. Cult. Soc.* **2013**, *31*, 427–447. [CrossRef]
33. Hickey, G.; Smith, S.; O'Sullivan, L.; McGill, L.; Kenny, M.; MacIntyre, D.; Gordon, M. Adverse childhood experiences and trauma informed practices in second chance education settings in the Republic of Ireland: An inquiry-based study. *Child. Youth Serv. Rev.* **2020**, *118*, 105338. [CrossRef]
34. Nouwen, W.; Van Praag, L.; Van Caudenberg, R.; Timmerman, C. *School-Based Prevention and Intervention Measures and Alternative Learning Approaches to Reduce Early School Leaving*; Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies, University of Antwerp: Antwerpen, Belgium, 2016.
35. Growing Up in Ireland Study Team. *Key Findings Cohort '98 at 20 Years Old in 2018/19: Education, Training and Employment*; ESRI/TCD/DCEDIY; Growing Up in Ireland Study Team: Dublin, Ireland, 2019.
36. Demeuse, M. *Education Policies and Inequalities in Europe*; Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, UK, 2012.
37. Smyth, E.; McCoy, S.; Kingston, G. *Learning from the Evaluation of DEIS*; ESRI: Dublin, Ireland, 2015.
38. Smyth, E.; Banks, J.; Whelan, A.; Darmody, M.; McCoy, S. *Review of the School Completion Programme*; ESRI: Dublin, Ireland, 2015.
39. Coffey, A.; Atkinson, P. *Making Sense of Qualitative Data, Complementary Research Strategies*; Sage Publications: London, UK; Thousand Oaks, CA, USA; New Delhi, India, 1996.
40. Lynch, K.; Lodge, A. *Equality and Power in Schools: Redistribution, Recognition, and Representation*; Psychology Press: Hove, UK, 2002.

education sciences

MDPI

Article

# Learners' Voices in Inclusive Education Policy Debates

**Antonella Mangiaracina, Anthoula Kefallinou, Mary Kyriazopoulou and Amanda Watkins** *

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, Østre Stationsvej 33, 5000 Odense C, Denmark; antonella@european-agency.org (A.M.); anthoula@european-agency.org (A.K.); mary@european-agency.org (M.K.)
* Correspondence: amanda@european-agency.org

**Abstract:** Although the idea of including learners in policy-making is gaining ground, their voices still seem to be marginalised. This article focuses on the issue of learners' voices in inclusive education policy debates. It begins by discussing main policy developments, arguments and key issues around learner voice and participation. It then draws on different aspects of work by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) that has directly involved young people in exchanges with policy-makers and decision-makers responsible for developing and implementing policy for inclusive education. This includes four European "Hearings" (in 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015), involving over 300 young people. It also includes workshops with learners in Cyprus and Poland as part of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support Programme activities. In the Agency's work, learners with a range of learning needs from across Europe shared their views on their right to education (access), their rights in education (learning and participation) and their rights in wider society (achievement). Key messages from learners included the importance of barrier-free schools, raising awareness, changing attitudes and combating stereotypes to support their longer-term social inclusion and ensure they are able to become full citizens in their local communities. Building on these messages, the article concludes with some important considerations for future work and recommends positioning learners as key agents in policy debates for inclusive education.

**Keywords:** learners' voices; inclusive education; policy debates

**Citation:** Mangiaracina, A.; Kefallinou, A.; Kyriazopoulou, M.; Watkins, A. Learners' Voices in Inclusive Education Policy Debates. *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 599. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11100599

Academic Editors: Michael Shevlin and Richard Rose

Received: 16 July 2021
Accepted: 24 September 2021
Published: 30 September 2021

## 1. Introduction

There is an increasing focus and body of evidence on the importance and effect of young learners' voices in shaping school practice [1–3]. Listening to learners is recognised as a main factor that promotes the change process in schools [4,5]. The Global Education Monitoring Report 2020 [6] affirms that learners must be at the centre of everything schools and the entire education system do. This means learners' voices must be heard in policy-making debates and must shape practice that directly affects them. Therefore, practitioners', researchers' and policy-makers' work must fully respect and take account of learners' views, experiences and opinions [7].

This article focuses on the issue of learners' voices in inclusive education policy debates. It adopts the position of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency), viewing inclusive education as a human rights issue and an approach towards a more inclusive and equitable society. The Agency's vision for inclusive education systems is to ensure that "all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers" [8] (p. 1).

Guided by this vision, the article addresses two main questions:

1. How has the idea of listening to learners' voices evolved within European and international guiding principles documents?
2. How can learners' voices be included in inclusive education policy debates and other decision-making processes?

Section 2 of this article provides an overview of the evolution of the concept of learner voice in the policy context. It discusses key policy developments at European Union (EU) and international levels that protect and promote children's and young peoples' voices and illuminates several issues and complexities. This brief overview covers policy documents that reflect EU and international policy debates over the last 30 years. Section 3 of the article outlines how the Agency has sought to involve learners in policy discussions. Section 4 presents findings and key messages from learners who have shared their views in policy fora.

The Agency is an independent organisation that acts as a platform for collaboration for the ministries of education in its 31 member countries. It focuses on supporting the development of inclusive education systems to ensure every learner's right to inclusive and equitable educational opportunities. It does this by combining the perspectives of policy, practice and research to provide member countries and stakeholders at the European level with evidence-based information and guidance and support on implementing inclusive education. The Agency's organisational set-up (member countries and their networks) and work focus place it in a unique position to directly involve learners in policy debates.

In discussing the issue of young voices in inclusive education debates, this article draws on two aspects of Agency work that directly involved young people with and without special educational needs and/or disabilities in exchanges with policy-makers and decision-makers responsible for developing and implementing policy for inclusive education:

- Four European "Hearings" involving over 300 young people, held in 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015;
- Consultation workshops with learners in Cyprus and Poland as part of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM) Structural Reform Support Programme (SRSP) activities.

## 2. The Evolution of Learners' Voices in European and International Policy Documents

Learners' voices is a cross-cutting topic intertwined with the general evolution of children's rights. This article uses the expressions "learners' voices" and "children's voices" interchangeably. Some official documents consulted for this article focus on a broad spectrum of topics, not only education. Therefore, in some cases, they use "children" to indicate young people enrolled in formal education, whereas "learners" refers to children who are not only agents in formal education, but also future citizens who need to be prepared for participation in democratic life and able to interact with other environments where they may participate and express their views. Participation in community life is a fundamental human right to which children are entitled.

The children's rights approach, which includes children's participation through policy- and decision-making, has been advocated for decades. However, it proved challenging to put into practice due to the marginal and passive role of children and childhood in most 20th-century societies and debates. In 1959, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child [9], which defines children's rights. However, in the international policy framework regarding children's voices, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the first forward-looking policy document advocating for children's rights. It states:

> States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
>
> For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law. [10] (Article 12).

The adoption of the UNCRC in 1989 and its entry into force in 1990 represent a milestone for children's rights. It acknowledged children's civil and political rights and was the very first legally binding international instrument for protecting children's rights. Before this—and even a decade later—policy documents considered children not as agents, but as "passive subjects" needing protection and care. The shift from "legal object" to "legal person" is therefore the turning point in advocating for children's human rights.

After the UNCRC, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union [11]—ratified in 2000, with entry into force in 2009—is the next major policy document that states children's right of expression on "matters which concern them in accordance with their age and maturity" (ibid., Article 24). In the period between the UNCRC and the Charter, other European and international policy documents [12–14] refer to promoting and protecting children's rights but only in a general way. They do not explicitly mention listening to children's voices. The child is a juridical subject with some sort of "passive" rights. The exercise of those rights is mentioned in administrative and judicial proceedings affecting them.

General comment No. 12 (2009) on the right of the child to be heard [15] is a further development in the framework of children's human rights. In it, the Committee on the Rights of the Child elaborates on the scope of Article 12 of the UNCRC and sets out how governments are expected to implement it. Specifically, in countries that adopted and ratified the UNCRC, government measures, such as legislation and policies, must ensure the complete implementation of Article 12 in recognising children as both individual and group entities.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child highlights the distinction between individual and group rights to be heard. It calls for additional measures regarding the right to be heard in educational matters for specific groups of children who are likely to experience social exclusion, such as children with disabilities or from minority groups [16]. Moreover, it sets out the steps, settings and situations for implementing the child's right to be heard. In particular, within educational settings, "Respect for right of the child to be heard . . . is fundamental to the realization of the right to education" [15] (p. 24). In the case of education, children must be consulted when governments plan to introduce new policy or legislation affecting them.

The end of the 2000s ushered in a new era for learners' rights, focusing on participation and the right to be heard in all settings. In 2011, the European Commission (EC) launched An EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child [17]. This illustrates the next steps for implementing children's rights. It emphasises the need to listen to children and enable their participation in decisions that affect them.

In subsequent years, an understanding emerged that merely stating the importance of children participating in educational life is insufficient and is quite different from putting it into practice. Therefore, EU and international organisations started promoting the application of those rights, seeking countries' partnership and commitment and encouraging national governments to take action. In line with this, in 2013, the EC launched guidance for EU Member States [18] intended to ensure children's rights to participate in decision-making that affects their lives.

Around the same time, a Council of Europe Recommendation [19] advocated that children and young people participate in decisions affecting their lives, including education. The application of human rights in national policies is central in the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development [20] from 2015. The 2016 Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child underlines the importance of strengthening "opportunities for children's participation in the school setting and the democratic governance of schools by supporting the development of citizenship and human rights education in its member States" [21] (p. 13).

In line with this trend, in 2017 the Council of the EU stressed the importance of the EU co-operating with partner countries "to enhance children's ability to participate in decision-making and processes which concern them, at local, national, regional and international level, in line with article 12 of the UNCRC and General Comment 12" [22] (p. 12). Arguably, child consultation in all settings is a crucial topic for the EU and international institutions.

In keeping with previous EU policies, in spring 2021, the EC adopted a Strategy on the Rights of the Child [23] and a Proposal for a Council Recommendation Establishing a European Child Guarantee [24]. Both aim to promote and protect children's rights, tackle children's social exclusion, and provide equal opportunities, with a clear focus on access to early childhood education and care and school-based activities for at-risk children. In line with the principle of children's participation and consideration in matters directly affecting them, the EC actively involved and consulted children in developing the Strategy. It will also involve children in the Strategy evaluation in 2024.

Additionally, in 2021, the European Parliament approved a resolution on the European Child Guarantee. This was the result of a plenary debate on how the EC and the Council of the EU intend to meet the new EU target of lifting at least five million children out of poverty by 2030. The resolution specifically:

> Welcomes ... that the views and suggestions of over 10,000 children have been taken on board in preparing the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child; calls on the Commission to ensure that children's voices, as well as those of their representative organisations, are heard in the implementation and monitoring of the Child Guarantee at national, regional and local level, by enabling them to be full participants in meaningful and inclusive public dialogue and consultation and have their say on matters that concern them at EU level. [25] (p. 10).

The latest key policy development is the Conclusions on strengthening multi-level governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes. These aim to ensure that all young people have equal opportunities for participation, involvement and empowerment in relevant decision-making processes at all levels [26].

The educational environment is one setting where learners' participation and empowerment can start or work in synergy with other environments. The latest policy developments (Appendix A contains a chronological list of all key international and EU policy documents related to children's rights and voices.) show that children's participation in all fields of their lives is pivotal in building future societies that promote and nurture principles and values from the earliest life stages and throughout childhood and youth.

### *Unlocking the Potential of Learners' Voices in Decision-Making Processes*

Although the concept of learners' voices has been debated and recognised widely, actually exercising learners' right to be heard is still high on the EU policy agenda. Over 30 years after the UNCRC came into force and 12 years on from the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union becoming legally binding, EU and international policy-makers perceive young people in all life settings as a resource for society and all policy contexts [27].

However, to fully empower learners' voices, different policies must be aligned—not just educational ones. Furthermore, the collaboration of different stakeholders and environments is required. The above-mentioned policy statements and tools should be relevant for countries, but their implementation mostly depends on national and local legislators and administrators. This is one reason why children's participation in community life in the education field is an uneven and gradual process across countries.

In 2012, the EC's Directorate-General for Justice commissioned an Evaluation of legislation, policy and practice on child participation in the EU [28]. This study, carried out in 28 EU countries (at the time), sets out several key points about children's participation in educational life: undoubtedly, children play a valuable role in influencing policies, especially ones regarding education in local sectors and settings.

Even though specific legal provisions about Article 12 of the UNCRC in relation to education were in place in all EU Member States when the study was conducted, the question of scale emerged as a crucial one: at local level and in countries with a longer history of democratic participation, learners managed to have an impact mainly through youth and school councils and small-scale local planning decisions. At regional and national levels, children's participation in educational life had less impact and was mostly linked to formal tools and mechanisms (Ombudsman or other officials; time-bound consultative participation). Although children said that education was the most important area where they would like to express their opinions, the study found that they did not feel listened to and that they thought adults still dominated decision-making [28].

A Save the Children study from 2011 had already highlighted that:

> ... the right to be heard and taken seriously remains elusive for most children across the world. And even where it is implemented, it is often only in limited aspects of a child's life and largely through short-term projects and programmes. Full implementation of Article 12 continues to be impeded by many long-standing practices, cultures and attitudes, and by political and economic obstacles. [16] (p. 4).

More recent publications [29–31] show that European countries have made progress in implementing children's rights, embedding their perspectives in policy-making and improving their participation in community life. Studies in developing countries underline the need to investigate and monitor developments in this area. The gap between legislation and practice persists, so unlocking legislative and policy documents' full potential with regards to learner voice requires cross-sectoral engagement and robust, well-developed democratic institutions.

In this context, the European Youth Forum—which advocates and acts in the field of youth policy and rights—is an example of an international umbrella organisation that represents millions of young people all over Europe. It combats discrimination and exclusion by identifying challenges and monitoring policies, using a rights-based approach in all fields and promoting youth participation to remove barriers and create equal opportunities. The Youth Forum advocates quality education:

> Quality formal and non-formal education and informal learning should be an inclusive space where all young people have the same opportunities and can learn, debate, fail, risk, and exchange ideas without the fear of being left behind. [32] (p. 4).

Despite the existence of active advocates for youth voices, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child invites States Parties to promote participation and consultation in decision-making affecting young people. Awareness and understanding of those rights are fundamental if they are to be exercised.

This is also one of the topics emerging from the 2018 report "Children Human Rights Defenders", which captures the views, perspectives and recommendations of children around the world [33]. Most children who replied to the report survey perceive themselves as children human rights defenders (CHRDs). However, there are challenges that impede their action as CHRDs. These include: children are not informed about their rights; they believe they are not taken seriously; they feel unsafe acting as CHRDs because of bullying, teasing, etc.; in some cases, they are unable to act as CHRDs due to a lack of time or money (ibid.).

It appears that the effectiveness of learners' voices and engagement relies on changes in political and cultural practices that will empower learners to become active and dynamic stakeholders.

## 3. Agency Work on Listening to Learners' Views on Inclusive Education

Policy developments concerning learners' voices result from a long debate and process of including learners in policy- and decision-making. This process has been gradual and divergent in countries all over the world. From the outset it has been full of gaps, improvements and adjustments to both policy and practice. Against this backdrop of uneven progress towards considering learners' voices, since 2003 the Agency has been including learners as active stakeholders in its activities. Actively involving learners and considering their opinions on educational matters has been and continues to be a mainstay of Agency work, as the following sections show.

### *3.1. European Hearings*

The Agency has organised four European Hearings that aimed to listen to the voices of learners and empower them by promoting their involvement in inclusive education policy debates. Two Hearings took place at the European Parliament in Brussels (2003 and 2011). One was held at the Portuguese Parliament, in co-operation with the Portuguese Ministry of Education and the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU, in 2007. The fourth took place in 2015 in co-operation with the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council of the EU and the Luxembourg Ministry of Education, Children and Youth.

In total, over 300 young delegates (with and without special educational needs and/or disabilities) participated in the four Hearings, alongside national and European policy-makers and professionals. The delegates were from secondary, vocational and higher education, aged between 15 and 28, and from all Agency member countries. All the Hearings included working groups of young people. These gave them the opportunity to discuss their views on how inclusive education is implemented in their educational settings, the main challenges faced and their suggestions for improvement.

In the first three Hearings, the learners expressed several ideas, opinions and proposals addressed to policy-makers and practitioners. They can be grouped into five themes:

- Rights related to non-discrimination, respecting diversity, receiving a quality education, equality of opportunity in education and having a good social and working life:

  "Inclusive education should be about breaking down barriers".

- Benefits related to inclusive education, such as acquiring social skills, becoming stronger and more independent and combating discrimination and stereotypes:

"It is good for us, good for them. It is important to recognise the benefits to everyone in the class. Inclusive education helps mainstream children to become more tolerant, with more open minds".

"I think we have to study together, because in society we are also together. If we share the education together, we already learn how to live together".

- Requisites for inclusive education, such as access issues, teachers' new role in being prepared for inclusion and being responsible for all learners, and special schools' new role in supporting the mainstream sector:

"Everybody should have the chance to take part in all the classes, teachers should help to make this possible. The teacher should facilitate so you can take part in activities in and outside the classroom".

"It is important to build values in the class. Teachers have to make it a common view that nothing is 'abnormal' and everyone has the same values".

- Achievements related to well-established support systems and related funding mechanisms, as well as mobility and accessibility issues. Disability is more visible in society:

  "We don't want too much focus on what we cannot do but on what we can do".

- Pending issues related to barriers that must be removed so all learners can reach local educational settings, easily access them and move around inside them; educational staff being better prepared for inclusive education, etc.:

"People with disabilities need to have the possibility to participate in society equally with anybody else. This requires accessible transport, public buildings accessible for all, including schools".

The results of the 2007 Hearing in Portugal formed the basis for the "Lisbon Declaration–Young People's Views on Inclusive Education" [34], which constitutes core content in scholarship about inclusive education and human rights (see, for example, De Beco, Quinlivan and Lord [35]).

In 2015, the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council of the EU hosted the Agency's fourth Hearing. It aimed to "give the word" to young people to discuss how their schools implement inclusive education. Seventy-two young people took part. Delegates from previous Hearings also participated as working group moderators and rapporteurs.

Six working groups were organised. The aim was to give all participants the opportunity to reflect and present their perspectives on five questions sent to them in advance, and to discuss and identify progress in the implementation of inclusive education policies and practice since the first Hearing in 2003. The focus was on how schools remove physical barriers and support learners in education; how classmates and teachers take all learners' needs into account; how the remaining barriers can be overcome, so that inclusion benefits all learners; and examples of organisations of young people with disabilities that influence politics and decision-making in different countries.

Discussions were in line with and built upon the main outcomes of the previous Hearings. Young people expressed their overall satisfaction with their education. However, they also identified shortcomings and formulated several concrete messages and proposals highlighting the need to take action for inclusive education.

The proposals were summarised and formed the basis for the "Luxembourg Recommendations" [36] presented at a Council of the EU meeting in November 2015. The recommendations aimed to support the implementation of inclusive education as the best option where the necessary conditions exist. They are grouped around five messages:

1. "Everything about us, with us" concerns young learners' direct involvement in all decision-making concerning them.

As the learners pointed out:

"Learners with disabilities should be listened to and their wishes taken into account".

"It is very important that parents are involved in decisions concerning their children".

"Establish student council to allow students to give their opinion on plans".

"There is a need to include the young people (with special educational needs) in policy-making on every level, from the government down to the everyday practice".

2. "Barrier-free schools" relates to eliminating all physical and technical barriers.

Although there has been much progress, there is a need to remove all barriers so all learners can easily reach, access and move around inside local educational settings. Suitable technical aids and educational materials should be available to meet individual needs.

The young people highlighted:

"Government/municipality should fully cover expenses for transportation, should be flexible".

"School environment has to be adapted (emergency exit, doors, lift, induction loops, adapted transports)".

"No separate buildings and classes, so we can help each other".

3. "Breaking down stereotypes" is about the concept of "normality". As a learner pointed out: "If we accept that everybody is different, then who is 'normal'?".

Providing teachers, school staff, young people, families and support services with reliable information on learners' different needs is key for fostering mutual respect and tolerance. Diversity must be perceived as positive; a shared value must be "to see disability as normal".

Young delegates have indicated that:

"Society needs to be more aware and more tolerant to people with disability".

"Anti-discrimination and anti-bulling training would help".

"More respect and understanding from teachers is needed. Students with special needs should not feel like outcasts. All children must be made to feel part of the group".

"More common activities, between students with and without disabilities should be organised to get to know each other and support mutual tolerance and respect from young age and it will get easier and easier later on".

4. This centres upon a slogan some young people use: "Diversity is the mix, inclusion is what makes the mix work":

Everyone should focus on what can be done, not on what cannot be done. Education must be fully accessible, respecting the needs of all learners as the basis for quality education for all. Co-operation among teachers and other professionals, and the necessary human and/or technical support from teachers and classmates, is crucial.

The learners expressed their opinions in the discussion:

"We should be considered for what we do and not for what we look like".

"There are teachers who believe that if we are deaf or have a disability, we are less important than the other students. They should be educated. Be aware that we are just the same as anyone else".

"The attitude of the teacher helps a lot ... My classmates joke about my blindness and it helps and makes people more relaxed. Why do people bully? They don't mean to do it on purpose; I have to learn to not take it seriously".

5. "Becoming full citizens" relates to the impact of inclusive education in being fully included in society:

Learners emphasised that inclusion in mainstream schools fosters social inclusion. The aim is that all learners are able to find their place in society.

The learners expressed the following ideas:

> Everybody should have a chance to take part in all the classes and the teachers should help to make this possible, so it will be a lot easier when we enter the labour market ... It is crucial for us to be included in mainstream schools in order to be included in society.

The "Inclusive Education: Take Action!" video about the Luxembourg Hearing in 2015 was selected for the UN Enable Film Festival in 2016. This festival selects short disability-related films based on content that can help raise awareness of disability issues and further promote full and effective participation in society for persons with disabilities.

### *3.2. Learners' Voices for Inclusive Policy Reforms*

The Agency collaborates with the EC's Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM) to provide technical support to EU countries under the Structural Reform Support Programme (SRSP). Two of these SRSP activities, in Cyprus and Poland, involved consultations with learners. Both are fully funded by the EC and concern legislative educational changes regarding inclusive education.

In Cyprus, the Agency assisted the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth in analysing the current policy framework for special needs and inclusive education. The analysis aimed to identify the framework's strengths and weaknesses. It also aimed to produce recommendations that could serve as the general principles and basis for a new bill on inclusive education.

In 2018, the SRSP team held consultation workshops and meetings with different Cypriot stakeholders, including learners, aiming to inform them and discuss the draft recommendations. The learner workshop involved a mixed group of learners with and without disabilities aged from 12 to 18 years who attended mainstream and special schools. Three were representatives of the Cyprus Children's Parliament.

Learners were asked to provide concrete comments and proposals for changes in their schools. The learners' inputs focused on raising awareness, changing attitudes and addressing other key issues of concern. According to a representative from the Children's Parliament: "The educational system is rather good, but it requires some improvement. There is a need to raise awareness on inclusive education, for both learners and professionals".

Learners from a special school raised concerns about issues of communication and racism in mainstream schools and emphasised that it is important to inform learners and raise awareness about diversity.

Learners highlighted that fostering good relationships between teachers and learners is key. They also pointed out several issues from schools that need special attention. For example:

> Bullying, poverty, parents' divorces: these are issues in schools. There was a national programme against bullying which was effective, but there is a need for psychologists in schools. The support should be continuous throughout school life. Even before interventions, professionals need to focus on early prevention; to get help from psychologists, it is necessary to find the roots of the problems.
>
> Some learners raised concerns about the education of foreign learners and made specific proposals:
>
> Immigration is an issue which also needs attention. They should be slowly included in mainstream classes through teaching Greek language programmes. In the meantime, they could be with other learners speaking the same language, who can help with translation.

The SRSP team considered the learners' positions when drafting the final recommendations.

The Polish SRSP work aims to support the development of new legislation to improve education quality for all learners. As part of this, the SRSP team has identified operational definitions and key concepts that will form the basis of the new law. This involved an extensive consultation process, including with learners.

A consultation to collect learners' views took place in December 2020. Four sessions were held with various age groups from pre-primary, kindergarten, primary and secondary schools (age range: 5 to 18 years). Sixteen schools, located in four different regions, took part, with a total of 120 participants.

For each session, the moderator (from the Ministry of Education) used the materials from other consultation meetings to prepare an age-appropriate document for the learners. Each session was divided into two parts: the first to get general opinions and the second to discuss possible solutions. The learners' views from these sessions are presented below.

Learners from across all age groups agreed regarding the right of all learners to education. The youngest children recognised that they learn from their friends who are different—e.g., who wear glasses, speak a different language—and that they need to help others.

Learners felt that there should be no streaming in the school system and that equal opportunity should be stressed. However, learners recognised that striving for equality of opportunity for all learners does not mean the same results for all. They acknowledged the need to adapt conditions to learner needs, particularly for those with disabilities who they felt should not be "mistreated and pointed out".

Learners felt there is an opportunity to increase awareness of learner rights in the school community and in society more widely. They stated that the role of schools should be to introduce learners to diversity and address ignorance.

In discussing transition through the education system and into adult life, learners recognised that schools have a social function and can prepare all learners for life in a diverse society.

Learners expressed a range of views on teachers and their training, seeing the perceived low competence and lack of empathy of some teachers as particular challenges. They noted the need for training for support assistants and teacher educators. One learner summed this up as follows:

"You need a teacher who, in addition to knowledge, should convey values, attitudes . . . ".

Learners noted the need for changes in assessment systems to use more descriptive feedback and no grades or competitive hierarchies.

There was some disagreement about whether learners should work in teams, but all wanted better relationships between learners and teachers. Other suggestions included smaller classes and more use of technology.

Some learners stated that each individual learner should receive personalised learning that incorporates life preparation and wider skills—not just curriculum content. They recognised the need for more flexibility in curricula and timetables and less reliance on textbooks.

Learners criticised the frequent practice of adapting content by reducing what is offered for some learners. They expressed the view that “education must be adapted to students–not the other way round” and the need to develop positive attitudes to difference. They stressed that support should be provided in a way that avoids discrimination.

Finally, learners noted that standards should not be lower for learners with disabilities; expectations and outcomes should not just focus on academic achievement.

These examples from the Agency’s SRSP work highlight the potential for including learner voice in high-level decision-making processes. In both cases, learners’ perspectives, along with those of all other stakeholder groups, were incorporated into the feedback to the Ministry. That is, the learners were on an equal footing with the other stakeholders. The respective Ministries of Education recognised, valued and reflected upon the learners’ contributions, which facilitated the Ministries’ work in developing their inclusive education systems.

## 4. Recurring Messages from Learners and Key Considerations

The work presented illustrates how the Agency has attempted to promote learner voice, by actively engaging learners in inclusive education debates and other decision-making processes. The messages presented align with learners’ views that were collected in other Agency work on various areas of inclusive education, such as transition from school to employment [37], vocational training [38], early childhood education [39] and raising achievement [40].

In all cases, learners’ contributions focused on their right to education (access), their rights in education (learning and participation) and their rights in wider society (achievement). Key messages from young people centred upon the importance of barrier-free schools and combating stereotypes to support their longer-term social inclusion and ensure they are able to become full citizens in their local communities [41]. On top of this, learners themselves challenged the concept of normality, which is tied to the long-lasting ‘dilemma of difference’ (Artiles, 1998; Minow, 1990; Terzi, 2005) [42–44]: ‘Do we treat all students the same (similar treatment), or do we make special accommodations for certain groups (preferential treatment)? This brings into the surface the dilemma that still exists for national priorities as to whether focusing strategies and innovations on special education or on diversity in the mainstream school [45]. Although there has been a lot of progress in quality and inclusive education in recent years, as opposed to special education, learners highlighted that much remains to be done. As they put it: “Real inclusion has not been achieved yet. Real action should be taken instead of just talking” [41] (p. 21).

Despite political recognition, several issues greatly affect how young people are currently positioned and their voices incorporated within decision-making processes. As stated, major cultural changes are needed to promote learner voice and participation within inclusive education systems. Indeed, a recurring message from young learners refers to the importance of teachers and other professionals taking learners’ wishes, views and opinions more seriously, providing space to listen to them and involving parents/guardians in decisions that concern learners.

This message resonates with the findings of a wide variety of learner voice studies that have highlighted the power imbalances in the adult-young person relationship [1,2,46–50] as well as the danger of representing learner voice uncritically, also known as the ‘problem of authenticity’ [47]. The danger of treating learners simplistically, tokenistically or—even worse—manipulatively [48,49] increases when they are involved in decision-making processes. Therefore, one significant cultural change that is needed relates to how adults represent the voices of learners, especially those from vulnerable groups (such as learners with disabilities). Learners emphasised the need for targeted training for teachers and teacher educators to promote not just knowledge, but a true culture of listening.

Representing learners as a uniform and united entity and treating learners as having a "collective" voice is problematic. It runs the risk of overlooking essential differences among learners, their perspectives and their unique needs [50]. The view that education must be adapted to learners—and not the other way round—seems relevant here; it implies that embedding positive attitudes to difference throughout school practice might inform new ways of listening. As learners put it: "we don't want too much focus on what we can't do but on what we can do" [41] (p. 14). It is therefore essential to seek effective ways to reflect critically and interpret voices in ways "that avoid tokenism or further alienation of young people" [49] (p. 238).

Learners have consistently highlighted that participation in quality education is a human right that involves common activities and interaction of everyone involved. It appears that teachers, researchers and especially policy-makers still lack the essential knowledge or mechanisms to listen meaningfully and promote learner participation. This is closely related to the act (and the art) of listening—how can adults truly listen to learners, especially those from vulnerable groups? Ainscow and Messiou take this question further, asking: "are we prepared to listen and act on what we hear?" [51] (p. 26).

A recurring message from learners refers to the social function of schools and their key role in raising awareness around inclusion, introducing learners to diversity and addressing ignorance and discrimination. Acting upon this important message would require several strategic actions in the context of education reforms, such as prioritising awareness-raising in schools and embedding diversity issues into national curricula. Through these types of concrete actions, education authorities and professionals can become more accountable and commit to learner voice as a principle.

## 5. Concluding Comments

This article focused on how learners' voices could be considered in the development of inclusive educational policies. It first discussed the emergence of the learner voices concept within EU and international policy literature and indicated the conceptual shift in bringing the child, as an individual, into the centre of the debate. This ties in closely with the development of inclusive education as a democratic and equitable educational approach. It then documented several contributions by learners from across Europe who shared their views about inclusive education. In so doing, it highlighted key messages from learners and the potential of their meaningful participation in inclusive education debates. The article's contribution lies exactly in providing the policy context as well as showcasing recent attempts of positioning learners at the centre of inclusive policy debates at EU level.

The latest policy developments suggest that learners are key agents who can lead and influence educational decisions at a school, local, regional and national level. However, in reality, any efforts to listen to learners' voices still consist of non-intensive involvement, mainly in the forms of expression, consultation and just partial participation. Therefore, as a first step, listening to learners must continue to be supported in research, policy and practice. The next crucial step involves intensifying research studies and practical examinations that aim to identify appropriate processes and practices that do not just involve learners, but actually act upon their voices, repositioning them as lead agents of educational change and reform [50].

Andrea, an Italian learner who participated in an event organised by the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU and the Agency in 2018, pointed out:

> It is not easy for us to live in a period where the values that founded the European Union are difficult to find within political choices ... There is a need to talk and confront each other. The European Union promotes cultural exchanges by allowing thousands of Europeans to travel and live throughout the Union. A European day dedicated to integration and inclusion, every year and in each school,

> would engage students in actions to disseminate what has been experienced and received thanks to European education programmes. [52] (p. 22).

In an era of uncertainty, this idea is even more important. The Agency's scoping research on the impact of COVID-19 shows that the pandemic has created one of the biggest education system crises in history, affecting access to learning, widening inequalities and limiting opportunities for the voices of the most vulnerable learners to be heard [53]. Recent evidence shows that learners had very limited participation in formulating education responses to the crisis (ibid). Yet, learners could and should be able to bring new perspectives and determine more adapted solutions to current educational realities. Including learners in education policy debates and decision-making processes not only exercises their right to be heard, but is a crucial step in developing more inclusive education systems.

**Author Contributions:** Supervision, A.W.; Validation, M.K.; Visualization, A.W. and M.K.; Writing—original draft, A.M. and A.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Acknowledgments:** The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of all the learners and the Agency country representatives to the activities this article uses as its foundation. Particular thanks to Victoria Soriano, Senior Policy Consultant, European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Appendix A

**List of key international and EU policy documents on children's rights and voices:**

- United Nations, 1989. Convention on the Rights of the Child
- European Union, 2000. Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union
- United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009. General comment No. 12 (2009): The right of the child to be heard
- European Commission, 2011. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: An EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child
- Council of Europe, 2012. Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18
- European Commission, 2013. Commission recommendation of 20 February 2013–Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage
- United Nations, 2015. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
- Council of Europe, 2016. Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021)
- Council of the European Union, 2017. Revision of the EU Guidelines for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child (2017). Leave No Child Behind
- European Commission, 2021. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: EU strategy on the rights of the child
- European Commission, 2021. Proposal for a Council Recommendation Establishing a European Child Guarantee
- European Parliament, 2021. Motion for a Resolution further to Questions for Oral Answer B9-0000/2021 and B9-0000/2021 pursuant to Rule 136(5) of the Rules of Procedure on the European Child Guarantee
- Council of the European Union, 2021. Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Strengthening the multilevel governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes

## References

1. Lewis, A.; Porter, J. Interviewing children and young people with learning disabilities: Guidelines for researchers and multi-professional practice. *Br. J. Learn. Disabil.* **2004**, *32*, 191–197. [CrossRef]
2. Robinson, C.; Taylor, C. Theorizing student voice: Values and perspectives. *Improv. Sch.* **2007**, *10*, 5–17. [CrossRef]
3. Toshalis, E.; Nakkula, M.J. *Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice: The Students at the Center Series*; Jobs for the Future: Boston, MA, USA, 2012.
4. *Organisation of Provision to Support. Inclusive Education—Literature Review*; European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education: Odense, Denmark, 2013.
5. Kefallinou, A.; Donnelly, V.J. (Eds.) *Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education: Lessons from European Policy and Practice*; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education: Odense, Denmark, 2017.
6. *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education: All Means All*; UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization): Paris, France, 2020.
7. Soriano, V. Young voices on inclusive education. In *Implementing Inclusive Education: Issues in Bridging the Policy-Practice Gap (International Perspectives on Inclusive Education, Volume 8)*; Watkins, A., Meijer, C., Eds.; Emerald: Bingley, UK, 2016; pp. 255–272.
8. European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. Agency Position on Inclusive Education Systems. 2015. Available online: www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/PositionPaper-EN.pdf (accessed on 7 June 2021).
9. *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*; Resolution 1386 (XIV), A/RES/14/1386; United Nations: New York, NY, USA, 1959.
10. *Convention on the Rights of the Child*; A/RES/44/25; United Nations: New York, NY, USA, 1989.
11. *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*; 2000/C 364/01; European Union: Brussels, Belgium, 2000.
12. *European Social Charter (Revised). European Treaty Series, No. 163*; Council of Europe: Strasbourg, France, 1996.
13. *European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights. European Treaty Series, No. 160*; Council of Europe: Strasbourg, France, 1996.
14. *Treaty of Lisbon Amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty Establishing the European Community, Signed at Lisbon, 13 December 2007. OJ C 306*; European Union: Brussels, Belgium, 2007; pp. 1–271.
15. *General Comment No. 12 (2009): The Right of the Child to be Heard. CRC/C/GC/12*; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child: New York, NY, USA, 2009.
16. Save the Children. *Every Child's Right to Be Heard. A Resource Guide on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 12*; Save the Children: London, UK, 2011.
17. *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: An EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child. COM/2011/0060 Final*; Publications Office of the European Union: Luxembourg, 2011.
18. *Commission Recommendation of 20 February 2013—Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage (2013/112/ EU). OJ L 59, 2.3*; European Commission: Luxembourg, 2013; pp. 5–16.
19. *Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)2 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Participation of Children and Young People under the Age of 18*; Council of Europe: Strasbourg, France, 2012.
20. *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A/RES/70/1*; United Nations: New York, NY, USA, 2015.
21. *Strategy for the Rights of the Child. (2016–2021)*; Council of Europe: Strasbourg, France, 2016.
22. *Revision of the EU Guidelines for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child (2017). Leave No Child Behind. 6846/17*; Council of the European Union: Brussels, Belgium, 2017.
23. *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. COM/2021/142 Final*; Publications Office of the European Union: Luxembourg, 2021.
24. *Proposal for a Council Recommendation Establishing a European Child. Guarantee. COM/2021/137 Final*; Publications Office of the European Union: Luxembourg, 2021.
25. *Motion for a Resolution Further to Questions for Oral Answer B9-0000/2021 and B9-0000/2021 Pursuant to Rule 136 of the Rules of Procedure on the European Child Guarantee. 2021/2605(RSP)*; European Parliament: Brussels, Belgium, 2021.
26. *Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States Meeting within the Council on Strengthening the Multilevel Governance when Promoting the Participation of Young People in Decision-Making Processes. 8169/1/21*; Council of the European Union: Brussels, Belgium, 2021.
27. *Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States Meeting within the Council on a Framework for European Cooperation in the Youth Field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019–2027. 2018/C 456/01*; Council of the European Union: Brussels, Belgium, 2018.
28. European Commission. *Evaluation of Legislation, Policy and Practice on Child Participation in the European Union (EU)*; Publications Office of the European Union: Luxembourg, 2015.
29. European Commission. *Embedding a Children's Rights Perspective in Policy and Decision-Making*; Publications Office of the European Union: Luxembourg, 2019.
30. *For Every Child, Every Right: The Convention on the Rights of the Child at a Crossroads*; UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund): New York, NY, USA, 2019.
31. Every Child Learns. *UNICEF Education Strategy 2019–2030*; UNICEF: New York, NY, USA, 2019.
32. *Resolution. EU Youth Strategy. GA 0233-16_FINAL*; European Youth Forum: Brussels, Belgium, 2016.

33. Children Human Rights Defenders. *The Views, Perspectives and Recommendations of Children across the World*; Child Rights Connect: Geneva, Switzerland, 2018.
34. *Lisbon Declaration—Young People's Views on Inclusive Education*; European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education: Odense, Denmark, 2007.
35. De Beco, G.; Quinlivan, S.; Lord, J.E. (Eds.) *The Right to Inclusive Education in International Human Rights Law*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2019.
36. *Luxembourg Recommendations*; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education: Odense, Denmark, 2015.
37. *Individual Transition Plan: Supporting the Move from Schools to Employment*; European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education: Odense, Denmark, 2006.
38. *European Patterns of Successful Practice in Vocational Education and Training—Participation of Learners with SEN/Disabilities in VET*; European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education: Odense, Denmark, 2013.
39. Kyriazopoulou, M.; Bartolo, P.; Björck-Åkesson, E.; Giné, C.; Bellour, F. (Eds.) *Inclusive Early Childhood Education: New Insights and Tools—Contributions from a European Study*; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education: Odense, Denmark, 2017.
40. Donnelly, V.; Kefallinou, A. (Eds.) *Key Actions for Raising Achievement: Guidance for Teachers and Leaders*; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education: Odense, Denmark, 2018.
41. *Take Action for Inclusive Education: Delegates' Reflections and Proposals*; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education: Odense, Denmark, 2016.
42. Artiles, A.J. 'The dilemma of difference: Enriching the disproportionality discourse with theory and context. *J. Spec. Educ.* **1998**, *32*, 32–36. [CrossRef]
43. Minow, M. *Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion, and American Law*; Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY, USA, 1990.
44. Terzi, L. Beyond the dilemma of difference: The capability approach to disability and special educational needs. *J. Philos. Educ.* **2005**, *39*, 443–459. [CrossRef]
45. Vislie, L. 'From integration to inclusion: Focusing global trends and changes in the western European societies'. *Eur. J. Spec. Needs Educ.* **2003**, *18*, 17–35. [CrossRef]
46. Robinson, C.; Taylor, C. Student voice as a contested practice: Power and participation in two student voice projects. *Improv. Sch.* **2013**, *16*, 32–46. [CrossRef]
47. Spyrou, S. Researching children's silences: Exploring the fullness of voice in childhood research. *Childhood* **2016**, *23*, 7–21. [CrossRef]
48. Messiou, K.; Hope, M.A. The danger of subverting students' views in schools. *Int. J. Incl. Educ.* **2015**, *19*, 1009–1021. [CrossRef]
49. Mitra, D.L. Balancing power in communities of practice: An examination of increasing student voice through school-based youth-adult partnerships. *J. Educ. Chang.* **2008**, *9*, 221–242. [CrossRef]
50. Cook-Sather, A. Sound, Presence, and Power: Exploring the metaphor of student voice in educational research and practice. *Curric. Inq.* **2006**, *36*, 359–390. [CrossRef]
51. Ainscow, M.; Messiou, K. Engaging with the views of students to promote inclusion in education. *J. Educ. Chang.* **2017**, *19*, 1–17. [CrossRef]
52. Soriano, V.; Hughes, G. (Eds.) *Promoting Common Values and Inclusive Education: Reflections and Messages*; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education: Odense, Denmark, 2018.
53. Popescu, C. (Ed.) *The Impact of COVID-19 on Inclusive Education at the European Level: Literature Review*; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education: Odense, Denmark, 2021.

education sciences

MDPI

*Article*

# University Students with Intellectual Disabilities: Empowerment through Voice

**John Kubiak *, Des Aston, Marie Devitt and Barbara Ringwood**

The Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, D02 PN40 Dublin, Ireland; astond@tcd.ie (D.A.); devittma@tcd.ie (M.D.); bringwoo@tcd.ie (B.R.)
* Correspondence: kubiakj@tcd.ie

**Abstract:** People with disabilities have been among the most marginalised groups both within society and within post-secondary/higher education. Over the last two decades, an increasing number of inclusive educational programmes have come into existence both nationally and internationally for this group of learners. The Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID), School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, offers students with intellectual disabilities a two-year programme entitled Arts, Science and Inclusive Applied Practice (ASIAP). This paper presents a selection of voices from ASIAP students which highlights their experiences of becoming both co-researchers and second language learners. These studies present a variety of ways in which power relationships are negotiated between faculty and students through utilising creative and inclusive approaches to the research process.

**Keywords:** people with intellectual disabilities; higher/postsecondary education; student voice; co-researching; second language learning; inclusive research

**Citation:** Kubiak, J.; Aston, D.; Devitt, M.; Ringwood, B. University Students with Intellectual Disabilities: Empowerment through Voice. *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 571. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11100571

Academic Editors: Richard Rose and Michael Shevlin

Received: 13 July 2021
Accepted: 18 September 2021
Published: 23 September 2021

## 1. Introduction: The Inclusion of People with Intellectual Disabilities in Post-Secondary/Higher Education

In recent years, across Europe, post-secondary and higher education institutions have been engaged in a process of change due to their involvement in the Bologna Process, the aim being to identify the importance of equal access to higher education for all non-traditional and under-represented groups which includes people with disabilities [1]. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) has been one of the main catalysts for the drive in promoting the rights of people with disabilities to express their opinions on matters affecting their lives [2]. Widening societal participation for people from marginalised groups has also become an established feature of policy frameworks internationally; in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Article 26, education was identified as a fundamental human right [3]. The right to education has also been enshrined across various international human rights laws, policies, and declarations—such as the World Declaration on Education for All (1990) [4], and The Salamanca Statement (1994) [5], which called for governments to give preference to policy and the allocation of specific funding to inclusive education with the recommendation to adopt inclusive education policy as a legal basis. The Education for All (EFA) movement (Dakar, 2000) [6]—a global commitment to provide quality basic education for all children, youth and adults—spearheaded a global initiative with the EFA Flagship entitled "The Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities: Towards Inclusion" (2004) [7]. This document not only outlines the necessity of basic education for people with disabilities but also commands full participation of persons with disabilities at all levels in the policy and processes.

Within the Republic of Ireland, policies in the area of education have developed rapidly over the past couple of decades and the initial focus on people from socio-economically disadvantaged groups has been extended to include people with disabilities [8]. Irish legislation enshrining an inclusive education policy within schools has been enacted and support structures have been developed to enable children with difficulties in learning to access the curriculum at primary and secondary levels [9–12]. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) made a specific reference to inclusion, and that children with special educational needs should, where possible, be educated "in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs" [12] (Section 2.1). One of the main implications of this Act was that the number of children with special educational needs attending mainstream schools increased dramatically and is now estimated to be between 25 and 28 per cent [13].

However, when these students transition out of formal schooling, their outcomes are extremely limited; while Health Service Executive funded disability support services (which include adult day centres or localised vocational training centres) are available, individuals often find themselves enrolled in courses in which they have little or no interest [14]. Recent research by Aston, Banks, and Shevlin [15] has highlighted that this cohort is more likely to be unemployed and dependent on social welfare, have an increased risk of living in poverty, and are significantly underrepresented in the workforce, with just 6 per cent in paid employment in the Republic of Ireland.

As many of this cohort struggle to make a successful transition from compulsory schooling to third-level education, intellectual disability consistently remains the most underrepresented minority group within the higher education sector [16]. While The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) was introduced in Ireland to widen the access of students with disabilities to third-level education, the numbers of students with intellectual disabilities in third-level education remain low with only 84 out of 57,872 people with intellectual disabilities registered in a third-level institution in 2017 [17].

### *1.1. The Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID)*

Going some way to address the underrepresentation of people with intellectual disabilities within higher education and post-secondary education programmes, the inclusion of students with disabilities is now high on the agenda across the sector, and the success of many institutions and faculties in creating an inclusive environment for students with disabilities and specific learning difficulties has gained traction. Over the last two decades, an increasing number of inclusive educational programmes have come into existence both nationally and internationally for people with intellectual disabilities [18–22]. The benefits of such projects are evident not only in relation to the individual student who is included, but also in the effect on social change as their participation impacts on others, such as lecturers [23], classmates [24], and employers [25,26]. Consequently, the case for inclusion can be made with reference to benefits for all, rather than just for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

There is growing evidence that by undertaking such programmes, students with intellectual disabilities improve their self-esteem and confidence [27], interpersonal relationships, self-determination, social inclusion [28], and employment opportunities [29]. Consequently, from this perspective, there are strong economic and moral considerations [30] for including those who have traditionally been excluded in higher education. For Stodden and Mruzek [31], combating such exclusion is essential to ensure that economies can develop while those at most risk can become part of the knowledge society and through the transformative power of their voice, can make their contribution.

In the Republic of Ireland, the numbers of people with intellectual disabilities accessing and graduating from inclusive tertiary/postsecondary education courses have gradually increased over the last ten years [32]. In The Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID), School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, students with intellectual disabilities who have completed the two-year programme entitled Arts, Science and Inclusive Applied Practice (ASIAP), reported feeling more accepted, more confident as learners, and having increased social networks [33–35]. The TCPID is built on three pillars—Education, Research, and Pathways; its ethos centres on treating people with intellectual disabilities with dignity and respect within an environment which fosters and encourages collaboration, inclusiveness, and flexibility. Graduates of the programme progress to employment and/or further education opportunities which are promoted through person-centred planning in collaboration with a team of Occupational Therapists. The ASIAP curriculum is aligned to Level 5 of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and as such, is unique within the university.

### *1.2. The Complexity of 'Difference' Regarding Student Voice*

It is often not clear what actually is being summoned in the notion of 'student voice'; voice is a nebulous term, sometimes used metaphorically, sometimes literally. It is not simply speech; according to McLeod [36] voice can suggest, "an ideal, a political agenda, and a basis for policy reform and action; it can declare difference and it can homogenise it; it has methodological and pedagogical dimensions and is rarely—if ever—simply a matter of creating opportunities for unfettered expression" (p. 179). Consequently, with such a vast variety of interpretations, the use of the term 'voice' can often generate contradictory responses. For example, Baker [37] regards voice as, "a monolithic, falsely representational, essentialising concept'"(pp. 369–370) that does injustice to the politics of difference and to the complexities of contemporary societies. Young and Jerome [38] indicate that the issues raised in the literature on student voice are not always explicit about the power relations operating; the tension lies in the political effect of eliciting voices, the possession of the power to 'close' voices, as well as the problem of how to represent the complexity of difference and the transformative aspect of voice in an authentic way.

### *1.3. The Nature of 'Student Voice' in Higher Education—Recognising the Voices of All Students*

The transformative aspect of voice—voice-as-right, voice-as-participation—has been noticeable within schools-based participatory research projects [39–41], with the term describing a range of activities, from the importance of problem sharing for students [42], pupils as researchers [43], pupils helping other students with their learning [44], approaches to assessment [45], to informing and supporting teachers' professional development [46]. Voice has been an especially influential concept within schools-based projects which address empowerment and equality [47]. In such ventures, voice is typically seen as a powerful force that has a radical potential for transformative practice with initiatives such as youth global citizen projects [48] placing voice within participatory and sometimes emancipatory discourses.

Within the existing higher education literature, Seale [49] describes the most cited purposes of student voice projects: gathering evaluations from students and gaining feedback on classroom strategies [50]; improvement of student representation through inclusive and participatory research approaches; and developing curriculum projects to improve quality enhancement and assurance and professional development [51]. The assumption is that in being able to express their views and participate in major decisions about their learning, students will 'become more engaged' and, one presumes, their learning will improve.

Young and Jerome [38] however raise concerns with regard to the literature on student voice in higher education; for example: (1) the inability of voice to establish a genuine dialogue between staff and students; (2) the use of practices entirely designed by managers who, "reconfigure students in ways that bind them more securely into the fabric of the status quo", and (3), the nature of what students are included. McLeod [36] notes that enabling student voice often fails to provide full recognition for all students, especially those traditionally marginalised in educational institutions, such as those with intellectual disabilities. Arguably, a justified argument attaches to requests to tap into these silenced and marginalised voices, thus allowing under-represented and neglected groups to have their perspectives heard, valued, and recognised. In doing so, the authority of the seemingly natural ways of looking at and organising the world can potentially be unsettled [52].

What might these arguments mean for the potential of voice for university students with intellectual disabilities within higher education? Going some way to answer this question, within the context of the ASIAP programme, we have explored a variety of ways to encourage students to express their views and perspectives; these include initiatives such as poetry writing [53], transition into the work environment [25], and policy advice [54]. Other projects currently being piloted within the TCPID include: students volunteering on the student to student (S2S) mentoring programme; co-lecturing on both the Masters in Education and Professional Masters in Education programmes; and evaluating social transitions in a virtual social group. The purpose of these voice-based initiatives is to gain insider knowledge and identify ways to encourage these learners with intellectual disabilities to express their views of their personal, social, and educational experiences of higher education and transition.

The following sections present three evidence-based studies which have privileged students' voices and provide an in-depth insight regarding their experiences of learning in two main areas, namely: the co-researching process, and second language learning. Section 2 (below) which focuses on co-researching include (1) Kubiak's [55,56] inclusive study of students' interviewing their peers, and (2) Fitzgerald, Dunne, Biddulph et al.'s [57] research on how the university library can be made more accessible. Attention is then given in Section 3 to Piazzoli and Kubiak's [58] study which outlines how an effective teaching pedagogy to support the second language learning process (in this case Italian) of ASIAP students was identified.

## 2. The Co-Researchers' Voice

### 2.1. Co-Researching the Learning Process

Traditional research has involved unequal power relationships with 'expert' researchers viewing people with disabilities as the subjects of research. For Cameron [59] however, there is a need for researchers to put their experience and skills in the hands of people with disabilities, "identifying them as participants and collaborators". Consequently, the importance of accessibility replaces a responsibility on the researcher to be creative and inventive in research design [60].

With this directive in mind, Kubiak's [55,56] study which utilised a phenomenographic approach [61] explored how a group of students with intellectual disabilities experience learning while undertaking a tertiary education programme. Stage 1 of this study addressed the following question: How can students with intellectual disabilities be meaningfully included in a phenomenographic research project about their peers' experiences of learning? The following section reports on the process of training six co-researchers who volunteered to be part of the research.

### 2.2. Methods

The challenge of selecting a 'representative' group of participant students has been highlighted as a complicated issue, and ways of recruiting students such as random selection [62] were considered. However, after presenting an outline of the research to students which explained the purposes, aims, and ideals behind the research project, six students were willing to volunteer. For ethical purposes, an information and consent letter were provided to both participants (in accessible format) and to their parents/guardians, explaining the project and offering the opportunity to ask further questions. The option to withdraw consent was made explicit and participants were provided with opportunities to raise questions and voice their concerns. The School of Education ethics committee approved the study and confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed to co-researchers and all participants in reporting results.

A timeline covering a period of eleven weeks of training was outlined and agreed upon by co-researchers with key objectives defined. Co-researchers recorded their thoughts in a reflective journal after each class, expressing what they felt was good, what was difficult and what they'd change about a particular session and its content. The feedback from these responses was used to inform the framework and delivery of subsequent training sessions. In addition, three focus groups were also conducted, at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the training, the aim being to offer a space where co-researchers could reflect openly and contribute collectively as a group to the process as it was unfolding. By week eleven, the training sessions had covered the following topics: key words used in research; the research question; a brief background of inclusive research; gaining consent; designing a consent form; designing an accessible PowerPoint of the project to present to the participants; and examining the process of questioning and interviewing.

### *2.3. Findings*

As part of their reflections, all co-researchers felt that this particular research was important, with one observing: " . . . *how you learn is important for all people, disabled or not. People all learn in different ways"*. As the research process unfolded, co-researchers identified roles that suited their individual strengths, these included: note-taker, timekeeper, facilitator, and interviewer. Providing information about the research and how to present this was deemed important by one individual: *"putting together a PowerPoint on why are we carrying out this project and information on inclusive research"*. For another co-researcher, the questioning process was a concern: *"what questions we will ask the group?"; "When to use open and closed questions"; "How to start an interview by saying: How are you today?"* and understanding *"the different ways you can listen"*.

Gaining confidence in the practice of interviewing was imperative for these co-researchers for two main reasons: first, among people with intellectual disabilities, there is evidence of low levels of responsiveness during interviews [62]. Second, according to Perry and Felce [63], conducting interviews is one aspect of the research process which is readily amenable to the active involvement of people with an intellectual disability, at least for those people with adequate cognitive and language ability.

Some anxieties arose however before co-researchers commenced the interviews; one co-researcher explained: *"I've never actually done an interview . . . I'll find it hard to look at the person"*. Another individual remarked: *"I'm a little nervous and concerned . . . how am I going to ask the questions? What'll people's responses be? It's nerve-racking"*. Going some way to address these concerns, we utilised a structure of: (1) building rapport—*"How are you today? "I'd like to thank you for coming along today for this interview, and your drawing is brilliant, can you explain what you have in your drawing?"; (*2) using open questions: *"Can you tell me about what this picture is about?"* and closed questions: *"Do you like listening to music?"; (*3) follow-up questions and probing: *"Why did you put those smiley faces in (your journal) and how do they help you learn?"*, and (4) closing an interview: *"Thank you for taking part today"*.

Reflecting on their interviewing skills highlighted informative insights from one co-researcher: *"I should have come to the point sooner, but I don't do that and that's something I need to work on"*. The timekeeper who reflected on this same interview stated: *"I felt that he did very good... He needs to watch the long sentences and don't cut people off with a 'how' or 'why'; let them explain 'till they're finished... he could have waited for her to finish . . . sometimes he answered questions for her"*.

Ultimately, this inclusive project had a profound influence on the development of the co-researchers sense of identity; as one individual observed: *"Reflecting on what you do in research is like learning in a different way . . . I'm a person with a mild (intellectual) disability but at the end of the day I am the only one that can say what's inside my mind, and I can speak up for other people with disabilities"*. While mindful of the need to redress the power imbalance between the "active doer of research" and the students—the so-called "passive subjects of research", the objective of this study's lead researcher was to place his skills and experience at the disposal of students so that they might take their rightful place as co-researchers and have a meaningful, yet realistic role in this process.

### *2.4. Co-Researching with University Librarians*

Not many people with intellectual disabilities are familiar with using a university library; consequently, there is a paucity of research on how students with intellectual disabilities use such a facility. This can be viewed as an issue in relation to the right to accessibility for this population; Article 9 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities [2] states that there should be guidelines about how to make access better to public services (which includes libraries), for students with disabilities. This poses a challenge for libraries in higher education, as traditionally they provide information in text-based books and journals, which can be difficult to access for many students with intellectual disabilities.

As it was found that the usage of the TCD's library by ASIAP students was low, two librarians invited six ASIAP students to become co-researchers with a view to write an accessible journal article [57] and make a video to encourage future students with intellectual disabilities to use the library. This research provided an opportunity for the project team to showcase to a wider audience the value of inclusive, action research in resolving real-life challenges. After gaining ethical approval from the School of Education Ethics Committee, students were given an information leaflet describing the project and a consent form to sign if they wanted to be involved.

### *2.5. Methods*

Methods included two focus groups that explored students' opinions of barriers to library use. At the first focus group meeting, students also talked about ideas that would be good to include in the video. The students were split into three pairs and using post-it notes and flip charts, they reflected on how Trinity Library is different to other libraries and whether it helped ASIAP students to learn. At the second focus group, students worked together with the librarians on the video story with ideas for the script based on students' answers from the previous meeting. For this session, two groups of students were asked to imagine themselves in a particular situation in the library, for example, asking for help or borrowing a book.

Following this meeting, a timetable for creating the video with suggested roles people could take. A draft of the script was also sent, and students could suggest changes to the script. When students and librarians met for a third time, they agreed on what role each person would have in making the video. On the day of making the video, students rehearsed their roles all morning and filming—undertaken by a professional videographer—took place in the afternoon. The outcomes of this study are both a video—an accessible learning tool for and by students with intellectual disabilities—and a peer-reviewed journal article which offers greater staff insights into the lived experience of this student group. Significantly, students have become powerful advocates for fellow students and have ensured that they are now visible members of the library community.

### *2.6. Findings*

One student who had difficulty using the library on his own remarked: "*I'd be helping future Trinity students to use the library a lot more, because it would be easier for them to understand what's available in the library*". For another individual, prior to this research, asking for help would have been perceived by her as "*a sign of failure*"; consequently, getting to know the library staff enabled her to "*feel confident about asking for help if she needed it . . . (as) no matter where you are in the library, there's always someone there you can ask for help*".

This reassurance is important as library anxiety [64] manifests in many ways. Drawing examples from Fitzgerald et al.'s [57] study, the fear of setting off the security alarms had the effect of making one co-researcher panic if the alarm sounded. Second, trying to find a way around the complicated layout of buildings and signage made another co-researcher feel he *"would pass out"* as he was surrounded by *"claustrophobic tall bookshelves and confusing signs"*. Third, library anxiety was experienced by another co-researcher from impatient and irritated students at the self-service library machines; this individual abandoned borrowing a book from a self-issue machine because he felt students in the queue *"were becoming impatient with him . . . it would have been easier to use Amazon to get a book than working out the library system!"*.

In addition to these challenges, some autistic co-researchers experienced sensory overload due to their extra sensitivity to lighting and noise levels as well as personal space issues. The idea of library social spaces, where students meet and talk freely, did not appeal to one individual who felt it was *"breaking the rules"* of a traditional library and she was not comfortable with other students *"being too close to her".*

To summarise, the co-researchers of Fitzgerald et al.'s [57] and Kubiak's [55,56] studies had to negotiate the uncertain shift that came from being a student to becoming a co-researcher. Doing the "self-advocacy talk", (or in the words of one co-researcher: *"speaking up for people with disabilities"*) allowed these co-researchers to articulate their own concerns through their use of informed reflection which arguably has the potential to challenge the dominant orders of discourse relating to people with intellectual disability and research.

## 3. The Language Learners' Voice

There is a paucity of research related to how educators can identify an effective language pedagogy to support the language learning process of students with intellectual disabilities. It has been found that for this group of students, the process of learning a second language can be a demanding and even a humiliating experience [65] and that having an intellectual or learning disability should not preclude a learner the opportunity to learn a second language, should he/she wish to do so [66].

### *3.1. Methods*

Inspired by the research in embodiment studies [67,68], Piazzoli and Kubiak [58] set out to identify an effective teaching pedagogy to support the second language learning process (in this case Italian) of ASIAP students. The qualitative study, which was ethically approved by the School of Education's research committee, asked the following research question: What effects does embodiment have on the language learning process of a group of adult students with an intellectual disability? The participants consisted of a group of six Irish ASIAP students—three male and three female—aged between twenty and thirty-five. The spectrum of disabilities of the participants included Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), dyspraxia, and Down Syndrome as well as learning disabilities like dysgraphia, dyscalculia, and dyslexia. While the students were absolute beginners of Italian (L2), they were familiar with drama and improvisation.

Students' reflections were elicited through three focus groups which were filmed and transcribed for analysis and were undertaken at the beginning, middle, and end of the project. In addition, a reflective practitioner's journal was maintained throughout the project by both authors which spanned 12 weeks for a total of 16 hours contact. The process consisted of creating: (1) a range of language activities, suitable for beginners (i.e., greetings, expressing identity, expressing basic needs, describing shapes and colours, and expressing likes and dislikes) which encouraged embodiment and play, and (2) a series of voice exercises based on ideokinesis, an L2 method developed by Asher [68] which draws on sensory-motor skills to connect speech and action.

### *3.2. Findings*

Mid-way through the study, the students' open attitude towards learning was evident; what we identified as "openness" is described by the following two students as a sense of fun in learning:

> *"I see that it's very interesting in doing all the acting and speaking Italian because it allows you to learn how dramatic the Italian language is. I like doing something rather than sitting in our chairs all day"*.
>
> *"I agree . . . Able to move around. Able to learn Italian through drama . . . It puts fun to learning new things like speaking another language"*.

One student, who initially resisted undertaking the embodied approach, shifted his responses throughout the course of the study, going from defensiveness to a gradual engagement. When asked: "What's it like to study Italian in this way?", he responded: *"Excellent . . . . It's the only learning I'm going to get."*.

While it has long been assumed by educators and policymakers working outside the field of intellectual disabilities that L2 study would be an enormous challenge to students with intellectual disabilities, such unquestioned assumptions have been recognised by Piazzoli and Kubiak as creative opportunities for their pedagogical practice. Building on insights such as: reducing the syllabus to the essential elements; slowing the pace of instruction; reducing the vocabulary demand and providing constant review; and incorporating as much visual/tactile/kinaesthetic stimulation as possible, Piazzoli and Kubiak's study managed to shed light on the connection between embodiment and language learning in the context of students with intellectual disabilities in a higher / post-secondary environment. In one student's words:

> *So now that I know a bit of Italian, I might be able to translate into English for my parents. Because I'm learning Italian so it's interesting to know so when I go to Italy, I can understand what people are saying. Or what's written on something; I can translate it into English for my mum and dad.*

Piazzoli and Kubiak's study has demonstrated that students with intellectual disabilities are willing to take risks with regard to second-language learning if they are offered a supportive and enabling learning environment. Crucially, this research has revealed that the value of a performative pedagogy is achieved when embodying imagery, meaning-making, and playful expressiveness in a meaningful context. It is, however, also acknowledged that further research needs to be taken in this direction to explore other inclusive learning opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to learn a second language.

## 4. Discussion

This paper presents a selection of voices from one of the most marginalised groups within higher education—students with intellectual disabilities. As such, a space has been opened for the voices of these students to be heard and to create awareness about their experiences of learning on campus. As attention to voice often signals a concern with representation and empowerment, the challenge for the current authors remains to "facilitate the creation of spaces in which student voice is not merely demonstrated as being present, but in which that presence also has power, authenticity, and validity" [69] (p. 183). Consequently, the transformative aspect of voice—voice-as-right, voice-as-participation—is foregrounded in the TCPID studies presented above and offers a valuable insight into the lived experience and the learning potential of students with intellectual disabilities in relation to co-researching and learning a second language.

However, it has been noted that the claims for the transformative potential of voice politics have been criticised on several grounds, from offering only superficial forms of inclusion, to the problem of power in the selective bestowing of voice [37]. While mindful of these concerns, this paper set out to present the voices of ASIAP students so their perspectives can be read, heard, valued, and recognised. Consequently, the value of privileging these students' voices may begin to challenge and question the authority and perspective of the so-called 'centre', i.e., those whose voices are already well and truly heard and dominate the seemingly natural ways of looking at and organising the world of the higher educational learning environment. This focus is important as the student voice literature in higher education is relatively silent on the issue of power relationships between teachers and students, consequently, little consideration is given to issues such as equality and empowerment [39]. This current paper has also gone some way to address both these observations, as well as McLeod's [36] concerns regarding the relations between learners and teachers, which are central to how we understand the mediation and reception of student voice. By outlining the value of privileging students' voices, the TCPID studies outlined above present a variety of ways in which power relationships are negotiated between faculty and students. Within the context of the TCPID, the term 'student voice' extends beyond what Seale described as 'the management of student voice' [60]. Rather, the focus within the TCPID centres on the meaningful nature of the dialogue between the TCPID and its students and being mindful of the profound possibilities inherent in establishing a symbiotic interchange between staff and students.

## 5. Strengths, Limitations, and Conclusions

We are mindful, however, of O'Donnell, Lloyd, and Dreher [70] who outline that there is a risk of constructing voice as a compensatory attribute of the marginalised and the culturally silenced, as a marker of 'difference' that needs to be acknowledged and managed in the foreign environment of a university. Accordingly, to align voice with marginalised or under-represented groups is to further stigmatise such students—they become known and heard by their 'otherness'.

The TCPID studies presented in this paper do not aim to speak for and on behalf of its students. Rather, the participating student volunteers were enthusiastic to learn about the research process and articulate their opinions and related feelings. While they may not necessarily be representative of all students with intellectual disabilities, we remain appropriately cautious about generalising from such work. It has significance beyond its specific context: research undertaken in the TCPID has implications for all higher educational institutions that provide inclusive education for people with intellectual disabilities. By tapping into these students' experiences, we have endeavoured to open some new lines of enquiry and (re)consider the effects and impact of student voice research, both in the classroom and for policy.

Further work with different students, in different contexts, should extend the range of interpretations and could provide one way of unmasking power and the inequality of opportunities. Consequently, these understandings have the potential to create possibilities for the multiple roles and identities people with intellectual disabilities have, or should have, access to. This is particularly true and important within the context of post-secondary and higher education, a setting where cultural identity is constantly being constructed and re-constructed through discourse and social interaction.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, J.K.; methodology, J.K.; software, J.K; validation, J.K., and D.A.; formal analysis, J.K.; investigation, J.K; resources, J.K., D.A., M.D., B.R.; data curation, J.K. and M.D.; writing—original draft preparation, J.K.; writing—review and editing, J.K., D.A., M.D. and B.R.; visualization, J.K.; supervision, J.K.; project administration, J.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The studies were conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of The School of Education, Trinity College Dublin (protocol code XXX and date of approval).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the studies presented in this paper.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the first corresponding author and are not publicly available to ensure the privacy of the participants and to comply with the instructions of the ethic committee that approved this study.

**Acknowledgments:** The authors wish to acknowledge the ASIAP students and co-researchers whose participation made the study possible.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

1. van der Wende, M.C. The Bologna Declaration: Enhancing the transparency and competitiveness of European higher education. *High. Educ. Eur.* **2000**, *25*, 305–310. [CrossRef]
2. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Disability. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). 2006. Available online: https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html (accessed on 20 September 2021).

3. United Nations General Assembly. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. 10 December 1948. Volume 217, p. A(III). Available online: https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3712c.html (accessed on 20 September 2021).
4. Inter-Agency Commission (UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank) for the World Conference on Education for All. World Declaration on Education for All and Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs. In Proceedings of the World Conference on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs, Jomtien, Thailand, 5–9 March 1990.
5. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, UNESCO. The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education. In Proceedings of the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality, Salamanca, Spain, 7–10 June 1994.
6. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, UNESCO. The Framework for Action: Education for All. In Proceedings of the World Education Forum, Dakar, Senegal, 26–28 April 2000.
7. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, UNESCO. *The Right to Education for People With Disabilities: Towards Inclusion*; UNESCO: Paris, France, 2004.
8. Government of Ireland. Disability Act. 2005. Available online: http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2005/act/14/enacted/en/html (accessed on 26 May 2015).
9. Government of Ireland. Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities. 1996. Available online: http://lenus.ie/hse/browse?type=author&value=Commission+on+the+Status+of+People+with+Disabilities&value_lang=en_GB (accessed on 26 May 2015).
10. Government of Ireland. Education Act. 1998. Available online: http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1998/en/act/pub/0051 (accessed on 26 May 2015).
11. Government of Ireland. Equal Status Act. 2000. Available online: http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2000/en/act/pub/0008/index.html (accessed on 26 May 2015).
12. Government of Ireland. Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act. 2004. Available online: http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/bills28/acts/2004/A3004.pdf (accessed on 26 May 2015).
13. McCoy, S.; Banks, J.; Shevlin, M. Insights into the Prevalence of Special Educational Needs. In *Cherishing All the Children Equally? Ireland 100 Years on From the Rising*; Williams, J., Nixon, E., Smyth., E., Watson, D., Eds.; Oak Tree Press: Dublin, Ireland, 2016; pp. 153–174.
14. Watson, D.; Lawless, M.; Maitre, B. *Employment Transitions among People with Disabilities in Ireland. An Analysis of the Quarterly National Household Survey*; Economic and Social Research Institute: Dublin, Ireland, 2017. Available online: https://www.esri.ie/system/files?file=media/file-uploads/2017-03/RS58.pdf (accessed on 20 September 2021).
15. Aston, D.; Banks, J.; Shevlin, M. *Post-School Transitions for Students with Intellectual Disabilities in the Republic of Ireland*; Trinity College Dublin: Dublin, Ireland, 2021.
16. National Platform of Self-Advocates. *Report on Our Pre-budget Meeting*; National Platform of Self-Advocates: Dublin, Ireland, 2018. Available online: http://thenationalplatform.ie/wpcontent/uploads/2018/07/Pre-Budget-Meeting-The-National-Platform-of-Self-Advocates.pdf (accessed on 20 September 2021).
17. Sarah Hourigan, S.; Fanagan, S.; Kelly, C. *Annual Report of the National Intellectual Disability Database Committee, Main Findings*; NIDD: Harrogate, UK, 2017. Available online: https://www.hrb.ie/fileadmin/2._Plugin_related_files/Publications/2018_pubs/Disability/NIDD/NIDD_Annual_Report_2017.pdf (accessed on 20 September 2021).
18. Saloviita, T. An inclusive adult education program for students with mild to severe developmental disabilities: Experiences from a pilot project in Finland. *Dev. Disabil. Bull.* **2000**, *28*, 27–39.
19. Flinders University. Up the Hill Project. 2011. Available online: http://blogs.flinders.edu.au/flinders-news/2009/09/28/flinders-offersunique-disabilities-program/ (accessed on 20 December 2012).
20. University of Alberta. On Campus Program. 2006. Available online: http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/oncampus/nav01.cfm?nav01=33356 (accessed on 20 December 2012).
21. Hart, D.; Grigal, M.; Sax, C.; Martinez, D.; Will, M. Postsecondary education options for learners with intellectual disabilities. *Res. Pract.* **2006**, *45*. Available online: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED521362.pdf (accessed on 20 September 2021).
22. Izuzquiza Garset, I.D.; Herrero, R. Inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in university. Results of the Promentor Program (UAM-PRODIS). *Siglo Coro Rev. Esp. Sobre Discapacidal Intelect.* **2016**, *2016*, 27–43. [CrossRef]
23. O'Connor, B.; Kubiak, J.; Espiner, D.; O'Brien, P. Lecturer responses to the inclusion of students with intellectually disabilities auditing undergraduate classes. *J. Policy Pract. Intellect. Disabil.* **2012**, *9*, 247–256. [CrossRef]
24. Carroll, S.Z.; Petroff, J.G.; Blumberg, R. The Impact of a College Course Where Pre-Service Teachers and Peers with Intellectual Disabilities Study Together. *Teach. Educ. Spec. Educ.* **2009**, *32*, 351–364. [CrossRef]
25. Devitt, M. *Update from the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, 2020*; Trinity College Dublin: Dublin, UK, 2020.
26. Newman, L.; Wagner, M.; Cameto, R.; Knokey, A.M. *The Post-High School Outcomes of Youth with Disabilities up to 4 Years after High School: A Report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)*; NCSER 2009–3017; SRI International: Menlo Park, CA, USA, 2009.
27. Myers, F.; Ager, A.; Kerr, P.; Myles, S. Outside looking in? Studies of the community integration of people with learning disabilities. *Disabil. Soc.* **1998**, *13*, 389–413. [CrossRef]
28. Hafner, D.; Moffatt, C.; Kisa, N. Cutting-edge: Integrating learners with intellectual and developmental disabilities into a 4-year liberal arts college. *Career Dev. Except. Individ.* **2011**, *34*, 18–30. [CrossRef]

29. Grigal, M.; Hart, D.; Paiewonsky, M. Postsecondary education: The next frontier for individuals with intellectual disabilities. In *Think College: Postsecondary Education Options for Students with Intellectual Disabilities*; Grigal, M., Hart, D., Eds.; Paul H Brookes Publishing Co. Inc.: Baltimore, MD, USA, 2010; pp. 1–28.
30. Yamamoto, K.; Stodden, R.; Folk, E. Inclusive postsecondary education: Reimagining the transition trajectories of vocational rehabilitation clients with intellectual disabilities. *J. Vocat. Rehabil.* **2014**, *40*, 59–71. [CrossRef]
31. Stodden, R.A.; Mruzek, D.W. Introduction: Transition to Postsecondary Education and Employment of Persons with Autism & Intellectual Disabilities. *Focus Autism Other Dev. Disabil.* **2010**, *25*, 31–133.
32. Kubiak, J.; Spassiani, N.; Shevlin, M.; O'Keeffe, M. Developing Higher Educational Programmes for People with Intellectual Disabilities in Trinity College, The University of Dublin, Ireland. In *People with Intellectual Disability Experiencing University Life: Theoretical Underpinnings, Evidence and Lived Experience*; Kubiak, J., Spassiani, N., Shevlin, M., O'Keeffe, M., Eds.; Sense Publishers: Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 2019; pp. 141–153.
33. Shevlin, M.; Kubiak, J.; O'Donovan, M.A.; Devitt, M.; Ringwood, B.; Aston, D.; McGuckin, C. Effective Practices for Helping Students Transition to Work. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*; Shevlin, M., Kubiak, J., O'Donovan, M.A., Devitt, M., Ringwood, B., Aston, D., McGuckin, C., Eds.; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2020.
34. Kubiak, J. Using 'voice' to understand what college students with intellectual disabilities say about the teaching and learning process. *J. Res. Spec. Educ. Needs* **2017**, *17*, 41–48. [CrossRef]
35. Kubiak, J.; Shevlin, M. Experiencing Learning: Students with Intellectual Disabilities in Higher Education in Ireland. In *International Advances in Education: Global Initiatives for Equity and Social Justice*; Information Age Press: Charlotte, NC, USA, 2015; pp. 139–162. [CrossRef]
36. McLeod, J. Student voice and the politics of listening in higher education. *Crit. Stud. Educ.* **2011**, *52*, 179–189. [CrossRef]
37. Baker, B. What is voice? Issues of identity and representation in the framing of reviews. *Rev. Educ. Res.* **1999**, *69*, 365. [CrossRef]
38. Young, H.; Jerome, L. Student voice in higher education: Opening the loop. *Br. Educ. Res. J.* **2020**, *46*, 688–705. [CrossRef]
39. Pedder, D.; McIntyre, D. The impact of pupil consultation on classroom practice. In *Consultation in the Classroom: Developing Dialogue about Teaching and Learning*; Arnot, M., McIntyre, D., Pedder, D., Reay, D., Eds.; Pearson Publishing: London, UK, 2004; pp. 7–43.
40. Cooper, P.; McIntyre, D. *Effective Teaching and Learning: Teachers and Students' Perspectives*; Open University Press: Buckingham, PA, USA, 1996.
41. Flynn, P.; Shevlin, M.; Lodge, A. Pupil voice and participation: Empowering children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. In *Routledge International Companion to Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*; Cole, T., Daniels, H., Visser, J., Eds.; Routledge: London, UK, 2012; pp. 253–260.
42. Mitra, D.L. The significance of students: Can increasing "student voice" in schools lead to gains in youth development? *Teach. Coll. Rec.* **2004**, *106*, 651–688. [CrossRef]
43. Fielding, M.; Bragg, S. *Students as Researchers: Making a Difference*; Pearson Publishing: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2003.
44. Topping, K.J. *Peer Assisted Learning: A Practical Guide for Teachers*; Brookline Books: Brookline, MA, USA, 2001.
45. Flutter, J. Teacher development and pupil voice. *Curric. J.* **2007**, *18*, 343–354. [CrossRef]
46. Rudduck, J.; Flutter, J. *How to Improve your School: Giving Pupils a Voice*; Continuum Press: London, UK; New York, NY, USA, 2003.
47. Biesta, G.; Lawy, R.; Kelly, N. Understanding young people's citizenship learning in everyday life: The role of contexts, relationships and dispositions. *Educ. Citizsh. Soc. Justice* **2009**, *4*, 5–24. [CrossRef]
48. Mitchell, K.; Parker, W. I pledge allegiance to . . . Flexible citizenship and shifting scales of belonging. *Teach. Coll. Rec.* **2008**, *10*, 775–804.
49. Seale, J. Doing student voice work in higher education: An exploration of the value of participatory methods. *Br. Educ. Res. J.* **2010**, *36*, 995–1015. [CrossRef]
50. Bennett, R.; Kane, S. Students' interpretations of the meanings of questionnaire items in the National Student Survey. *Qual. High. Educ.* **2014**, *20*, 129–164. [CrossRef]
51. Flint, A.; Goddard, H.; Russell, E. *Architects of Their Experience: The Role, Value and Impact of Student Academic Representation Systems in Higher Education in England*; TSEP: London, UK, 2017.
52. Fielding, M. Transformative approaches to student voice: Theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities. *Br. Educ. Res. J.* **2004**, *30*, 295–311. [CrossRef]
53. Kubiak, J. Poetry pedagogy and university students with intellectual disabilities. *J. Poet. Ther.* **2020**, *33*, 137–151. [CrossRef]
54. Higher Education Authority. Invitation to Make a Submission on the next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2022–2026). Available online: https://hea.ie/policy/consultation-new-national-plan-for-equity-of-access-to-higher-education-2022-2026/ (accessed on 2 July 2021).
55. Kubiak, J. Researching Inclusively with College Students with Intellectual Disabilities. *Int. J. Learn. Divers. Identities* **2015**, *22*, 37–50. [CrossRef]
56. Kubiak, J. How students with intellectual disabilities experience learning in one Irish university. *Ir. Educ. Stud.* **2015**, *34*, 125–143. Available online: http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/w5eBPHg95SKHyZswsvJt/full (accessed on 20 September 2021). [CrossRef]

57. Fitzgerald, G.; Dunne, S.; Biddulph, N.; O'Donovan, M.A.; O'Rourke, M.; Ryan, S.; McGilton, S.; O'Rourke, D.; O'Callaghan, H. Improving the university library experience of students with intellectual disabilities: A case study from an Irish institution. *Disabil. Soc.* **2020**, *35*, 1698–1704. [CrossRef]
58. Piazzoli, E.; Kubiak, J. The only learning I' m going to get': Students with intellectual disabilities learning a second language through performative pedagogy. *Scenario* **2019**, *13*, 21–41. [CrossRef]
59. Cameron, C. *Disability Studies: A students' guide*; SAGE: London, UK, 2014.
60. Mercer, G. Emancipatory Disability Research. In *Disability Studies Today*; Barnes, C., Oliver, M., Barton, L., Eds.; Polity: London, UK, 2002.
61. Marton, F. Phenomenography—A Research Approach to Investigating Different Understandings of Reality. *J. Thought* **1986**, *21*, 28–49.
62. Williams, V. *Disability and Discourse: Analysing Inclusive Conversation with People with Intellectual Disabilities*; Wiley-Blackwell: Chichester, UK, 2011.
63. Perry, J.; Felce, D. Initial findings on the involvement of people with an intellectual disability in interviewing their peers about quality of life. *J. Intellect. Dev. Disabil.* **2004**, *29*, 164–171. [CrossRef]
64. Mellon, C.A. Library Anxiety: A Grounded Theory and Its Development. *Coll. Res. Libr.* **2015**, *76*, 276–282. [CrossRef]
65. Sparks, R.L. Myths About Foreign Language Learning and Learning Disabilities. *Foreign Lang. Ann.* **2016**, *49*, 252–270. [CrossRef]
66. Kormos, J.; Smith, A.M. *Teaching Languages to Students with Specific Learning Differences*; Multilingual matters: Bristol, UK, 2012.
67. McNeill, D. *Language and Gesture*; Cambridge University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2000.
68. Asher, J. *Learning Another Language through Actions. The Complete Teachers' Guide-Book*; Sky Oaks Publications: Los Gatos, CA, USA, 1977.
69. Ellsworth, E. Why doesn't this feel empowering: Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. *Harv. Educ. Rev.* **1989**, *59*, 297–324. [CrossRef]
70. O'Donnell, P.; Lloyd, J.; Dreher, T. Listening, path-building and continuations: A research agenda for the analysis of listening. *J. Media Cult. Stud.* **2009**, *23*, 423–439. [CrossRef]

education sciences

MDPI

*Article*

# Voices of Women within the Devanga Community, Bangalore, India

**Pooja Haridarshan**

Faculty of Health, Education and Society, University of Northampton, Northampton NN1 5PH, UK; pujapadki@gmail.com

**Abstract:** Women face a unique set of challenges in India on account of traditionally held views of their gender, as well as often having lower educational and community status. Gender discrimination has continued to remain an evil in our society. Almost 70% women in South Asia are married at a young age, which is coupled with early childbearing and a lack of decision-making abilities within the traditional family structures, further enhancing their "disadvantaged" position in society. In India, the relationship of status and patriarchal values in addition to the deprived status of women worsens the situation. Despite advances having been made in the active participation of women in the political and economic domain, not much change has been seen in incidences of gender discrimination or dominant patriarchy. Daily interactions ensure that gender stereotypes have a strong influence on our values, judgements and evaluations to an extent that men and women are treated differently in society. A small weaving community, the Devanga community, which has its roots spread across India, practices stereotypes and patriarchal norms which have ensured the existence of male dominance in almost every aspect of decision making. The position of women within this community is worthy of debate and discussion, although no prior research has been conducted on this issue within the Devanga community. This paper draws upon the voices of women from within this community to understand the various levels of discrimination faced by them on a regular basis, along with highlighting male privilege as a cause of perpetuated discrimination and lesser opportunities for girls compared with boys. The reported research study analyzed data obtained from 120 women from the Devanga community through semi structured questionnaires and interviews and adopted an ethnographic feminist perspective to interpret these data. Findings indicate that the voices of women within this community are suppressed due to contributory factors such as orthodox beliefs and practices, male dominance, early marriage, and domestic responsibilities and all of these can be viewed as a barrier to providing educational opportunities to girls. Findings suggest that despite the progress made by women in India, they are still considered to be the single largest group of backward citizens.

**Keywords:** stereotypes; status of women in India; gender discrimination; feminist research

**Citation:** Haridarshan, P. Voices of Women within the Devanga Community, Bangalore, India. *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 547. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11090547

Academic Editors: Michael Shevlin and Richard Rose

Received: 2 August 2021
Accepted: 9 September 2021
Published: 16 September 2021

## 1. Introduction: Purpose of the Study

Women's emancipation continues as a subject of interest, predominantly because of the subordination and repression experienced by many. The struggle for liberation continues because women's progress cannot be addressed in isolation from other political and socioeconomic factors. It has been suggested that contemporary India with its unique heritage and cultural history continues to remain a patriarchal society where predominantly women carry the burden of family heritage [1]. Several debates are ongoing about the situation of women in India and because of this, gender inequality has now become one of the most widely discussed subjects in Government and Non-Government organizations with an immediate identified need to eliminate all forms of inequality against women [2].

Though women's education is a highly debated topic of importance, it continues to remain an area of contention [3]. Researchers such as Madigan [4] reported that despite girls being raised to assume roles such as that of a wife and mother, the enforcement of equal access legislation has tremendously increased their options. However, in several parts of the world, there are evident gaps between where girls' education is and where it should be [5]. The study reported in this paper is based on this premise with acknowledgement that the education of girls is understood and interpreted in several different ways by the members of the community investigated. This paper aimed at understanding the lives and roles of women within a weaving community in India, the Devanga community, to provide them with an opportunity to have their voices, experiences and life stories heard. In doing so, a specific focus was maintained on gaining an insight into the educational opportunities provided to women and girls in this community as it would help in gaining an understanding of their roles in society.

At the onset of this study, the researcher believed that women of the Devanga community were conditioned into being submissive as well as to follow patriarchal societal rules before and after marriage. This coupled with deficits in women's power and voices makes the gender inequality situation worse. In India, sons are considered more important than daughters to ensure the masculine parental lineage, and this practice is followed strongly within the Devanga community. A good understanding of this aspect demands an investigation into how gender bias is experienced and maintained within the families of the Devanga community, and the way it is reinforced through various social, cultural and traditional contexts. The Devanga community is a small weaving community which has its roots spread across several states in India. There are several theories on the emergence of this community, and it is believed that because of the prevalent caste system and social conditions in India they became an endogamous weaving unit. According to several ancient texts, members of this community hold significant authority over a range of religious practices and customs; however, there is no literature that provides evidence for this community following strict gender norms and stereotyped rules. Having understood the patriarchal rules followed by this community, it was imperative that the researcher generated sufficient data that can be used to support women in this community to find their voices and be aware of their basic rights as individuals. The researcher cannot be seen as being totally neutral, being a member of this community and holding preconceived ideas that orthodox ideas and prejudiced norms should be confined to the past. This situation is not unusual in feminist research that adopts a socio-ethnographic approach and requires close observations of the phenomena under scrutiny in order to provide data that are trustworthy and can be verified by reference to the data presented in this study. An important motivating factor for the researcher was to provide a clearer understanding of the educational opportunities afforded or denied to a sample of women, which might ultimately assist them in gaining improved life chances in the future.

The gender roles of women in India have been broadly studied under the headings of marriage and motherhood [6] factors that have shaped their identities in society. Looking from a cultural perspective, motherhood is viewed as an essence of womanhood, and though this along with marital status is rightly seen as important, the researcher feels the current interpretation of these terms restricts and regulates women's lives [7]. An unspoken and unheard voice was discussed by Armstrong [8] wherein the focus is on those people whose lives have been affected the most in terms of marginalization. Armstrong [8] makes this reference in the field of special education, but the same can be contextualized to this research as the unspoken voices are those of the women in the community under investigation. These voices can be considered as being in need of being heard and listening to these voices may bring new perspectives to this research. Women of this community are known to be submissive in nature as well as abiding by the rules laid down by the male members of the community, though it is not clear as to what the consequences might be of not complying to the rules. In modern India, women are aware of their marginalized role in social structures and realize that they cannot overcome this deprived state until they receive social acceptance as an individual, especially by the male members of the family and society [9]. Women are regarded as "individuals in need of a male anchor" to provide them with social and cultural acceptance. This raises a question about the role of education because women are constantly stifled by religious and social customs and find their lives torn between traditionalism and modernity. They seem to be unable to liberate themselves from the practices that are embedded as a major entity in society.

While viewing gender equality through the lens of human development, many Asia Pacific countries have made significant advances in this key development because women are able to outperform men in several domains. Despite these achievements, women in South-East Asia are still subjected to discriminatory activities because of higher vulnerability to poverty and their inability to access economic opportunities which further restricts their mobility in society.

Marriage has a significant impact on individual lives, especially those of women, which has led researchers and policymakers to consider marriage from a human rights perspective, especially due to considerations of consent and age at marriage. Despite the imposition of regulations, many women in developing countries including India are subjected to early marriage, most of the time, without choice. Child marriage or early marriage (marriage before 18 years) is a global concern and is a human rights violation which has affects girls across the globe. India, among other countries, remains among the top countries practicing child marriage [10]. Women who marry young tend to have lower education and lesser decision making power within their families, presumably because these marriages are coordinated and orchestrated by their families [11]. This has been a rising cause of concern, particularly in the Sub-Saharan African countries and South Asia, wherein almost 70% of the girls are married before attaining the legal age for marriage. This has been strikingly pervasive within the community reported in this paper and hence the need to investigate this aspect arose because of the potential health consequences it may have on these young women. Data from the Devanga community evidenced that though parents want their daughters to achieve academic ambitions, they are also worried, because educating girls translates into difficulty in finding a suitable groom which is a very important aspect for the parents. Girls well-versed with domestic skills increases their chances of finding a suitable groom, rather than educating them Additionally, women who marry young may not be in a position to assert themselves or establish their position within their family due to their suppressed voices.

The goal of the research reported in this paper was to adopt an emancipatory approach into understanding the various factors that contribute to the suppression of women's voices and the consequences of this situation.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The current study was designed to provide voices to women whom the researcher believed were living disadvantaged lives. The research enabled the collection of data along with providing women a platform to have their stories heard without the researcher's own bias playing an influential role. Hence, a feminist stance was adopted because "feminism focuses on injustices that have historically developed and continue to exist in our society" [12]. Feminist researchers believe that this methodology requires the establishment of an emotional connection with the participants because there are multiple pathways to gaining scientific knowledge. From the viewpoint of the researcher, it was important to obtain all aspects of these women's lives such as their day-to-day functioning, their roles within the families as well as their husbands' roles and most importantly their childhood experiences related to gender discrimination and the provision of educational opportunities, in order to find the depth of this problem. The researcher believes that a woman's childhood experiences contribute largely to the expectations she has for her children, and if she made any differing provisions with regards to educational opportunities for her son compared with her daughter. Conforming to the societal norms of girls marrying young and, ensuring that women do not have freedom or financial independence are predominant influences within the Devanga community and the researcher believes that change needs to be implemented. Male dominance was also cited as a predominant factor contributing to suppression of women by researchers such as [2] and the researcher also believes that women are perceived to require a male anchor to provide them emotional and social stability. The research sought to gain greater understanding on a woman's perceived role in a society which has been influenced by her childhood experiences with regards to the educational opportunities provided to her. This was investigated by adopting an approach which obtained data through different sources and to validate the findings appropriately. A combination of semi structured questionnaires, and semi structured interviews was chosen to respect the women's voices and opinions as well as to establish social relationships, while keeping feminist principles in mind. This decision was prompted by the intention to obtain a broad picture of the experiences and beliefs of women of the Devanga community whilst also developing a detailed account of these individuals' experiences. Women may have literacy equal to men, but they may lack the awareness to exercise their rights or in some cases may not even be aware of their rights, as reported in this paper. A dominant source of resistance to women's advancements comes from perceived male superiority and societal structures centered around it which may prevent women's voices from being heard.

A purposive sample of 120 mothers served as the focus of the initial questionnaire. The women approached to be a part of this study essentially fell into one common category of having two or more children (comprising both boys and girls). All the women included in the study essentially were within the age group of 25 to 60 years of age. Women were identified through community databases as well as familiar contacts. Having decided on the sample, the research instruments were designed to seek information on these women's' childhood experiences and the impact of these on their lives. The purpose of developing questionnaires was to ensure that questions would be interpreted the same way by every participant thus enabling them to respond accurately and willingly [13]. A combination of close and open-ended questions was used to enable women to provide their demographic details as well as have the freedom to use their own language to answer questions about their childhood and motherhood (many would use Kannada as their first language). Based on their responses in the questionnaires, women were further categorized into three distinct groups based on their educational qualifications.

The intention behind segregating women was not undertaken with the purpose of differentiating them but to explore the role of education and its influence on their understanding of their role in society.

In order to avoid conflict between the researcher and the researched population as well as to maintain their rights and confidentiality, the researcher adhered to established ethical procedures. This was ensured by distributing information sheets and informed consent forms to all the participants prior to administration of questionnaires. The information sheets provided details about the context of this study and why it was being conducted while the informed consent form sought written consent by the participants to ensure they had read and fully understood the reasons for conducting this study before their participation.

Of the 120 questionnaires distributed, 96 were returned from which 75 women consented to being interviewed. The returned questionnaires on analysis revealed that participants appreciated that their opinions were being sought and respected which possibly provided them the required encouragement to fill the questionnaires as well as consent to participate in the interviews.

Semi structured interviews were conducted with the participants to obtain in-depth information on sensitive areas of their lives which would also provide the participants the freedom to steer the discussion towards issues that were of relevance to them within the scope of the study [14]. Of the 75 women who consented to be interviewed, three women chose to withdraw from the research as their husbands were aware of their participation and the women feared trouble. Five women requested to be called at a later time but when they were called there was no response which was also recorded as having withdrawn from the research and the remaining four women wanted to be interviewed "just for fun", obviously having not understood the seriousness of conducting a research of this nature. This left the researcher with 63 women: 42 who were interviewed one-to-one and 21 telephonically.

Instilling confidence in interviewees is of the utmost importance along with using comfortable and non-intrusive language while addressing sensitive topics. Scrutinizing their childhood experiences through the questionnaires and interviews provided data on aspects of gender discrimination faced by the participants in their childhood as well as a lack of encouragement in pursuing academic and non-academic ambitions which eventually led to their suppression, both emotionally and physically. Probing questions to understand the life experiences of the women, impacting their perceptions of their role in society, involved asking questions about their treatment by their husbands' families, their opinion on their role in society and where they position themselves in that role. This was a sensitive topic for most women but having developed a high level of trust with the participants ensured honest and trustworthy responses. Some researchers [15] have mentioned the importance of maintaining trust and confidence with participants because it can have a positive impact on sharing personal and sensitive information, which can also become a long-term relationship. In this paper, the researcher was required to reconstruct the past events in the lives of these women in order to be able to appreciate their current issues and such sensitive information can be managed effectively through interviews, which at times were shaped by the interviewees themselves; hence, they were regarded as active participants in the research process [14].

The importance of being a female researcher at this stage was evident. Being a woman placed the researcher in a better position because of the ease of being able to shape social relations which may not have been so easy for a male researcher.

## 3. Results

Based on discussions from interviews and questionnaires, along with a critical analysis of the literature, several prominent issues and themes emerged which are a cause of concern but may also point to positive actions that can be taken to improve the lives and opportunities of women in this community. Having transcribed all the interview and questionnaire data, aspects that related to childhood experiences were separated from the ones that considered expectations from children and perceived roles in society. Facets of women being dissatisfied with their lives, having received support/no support from spouses and lack of independence were clustered under the third theme. Hence, the main issues being addressed in this paper are:

(a) Childhood experiences of women;
(b) Expectations from children;
(c) Role of women in the society.

Issues such as gender discrimination in childhood, childhood ambitions remaining unfulfilled, being subjected to over-protective parenting and allocation of funds towards the son's education were under the first theme. The second theme looked at issues of women having higher aspirations for sons, while some women had equal aspirations for sons and daughters. The last and final theme discussed aspects of women's perceptions of their roles and status in society and whether they were provided equal rights as men.

Though this study was conducted within a small community in Bangalore, several issues arose that require further exploration and understanding. Thematic analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data revealed that the birth of boys was preferred over girls, the major consequence of which is the discriminatory practices in educational opportunities and the suppression of women. A 33-year-old woman was subjected to psychological abuse to bear a third child because her first two children were girls. Despite the financial stability of the family being weak, she was compelled to bear another child as the family desired a "male-heir". She said: "My husband is a nice person, but he is completely dependent on his parents, he doesn't have the ability to think and act independently, so I just keep quiet. I cannot take any body's decisions because my in-laws don't understand all this. For my daughters I decide and sometimes ask my husband."

Three women in the sample emphasized the displeasure caused to their parents because they were born as a girl which eventually led to these women striving hard to make themselves self-reliant. Women also mentioned the desire to be treated equally to men and to be provided equal opportunities as men because a society such as the Devanga community currently believes in suppressing women rather than providing them with self-sustaining opportunities.

A 37-year-old woman is forcefully restricted to the house as her spouse is insecure of her mind being corrupted if she steps out. Her childhood was restricted as well because her parents believed in keeping girls home once they attained puberty.

Of the 63 women interviewed, 38 women mentioned that their freedoms are limited and are bound to strong stereotyped roles within the family. This is compounded by poverty because girls born in poor families are known to be married early in part because the demand for dowry is lower for younger girls [16]. This can be substantiated with the following excerpts: "We had ambitions of studying but our parents wanted us girls to get married as soon as possible"; "opportunities were lesser for us girls. I wanted to study but I wasn't allowed to. My parents got me married early."

Stereotyping and conditioning girls into gender specific roles was identified as another major finding. A 44-year-old participant of the study revealed that "when I was in eighth standard, I wanted to learn music/dance/instrument very badly, but my parents didn't send me for anything. They never used to let us out of the house". Another participant mentioned that "I just wanted to go out, but I was not sent, so we just grew up that way. Stayed inside the house and learned the domestic work. It was very clear, girls will study till 7th grade and boys till tenth grade. The reason for this was that once girls attained puberty they were not allowed outside the house".

A total of 21 women in the study stated that women are better equipped than men to handle responsibilities at home and outside and would perform better in society if they were provided with equal educational opportunities. A 37-year-old woman said: "They (girls) should be left free; their desires should be fulfilled and should not be restricted to the four walls of the house. My husband doesn't let me go out of the house because he feels if I socialize, my mind will get corrupted. Girls should be encouraged in everything by her parents, husband or in-laws. They should be taken care of well. They also deserve a good life that's the only dream I have."

Women in this study crave an equal status in society but are often told to "shut up" by the male members of the community because a woman's voice is not meant to be heard. Even today women of this community are told not to voice their opinions especially in the public sphere because speaking in public is a "man's job". Women's subordination and oppression is reflected in almost every aspect of society. To promote gender equality in a strongly patriarchal system such as India requires the consent of the male members. When women speak about gender equality, it seems more like seeking release from their repetitive restrictive life. In their understanding, letting women free of the domestic responsibilities of a "care giver" means gaining equal rights.

Having supportive partners may be considered as a positive factor in encouraging women to stand up for themselves and the data obtained revealed that some women have encouraging partners, but this issue has received little attention in the research literature. There is evidence such as those provided below to highlight the encouragement provided by the spouse:

"My husband also was very cooperative. After marriage he enrolled me into computer classes, spoken English class and finally beautician courses" and "My husband was very understanding and supportive in everything. He understood the difference in the way I was at my parents' place and used to help out in everything".

A majority of families in India, especially within the Devanga community, expect women to be subservient to their husbands and to remain submissive, a situation that could be termed psychological abuse because it is amalgamated with the lack of education and independence. Women additionally admitted to having developed feelings of guilt, fear and inadequacy despite having the husbands' support (in some cases) because other members of the family play a significant role in creating conflict and disharmony. Citing one example to evidence this was a 33-year-old woman who was initially harassed by her husband's parents for having not brought sufficient dowry. Her inability to have a son after having borne two daughters resulted in her being forced to have a third child despite her lack of financial security to support three children (as mentioned above).

In another instance, a 48-year-old woman revealed that she was going through a very abusive marriage, both physically and psychologically and has been humiliated all her life, not just by her husband but by her son and daughters as well. Paying specific attention to this situation, violence was perpetrated by the spouse and the children and the lack of education and a support system resulted in her silently accepting the abuse.

In most cases such as these, women bear the abuse silently because it creates an uncomfortable situation discussing these aspects with an outsider as well as having no support from family.

## 4. Discussion

While trying to understand the intricacies of the Devanga community, the researcher wished to interrogate the roles played by women and how they perceived their positions in society. As evidenced in the data, women in this sample believed that they had been neglected from their childhood and continue to feel so, primarily because of their lack of participation in family decisions, poor educational background, and the inability to obtain freedom. Several studies have been conducted to understand the lives of women in rural India, but a study of this nature has not previously been conducted in India within an urban environment in which the researcher's aim was to focus on a woman's role and status in society and understand the various reasons why women are maintained in positions of subservience. A strong correlation was also identified between girls marrying early and educational attainment each negatively impacting the other. As shown in the results section, some women explicitly mentioned the unhappiness their birth brought to their families and growing up with a feeling of resentment was not easy. Having had no higher education, it was challenging to be assertive and find ways to sustain themselves. Education alone does not provide empowerment, but it is rather the will and attitude of empowering oneself that matters. Though women are becoming more aware of their rights as individuals, they also require support to be able to stand up for themselves. From the data obtained, it can be observed that there is a strong urge to rise beyond the role of a wife and mother to become a more economically and intellectually independent being. The indication of women being told to "shut up" reinforces the suggestions of Beard [17] who found that women are commonly expected to stay quiet and not voice their opinions. One might presume that these were behaviors of the past, but the data collected in this study evidences its presence in Indian society today. Talking in the public sphere is a man's domain, any woman doing the same is believed to bring dishonor to the family.

The results also indicated that some women have supportive partners and that this may be viewed as a positive impetus for the future generations of girls being able to pursue their ambitions. However, interference by other family members was also a finding in this study to be a behavior which restricts the spouse' support and results in women succumbing to traditional societal pressures.

## 5. Conclusions

Women's status continues to remain paradoxical and ironical in India and the Devanga community women fare no better than others. The picture is less positive when the education and literacy of girls in India is considered [18]. Despite the Indian economy growing so rapidly, the educational attainment of women in India continues to remain a cause of concern and debate. Several women within the Devanga community have begun to recognize the need to be provided equal rights and opportunities as men but find it difficult to disentangle themselves from the clutches of patriarchy and oppression.

There are several reasons for this including poverty, the lack of educational opportunities, and gender discrimination to name a few. Data obtained in this study also revealed that parents hesitate in providing educational opportunities to girls as it indirectly influences finding a suitable groom for her as no one within the Devanga community prefers an educated daughter in-law. This also contributes to getting girls married at a very young age (32 women of the 63 interviewed were married very early). Evidence was indicative of women understanding the need to educate their daughters for them to be able to lead independent and successful lives in the future. However, the lack of courage and self-esteem eventually leads to them succumbing to societal pressures. The prevalence of dominant ideologies such as these, restricts girls and women to stereotyped roles which in turn leads to their devaluation in several aspects. A positive finding that emerged because of this was that women who have experienced childhood discrimination and a lack of opportunities have chosen to allow their daughters to decide their career paths. Though this may not seem a significant finding, the author finds it important because suppression in their childhood led to them having their ambitions denied; encouraging their daughters is a way of marking their own freedom and empowerment. Women have thus chosen to let their daughters decide their career paths rather than restrict them to the four walls of the house. Further research is required to understand whether girls were permitted to pursue their ambitions, especially by the male members of the family. One participant mentioned that women within the Devanga community are looked down upon and are backward in aspects of education and empowerment. Aware of this prejudiced system and orthodox beliefs, it will be a challenge to fight the system and stand up for girls' rights. Having understood the cultural nuances of this community, the author firmly believes that irrespective of any situation, it is quite challenging to fight these beliefs without adequate support. Disrespecting the rules laid down by the community members can bring in contempt and dishonor which the women are fearful of.

It would be helpful to discuss the findings of this research with the members of the community, especially with those male members who hold positions of authority and were instrumental in assisting with gaining access to the sample. Developing a support group would also prove helpful to address the existing prejudices and orthodox beliefs and ideologies by spreading the message that gender discrimination is a thing of the past and it is essential to provide women and girls with equal opportunities as men.

Conducting similar research with the male members of the community would throw more light on the reasons for the existence of these prejudiced ideas and would pave way for opening more avenues for improving the lives of the women of the Devanga community in the future. This study was conducted in a major city in South India; hence, the data obtained from this study cannot be generalized to the entire Devanga community spread across India. Replicating this research in other parts of India with the Devanga community women would also provide insight on whether this issue of women subordination and oppression exists only in Bangalore or if it is more widespread across India.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Anand, M. Gender in Social Work Education and Practice in India. *Soc. Work Educ.* **2009**, *28*, 96–105. [CrossRef]
2. Jha, P.; Nagar, N. A Study of Gender Inequality in India. *Int. J. Indian Psychol.* **2015**, *2*, 46–53.
3. Dean, N.B. *Women's Education: An International Perspective*; University Honors Program Theses; Georgia Southern University: Statesboro, GA, USA, 2017.
4. Madigan, J.C. The education of women and girls in the United States: A historical perspective. *Adv. Gend. Educ.* **2009**, *1*, 11–13.

5. Tembon, M.; Fort, L. *Girl's Education in the 21st Century: Gender Equality, Empowerment and Growth*; World Bank Publications: Herndon, DC, USA, 2008.
6. Lau, L. Literary Representations of the 'New Indian Woman': The Single, Working, Urban, Middle Class Indian Woman Seeking Personal Autonomy. *J. South Asian Dev.* **2010**, *5*, 271–292. [CrossRef]
7. Puri, J. *Woman, Body, Desire in Post-Colonial India: Narratives of Gender and Sexuality*; Taylor & Francis Group: London, UK, 1999.
8. Armstrong, D. *Experiences of Special Education: Re-Evaluating Policy and Practice through Life Stories*, 1st ed.; Taylor & Francis Group: London, UK, 2003.
9. Thakur, P. Status of Hindu women in Modern India. *Int. J. Eng. Technol. Sci. Res.* **2017**, *4*, 66–70.
10. Salvi, V. Child marriage in India: A tradition with alarming implications. *Lancet* **2009**, *373*, 1826–1827. [CrossRef]
11. Thornton, R.; Jensen, R. Early female marriage in the developing world. *Gend. Dev.* **2003**, *11*, 9–19.
12. Huilman, R.R.; Winters, K.T. Feminist Research in Higher Education. *J. High. Educ.* **2011**, *82*, 667–690. [CrossRef]
13. Artino, A.R., Jr.; La Rochelle, J.S.; Dezee, K.J.; Gehlbach, H. Developing questionnaires for educational research: AMEE Guide No. 87. *Med. Teach.* **2014**, *36*, 463–474. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
14. Warren, S.; Vincent, C. "This won't take long . . . ": Interviewing, ethics and diversity. *Int. J. Qual. Stud. Educ.* **2001**, *14*, 39–53. [CrossRef]
15. Crow, G.; Wiles, R.; Heath, S.; Charles, V. Research Ethics and Data Quality: The Implications of Informed Consent. *Int. J. Soc. Res. Methodol. Qual. Soc. Res.* **2006**, *9*, 83–95. [CrossRef]
16. Singh, R.; Vennam, U. *Factors Shaping Trajectories to Child and Early Marriage: Evidence from Young Lives in India*; Working paper. Young Lives; Oxford Department: Oxford, UK, 2016.
17. Beard, M. *Women and Power*; Profile: London, UK, 2017.
18. Saha, A. An assessment of gender discrimination in household expenditure on education in India. *Oxf. Dev. Stud.* **2013**, *41*, 220–238. [CrossRef]

education sciences

MDPI

*Article*

# The PRU: The Solution for Whom?

**Johan Malmqvist** [1,2]

[1] Faculty of Social Sciences, Linnaeus University, 351 95 Växjö, Sweden; johan.malmqvist@lnu.se
[2] School of Education and Communication, Jönköping University, 5. Box 1026, 551 11 Jönköping, Sweden

**Abstract:** In Sweden, pupil referral units (PRUs) have been recommended by the government, suggesting that "inclusion has gone too far". This governmental recommendation is not based on research focusing on PRUs, as such research is sparse. Furthermore, there has been a lack of evaluations of the efficacy of PRUs, and no national evaluations of such provision have been undertaken. Furthermore, more attention must be paid to PRU students' own perspectives and experiences as we lack knowledge of their needs and situation. This study aimed to investigate how educational needs have been and should be addressed in one PRU according to nine stakeholder groups, for example, current students, former students, parents, school staff, and various groups of people who, in their work, were responsible for deciding about the PRU (e.g., chief education officers or politicians) or supporting the PRU (e.g., school healthcare unit staff). Comparative analysis of all groups' perceptions considered similarities and differences of views of this topic. Preliminary results indicate substantial between- and within-group variation concerning the purpose of the PRU and uncertainty about educational quality, partly due to insufficient documentation. Some students described a "Catch-22": having been told to catch up educationally with peers and that PRU placement would help in this, they were disappointed, as the emphasis on non-educational practices impeded catching up.

**Keywords:** PRU; special needs education; special education; segregation; inclusion; inclusive education; stakeholder

**Citation:** Malmqvist, J. The PRU: The Solution for Whom? *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 545. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11090545

Academic Editors: Michael Shevlin and Richard Rose

Received: 20 June 2021
Accepted: 6 September 2021
Published: 15 September 2021

## 1. Introduction

For about twenty years, Swedish schools have struggled with poor results in international tests, such as PISA, and increased inequity. This has prompted a long-running debate about the causes of the current state. In parallel, the social order in schools and the efficacy of inclusion have been questioned. The establishment of Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) has been recommended by the government, as it is suggested that "inclusion has gone too far" [1]. Students who experience severe school difficulties concerning behavioural issues, such as students displaying emotional and behavioural difficulties, are the main target of PRU schooling. In some cases, PRUs address students with various causes of their school difficulties, whereas other PRUs target only students with certain disabilities, such as speech impairments, or certain diagnoses, such as ADHD. PRUs are often small with under 10 students; they follow the national curriculum and are often governed by municipalities, such as the PRU investigated here. Placement in a municipal PRU is often unavailable until it has been established that the regular school, despite extensive special needs support from a central municipal unit, cannot adequately address the student's needs. This depends partly on the inclusive education capacities of regular schools, as even regular schools that are similar in most other ways may differ greatly in this regard [2].

To understand the demand for and growth in PRUs in Sweden, it is important to understand the presence of private companies that administer PRUs as independent schools. Here, "PRU" refers to schools that restrict enrolment to students needing special support, irrespective of whether these schools are private or owned by municipalities. PRUs are to offer temporary school placement, as their students should eventually re-enter regular schools; however, this is neither a realistic nor desirable aim for all PRU students, as stated by a recent school commission [3]. The quotation above, which states that inclusion has gone too far, shows that there is party-political interest in where students who encounter school difficulties will receive their education. In 2010, the previous government reformed educational legislation to make it legal for independent schools to restrict their enrolment to students needing special support, something they had done without permission for several years [3]. According to Magnusson, some private companies are clustering pupils needing special support in PRUs as a marketing idea, and have renewed the idea of ″special schools″ for students needing special support [4,5]. In an educational system based on school choice, many such schools have claimed to have expertise and competence to provide good-quality education for students failed by mainstream schools. This has led to a less inclusive education system and is partially a consequence of the school choice idea, in which parental/individual preferences and a client focus have been prioritized [4].

To grasp the complexity of the Swedish school system, it should be noted that the School Inspectorate has long claimed that PRUs governed by municipalities contravene legislation, leading to a decreased number of municipal PRUs. However, not all 290 municipalities agree with this interpretation of educational legislation. In 2017, the Supreme Administrative Court established that municipally run PRUs are legal, and several new PRUs have since been established. The municipal desire to establish PRUs can partly be regarded as a consequence of the development of the Swedish market-driven educational system. When students and/or their legal guardians choose independent schools specializing in students with a medical diagnosis, such as ADHD, municipalities may incur substantial costs. The establishment of municipal PRUs specializing in students with diagnoses such as ASD and ADHD may indicate a strategy to reduce such costs.

As described above, current national policy is diametrically opposed to the previous policy of decreasing the number of segregated educational settings. This about-face follows the pattern of political standpoints in Sweden swinging from one pole to another regarding inclusion and segregation. Another example can be seen in teacher training policy, with two opposite positions being proposed concerning special pedagogical policy between 1999 and 2008 [6]. Today, it is obvious that the previous Swedish policy of inclusive education has been challenged, being partially replaced with one of segregation. The approval of privately owned PRUs, followed by recommendations to increase the use of PRUs by municipalities, indicates that the policy of segregation in education has gained strength in Sweden. Notably, in instituting these changes regarding PRUs and other segregation measures, the Swedish government has emphasized that schools must base their work on science, as stipulated in educational legislation. However, the government recommended an increase in PRUs without scientific support [3]. Instead, this segregation measure was based on agreements between political parties in January 2019, when parliamentary deadlock was resolved with an agreement covering 73 issues negotiated by two non-governmental political parties bargaining with the coalition government. The agreement decided that the Swedish National Agency for Education should investigate how to make it easier for municipalities to establish new PRUs.

The establishment of new PRUs has started to affect the school conditions of some learners. These learners often have underlying socioeconomic disadvantages, and many also have neuropsychiatric diagnoses. They are learners who run a high risk of being marginalized as adults as well, especially if they are locked into a segregated pathway through the education system [7]. A recent governmental commission stressed that school principals view segregated schooling as disadvantageous for learners [3]. According to the commission's review of PRU research and evaluations, we lack knowledge of PRU students' own perspectives on and experience of PRU schooling. This study was accordingly intended to build such knowledge and make relevant comparisons by also examining other groups affected by PRUs and groups that have power to affect the development of PRUs.

The primary aim of this study was to investigate stakeholders' experiences of work in one PRU with a secondary aim of comparing students' experiences with those of other stakeholders. It was considered important to initiate discussion of the role of PRUs in the school system, discussion substantially informed by knowledge of students´ experiences. This is in agreement with recent Swedish legislation implementing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The research questions focusing on the stakeholder groups' perceptions were:

1. What are the underlying problems that make PRU placements necessary for some students?
2. What are the relevant PRU policies and their main objectives?
3. What support does the PRU provide?
4. What are the outcomes of the PRU according to stakeholders?
5. What experiences have stakeholders had of PRU placements?
6. What are the alternatives to the PRU and how are they perceived?

## 2. Prior Research

A literature review identified few studies investigating PRU students' views and experiences regarding their school situation and schooling. A recent literature review by the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools (SPSM) [8] entitled "A PRU knowledge base" (translated from Swedish) found only four publications on PRUs, three of which were written by the present author. The SPSM's literature review found that students with an ADHD or ASD diagnosis are more often segregated to PRUs than other students, based on a total population study by Malmqvist and Nilholm [9]. Furthermore, there is greater demand for PRU placements for these two groups of students than for other groups of students. These demands are mainly voiced by parents of children with these diagnoses, parents of children whose peers have these diagnoses, interest groups, and teachers. Based on this demand, many independent schools (i.e., "free schools") have adopted a PRU profile, according to a mapping report by the Swedish Agency for Education [10]. According to the SPSM [8], this indicates increasing segregation in the Swedish educational system. The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions has argued that municipal PRU placements can be viewed as a long-term strategy to foster inclusion; however, according to the review's conclusion, this claim is unsupported. Furthermore, and as reported by the Swedish Agency for Education report [10], PRU students often want to return to regular schools but do not know how to do this [8].

PRUs are also used in other countries, such as the UK, where the objective of sometimes using PRUs for excluded students [11] differs from the objective in Sweden, as "deep exclusion" [12] does not exist in the latter. According to Hart [13], PRUs were introduced in England and Wales in 1994 with the aim of taking children "off track" for a period before helping them back on track for successful reintegration into mainstream schools [11,13]. In Hart's study [13], six children and the staff of one PRU were interviewed. The children, who were known to Social Services, were aged 9–13 years and subject to several risk factors. In investigating potential protective factors identified by children and staff, Hart found three key factors: attachment relationships, adult support, and personalized learning. The reality is that most PRUs lack these factors, as there are problems with poor-quality education provision contributing to academic underachievement and negative life trajectories [11]. In comparing the views of primary- and secondary-education PRU students, Jalali et al. [11] investigated how the students attributed their difficulties. The researchers found small differences between the two groups, but the secondary-education PRU population showed greater awareness of environmental factors influencing their situation, such as home and teacher relationships. The researchers also investigated the students' views of reintegration into regular schools. Whereas most of the younger students said that they wanted to return to mainstream education, the older students largely wanted to opt out. The views of PRU versus mainstream school staff regarding reintegration were investigated by Lawrence [14] using focus groups. Lawrence found that it was crucial that the students should want to return to mainstream schools if the reintegration was to succeed. Another factor promoting successful reintegration was that the parents were engaged in their child and her/his education.

The educational quality in regular schools corresponds to the need for PRU placements. A review of students with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) in mainstream schools that focused on teachers' attitudes toward including students with EBD in mainstream settings [15] is relevant here. PRUs' descriptions of their target groups often describe these students as having EBD. In addition, these students often have neuropsychiatric diagnoses [2,9,16], and special education classes have been established for diagnoses such as ADHD [14]. Gidlund [15] found 15 studies from 15 countries that considered teacher attitudes and multiple student groups. In ten of these studies, students with EBD were considered by teachers to be the most difficult group to include in mainstream settings. The teachers' attitudes were dependent on the nature of the disability, teaching experience and training, and the availability of support services. Gidlund also emphasized that cultural norms affect the attitudes toward students and that there is a need for further research into what support mainstream teachers need.

To sum up, studies of PRUs in Sweden are lacking and studies of students' experiences of their schooling in PRUs could not be found. Of the limited number of international studies of PRUs, few include reports on PRU students' experiences. Of course, a large body of research explores other types of segregated educational settings for students who experience school difficulties or have disabilities. The present review, however, is restricted to research on PRUs, as they represent a specific educational setting intended to return students to regular schools after a short period. This literature review underlines that the ongoing establishment of PRUs in Sweden has been authorized and supported without a sound basis of research knowledge.

## 3. A Framework of Stakeholder Views of Key Issues in Educational Settings Contributed by the IRIS Model

Stakeholder theory was chosen to collate views and opinions as it provided a theoretical tool with which to investigate and compare the experiences and views of nine stakeholder groups participating in a study of a PRU (cf. [17]). With this theoretical tool, originally described in his seminal 1984 work [18], Freeman advised organizations, for instance, educational organizations, to be aware of different stakeholder groups of importance to achieving improved performance [17]. According to Fassin ([19], p. 116), referring to Freeman's [19] classical definition, a stakeholder is a person or group who "can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization's objectives".

A central foundation of stakeholder theory is that organizations should be managed in consideration of all who are affected by them [17]. Who are considered stakeholders depends partly on the kind of organization being examined. How to delimit who, or what groups, are identified as stakeholders has been debated [20]. In stakeholder research, some are categorized as primary stakeholders. In this study, the PRU students are considered primary stakeholders, as they have their school placements at the PRU. Other stakeholders, including students in regular schools, are considered to belong to the category of secondary stakeholders, mainly because they are in no way involved in activities at the PRU, and their schoolwork does not directly influence the PRU. These students may indirectly experience gains or losses due to the presence of a PRU in their municipality. For instance, the presence of a PRU may influence what students at a school are transferred to a PRU. This may happen if regular school students complain about the actions or behaviour of a student, which may lead to the student being segregated in a PRU. There are a number of other secondary stakeholder groups, such as the parents of students in regular schools and the teachers at these schools, who were not part of this study. The primary stakeholder groups in this study are stakeholders who had work tasks/assignments related to managing the PRU, were current pupils, or were legal guardians of pupils attending the PRU when the data were collected. In other words, the first group supplied schooling services, while the second and third groups can be viewed as service recipients ([20], p. 453, Figure 6). This is in line with Freeman's definition of a stakeholder as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" ([17], p. 1160). A third strand of stakeholder theory addresses outcomes, or performance, based on how the organization works and is referred to as instrumental stakeholder theory [17]. Hence, the outcomes that the PRU is regarded as supporting, as well as the outcomes the stakeholder groups experience, will be interrogated here. However, what precedes the outcomes of the PRU is of equal importance for this study. Hence, stakeholder theory has been combined with the Inclusive Research in Irish Schools (IRIS) model.

The IRIS model [21] was developed from the findings of a literature review conducted as part of the IRIS research project; it was eventually elaborated on and applied in the IRIS empirical research study. In the present study, the experiences and views of the stakeholders are related to the four areas of the IRIS model. These areas are shown in Figure 1 and defined as policy, provision, experiences, and outcomes. In this study, the model was used as a screen to sort the empirical findings. The four IRIS model areas cover general educational issues, but not specific aspects of the PRU. The model has an inherent logic, a logical pathway, that was applied here. This pathway was formulated as and guided by the following questions, which served as research questions for this study:

1. What policy has been formulated?
2. What educational provision are administered to achieve the policy objective/objectives?
3. What are the outcomes of the administered educational provision?
4. What are the different stakeholder groups' experiences of the implemented policy in terms of policy, educational provision, and outcomes?

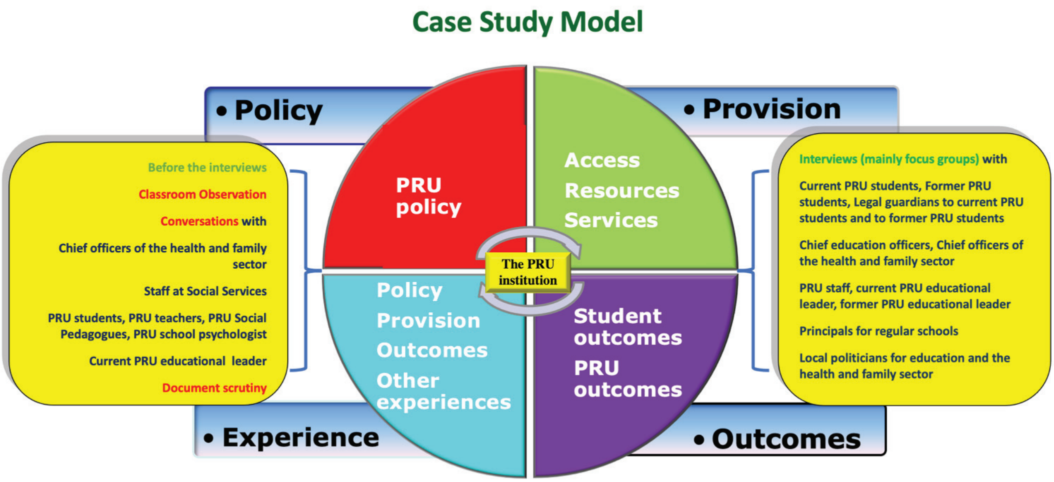


**Figure 1.** An adaption of the IRIS case study model that has been used in analysing stakeholder groups' perceptions about a pupil referral unit (PRU). Reprinted with permission from ref. [21]. Copyright year 2015, Copyright owners, Richard Rose and Michael Shevlin.

Two additional areas were also investigated and formulated as research questions: one area concerned who the prospective PRU students will be, and the other concerned whether there are alternatives to PRU placement, as described above.

## 4. Method

The study was designed as a stakeholder study based on the guidelines from the municipality that commissioned the study. One objective was to collect data from several groups representing different perspectives: students, legal guardians, professional groups whose work in some way concerns the PRU, and politicians. The consequence of this objective was that most, but not all, of the interviewees were primary stakeholders [17].

The data collection was conducted in 2011 framed within the same educational legislation that is present today [3]. A thorough analysis based on transcribed audial recordings of this data has not been conducted before, and there is no research article based on this data that has ever been published.

### 4.1. Participants

All participants were formally invited by the municipality to participate in a research-based evaluation of the PRU; it was stated that the empirical findings would also be part of a research study. Participant consent was required, and all participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they were free to end their participation at any time. Written consent was obtained from the legal guardians.

In this study, the researcher informed the municipality who to contact as interviewees; of the 44 invited participants, 37 agreed to participate (Figure 2). Students who had their school placement at the PRU were one stakeholder group (five of the PRU students enrolled were asked to participate), and legal guardians of former students were another. Most of them were legal guardians to students who were part of the focus group that consisted of former students. Several interviewees were chosen by the researcher based on their position as municipality employees. They were working as chief education officers, chief officers of the health and family sector, principals of regular schools, and PRU staff. The PRU staff consisted of one educational leader who also taught, three teachers, one leisure time pedagogue, and two social pedagogues. The latter three also taught to some extent. However, the leisure time pedagogue mainly worked with leisure time activities, whereas the two social pedagogues worked, for instance, with the social interaction in the PRU and with supporting PRU students' families. The politicians responsible for young people and their schooling were another stakeholder group. All these interviewees were considered primary stakeholders.

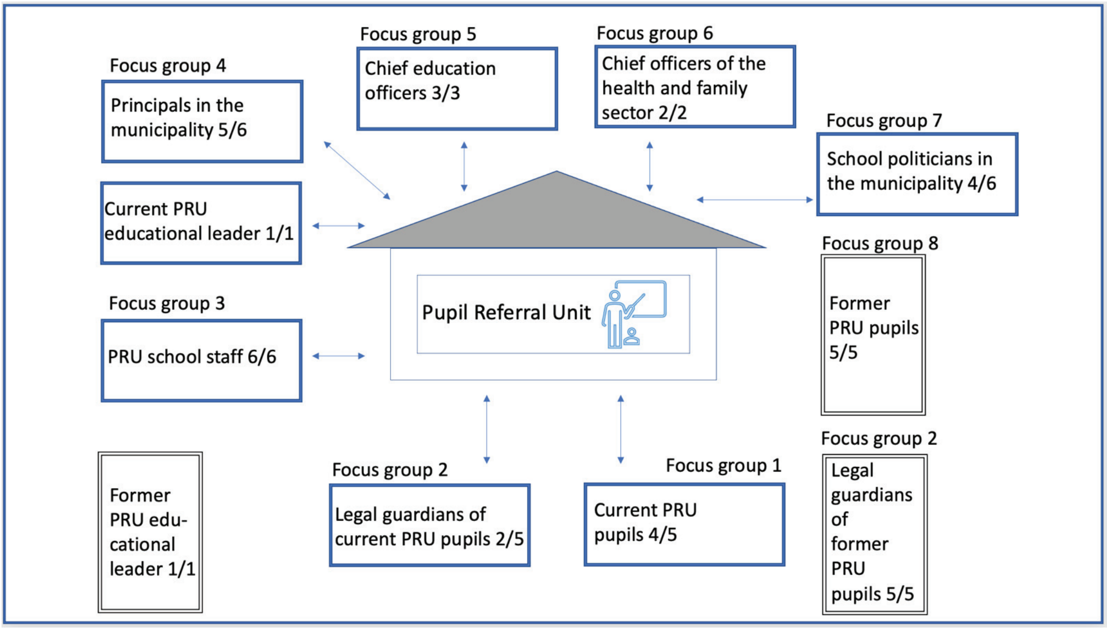


**Figure 2.** Stakeholder groups and participants in each of the eight focus group interviews and number of interviewees/number of invited participants. Primary stakeholders in blue boxes; secondary stakeholders in black boxes.

The situation differed for two other groups of stakeholders, i.e., former PRU students and legal guardians of former students, who are regarded as secondary stakeholders in this study. The municipal contact person for the project was asked by the researcher to recruit former students and their legal guardians, which was difficult for this person. Eventually, four legal guardians, including the two guardians of one former student, consented to participate in the study. They were recruited without any contact with the researcher, who received no information about them before the focus group interviews. It turned out that three of these legal guardians had been persistent in persuading the municipality to provide PRU placements for their children. Two of the legal guardians had in fact strongly pressured the municipality to establish the PRU. It is unlikely that most legal guardians whose children attended the PRU resembled these three, so in this sense, the selection of legal guardians and their children was skewed/biased. Their and their children's retrospective views were nevertheless seen as important for the study. Furthermore, the individual interview with the former educational leader of the PRU added a retrospective view of the PRU, whereas the individual interview with the current educational leader supplied an updated view. These two experienced PRU leaders were not invited to participate in the focus group interviews; rather, their views and experiences were documented during the individual interviews only. They were described as principals by some interviewees but they did not have the authority to make decisions as principals can.

### *4.2. Observations*

Non-participant observations were conducted for two full school days. The observations were conducted before the interviews to contribute to a holistic perspective on the students' school situation and to better understand what was described during the focus group interviews. This meant that use of the observations depended on the nature of the research project, in which observational data mainly served to enhance the quality of the extensive interview data and where the observer acted as a witness [22].

The most attention was paid to each student's school situation, how the teaching and other school activities were organized and realized, the extent to which the students were involved in one-to-one teaching separate from the other students in their own rooms or together with other students, and social interactions between students or between students and school staff. Field notes were taken for documentation. The observational findings are not reported separately in the "Results" section as they mainly served to enhance the quality of the interview data. For example, the observation findings clarified for me, as the interviewer, certain crucial matters that were important to understand in the interviews: the relationships and, not least, the tensions between current PRU students; the types of events that occurred during regular school days; and the comments of staff interviewees who had different roles and educational backgrounds. Additionally, informal conversations during the observation days provided additional understanding, as I could ask staff about the daily routines that I was observing.

### *4.3. Interviews*

The individual interviews with past and current leaders were semi-structured, and all were digitally recorded. The group interviews were also digitally recorded but differed in character from the individual ones. Whereas the individual interviews were conversations with a more or less continuous flow of words, in the focus group interviews, the interviewees were given time to reflect and to formulate their answers, resulting in frequent pauses in speech. There were also some intense discussions, for example, due to disagreement about the PRU and responsibility for students with special needs. The focus group interviews also involved individual marking and rating activities (see below), resulting in the interviewees being quiet for extended periods.

The focus group interviews had two parts. The first part was a group interview using focus group interview technique to some extent. This was followed by a focus group interview in which qualitative as well as quantitative data were collected. The format of this focus group interview was developed by Obert and Forsell [23]. The data were digitally recorded, and the interviewees completed Excel spreadsheets in which they rated their group's formulated statements. One question was posed to all groups: What do you believe is important in order to make the PRU work well? This question was written on posters around a conference table, visible to all. The researcher sat near the end of the table with a computer connected to a projector, which projected an open Excel spreadsheet on a screen visible to all interviewees. The interviewees continued to describe what factors they considered important until they ran out of new ideas, which could be viewed as a type of saturation. All responses were immediately written down in the projected Excel spreadsheet and were revised until the responding interviewees were satisfied with the formulation. During this phase, the interviewees described the PRU at length and discussed their responses. Many clarifications were made, prompted by the researcher and other interviewees. There was no intention that the interviewees should agree on what was important. On the contrary, the interviewees were encouraged to come up with different answers based on what each of them found important. The number of factors ranged from eight (from the current PRU pupils) to 23 (from the PRU staff).

In the next phase, individual interviewees in each group were asked to rate what factors were most important. First, the interviewees were all handed pencils and printed Excel spreadsheets containing all the answers from their own group. The interviewees individually selected one third of the answers regarded as most important on their Excel spreadsheets. The PRU staff, for example, marked eight answers each, approximately a third of the answers from that group. After that, the marked-up spreadsheets were returned to the researcher. The researcher then provided the interviewees with another unmarked copy of the Excel spreadsheet containing all the answers. For example, the PRU staff again received the Excel spreadsheet with 23 answers; this time, they rated all 23 answers on a scale of 1–5, with 1 indicating that the answer described something not aligned with the current status of the PRU and 5 indicating full alignment.

Finally, the Excel spreadsheets were examined and summarized. Again, citing the example of the PRU staff, all six interviewees had marked the following factor as important for PRU functioning: "The staff consists of professionals with different types of education, knowledge, and competence (within education or social work), contributing different types of education, knowledge, and competence (in pedagogy or social work)". They had rated this factor as one of the eight most important. The interviewees also rated to what degree this factor was aligned with the current state of the PRU; three interviewees rated this as 5 (indicating full alignment), two as 4, and one as 3 (this example comes from the "Results" section; see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Statements regarding which factors are important for good PRU functioning, agreement about which factors are most important, and individual ratings as to whether the statements correspond to the state of the PRU together with group averages.

| ***Items (Answers that Are Formulated as Statements)*** | **Agreement** | **Average Rating** | **Individuals' Ratings** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Current students | | | | | | | | |
| *to be in the class in the homeschool often (at least once a week).* | 2 of 3 | 2.0 | 1 | 4 | 1 | | | |
| *school work is given higher priority (there are too many other activities).* | 2/3 | 2.0 | 1 | 1 | 4 | | | |
| Former students | | | | | | | | |
| *sufficient with resources to have a teacher - student ratio of 1:4.* | 4/5 | 4.8 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4 | |
| Legal guardians | | | | | | | | |
| *the communication between legal guardians and the PRU staff works well.* | 5/6 | 5.0 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| Staff at the PRU | | | | | | | | |
| *the staff consists of professionals with different education, knowledge and competencies (within education or social work).* | 6/6 | 4.3 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 3 |
| Principals for regular schools | | | | | | | | |
| *the responsibility for documentation is clarified and follows educational legislation (common routines).* | 4/5 | 2.6 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 3 | |
| Chief officers of the health and family sectors | | | | | | | | |
| *the staff working at the PRU wants to be employed there (own decision).* | 2/2 | 5.0 | 5 | 5 | | | | |
| *the PRU always works toward getting the student back to the home school.* | 2/2 | 4.5 | 4 | 5 | | | | |
| *the PRU staff have the right competence (teachers with teacher training qualification, social pedagogues with social work qualification).* | 2/2 | 4.0 | 3 | 5 | | | | |
| *the collaboration works well between the home school principals and the PRU principal (PRU students' feeling of still having their regular placement in the home school).* | 2/2 | 3.5 | 4 | 3 | | | | |
| Chief education officers | | | | | | | | |
| *the PRU staff work with solution based pedagogy and with high expectations.* | 3/3 | no ratings | | | | | | |
| *the work in the PRU is followed up and evaluated regularly.* | 3/3 | no ratings | | | | | | |
| Local school politicians | | | | | | | | |
| *the PRU staff has the right educational qualifications and work together to meet the children's needs.* | 3/4 | 3.8 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 5 | | |

Most of the group interviews lasted three hours with a 20-min break, although the focus group interview with the current PRU pupils lasted only one hour. The individual interviews were also shorter, lasting less than an hour. There were also several shorter conversations with people (e.g., administrators) who had worked or were working in positions that had some weaker connection to the PRU. During the observation days, I had frequent conversations with PRU students.

All individual and group interviews (including focus groups) were transcribed verbatim for analysis (302 A4 pages of text).

### 4.4. Data Analysis

A stepwise analysis of the interview data was conducted. The first step was to sort passages from each interview transcription into six categories corresponding to the research questions. Four of these categories were informed by the IRIS model (Figure 1), while the other two were specifically formulated for the PRU studied here. The four categories informed by the IRIS model are policy related to the establishment and running of the PRU, special education provided and/or required at the PRU, academic and social outcomes for PRU pupils as well as other outcomes closely related to the PRU as an educational institution, and experiences related to the PRU. The two categories specifically formulated for the PRU are general descriptions of PRU students and of the reasons for their placement and answers indicating potential alternatives to having a municipal PRU. Text reduction followed in which the most relevant interview material for the six categories was presented in the form of condensed descriptions retaining the original wording as much as possible. All descriptions were indexed for control purposes, making it easy to find and reread them in the interview context as necessary. These 327 descriptions were positioned in A3 format matrices screened into the different stakeholder groups and six categories to enable comparisons. This data arrangement provided an overview of the groups, illustrating to what extent the focus groups had the same or different opinions, whether or not the participants in a certain focus group agreed within a category, and whether the interviewees were consistent in their answers. Within-group similarities and differences between the interviewees were also examined based on each interviewee's choice of what was important and on the degree to which each statement was aligned with the current state of the PRU according to the interviewees' perceptions. The aim was to examine the dominant perceptions in each focus group as well as the variation among interviewees in each group, as both are important for a nuanced picture of the material. Based on the second aim of the study, i.e., to compare the students' experiences with those of the other stakeholders, the current students' descriptions are paid more attention in the "Results" section than the other stakeholder groups' descriptions.

### 4.5. Trustworthiness

Focus group interviews were the main data collection method, as they are useful for exploring experiences and promoting insightful discussions in which interviewees are likely to express their true views [24]. Several measures were undertaken to enhance the quality of these interviews and other parts of the study. These measures will be described in relation to credibility, transferability, and dependability [25]. To ensure credibility, thorough preparation was undertaken, including training in the focus interview format used here [23] on three occasions and a pilot study to test the efficacy of the research instruments [26]. The preparation also included conversations with three researchers who had extensive experience of conducting different types of focus group studies and one workshop with a research group whose members use the focus group interview technique. The format used required strategies and techniques differing from those of a standard interview. For example, strategies had to be worked out in advance concerning where the researcher should sit, how the group should be positioned around the conference table, and guidelines on the role of the researcher acting without a second researcher. A second researcher is often used in other types of focus group interviews but was not needed in the approach adopted here. As part of the preparations, a pilot study was conducted with two participants, in which all procedures in the focus group format were tested and the participants had to give feedback. The handling of the technical aspects had to be automated, so that the interview technique would function during the interviews. To ensure transferability, this article presents thorough descriptions and carefully chosen quotations from interviewees. The quotations represent the interpreted gist of the interviewees' descriptions to help the reader understand what the interviewees were trying to convey. Regarding dependability, the aim was to thoroughly describe the interviewee selection, data collection, and analysis of the collected material.

## 5. Results

The presentation of the interview results follows the order of the research questions. Quantitative data from the focus group interviews and observation data are presented after the results.

### *5.1. Description of PRU Students and Reasons for Their Placements*

The analysis found differences between stakeholder groups concerning the perceptions about what students should have their placement in the PRU. The students, both former and current, described having learning difficulties. In both groups, some interviewees described previous schooling in which they had been bullied and had responded physically. An additional reason for placement was their social circumstances, which, according to the former students, had a large impact on their life situation. One student disagreed, saying that the social service sector had never been involved. Neuropsychiatric conditions were not mentioned by the students. It was, however stated by a few legal guardians that the PRU group also contained one or more students with a neuropsychiatric condition. Participants in several other stakeholder groups had the opinion that students with a neuropsychiatric condition usually consisted a part of the PRU group. In these descriptions, two positions were evident: that there are social conditions that at least partly underlie the school problems and that current PRU students differ from the former students from ten years earlier. The reason that students receive a PRU school placement is more often due to neuropsychiatric difficulties today, than it used to be. A common opinion was that the current students more often have neuropsychiatric rather than social problems and therefore need medication. In follow-up questioning, no one could explain this change, while others claimed that the students were still of the same type. Most descriptions were of overt aggressive behaviour. A few mentioned "disturbed behaviour", and several different stakeholder groups were obviously describing the behaviour of the same child as the descriptions were strikingly similar. The child had had a PRU placement several years earlier. Regular schools often responded to the students' inappropriate behaviour by segregating them. One legal guardian described the school situation before the PRU placement: "He had private sessions alone with his assistant for one and a half years, and the assistant was dyslexic and was required to teach him all the subjects". There were more descriptions in the focus group interviews of similar ways of arranging the school situation for students. The PRU leader commented on previous work in a regular school with a student who just had been placed in the PRU. The leader said that it was very strange that so much special needs provision over many years appeared to have had no effect at all.

### *5.2. Policy*

There was almost complete agreement that the most important task of the PRU is to return the students to their home schools. According to many responses, the strategy is to remove the students from school situations where they did not fit in or enjoy their schooling, support them in the PRU, and work with the family in collaboration with Social Services. This is described as "taking them off track" for a while. Several stakeholder groups described this as a way to improve these students' schooling so that they would earn passing grades and have an educational setting in which they feel comfortable. An alternative view was expressed by the current PRU educational leader, who stated: "A goal must be that there is no PRU". The leader added that the regular schools were inadequate and could not provide a conducive setting for all their students.

Both student stakeholder groups claimed that they were forced to leave their home schools and study at the PRU. According to the current students, the PRU is a school setting characterized by rules where they are always being watched and guarded. Two of them claimed that the teaching there was lesser in quantity and quality than at their home schools, meaning that they would never catch up with their former classmates. They were upset at this, as the main reason they were given for PRU placement was that it was required so that they could catch up with their home school peers; if they did, they could return to their home schools. The former students' descriptions were different. They described the PRU as a type of school where they received a lot of support as students. They did not say whether the goal of their placement was that they should return to their home schools or whether the intention was to continue at the upper secondary school level. The latter was likely the case for two of them who were placed in the PRU late, in ninth grade (the last year of secondary school). Some student stakeholders described how their legal guardians had demanded PRU placements for them.

The view that the PRU should provide good-quality education and have special competence that was unavailable in regular schools was shared by most stakeholder groups. There was also agreement that other factors were decisive for establishing the PRU, which was started for economic reasons according to the politicians, chief education officers, and the chief officers or the health and family sector. The cost of placement in institutions offering treatment had increased greatly, and the PRU was supposed to reduce such expenses. These stakeholder groups emphasized that it was less stigmatizing to attend a PRU than other treatment institutions. However, one of the chief officers of the health and family sector also emphasized that placement in a PRU is a "very big step in segregation".

Many stakeholder groups discussed a previous report by the School Inspectorate that criticized the PRU education. The criticism was strong concerning several aspects of work at the PRU. One claim in the report was that the students were not given supportive conditions to obtain grades in all subjects.

### *5.3. Provision*

Whereas the current students acknowledged that the PRU gave them support, they also criticized their schooling, saying that too much time was spent on activities outside the PRU. They described these activities as hindering them from catching up with students in regular schools. The former students described their schooling at the PRU in more positive terms. They emphasized more than the current students that they received a lot of support, they all felt accepted and in a relationship with the PRU staff. The PRU staff was also persistent and never gave up in their effort to support, the staff had patience and they always remained calm, understanding and motivating their students. This differed from what they had previously experienced at their regular schools. Included in the motivational work, according to the students, was that the PRU offered breakfast:

> "That was wonderful!" (Girl 1)
>
> "Yes!" (two boys in chorus)
>
> "That made you come on time—you couldn't miss breakfast at school". (Girl 1)

According to the students, token reinforcement programmes, within a behaviour modification framing, were used. This was useful for some students, as a conversation with another girl showed:

> "If you behaved in an orderly way during the week, you got a reward on Friday". (Girl 2)
>
> "Yes." (two boys in chorus)
>
> "Why was this important?" (interviewer asking for clarification)

> "Then you felt that you had managed it in some way". (Girl 2)

The legal guardians, especially those representing the former students, agreed with their children's descriptions. All legal guardians of the current and former PRU students agreed that communication between them and the PRU staff functioned well, as they felt invited to collaborate in their children's schooling. All adult stakeholder groups emphasized that high-quality relationships between families and the PRU were important. This was often declared to be the most important aspect of PRU collaboration, with the collaboration with social workers in the school health sector also being stressed as important. The former students mentioned this collaboration indirectly or only stated that they, with one exception, had contacts with municipal Social Services. The current students did not mention such collaboration or contacts at all. The former students confirmed that PRU staff had come to their homes to encourage them to come to the PRU when they were absent without permission; this part of the support was also emphasized as important by the principals of the regular schools and the chief education officers.

Many stakeholder groups comprising adults, including the legal guardians, argued that it was important to "take the students off track", i.e., take them away from the regular school setting and offer them support at the PRU where the staff density is much higher. The legal guardians based their arguments on previous experiences of schools that could not or were unwilling to provide their children with schooling that worked. This was largely described as insufficient competence in regular schools regarding neuropsychiatric diagnoses. A different opinion was expressed by one legal guardian who works with people who have neuropsychiatric diagnoses:

> "It is too simple to say that this student has ADHD or Asperger's".
>
> "Yes." (another legal guardian agreed)
>
> "These simplified labels that we have today, I work with them and I know how easy it is to put children into these categories. Then they never see anything else at school and, regardless of what they do, they are marked".

When asked for clarification about neuropsychiatric diagnoses and what teachers should do based on them, no clarification was given by any of the legal guardians who had emphasized the importance of neuropsychiatric knowledge. One chief officer of the health and family sector said: "We have taken a look at the children who come to the PRU and tried to develop staff competence based on that, so we have offered a 7.5-credit course on neuropsychiatry to some and we are now looking for this knowledge when we hire new staff".

No specific teaching method that could be regarded as neuropsychiatrically based was described in any interview. Some interviewees said that structure and rules were important. An individualized teaching approach and "solution-based pedagogy" were emphasized as important by most adult interviewees in the stakeholder groups. "Solution-based pedagogy" was described by PRU staff as "working on the things that work (i.e., in which the students function well) and not focusing on the problems they have". One chief education officer said: "This is so basic and instinctive to me and I have not had any formal training in this". Nearly all stakeholder groups assumed that the teaching should be individualized at the PRU. One leader of the school and health department added: "They have their teaching separated from other children to a very large degree—they are not group-oriented children".

The PRU had seven full-time staff and often only seven students with a maximum of ten students. Most stakeholder groups deemed it important that the staff be highly competent, having university qualifications and considerable experience working with students needing special support and living in difficult social circumstances. One principal from a regular school said: "If we should say what would be really important, they should be super pedagogues, and with a lot of experience, of course." The PRU school staff maintained that the PRU could not succeed with students who needed a school offering treatment; these students were eventually placed in institutions.

### *5.4. Outcomes*

One current student told, with what seemed like envy, about one student who had succeeded greatly two years earlier, leaving the PRU for placement in a regular school. The student said: “I am probably one who won’t succeed”. The former students continued at the upper secondary level, even if they did not qualify for national programmes but rather for preparatory programmes. There is agreement among them that the support in the PRU helped them to finish the nine-year compulsory schooling. The parents of the former students were satisfied that their children had received passing grades in more subjects than before, and one parent of a current student expressed similar satisfaction.

The descriptions from all other stakeholder groups were similar. Nobody knew about the overall outcomes of student groups placed in the PRU or what happened to them after they finished their schooling in the municipality. There were anecdotal indications of good progress for previous PRU students, mostly concerning only one student in the municipality. Furthermore, it was known that the PRU could not serve the group of students for which it was originally established, so the costs of student placements at treatment institutions had not decreased. Concerning the PRU, there was no documentation, no quality assurance work or reports on such work, and no evaluations or follow-ups. As one chief officer of the health and family sector said, “We don’t have instruments to see whether we have succeeded with the PRU”, and one politician said: “It is annoying to have to admit to you that we don’t have 100 per cent control”.

### *5.5. Experiences*

Two current students had lost contact with their former classmates in their home schools. One student was very upset about this, especially about losing contact with his closest friend since preschool years. The distance from the PRU to his home school had made it almost impossible to have part of his education at his home school. His friend had a lot of homework and a school week schedule that was different from that of the PRU student. Taken together, the PRU placement had made it almost impossible for them to stay in contact, according to the student. Another student’s home school was much closer to the PRU, so he had never lost contact with the home school and his classmates there. He had been able to continue having some lessons there, as he could easily move between schools during the day. He said that the other students, due to the long distances to their home schools, had a much tougher situation and that he was quite pleased with his own situation.

The former students described several problems with their schooling at the PRU. Being associated with the PRU was one. Some of the students had been threatened by regular school staff that if they did not behave properly, they would be sent to the PRU. One student said that he was viewed as similar to a jailed prisoner by regular school staff, due to his placement in the PRU. He repeatedly raised the issue of how the PRU was regarded by others. He said, for instance, that he was ashamed of being connected to the PRU, and that when the PRU group met other students outside the PRU he “wanted to take off his head and kick it away, to stop seeing everything” and that he was ashamed of being a difficult child. Another male student agreed, while a female student said: “It wasn’t that way for me—I only hung out with other difficult children”. These students also laughed about the rule that they were forbidden to visit their home schools but not when the class photos were taken: then, their home schools insisted that they should participate.

The legal guardians said that they had had a difficult time when their children were in their home schools (i.e., regular schools), and they felt hurt at having been questioned by school staff. One legal guardian said that they (the legal guardians) had “received a call from the school, which I was so scared to death of for a while, that I could not answer the phone”. The legal guardians compared the different attitudes at the home schools and the PRU. The home schools conveyed blame and the indirect message that they should come and remove their children from school but signalled no intention of seeking solutions. The PRU, in contrast, always tried to find solutions and did not dwell on what had happened.

This was called a solution-based approach by the legal guardians. They also praised the PRU for contacting them and giving positive messages about their children's development.

School staff were mainly positive regarding their work at the PRU and their collaboration with the legal guardians and other parties, such as Social Services and the home schools. However, they described the home schools as differing from one another, with some principals wanting to collaborate, while others did not. Some of the home schools were unwilling to let the PRU students return. The educational leader of the PRU stated that the home schools had to change, as they were struck in old structures and modes of thinking. Both the current and former PRU leaders echoed the PRU staff, describing different attitudes among home school principals, some of whom were willing to collaborate while others were not.

This issue of enabling the students' return to their home schools was intensely discussed by the principals in their focus group interview. There was agreement that it was very difficult to welcome the PRU students back to their home schools. One principal described a hypothetical situation facing a principal in which a bonus system could be called for, which resulted in a lot of laughter mixed with serious discussion among the principals:

> "I think it's like this, I think it's good that 'he' has done schooling at the PRU for five years and that I only pretend that I want that student back" (i.e., the main argument for having a bonus system, suggested by this principal).
>
> Another principal replied: "I think it's our damn responsibility and mission to get them back to their home school as soon as possible".
>
> The principal who suggested the bonus system clarified: "But I don't think that will happen".

The chief officers of the health and family sector criticized the employment policy at the regular schools, which they thought was wrong and had to be changed. One chief officer said: "We hire young people who have just finished upper secondary school, and they may be employed as resource persons for the children with the greatest difficulties. The municipality must rethink this, as we are not providing the children with what they need".

### *5.6. PRU Alternatives*

Several stakeholder groups discussed the idea of a separate school for the PRU students. The establishment of a separate school, a PRU, was decided by the politicians based on the suggestion of one employee in the municipal central administration. This person had worked in institutions for children in need of treatment. The suggestion was aligned with the economic problems of the municipality, as the costs of institutional placements had increased too much. Some interviewees in the stakeholder groups favoured meeting the students' special needs in their home schools, whereas others favoured placing the students separately from their classmates. When one politician emphasized that the PRU students still would have contacts with students from other schools, another one replied: "Yes, but they will still be in an enclave".

Several stakeholder groups cited the example of a principal who had improved the special pedagogical competence in the home school based on an inclusive education policy. According to the politicians, the school succeeded so well that, without any extra resources, PRU referrals were no longer needed. The principal gradually developed the teacher competence over a long time to realize inclusive schooling. Then, the principal left the school and the municipality for a higher position in another municipality. The two politicians, who had been involved in establishing the PRU ten years earlier, described the case in detail, and one of them summed up: "What he did succeeded as long as there was a shared policy, but when he left it started to crumble, and such systems (systems that are depending on one person's leadership) are not good".

### *5.7. Factors of Most Importance Regarding the PRU According to Stakeholders' Ratings*

When the interviewees in the stakeholder groups answered the question about what was important for good PRU functioning, many different factors were suggested. The number of suggested factors varied between stakeholder groups, as mentioned above. The current students, who suggested only eight factors, were asked to rate the three most important factors for good PRU functioning, which is close to a third of the suggested factors. The chief officers of the health and family sector chose eight factors—one third of their suggested 23—rated as especially important. In this section, the main focus is to compare what factors were considered the most important by each stakeholder group. This is based solely on the factors that received the most votes in each group, which is a methodological choice that may be questioned. However, a result presentation of more factors from each stakeholder group would result in a large number of factors making comparisons very complicated as all factors were unique in their wording. As seen in Table 1, between one and four factors were rated as particularly important by each of the various stakeholder groups, for a total of 13 important factors.

In the group with the four current students, one student had left when it was time to choose which three factors were most important. That student, who did not seem to get along with two of the other three students, wrote the most important factor on a separate paper: "It's more peaceful during lessons so I get more done. I had more friends at my home school. I have received passing grades in more subjects at the PRU". Two of the three students who stayed for the whole focus group interview voted that "often being in class in the home school" was among the three most important of the eight factors that the group had suggested.

All participants also rated to what degree each factor was aligned with the current state of the PRU. Concerning the factor "often being in class in the home school", the ratings given by all three current students on the scale of 1–5 were low at 1, 1, and 4, which gave an average rating of 2.0. This means that, according to two students, the PRU did not live up to what the group valued as important, whereas the third student apparently had been in class in the home school quite often, hence the rating of 4. Their ratings differed regarding the next factor, which the first student again gave a low rating of 1, but now the second student gave a high rating of 4 and the third student assigned a rating of only 1. This underlines what the three students said during the interview and further reveals differences within this stakeholder group.

The within-group differences were less pronounced in most other stakeholder groups, depending partly on differences regarding the content of the identified factors. Two chief education officers did not want to rate the extent to which the work or conditions in the PRU corresponded to some of the factors, including the two in Table 1, so individual ratings have been omitted for that group. The ratings show, in line with the transcribed interview data, that in most stakeholder groups, there was agreement about what was most important for the PRU to work well. Their individual ratings were also usually in agreement regarding the factors rated as most important by each group as a whole but there were clear differences between the groups as to what was deemed most important. The goal of returning the students to their home schools, was expressed by the current students in two factors, keeping contact with their home schools and schoolwork prioritized so the students could catch up with their classmates in their home school. Notably, this goal of returning the students to their home schools was the top priority in only one other group, i.e., the stakeholder group of the chief officers of the health and family sector. Of the 142 unique factors identified in all stakeholder groups, this one is only found in one more stakeholder group, namely, the group of politicians, in which two of the four politicians rated this factor as one of the most important.

## 6. Discussion

The experiences and views of current PRU students are of great importance in this article, as their voices are often ignored in research. It is especially important in the

Swedish context to enhance our knowledge of how these students perceive their situation in PRUs, and this study was intended to accomplish this. In the following discussion, the current PRU students' comments will be compared with those of other stakeholder groups. This discussion will be based on mainly the responses of the three current students who completed the whole focus group interview.

### *6.1. Limitations and Strengths*

This study has certain limitations, one being that its results come from only one PRU; however, as the purpose was to contribute sound knowledge based on information from many stakeholder groups based on one PRU, this limitation has been taken into account. Moreover, the interview sessions were long and contained many clarifying discussions. Data saturation occurred at each focus group session when the interviewees could no longer contribute statements describing new factors. Based on the chosen interview format, all interviewees' voices were individually documented, except when one current student left the interview. A great many data were collected, based on individual interviews, other conversations, school documents, and observations that were intended to give the researcher contextual knowledge before the interviews. This thorough data collection is a strength of this study, and the theoretical framework provided a useful analytical tool with which to explore the large amount of data.

### *6.2. The PRU Is Ideal for Whom?*

There were different opinions about the PRU establishment. According to the stakeholders who started the PRU, it was started based on an economic rationale. The intention was to reduce the expenses associated with the original target group, i.e., students placed at treatment institutions. This coincided with legal guardians' demands that the municipality should provide better educational conditions for their children. A local solution was suggested, and the PRU was started. This arrangement did not work, according to the interviewees, as the PRU could not offer a solution that worked for the target group. Interestingly, once started, the PRU became popular, but the target group changed. The consequence was that, instead of improving teaching quality in the regular schools, a new segregated school institution was established.

The PRU clearly has a function in the municipality when regular schools are not equipped to address a few students' inappropriate behaviour. There are three types of such behaviour in students: withdrawal, acting out, often combined with aggression, and behaviours described as abnormal and difficult for staff in regular schools to understand. Children manifesting the last type of behaviour are so rare that the examples of such behaviour discussed in several interviews likely all relate to a single case. Regarding students' descriptions of their own behaviour and its causes, they cite external factors such as having been bullied. They attribute their behaviour to external factors and reveal a lack of perceived responsibility, according to Jalali and Morgan [11], who apply a psychological perspective in analysing student behaviour. For the students in the present study, psychological explanations seem too simplistic. The students' social background is one other factor, and Social Services have been involved in most of the students' families, recalling the students studied by Hart [13]. Most of the students had experienced social circumstances that must have affected their wellbeing at least during some period over their schooling. These students' situations seem to have been exacerbated in the regular schools by the special support they were provided to meet their needs. The interviewees cited many examples of students having been provided with educational conditions of very low quality. According to the interviewees, this especially affected students from socially disadvantaged families. Interestingly, one chief officer of the health and family sector seemed to downplay the relevance of the social background of the PRU students. This chief officer said that children with neuropsychiatric diagnoses have replaced the earlier PRU students to a large extent. However, the social difficulties experienced by the current PRU students' families seem serious. Furthermore, it seems highly improbable that social circumstances could have improved so dramatically over a ten-year period. That several students over the last years also may have had medical diagnoses can partly be explained by the current over-diagnosis of students [27,28]. It does not seem justifiable to reduce the three interviewed current students' life circumstances, or other recent PRU students', to individual-level factors such as their use of maladaptive coping strategies [11] and/or their biological constitutions, as in neuropsychiatric explanations, as suggested by the conversations, interviews, and other utterances made by participants in the focus groups. If such factors are dominant, why does the PRU focus so strongly on working with Social Services and the families? The first research question, concerning the underlying problems making PRU placements necessary, is not easily answered. The official underlying rationale of the PRU was to provide a supportive school setting for students with special needs that regular schools could not meet, with the aim of returning these students to their home schools as soon as possible. The interviewees described different student target groups and different causes of their need for special support. It is clear, however, that the PRU was originally established for a target group that it could not handle: a very small number of students with extremely complex life circumstances. The idea of taking them "off track" for a short while and then returning them to their regular schools appears naïve.

### *6.3. Stakeholder's Views of the PRU*

Research questions 2–5 focusing on policies, provision, outcomes, and experiences of PRU placements will be addressed here. PRU policies were well-known by the stakeholders, the main policy objective being to return the PRU students to their home schools. The three current students said that this objective was very important for them, in line with Jalali and Morgan's [11] findings. For this to happen, the students first had to be segregated from their home school—taken "off track", as it was described. Logically, this would seem to be a detour, and this is the strategy also used in the UK [11,13]. As the results showed, only one of the three current students was satisfied with his contacts with and visits to his home school, and he was confident about being able to return. The situation differed for the other two current students, who were frustrated and discontented with three things in particular: first, they were given no choice about their school situation; second, they had almost completely lost contact with their home schools; and third, they had been promised that the PRU education would help them catch up with their home school peers, although this proved not to be the case. It appears that these students had analysed their situation correctly, as these problems were well-known in other stakeholder groups and made it very difficult to return the students to their home schools. In this way, establishing the PRU increased inequity problems in the municipality. Furthermore, the policy that the PRU students should return to their home schools was not supported by all stakeholders. The interview with the principals, for instance, revealed two antithetical positions: one was that it was not self-evident that PRU students should return to their home schools, and the other was that it was the home school's responsibility to take these students back. Interviews with other stakeholder groups and individual interviews support this description. The idea of a bonus system to incentivize the principals' efforts to enable student return to their home schools indicates that this policy objective also concerns issues of resources and responsibility. Interestingly, few stakeholder groups identified this main policy objective as an important factor.

The geographical area of provision is closely connected to the main policy concerning the PRU. The construction of one PRU geographically distant from some of the regular schools was a great barrier impeding two of the three current students from maintaining contact with their home schools and with friends and from eventually being reintegrated. Another barrier perceived by the three students was the teaching in subjects necessary for success in school. They perceived such success as required for reintegration and expressed disappointment with the time spent on other, non-scholastic activities. The School Inspectorate report supports them in this criticism. The observed teaching was delivered by engaged teachers, but the teaching was conventional and based on the same pedagogical principles used in most regular school classrooms. However, the PRU teaching was mainly delivered one-to-one or, occasionally, one-to-two. Compared with the regular-school teaching described by the stakeholders, in which students were separated from the class for a long time and taught by student assistants lacking education for this work, the PRU teaching was obviously much higher in quality. It is interesting that the resources and ambitions were so much higher in the PRU. The stakeholder groups comprising professionals responsible for educational quality emphasized that the staff working with the PRU students must be highly competent. Suggestions that staff should have university-level qualifications and advanced experience to work at the PRU met with approval. This difference in ambition level, which was never explicitly discussed in any stakeholder group, is striking and difficult to understand. To answer the third research question about what support the PRU provides, is it evident that substantial resources created a better learning situation for the PRU students, especially compared with what they had experienced previously. Nevertheless, several quality issues were reported by the School Inspectorate.

The fourth research question about the PRU outcomes according to the stakeholders can be answered briefly: the current students' outcomes were to come in the future. The current student who participated in only part of the focus group interview wrote about achieving passing grades in more subjects. The former students had not qualified for the national programmes for which 80–85 per cent of Swedish youth qualify. They had, however, continued with their studies at the upper secondary school level but on introductory education for students who do not fulfil normal eligibility requirements. Note that a comment was previously made about the former students and their legal guardians, who do not appear to be representative of legal guardians in general whose children attend the PRU. Interestingly, anecdotal descriptions dominated discussion of the PRU students' outcomes. In fact, little systematic data collection, follow-up, and evaluation of the PRU were conducted in the municipality, and the politicians expressed embarrassment at this. The fourth research question about PRU outcomes therefore cannot be answered in a valid way. This has been a common problem regarding PRUs in general, being reported in one total population study [9] and recently described as problematic by a Swedish commission that recommended measures to improve the situation [3].

The stakeholder experiences naturally differed both between and within the groups, and several stakeholder experiences have already been discussed in relation to the areas of policy, education provision, and outcomes. Other mainly negative experiences related to being a PRU student will also be discussed here. Across the stakeholder groups, there was awareness that the segregation of the PRU from the home schools is problematic. One chief officer of the health and family sector said that it was a "very big step in segregation" and expressed concern about such measures. Results from other PRUs are that stigma was associated with being transferred from a regular school to a PRU [29]. Several participants in this study reported that school staff threatened misbehaving students with transfer to the PRU, and one student said that, as a PRU student, he was regarded as a prisoner. One student expressed strong feelings of shame at being a PRU student. In answer to the fifth research question about experiences of PRU placements, it is evident that PRU placement may negatively and substantially affect the situation of students who have already experienced several perceived school failures. Based on the participants' descriptions of the negative consequences of segregated schooling [3], the question is whether there are any alternatives.

### *6.4. Alternatives to the PRU*

The sixth research question concerns whether the stakeholders believe that there are alternatives to PRUs. The idea of establishing a PRU entirely separate from the regular schools was based on a suggestion from one person in the municipal educational administration. This person, who had worked in an institution for students needing treatment (the PRU's initial target group), suggested establishing a separate school. The decision to do so was discussed in several groups, and some of the stakeholders expressed the opinion that the resources for special needs education would be better used in regular schools. This would appear to be an alternative that might reduce the risk of stigma. Several stakeholder groups discussed the example of a school whose principal had increased the staff's special pedagogical competence so that the school would not need to refer students to a PRU; another case of such a regular school was reported in a previous study by the present author [2]. Interestingly, those schools increased their capacity to create what seem to be inclusive learning environments without requiring any extra resources. Accordingly, the answer to the sixth research question is that there are alternatives to PRUs, some of which may reduce or even eliminate the demand for PRU placements.

### 6.5. Contributions of Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory was used to identify study participants (Figure 2) and, during data collection, to identify additional relevant stakeholders who had not yet been recruited. Several other stakeholders were mentioned by the interviewees, such as students and staff in the regular schools, Social Services, and, in particular, the School Inspectorate. Stakeholder theory has brought an ethical dimension to business research [18], broadening corporate responsibility to encompass more stakeholders than just the shareholders. It has been recognized that some stakeholders lack power [30] and that their only choice is to trust their organizations. From an organizational perspective, some stakeholders who participated in the study lacked power, whereas others occupied strong power positions. The PRU students and the legal guardians described many poor-quality educational situations in their previous regular schools. Transfer to a PRU may have been the only way for these students to obtain a better education. The lack of systematic follow-ups and evaluations, however, makes it impossible to determine whether the PRU represents a good educational solution for future students. Again, it should be recalled that the groups of former students and legal guardians of former students were not viewed as representative of other students and their legal guardians in this study. Nevertheless, many students and their guardians stated they had long experienced difficulties and had often been blamed by others, including staff in regular schools. In relation to the municipality and schools, the guardians were stakeholders with low self-confidence and little power, according to many participants. As neither the municipality nor the PRU fulfilled their responsibility to document the PRU work, the School Inspectorate appeared to be a strong stakeholder with considerable power. The School Inspectorate claimed to uphold the students' right to a good-quality education, which they had not received.

## 7. Conclusions

An increase in the number of PRUs has been recommended in Sweden, as has previously been reported in the UK [31]. There is no scientific support for the premise that Swedish PRUs offer improved conditions to the students placed in them. In Sweden, the dominant official discourse is that students experiencing severe school difficulties will receive better education if there are more PRUs dedicated to serving excluded students. The official discourse has been the same in the UK [32]. However, another strong motive for establishing PRUs is to remove disruptive students from mainstream schools, as their presence has been described as hindering other students' education and the improvement of schools [32].

Disruptive students seem out of place in the current neoliberal era, with economic steering models based on New Public Management and demands for efficiency and higher-quality public education based on market models. In this context, there is demand for segregated settings and medical labels for students in need of special education. The focus on individual deficiencies de-emphasizes causative factors based on systemic societal conditions [33]. The situations of some individuals may even worsen in PRUs, as "PRU attendance may actually contribute to the presence of mental health problems" ([11], p. 64). There is an urgent need to further elucidate the school and life circumstances of students who experience severe school difficulties and who risk being referred to PRUs.

This requires that their voices be listened to by stakeholder groups with the power to decide on the objectives of the school system and of society more broadly.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Ethical review and approval were waived for this study as it was conducted according to ethical regulations in Sweden, where Ethics Committees at universities and university colleges are rare and where ethical approval is managed by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. Ethical approval is required when sensitive personal information is registered or handled, for instance information that reveal an individual's religion. The material for this study was collected in an agreement between Jönköping University and one municipal, and it does not contain sensitive personal information. Furthermore, Jönköping University does not have an Ethics committee.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares that there are no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Social Democratic Party. 2019. Available online: https://www.socialdemokraterna.se/download/18.1f5c787116e356cdd25a4c/1573213453963/Januariavtalet.pdf (accessed on 17 June 2021).
2. Malmqvist, J. Working successfully towards inclusion—or excluding pupils? A comparative retroductive study of three similar schools in their work with EBD. *Emot. Behav. Diffic.* **2016**, *21*, 344–360. [CrossRef]
3. SOU 2020:42. En Annan Möjlighet Till Särskilt Stöd. Reglering av Kommunala Resursskolor. Another Special Provision Alternative. Municipal Pupil Referral Unit Regulation. Available online: https://www.regeringen.se/49ec22/contentassets/0966298832c643809905412ddc67414a/en-annan-mojlighet-till-sarskilt-stod--reglering-av-kommunala-resursskolor-sou-202042 (accessed on 10 May 2021).
4. Magnusson, G. Representations of special support. Independent schools' descriptions of special educational provision. *Eur. J. Spec. Needs Educ.* **2016**, *31*, 155–170. [CrossRef]
5. Magnusson, G. Inclusive education and school choice lessons from Sweden. *Eur. J. Spec. Needs Educ.* **2020**, *35*, 25–39. [CrossRef]
6. Malmqvist, J. Statliga perspektivskiften inom specialpedagogik. Exemplet: Speciallärare och/eller specialpedagoger. [Shifts in state perspectives in special pedagogy. The example: Special education teachers and/or special educators/SENCos. *Vägval* **2015**, *15*. Available online: https://undervisningshistoria.se/statliga-perspektivskiften-inom-specialpedagogik-exemplet-speciallarare-ocheller-specialpedagoger/ (accessed on 17 June 2021).
7. Skolverket. *Vad Påverkar Resultaten i Svensk Grundskola? Kunskapsöversikt om Betydelsen av Olika Faktorer. What Influences Educational Achievement in Swedish Schools? A Systematic Review and Summary Analysis*; Skolverket: Stockholm, Sweden, 2009.
8. SPSM. Kunskapsunderlag om Resursskola. Knowledge about Pupil Referral Units. 2019. Available online: https://www.spsm.se/ (accessed on 1 September 2021).
9. Malmqvist, J.; Nilholm, C. The antithesis of inclusion? The emergence and functioning of ADHD special education classes in the Swedish school system. *Emot. Behav. Diffic.* **2016**, *21*, 287–300. [CrossRef]
10. Skolverket. *Fristående Skolor för Elever i Behov av Särskilt Stöd–en Kartläggning*; Independent schools for students in need of special provision–a mapping; Skolverket: Stockholm, Sweden, 2014.
11. Jalali, R.; Morgan, G. They won't let me back. Comparing student perceptions across primary and secondary Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). *Emot. Behav. Diffic.* **2018**, *23*, 55–68. [CrossRef]
12. Daniels, H.; Cole, T. Exclusion from School: Short-Term Setback or a Long Term of Difficulties? *Eur. J. Spec. Needs Educ.* **2010**, *25*, 115–130. [CrossRef]
13. Hart, N. What helps children in a pupil referral unit (PRU)? An exploration into the potential protective factors of a PRU as identified by children and staff. *Emot. Behav. Diffic.* **2013**, *18*, 196–212. [CrossRef]
14. Lawrence, N. What makes for a successful re-integration from a pupil referral unit to mainstream education? An applied research project. *Educ. Psychol. Pract.* **2011**, *27*, 213–226. [CrossRef]
15. Gidlund, U. Teachers' attitudes towards including students with emotional and behavioural difficulties in mainstream school: A systematic research synthesis. *Int. J. Learn. Teach. Educ. Res.* **2018**, *17*, 45–63. [CrossRef]
16. Malmqvist, J. Has schooling of ADHD students reached a crossroads? *Emot. Behav. Diffic.* **2018**, *23*, 389–409. [CrossRef]
17. Laplume, A.O.; Sonpar, K.; Litz, R.A. Stakeholder theory: Reviewing a theory that moves US. *J. Manag.* **2008**, *34*, 1152–1189. [CrossRef]
18. Freeman, R.E. *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*; Pitman: Boston, MA, USA, 1984.
19. Fassin, Y. The stakeholder model refined. *J. Bus. Ethic* **2009**, *84*, 113–135. [CrossRef]
20. Miles, S. Stakeholder theory classification: A theoretical and empirical evaluation of definitions. *J. Bus. Ethics* **2017**, *142*, 437–459. [CrossRef]

21. Rose, R.; Shevlin, M.; Winter, E.; O´Raw, P. *Project IRIS–Inclusive Research in Irish Schools. A Longitudinal Study of the Experiences of and Outcomes for Pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Irish Schools (NCSE Research Reports No. 20)*; National Council for Special Education: Trim, Ireland, 2015.
22. Wästerfors, D. Observations. In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection*; Flick, U., Ed.; Sage: Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, 2018; pp. 314–326.
23. Obert, C.; Forsell, M. *Fokusgrupp–ett enkelt sätt att Mäta Kvalitet*; Bokförlaget Kommunlitteratur: Höganäs, Sweden, 1999.
24. Kitzinger, J.; Barbour, R. Introduction: The promise and challenge of focus groups. In *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*; Barbour, R., Kitzinger, J., Eds.; Sage: Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, 1999; pp. 1–20.
25. Bryman, A. *Samhällsvetenskapliga Metoder*; Methods in Social Science; Liber: Malmö, Sweden, 2008.
26. Malmqvist, J.; Hellberg, K.; Möllås, G.; Rose, R.; Shevlin, M. Conducting the pilot study: A neglected part of the research process? Methodological findings supporting the importance of piloting in qualitative research studies. *Int. J. Qual. Methods* **2019**, *18*, 1–11. [CrossRef]
27. Polanczyk, G.V.; Salum, G.A.; Sugaya, L.S.; Caye, A.; Rohde, L.A. Annual research review: A meta-analysis of the worldwide prevalence of mental disorders in children and adolescents. *J. Child Psychol. Psychiatry* **2014**, *56*, 345–365. [CrossRef]
28. Rydell, M.; Lundström, S.; Gillberg, C.; Lichtenstein, P.; Larsson, H. Has the attention deficit hyperactivity disorder phenotype become more common in children between 2004 and 2014? Trends over 10 years from a Swedish general population sample. *J. Child Psychol. Psychiatry* **2018**, *59*, 863–871. [CrossRef]
29. Thomas, D.V. Factors affecting successful reintegration. *Educ. Stud.* **2015**, *41*, 188–208. [CrossRef]
30. Greenwood, M.; Van Buren, H.J., III. Trust and stakeholder theory: Trustworthiness in the organisation–stakeholder relationship. *J. Bus. Ethics* **2010**, *95*, 425–438. [CrossRef]
31. Reid, K. An evaluation of reports on the attendance of pupils in out-of-school provision. *Int. J. Educ. Manag.* **2007**, *21*, 144–157. [CrossRef]
32. Solomon, Y.; Rogers, C. Motivational Patterns in Disaffected School Students: Insights from pupil referral unit clients. *Br. Educ. Res. J.* **2001**, *27*, 331–345. [CrossRef]
33. Stangvik, G. Progressive special education in the neoliberal context. *Eur. J. Spec. Needs Educ.* **2014**, *29*, 91–104. [CrossRef]

education sciences

Article

# Parent Enablers of Education Support for Young People with Hearing Impairment in Pakistan

**Tehmina Hammad**

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB2 8PQ, UK; th397@cam.ac.uk

**Abstract:** This article examines the support received by young people with hearing impairment from parent enablers of education in Pakistan. In this ethically designed research, the society's learning pathways of strong and weak knowledge and education centralised the voice of young people with hearing impairment as a methodology to evaluate society's influence on parent enablers support, including from for-profit and not-for-profit education. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 young people with hearing impairment, 10 each from for-profit and not-for-profit education. The case-by-case analysis of young peoples' voice showed that in strong pathway, the binding together of family support in education with society formed young peoples' equal but different identity that shaped an imbalance in gender and social choice of impairment over poverty with restricted translation of for-profit education in employment outside the family. In weak pathway, the family support in education disconnected from society formed young peoples' same but unequal identity that shaped conflict in gender and social choice of poverty over impairment with limited conversion of not-for-profit education in local employment. In conclusion, alignment of society and parent enablers of education with reference to gender is required for young peoples' entry in outside and local employment for sustainable development in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** parent enablers; voice; hearing impairment; learning; knowledge; education; employment; Pakistan

**Citation:** Hammad, T. Parent Enablers of Education Support for Young People with Hearing Impairment in Pakistan. *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 480. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11090480

Academic Editors: Richard Rose and Michael Shevlin

Received: 18 June 2021
Accepted: 26 August 2021
Published: 30 August 2021

## 1. Introduction

Parent enablers represent a sum of practice or total support received by young people with hearing impairment from family, and others, including from different types of education. Currently, the focus on parental self-esteem and parent–child communication [1] creates variation in parental involvement in their children's education [2,3] and which requires new ways of approaching family support in education [4]. In this respect, the current focus in educational research on literacy of children and young people with hearing impairment seldom overcomes their linguistic difficulties and challenges that they face in accessing written forms of assessments under standard examination conditions [5]. In education, hearing is equated with learning which is seen as important in interacting and relating to others in society but with implications for employment prospects of young people with hearing impairment in their adult life. Moreover, society's interventions and approaches often seek to develop these young people through access to learning in terms of provision of accessible instructions or learning to access that reinforces the importance of gaining independent skills such as checking whether their audiology equipment is working. While access to learning is irrespective of young peoples' placement in different types of education, the learning to access is linked with variety of educational placements with a number of professionals, such as special educational needs coordinators, specialist teachers, and audiologists, who are supported by technology to facilitate the learning and development of children with hearing impairment [6]. While the interrelations in access to learning and learning to access is recognised, its application remains limited with an overemphasis on explicit instruction that reduces the development of independent skills [7] or an underemphasis regarding dependence on technology that makes young people with hearing impairment frustrated, isolated, and unable to express themselves in different educational contexts.

At present, the majority of educational research takes a deficit view of voice [8]. This makes it difficult to know how young people with hearing impairment receive support from parent enablers of education in their learning and development in different educational contexts to achieve valued outcomes. Overlooking the voice of young people in educational research poses the risk of preserving power in knowledge that moves in different directions for political purpose [9] with subsequent rejection of entry of narrative in institutions for education and employment [10]. This requires controlling the political listening of voice [11] by centralising the voice as an evaluative tool or an automated causal mechanism with intervals in stress and strain for continuous linguistic reflection, textual observation, and strategic reflexivity [8] that can be verified in the family sphere and validated in different types of educational contexts [12]. This centralisation of voice that engages with society's capability of knowledge and its interventions and approaches in the context of education reveal its influence on parent enablers support, including contributions from different types of education, especially important for young people living in difficult circumstances and challenging conditions.

The educational research that is closed to voice exacerbates stress for young people, especially in their adult life. The subtraction of young peoples' voice from society leads to parental distress. In particular, the father as an important determinant of young peoples' life satisfaction transmits intergenerational stress that has negative impact on the well-being of young people [13]. The subsequent formation of young peoples' separate identity draws attention to their difference rather than sameness [14]. The subsequent efforts in a theoretical vacuum to remove the blockage within the physical make-up of young people as a product of home rather than society leads to tacit and remote interventions [15] in education and employment [8]. The parental stress that comes about [16] generates a sense of urgency that dominates [17] the corresponding chain of demands placed on young people to work outside the home, have a job, earn a decent income, be happy and satisfied by fulfilling parental and family responsibilities alongside completion of education where in some cases fathers disapprove of their daughters' education and prevent it [18], including their aspirations for non-traditional employment. These demands lock the learning potential of society raising questions on the legitimacy of its practices [19] that for-profit education adapts to in its provision of access to learning [20] but where it often falls short of translating this provision in employment for young people outside their family sphere.

The educational research that is open to voice shows strains in effort, especially in empowering women for their participation in education and society. In this respect, the substitution of young peoples' voice with society equates education with capacity to aspire for a different life. This instills an image of an educated woman in community consciousness to bring about a change in what girls and women can be and do [21]. The identity formed shapes entangled freedoms for men and women that require more effort to bring about change in gender norms, in particular on maternal employment, which is seen as having a positive impact on aspirations and emotional well-being of young people [22]. These efforts emphasise intergenerational transmission of education from mothers to daughters rather than paternal to sons because only maternal education increases participation of daughters in education [23]. The demands that are placed on mothers for advocacy and taking charge of their child's future [24] increases their responsibility and workload [25] where their part-time work is not adjusted in the labour market [26]. These unrelenting efforts result in maternal speedup but where mothers are held accountable for feminising ties with sons, and for guarding gender boundaries [2]. These efforts trigger new forms of social movements and organisations that are inextricably interwoven with the autonomous communication network through technology that raises awareness and induces political change in the global network society [27]. These global networks orient young people towards imagined future [28,29] making them move away from their families and society [30,31]. This empirical gap raises questions on reforms in governance of education [32] with capacity-building initiatives for learning and development [33].

Figure 1 shows society's learning pathways of strong and weak knowledge and education that centralise the voice of young people as an evaluative tool to examine the support provided by their parent enablers in real and distant time.

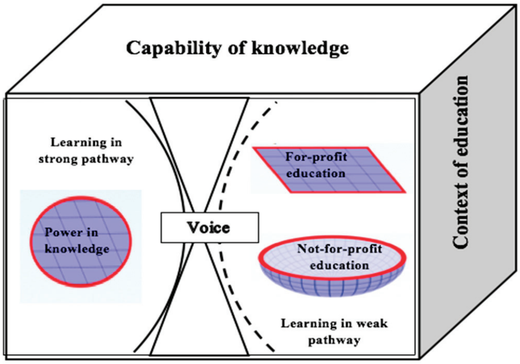


**Figure 1.** The learning pathways of knowledge and education (adapted from a capability-context framework of culture [8]).

## 2. The State of Pakistan

Pakistan is a young country with ongoing work on the place and position of an individual in society. Similar to other parts of the world, Pakistan promotes human rights regardless of local conditions [34]. Pakistan also emphasises legal reforms and good governance for greater empowerment of women in society but which often produce results that are opposite to the claims of social justice. Moreover, the benefits of higher education are seen as direct and leading to economic independence [35], increased status within the family, and reduction in discriminatory gender norms [36] in education but which seldom translate in gainful employment for young people with hearing impairment in Pakistan.

In Pakistan, children and young people with hearing impairment are seen as having limited ability to learn and develop [37]. The assumption that some children cannot be taught science or study in mainstream schools limits investments in their education [38], such as in sign language. In Pakistan, young people with hearing impairment are mostly educated in poorly designed state segregated schools [39] with little parental cooperation in engaging with their education [40]. This segregation limits their access to curriculum, movement towards mainstream schools and employment opportunities. Currently, the government schools are not prepared to include these children, and teachers are reluctant to admit them, and only do so because of government pressure and international mandates on education and employment of marginalised young people.

In Pakistan, the voice is fitted to the parameters of society, especially on gender. While women are encouraged to acquire knowledge to support their husbands, this has implications for family mobility [41]. In this respect, mothers of a child with impairment resist, negotiate, and seek information from internal and external sources to overcome their dual exceptionalisation but which increases their workload with little success in reducing the concentration of power in society [12]. While maternal employment is seen as increasing the number of children enrolled in low-fee private education nearby, this also reduces the provision of public education in Pakistan [42].

Pakistan shows persistent inequalities in education, especially in gender [43]. The learning gap is widening [37] and since 2001, even with the increased economic and humanitarian assistance, little impact has been achieved in improving educational outcomes of marginalised children and young people [44]. The persistent discrepancies in the state provision of education between provinces, rural, and urban areas show limited outreach.

In 2017, the public expenditure in education as percentage of GDP was 2.3 per cent, up from 2.2 per cent in 2015, but lowest in the developing world, against government's commitment to invest 4 per cent of GDP in education. Pakistan's investments for children, especially marginalised children and young people, are scattered under sectoral programmes, such as primary education, tertiary health care, and social welfare. Moreover, the poverty-reduction programmes are financed through both current and development expenditures where the focus on marginalised children and young people remains missing. Following the 18th Amendment, Punjab has increased its budget on education to 46 per cent but continues to show regional disparities in education even with international support to increase the enrolment rates of children with impairments because of lack of relevant and adequate data. The low fee private schools are introduced as the solution but these apply different models in urban areas with little success in rural schools in retaining marginalised children without cash incentives from the government of Pakistan.

## 3. Research Design and Methodology

This study applied an ethical research design of society's learning pathways of strong and weak knowledge and education adapted from the capability-context framework of culture [8]. This research design focused on society's causal influence on parent enablers support for young people with hearing impairment from their childhood to adult life, including the contribution of different types of education in Pakistan. These ethically designed learning pathways of social protection centralised the voice of young people with hearing impairment as an evaluative tool or an automated mechanism with intervals in stress and strain that influence the support provided by parent enablers of education [8]. In this collaborative and participatory research design, the focus on the voice of young people as a methodology provided continuous linguistic reflection, textual observation, and strategic reflexivity. In this methodology, each case of voice was given an equal weight with reference to the same theme such as family, others, and for-profit and not-for-profit education. This allowed for integrating the thematic combinations of commonalities and differences to ensure valid coverage of the whole participant group. The focus on young people with hearing impairment emerged from the selection of self-identified for-profit and not-for-profit educational institutions from 499 organisations that provided education for young people with impairments, including hearing, across Pakistan. Of these, only one self-identified itself as for-profit which was selected and 13 regarded themselves as not-for-profit from which the most contrasting to the for-profit was selected in Punjab, Pakistan.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 young people with hearing impairment, 10 each selected from the membership list of self-identified for-profit and not-for-profit educational institutions in Pakistan. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Urdu language in the presence of an interpreter familiar to the participants to ensure that they felt comfortable in having a conversation about their past, present, and future. The transcripts were cross-checked by the participants/interpreters which was followed by an experimental coding of the voice which itself was a part of the research process as a group activity in which codes read each other. The case-by-case analysis of the voice of young people revealed the commonalities and differences in their accounts of family, others, and contributions of different types of education. The pseudonym given to participants protects his or her identity, and the original meaning of young peoples' accounts of parent enablers of education was retained in Roman Urdu.

In for-profit education, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five young men and women aged between 21 and 28 years. This formal and large-sized educational institution had a general body of 27 volunteers and 10 executive members that included nine male members with none having an impairment. In total, the institution employed 132 staff members, including a physiotherapist, a psychologist, teachers, and other administrative staff. The education was provided to over 1200 children (approximately 400 in urban areas and 800 in rural areas), 80 per cent of whom came from low-income families. The institution also managed 15 other schools in nearby rural areas providing formal curriculum with voluntary interactions with parents. The aim was to make young people with hearing impairment, '... useful, well-adjusted, and integrated members of the society'.

Table 1 presents the profile of young people with hearing impairment from for-profit education. Most young people came from an average family size of eight members with fathers having more years of education than mothers. The fathers worked in a post office, water/sanitation agency, bank, university or government, salesman, builder, and jeweler, and mothers were mainly housewives. Of the 10 young people, seven had hearing impairment from birth. Most young women had continuous education in for-profit institution with some also having attended government special education. While six were enrolled for graduate studies in the institution, four had completed 12 years of education. Only three young men were employed, of which one helped at his father's tea stall.

**Table 1.** Profile of young people with hearing impairment from for-profit education.

| Pseudonym | Age (Years) | Marital Status | Family Size | Impairment | Education (Years) | Type of Education | Employment Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Mahmood** | 26 | Unmarried | 9 members | Did Not Say | Bachelor of Arts (14) | Government and for-profit | Unemployed |
| **Faizan** | 25 | Married | 8 members | Did Not Say | Bachelor of Arts (in progress) (14) | For-profit | Employed |
| **Ishtiaq** | 23 | Unmarried | 7 members | From birth | Fellow of Arts (12) | For-profit | Employed |
| **Mohammad** | 24 | Unmarried | 8 members | Acquired later | Fellow of Arts (12) | For-profit | Employed |
| **Asif** | 22 | Unmarried | 7 members | From birth | Bachelor of Arts (14) | Government and For-profit | Unemployed |
| **Zeba** | 21 | Unmarried | 8 members | From birth | Fellow of Arts (12) | For-profit | Unemployed |
| **Tahira** | 28 | Married | Lives with in-laws | From birth | Bachelor of Arts (14) | For-profit | Unemployed |
| **Zainab** | 21 | Unmarried | 6 members | From birth | Bachelor of Arts (14) | Government and For-profit | Unemployed |
| **Fatima** | 22 | Unmarried | 9 members | From birth | Fellow of Arts (12) | For-profit | Unemployed |
| **Mehr** | 22 | Unmarried | 6 members | From birth | Bachelor of Arts (14) | For-profit | Unemployed |

In not-for-profit education, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 young men aged between 18 and 29 years where women largely remained invisible and only participated in religious activities. This small-sized urban-based institution had strong links with the government special education. The institution was governed by five staff members, all with hearing impairment that aspired to empower, educate, and develop the leadership skills to enable young people with hearing impairment to progress in life. The institution received voluntary contributions from society and was also supported by an international charity in the provision of English language and computer courses, in addition to contributions from religious charity (Zakat) and philanthropy from local politicians.

Table 2 shows the profile of young people with hearing impairment from not-for-profit institution of education. Most young men had been a member for more than 10 years and the majority came from an average family size of six members with low income. Of the 10 young men, five had completed or were completing 14 years of education, and four had completed 10–12 years of education. While three young men belonged to the city in which not-for-profit education was located, the remaining had migrated from other parts of Pakistan. Only two young men had fathers who had completed 10 years of education with the remaining fathers having no formal education. The fathers' occupations included clerk, small businesses, air-conditioner mechanic, property dealer, sweet vendor, dyer, construction worker, speedometer mechanic, and shopkeeper. Most mothers were housewives with two self-employed, as a beautician and a school teacher. Of the 10 young men, nine began their education in different special schools but later transferred between government and not-for-profit education with one young man having attended both private and government special schools. Of the 10 young men, six were employed as computer operators, accounts clerk, waiter, government department, and administration, and four were seeking employment.

**Table 2.** Profile of young people with hearing impairment from not-for-profit education.

| Pseudonym | Age (Years) | Marital Status | Family Size | Impairment | Education (Years) | Type of Education | Employment Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Majid** | 22 | Unmarried | 6 members | From birth | Bachelor of Arts (14) | Government and Not-for-profit | Unemployed |
| **Abdul** | 21 | Unmarried | 8 members | Acquired later | Bachelor of Arts (14) | Government and Not-for-profit | Employed |
| **Hammad** | 29 | Married | 6 members | Acquired later | Bachelor of Arts (14) | Not-for-profit | Employed |
| **Ali** | 18 | Unmarried | 6 members | From birth | Secondary School (10) | Government and Not-for-profit | Unemployed |
| **Rizwan** | 29 | Married | 7 members | From birth | Bachelor of Arts (14) | Not-for-profit | Employed |
| **Ahmed** | 28 | Unmarried | 16 members | Acquired later | Fellow of Arts (12) | Government and Not-for-profit | Employed |
| **Waheed** | 23 | Unmarried | 7 members | From birth | Fellow of Arts (12) | Government and Not-for-profit | Unemployed |
| **Ahsan** | 19 | Unmarried | 5 members | From birth | Fellow of Arts (12) | Government and Not-for-profit | Employed |
| **Arsalan** | 29 | Married | 9 members | From birth | Fellow of Arts (12) | Government and Not-for-profit | Unemployed |
| **Mohsin** | 24 | Married | Extended family | Acquired later | Bachelor of Arts (14) | Not-for-profit | Employed |

## 4. Findings

The findings are presented in society's learning pathways of strong and weak knowledge and education in which the voice of young people with hearing impairment is centralised to evaluate parent enablers support in terms of family, and others, including from different types of education in Pakistan, as shown in the following sections.

### *4.1. Pathway of Strong Knowledge, Binding Together of Family Support in Education with Society*

In the pathway of strong knowledge, the binding together of family support in education with society closed the voice of young people with hearing impairment. In this disciplinary pathway, Mahmood recounted that, ' . . . my father did not let us go out . . . ' Similarly, Ishtiaq also stayed at home and shared that, 'I used to stay quiet . . . unless my father told me to go out to get something . . . ' He added that, 'When my father is sleeping I don't make any noise . . . ' Asif stated that, 'I am very close to my father. My father fulfils all my wishes (khawaish ko pura kartey hain)'. In the absence of father, mothers provided support in education, as stated by Ishtiaq, who said that, 'My father was working, but my mother helped me with my studies (thoora thoora parhatey thee)'. Mohammad also said that, 'At home mother helped me a lot, my father was busy with work, he does not have the time . . . .' Asif also took help from his siblings and recounted that, 'They used to explain to me even the smallest of things and guide me but as soon as I have grown up my brothers don't give me the same level of attention'. As a result, Asif started relying more on his friends for support in education in his adult life.

The father motivated young men in education and most young men wanted to work with their father. In education, Faizan stated that, 'My father thought that I should study. He was the one who brought me to school first holding my hand . . . .' He reflected that, 'My father, he used to tell me keep trying (Koshish karo Koshish karo). He was most helpful'. Mahmood said that, "I enjoy working with my father in computers. I help him with Hisab Kitab [accounting]', adding that, 'I also want to work in a post office where my father works but he does not take me with him . . . ' Similarly, Ishtiaq said that, 'After completing my studies I want to work at my father's tea stall (chai ki dukan par kaam karna hai). Faizan also wanted, ' . . . to work where I am currently working [in his father's workplace] . . . ' He added that, 'When I get more educated my mind will open up and it will become easier for me to work [with him] . . . ' Mohammad being the only son was supported by the father in fulfilling his family responsibilities alongside his education and he stated that, 'I work to help my father. I have taken a job. My day is very busy as during the day I am at college but in the evening I go to the factory'.

The young women received love and care from their families. Tahira shared that, 'Overall the whole family is very cooperative and all my needs are fulfilled whether asked or not'. She added that, 'I am keenly involved in all the activities in my home'. She stated that, 'My parents inform me in every matter of concern and ask for my consent. I have no special treatment'. Similar reflections were provided by Zainab who said that, 'My parents are very caring and loving. My needs are fulfilled. Behaviour of all family members is very good and cooperative'. Fatima reflected that, 'My father has helped me a lot. I am shy and reserved', adding that, 'My parents treated everyone equally with all children including me'. Like other young women, Mehr stated that, 'My family members are caring and attentive'. In terms of mothers, Zainab said that, 'My mother fulfilled my aspirations', with similar reflections from Mehr who stated that, 'My mother has fulfilled all my aspirations'. In terms of siblings, Zeba recounted that, 'Two elder sisters paid attention to me and helped me a lot. Now two other sisters and my two brothers give me no time'. Regarding employment outside the family sphere, Zeba wanted any kind of employment, Fatima aspired to be a special education teacher, but was soon getting married and was uncertain about fulfilling her aspiration. Mehr wanted to do a computer-related job, but which her father was not permitting and she stated, 'I am not sure why?'

The binding together of family support in education with society increased young peoples' dependence on family that subsequently formed their identity and shaped their views on gender as well as social choice for adult life, as shown in the following section.

### *4.2. Equal but Different, Imbalance in Gender and Impairment over Poverty*

While young men felt equal to others, they regarded themselves as different. Mahmood had observed that, 'They [with hearing] are different kind of people and we are different kind of people (Woh log aur hain aur hum log aur hain)'. Mahmood experienced lack of response from others and said that they say, ' . . . stop, we will listen to you later . . . they are not happy but get angry. They start talking to other people . . . '. While Ishtiaq also felt that, ' . . . we are all equal (sab baraabar hain)', he added that, 'We talk to each other but people outside don't talk to us but when we talk to each other we feel very happy'. Similarly, Mohammad had observed the growing distance between him and his friends and shared that, ' . . . my normal friends began to distance themselves from me [after learning about his impairment]. Their behaviour towards me changed. They started making fun of me'. This distance further increased after Mohammad was enrolled in a special school, and he said that, 'They used to name-call me. Then I made deaf friends who are very cooperative . . . they understand my problems and they don't make fun of me'.

Like other young men, Faizan said that, 'I feel different from normal because of my hearing', but said that, 'When I talk to my normal friends I feel very happy and I learn a lot . . . ' He added that, 'They usually write to communicate with me. I learn English vocabulary from them', but also said that, 'I am happy within my own society [hearing impairment], but when I go out in the outer world, I realise how important communication and hearing is'. Faizan was of the view that, ' . . . we know sign language . . . ' and 'If we are given the opportunity to work we will be ahead of everyone else (hum sab se aagey jain gey)'. Faizan made several attempts to teach sign language to others but said, ' . . . they don't want to learn', and stated the following observation:

> When people who can speak interact with me they go quiet. I don't go quiet, they go quiet, but because they don't know sign language they begin to think what to say to me. I tell them look in my eyes and talk to me, but when I explain things to them they forget and they don't understand (un ko samajh nahi ati). But I don't leave them. I still keep my friendship with them, they can forget me but I don't forget them (mein unko nahi bhoolta hoon) and I try to keep them happy.

The difficult interactions with others and growing distance from society shaped young men's views on gender. The young men compared women with and without hearing impairment in relation to work at home and marriage. While Mohammad said that, 'There is no difference [in women and men], they face similar difficulties', Faizan said that, 'I think girls who don't hear and speak are better at doing household work'. He added that, 'Their full attention is on the task that they are doing, for instance if they are cooking (handi paka rahi hain too ussi ki taraf dekhteen hain, idhar udhar nahi dekhteen). Faizan also said that, 'When the husband calls her, she looks at him with happiness. When they see guests, they say Salam asks them whether they want water and cook for them and feed them'. While Mahmood was of the view that, 'Even a normal person who gets married faces a number of difficulties but if there is a person with a disability he or she will face even more problems'. He added that, ' ... if a normal girl is called she will respond and do the work but if the girl is hearing-impaired then someone will have to go to the girl to ask her to do the work. This could be a problem for a girl'. Mahmood elaborated that, 'Also when they get married they face issues because some girls prefer that their husband should hear and speak but the majority prefer that their husbands should not hear or speak because it is easier to communicate with each other'.

The young women felt little impact of their impairment on their daily lives. Zeba noted that there is, ' ... no particular affect [of impairment in everyday life]', adding that, ' ... society makes me realise my impairment'. Like young men, Fatima saw herself as, ' ... equal with others ... ', and said that, 'My society is narrow and includes my family, class fellows, and friends, [they] are my society'. Similarly, Mehr had observed that, 'Everyone behaved normal, but cousins behaved differently because of my impairment'. Like other women, Tahira also said that, 'My life is not affected by my hearing impairment too much ... ' and added that, 'My family members helped me in every matter'. The school made Zainab aware of her impairment and she shared that, ' ... because all the girls in school were normal and I was the only one who was deaf. I remained separate and silent from the rest of the girls. She added that, ' ... this feeling did not affect my family life much but regarding friend-making, it created worries for me. This feeling hit me much harder in school ... '.

The young women also shared their views on gender. Zeba said that, 'For me both men and women face equal difficulties'. Tahira held traditional views on gender and stated that, 'Women are more compassionate than men', a view also shared by Zainab who said that while the struggles are the same for all, 'Women behave good than men'. and had observed that, 'the affect of impairment is more on men [society expects them to be in gainful employment] than women'. Mehr expressed similar views on gender and said that:

> Men are more attentive than women. They pay attention. Boys also have more information. We girls remain at home mostly. My class fellows were very good. They informed me a lot about the outside world.

The young people felt equal but different from others which made them look towards society to gain information and knowledge which influenced their views on gender in which young men compared women with and without hearing and young women held traditional views of men and women with social choice of impairment over poverty (except for Mahmood and Faizan) for their adult life, as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** The social choice of impairment over poverty for adult life.

| Young People | Poverty and Normality | Change in Life |
|---|---|---|
| Mahmood | Even if I am poor I want to be normal. | I will use computer to change my life. They(with hearing impairment) need more opportunities for learning as well to learn skills like computers. |
| Faizan | I would prefer to be normal. I will try to progress upwards (kudh ko oper ley jaoon ga). | I want to be poor but with thinking I can develop myself. If I am poor but can hear and speak then I will make life better through work. |
| Ishtiaq | Rich because that will give me facilities for my life. | When you have money you are not dependent on others (kisi ka muhtaj nehi hona parta) |
| Mohammad | I want to be deaf and rich. | There is no life without money. I want to live a comfortable life even though we maybe deaf |

**Table 3.** *Cont.*

| Young People | Poverty and Normality | Change in Life |
|---|---|---|
| Asif | Did not respond | Did not respond |
| Zeba | Rich and deaf person than poor and hearing girl | Did not elaborate |
| Tahira | Deaf and rich | Did not elaborate |
| Zainab | I would prefer to be rich and deaf | Did not elaborate |
| Fatima | To be rich and disabled | Did not elaborate |
| Mehr | Deaf and rich rather than poor and hearing person | Did not elaborate |

### *4.3. For-Profit Education, Restricted Translation in Employment Outside the Family*

The for-profit intervention of access to learning with explicit approach to instruction activated young peoples' observation skills. In this type of education, Faizan learnt,' . . . how to watch (observe) the world [and] how I should develop my character (kirdar) to interact with people that is what I have learnt'. Faizan stated that, 'I look, I observe, and I think what people are doing', He elaborated that, 'When I come to the institution the people are different [good] but when I go into the outside world I see that people are all the same [bad]. I compare the two and this increases my information and knowledge'. This helped Faizan to think about, 'How should I develop my character (kirdar) to inter-act with people?' Faizan recognised that in this type of education, '[I] developed my confidence. I can communicate with people. I don't feel shy anymore'. In terms of teachers, Faizan said that, 'When I look at my teachers and people who are like me, I feel very happy over here . . . '. In particular, ' . . . [the English teacher] made me understand really well (aur bauhat acha samjhaya). She made me become interested in studies'. Similarly, Mohammad said that, ' . . . she [the English teacher] has guided me so well and made me understand well'. Ishtiaq elaborated and said that, 'She understands us and we understand her'. Asif shared his learning experience in for-profit education by saying that:

> At the [for-profit] college I found people who made me learn and clear my concepts. I have felt that there is someone who can teach me (sikhaney wala mila hai). Coming over here, teachers have helped me learn and all teachers have helped me to clear my concepts.

The for-profit education activated young men's passion for learning. Asif said that, 'I have also learnt how to remain social . . . how to move in society'. He stated that, 'I studied so much that in the intermediate I topped in Punjab amongst all schools . . . I am very satisfied with my studies over here. I started managing my life'. Mahmood shared his specific interest and said that, ' . . . [learning] computer, this is what I have really liked and learnt with passion'. He added that this interest, ' . . . enabled [him] to learn how to use English', in addition to learning physiotherapy skills. Similarly, Ishtiaq said that, 'I like studying, particularly computer. I am passionate about computer . . . ' Moreover, Ishtiaq stated that, 'I feel confident in talking to people. My sign language has improved . . . ' adding that, 'I can communicate with people by looking them in the eye. I don't feel shy anymore'. Like Mahmood who developed his physiotherapy skills, Faizan became skilled in repairing mobile phones and Ishtiaq's mathematics skills enabled him to help his father with book-keeping. Mahmood now wanted, ' . . . more opportunities for learning'. Faizan said that, 'If we are given opportunities we will keep learning and they [others] should take us along with them. Don't think that if we are unable to hear and speak that we are different'.

The young people had also experienced government education. Asif stated that, ' . . . there was no special school in the village that is why we shifted . . . ' Asif said that ' . . . my parents were not satisfied with the government school because either I was not given proper attention or because I did not feel easy over there. That is why my father got me admitted into for-profit institution'. Ishtiaq, however, appreciated the teachers in government school and said that, ‘When I was in the government institution the teachers were very helpful’. Mohammad was of the view that, ‘ . . . after studying in the college [for-profit] I now have a concept of what a word means’, which was not the case in the government school where the only thing they taught me there was writing (sirf lekhna hi sakhaya hai). I am not clear about a single word, what that actually means (yeh word kia hai) . . . ’ I now have a concept of what a word means. Mohammad also remained unsatisfied with the extent of his learning in for-profit institution and said that, ‘ . . . the only thing that helped me was what I learnt in the factory; education did not help me in any way’, adding that, ‘Education is not a necessity for this type of work (education is ke liyey zaroori nahi hai). I sit on a machine and knit socks’. Mohammad also said that while he now knows, ‘ . . . how to communicate, how to sit. and stand up’, and, ‘I have been able to understand people (logon ko samajhna aya hai society mein). But I must say that this degree has not benefitted me in my job’. Similarly, Mahmood said that in for-profit education, ‘I have come to know about [the] how and why of life . . . ’ and, ‘How one should talk to others, respect my father and mother, love my younger siblings, how to communicate, how to sit and stand up; meeting similar people and working with them is what I really like’, but:

> Education has not helped much because I have not been able to do what I wanted to do. I want to work in the post office. Yes, education benefitted me in terms of making friends, but I haven’t been able to learn the sign language that is needed to communicate with friends so I still have this problem.

In terms of employment, Mohammad had secured his job in a factory through his father’s connections (sifaarish) but where he said that, ‘I keep myself to myself (kam se kam rakhta hoon) because of my lack of communication’. Mohammad now wanted to work in an organisation where the salary is high, ‘ . . . so that I can make my family comfortable. I feel very happy when I do anything for my family (family ke har kam mein buhat happy hota hoon) and I feel very satisfied . . . ’ Asif aspired to do an office job in a reputable institution and shared that, ‘I have a friend who wants to work in traffic police. But the police people have rejected him because he is deaf’. Ishtiaq spoke about the issue of remuneration and said that employers give, ‘ . . . low remuneration, thinking of us as deaf and dumb. This makes me angry . . . ’ He noted that, ‘Like other people argue if they are given less money, but we can’t do that. We feel angry but keep quiet’.

The young women felt a sense of belonging in for-profit education. Zeba said that, ‘I liked school life because there I met my class fellows like me. In school everyone is special and we feel like home together’. She added that, ‘ . . . its [instruction-based approach] built my confidence, improved my learning, and enlarged [my] circle of friends’. Zeba elaborated that, ‘[A] variety of activities were organised which provided knowledge and rich learning. Most special is the achievement of a graduation degree’. Similarly, Tahira said that, ‘ . . . [for-profit special education] helped me develop confidence, increasing my circle of friends, [and] fulfilled my aspirations (graduation)’. Zainab also said that, ‘I learnt a lot from my studies . . . ’, stating that, ‘ . . . the for-profit institution developed my confidence . . . ’, and where, ‘I learnt a lot from my studies . . . which [learning] was so much neglected by the government school . . . ’. She added that, my relations with people were positive. Confidence was attained and aspirations were fulfilled’. Similarly, Fatima shared similar learning experience in for-profit education and said that it developed her, ‘ . . . confidence and improved so many functional skills. I can do sewing, drawing, sketching, and cooking. We learnt to manage any situation with perfect ability. My confidence has grown . . . ’ Similarly Mehr said that, ‘So many activities were organised, which were of my interest and made me interested’. She added that, ‘[for-profit education] fulfilled my aspiration of learning. I learnt a lot. I learnt to be an all-rounder, sports, management of activities, painting, sewing, cooking, laundry work, etc. I was able to achieve education up to graduation’.

While the for-profit education activated young peoples’ observation skills and passion for learning, which developed their confidence and achieved reasonably high levels of education, it remained restricted in translating its provision of access to learning in employment for these young people outside the family sphere. Most young men and women remained unemployed (and unmarried), and that required their inclusion in pathway of weak knowledge and education, as shown in the following section.

### *4.4. Pathway of Weak Knowledge, Family Support in Education Disconnected from Society*

In pathway of weak knowledge, the family support in education remained disconnected from society which opened the voice of young men with hearing impairment. In this interdisciplinary pathway, Majid reflected on his father's support and said that, '... he [my father] has supported me a lot and encouraged me ... '. Arsalan recounted that, 'My father shares everything with all of us equally'. Rizwan reflected that, 'Through my father's efforts I was enrolled [in a special school] and stated an incident by saying that, 'My father went to school with me and told them that this is just a child and has not developed enough sense so please explain things to him with love and affection ... '. Abdul's father asked people about the, ' ... school for deaf children'. Adding that, 'My father made the decision about sending me to school'. Similarly, Ahmed said that, ' ... my father asked people that my son is deaf and I need to get him admitted in school. That is how I got admission'. Abdul shared that, 'My father always told me to get education and progress in life (ilm haasil karo, aagay barho). He gave me permission to do anything I want in life'. Ali also said that, 'My father decided to take me to school. My father is very keen that I should study further but he is unable to pay the fees'. As a result, Ali's father asked him to, ' ... work hard myself, [and] do a part-time job'. Majid shared similar reflections and said that, 'My father has supported me a lot and encouraged me'. He added that, 'My father was very worried about me that when I am able to do something ... I will become his helping hand (un ka bazoo bnoon ga)', but recognised that, 'I have a language problem, so people don't understand me, and as it is technical work so it is difficult'.

In the absence of his father who worked overseas, Ahsan said that, 'My mother took me to school ... took care of me in every way (har lihaz se kheail rakha)'. Mohsin's mother also had hearing impairment and he shared that, ' ... she supported me the most (mujhey bohat ziyada support kia). She taught me sign language since I was a small child and she continued to teach me all along. My mother has played a very important role in my life (ahem role play kia hai meri zindagi main)'. Like Mohsin, most of Ahsan's siblings knew sign language, and ' ... so if I [Ahsan] have any problem, they help me'. While Ahsan fully participated in family functions, Ahmed said that, ' ... so I am a bit involved'. Waheed also stated that the attitude of family, ' ... is mixed ... when I try to convey something to them through sign language, they don't give any attention to what I am saying'. Majid also stated that, 'My family has never involved me in discussing household matters and issues (ghareloo masial). I am ignored because I have a language problem'. Majid felt that if he supported his family financially then, 'I will get importance in my family and I will be listened to and they will accept what I say'. Hammad also wanted to, ' ... .proactively make suggestions [in the family]'.

The young men worked or wanted to work for the government. Ahsan wanted a government job, ' ... especially related to computer typing', even though his father wanted him to work in the family business. While Rizwan shared that, 'I got a job in the government ... but with difficulty', Arsalan said that, 'I have told my father many times that I want to do a government job. But my father says that in a government job the salaries are not high and so you should do business. You need to have a better life, adding that, 'My father will not give me permission to do a government job in Pakistan but he may allow me to go abroad'. Waheed also wanted to work for the government and said that, 'If I don't get a government job then I will try for a private job', adding that, 'There is no one in the family who can help me get a job'.

The family support in education disconnected from society increased young peoples' dependence on government that subsequently formed their identity, shaped their views on gender and social choice for adult life, as shown in the following section.

### *4.5. Same but Unequal, Conflict in Gender and Poverty over Impairment*

The young men felt the same as others but society treated them differently. Ahsan stated that, 'I never felt that I can't speak like other children . . . ' but recognised that, 'It is very difficult as I can only communicate briefly with those who can speak due to a language problem . . . ' Similarly, Waheed regarded himself to be the same as normal children and Abdul stated that, 'I can communicate with normal people by lip-reading'. Like Abdul, Ali had noticed that, 'When I communicate with the people who can hear and speak I use English and I can also speak a little. This is very helpful for me'. Similarly, Rizwan stated that, 'Although no one completely understands what I am saying but they generally understand'. Arsalan said that, 'When I have a problem in communicating then I refer them to my brother . . . '. Ahsan explained that, 'Normal people don't ignore or kam tar samjhen [consider us less than themselves]. It is not like that', and went on to say that, 'If I need to talk to a normal person then one of my friends who can speak a little, he conveys what I want to say to him [them]'.

The young men found it difficult to express themselves. Majid said that, ' . . . we feel distressed (takleef mehsoos hoti hai) . . . '. Adding that, "We feel very frustrated we keep things to ourselves (ahsaasaat ko dil mein daba kar rakhtey hain) because others don't understand what we are saying (hamari baat naheen samajh patey)'. He elaborated that some people, ' . . . are good (achey log bhi miltey hain) and want to help us and talk to us with a smiling face. But because they are unable to communicate with us they are unable to help us or behave with us'. Arsalan used technology to fill the language and communication gap and Waheed spent most of his time at home, ' . . . search[ing] different things', and making, ' . . . friends with people in England and Europe and I chat with them'.

Majid was of the view that, 'The problem is with their [society's] attitude, they don't give us the respect we deserve (sahee respect) or attach importance to what we say (hamaari baat ko importance nahin detey) . . . '. He added that, 'In our society people belonging to the deaf community are not considered equal. If society gives us the same rights as other people enjoy, I think that will bring a positive change in our lives . . . '. Majid further stated that, ' . . . the reason [is] that there is no representation (tarjumani) so the issues related to our equality and rights (baraaberi aur haqooq) do not reach them [the government]. That is why they don't understand it either'.

In his workplace Arsalan observed that, 'There was no support from the government'. Ahmed highlighted the lack of use of sign language in his workplace and said that, ' . . . but I communicate with them in broken English by writing things down'. Similarly, Waheed said that, 'When I try to communicate with them [in offices] they are unable to understand what I am saying. They then say leave the application and go . . . ' Hammad relied on a colleague who knew sign language and said that, 'It has helped me a lot in communicating'. Mohsin said that, 'They [my colleagues] also don't make an effort to make me understand. There is a colleague in my office who I have taught a little bit of sign language, but other than him there is no one'. Ahmed also shared that the, ' . . . biggest issue is sign language. If I am not able to convey what I am saying, then how can I interact with them . . . ?'

The young men contrasted the freedoms of men and women in society. Majid stated that, 'Our issues are the same [women and men] as we have to face problems communicating with people', particularly in employment, stating that, 'We need to go to different places for jobs where we are ignored. Ours is an Islamic society so deaf girls face more issues because individually they cannot make an effort for a job or to resolve their problems'. He added that, 'In other societies there is a co-education system so girls on their own can make their own efforts for their jobs and their betterment. This is the additional issue they face'. Abdul regarded education as the solution and stated that, 'Families who are educated support their deaf girls in every way. They are sent to learn [for education], they also do language courses, and computer courses'. He added that, 'But if the parents of these girls are not educated then they face a lot of problems and difficulties'. Abdul actively encouraged parents to send their daughters for courses offered by not-for-profit education and stated that:

> We are working on this—girls who are confined to their homes, we will go door to door and talk to parents to send their girls for courses. I am unable to do this individually, but there is an organisation [for women with hearing impairment] . . . and I am involved with them.

Hammad shared that, 'My wife works and there are no issues whatsoever that she faces. If we have any issues, then they are exactly the same'. Ali was of the view that, 'Men have more opportunities because they can move around more freely, but girls don't have these opportunities'. Similarly, Ahmed said that, 'We, the deaf boys, have a number of opportunities to meet each other on various occasions. We have a lot of experience'. He added that, ' . . . because deaf girls are confined to their homes and they are not given a role in society that is why they are unable to develop confidence. This also limits the development of their intellectual capabilities'. Ahmed emphasised that women must, ' . . . participate in its [not-for profit institution] outdoor activities, this will help them to develop a lot'. Waheed also said that, 'The problems (masail) of deaf girls and boys are the same. Some parents also give permission to girls to take up jobs. But boys are more free to participate in activities'. Ahsan further stated that, 'The boys take part in a lot of outdoor activities but it is not the same with girls. They remain at home. There is no other real (khas) difference between the girls and boys with impairment'. Similar views were provided by Arsalan who said that, 'As women are confined to their homes and they don't participate in any other activities so they face more issues. We have more exposure of going to functions'. Mohsin contrasted freedoms of boys and girls and said that:

> Although the problems that me and my wife share are common, the only difference that I can think of is that deaf girls are restricted to home. As a result, they face more issues than us. Like in other societies, men and women have the same opportunities. We can try and create a similar thing over here.

The young men felt the same but were treated unequally by society which made them look towards technology to gain information and knowledge from other educational contexts which influenced their views on gender and social choice of poverty over normality in their adult life, as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4.** The social choice of poverty over impairment for adult life.

| Young People | Poverty and Normality | Change in Life |
|---|---|---|
| Majid | I would prefer to be poor and normal. | If this society gives us the same rights as what other people enjoy, I think that will bring a positive change in our lives |
| Abdul | I would like to be poor because I want to be physically fine | Did not elaborate |
| Hammad | I should be fine physically even if I am poor | Education can make the lives of deaf people better. The education needs to focus on English in which the intelligence of deaf people can be improved through question and answers. My only aspiration is that I should progress with the world |
| Ali | I would prefer to poor but normal | There is a need to improve the education system. Our teachers should know our language. We should not only be taught English and Urdu but also social studies and Islamiat. |
| Rizwan | My aspiration (Khawaish) is that I am physically able even if I am poor | One way that the lives of poor deaf people can be improved is through education and also if they get good jobs. If I get a position or have an opportunity I will contribute by financially assisting the poor deaf people and provide them with free education system so that they can get educated. |

**Table 4.** *Cont.*

| Young People | Poverty and Normality | Change in Life |
|---|---|---|
| Ahmed | I would like to be physically fine because if I am fine physically and work hard I can improve my life. | To do something for the deaf people, I will help them economically (mali toor per) by helping them find jobs. Like normal people have progressed in every field. In a similar way if the quality of our education is ensured then we can also progress in different fields just like the normal people. |
| Waheed | I would like to be poor and non-disabled | Get a good job so that I can also support other deaf boys . . . .if deaf people are given employment opportunities then their lives can get better(achi tabdeli aa sekti hai) |
| Ahsan | I want to be normal even if I am poor | Study further with financial support |
| Arsalan | If I am physically okey then I can taken on the challenge of poverty (gurbat ka muqabala kar saqoon ga mehna kar key) with hard work. | If I get a opportunity in life the only thing I will work on is that we should be treated like normal people, we are given our rights and problems are solved (Hamarey masiel hall kiye jain). Poor people remain behind in education (taleem key aitbar se peechey reh jatey hain). If they get educated they will get better jobs . . . to progress further. |
| Mohsin | I would prefer to be poor but have a normal body(Jismani toor per theekh hoon) | Just like the normal people take their issues to the government, share these and get them resolved I would like to do the same. That is take their issues to the seat of power (Sahebe Iqtedar). |

### *4.6. Not-for-Profit Education, Limited Conversion in Local Employment*

In not-for-profit education, the learning to access with an implicit approach of question-and-answer activated young men's social activities. Majid said that, ' . . . If there was no not-for-profit institution, then we would not be an organised group (munazam tanzeem) We now have a platform where we can all gather'. He added that here, 'We got an opportunity to learn English language and we also got an opportunity to exchange views with each other. We now have a platform where we can all gather'. Arsalan said that this type of education provided, ' . . . a social space . . . ', with similar views shared by Rizwan who said that they used this space to, ' . . . socialise with other deaf people'. Abdul added that because of not-for-profit education, 'My difficulty in communicating with people around the world has been resolved I write and chat with them. In Canada, in America. Some deaf people are from Pakistan'. Abdul shared the value of not-for-profit education for him and stated that:

> It [not-for-profit education] gave me the strength to talk to other people. Now it is my aspiration that I teach others English so that they become confident like me. Just like normal people have the confidence, I want these people [deaf people] to also have the same confidence.

Ahsan and Rizwan regularly organised social events. Rizwan said that, 'Other deaf people who are not associated, are not its members, lead a very strange life and their thinking is very limited. Those who come are much more developed'. Rizwan summed up the value of not-for-profit education for him by saying that:

> After getting education, I can talk to people through written communication. People who can speak have an advantage that they can communicate through speech but deaf people cannot communicate with others in any way without education. So education is most important for deaf people.

Most young men had completed a computer course and all had attended English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Ahsan shared that, ' . . . they [not-for-profit education] feel that if we know good English, we will get a good job and our biggest problem will be resolved (hamaara masala hulhojai ga)'. Ahsan shared his experience of learning from a teacher who, ‘ . . . came from England. He teaches very well (buhat acha sikhaya) [and] really benefitted me with my schoolwork. When I wrote sentences, he would help us by telling to write this before and that after’, and Waheed stated, ‘When he taught us I listened with a lot of interest (dilchaspi se seekhta tha)’. Overall, Mohsin said that, ‘ . . . what I can say is that it [not-for-profit education] plays an important role in deaf people’s lives’. The question-and-answer based learning helped Hammad to think critically. Majid said that this allowed him to differentiate, ‘ . . . between good and bad; which occupation is good and which is bad. Which path should I take, which path is good for me; and which path is not good for me’.

Waheed shared his experience of learning in government school and said that, ‘The role of teachers [government special education] was limited because they just used to write on the board and we used to copy it’. Similarly, Ahsan said that, ‘My teachers used to write on the whiteboard and we used to copy that’, Abdul also said that, ‘The teachers did not know sign language . . . ’ They could not explain things well’. Majid shared his experience and said that, ‘I was taken to school [government] [and] it was a very different experience as all children were deaf, because I was the only deaf child in the family. I felt very strange’. He added that, ‘ . . . but my teachers taught me by writing on the whiteboard with a lot of love and affection. This was something very new for me. I was very happy’. Majid added that even if teachers knew sign language they did not, ‘ . . . explain with examples something they don’t know . . . ’ Ali appreciated his teacher in government school because, ‘ . . . she also helped me to lip-read,’ also stressing the need for teachers to learn sign language where Ahmed felt that this was the reason, ‘ . . . why we have not developed intellectually’.

Waheed said that the government sector prefers physically disabled over people with hearing impairment ‘ . . . because they have communication issues (baat cheet karney main in ko darpesh masail hain)’. Waheed had applied to a number of private companies but received no response from them. Rizwan had secured a job, ‘ . . . with a lot of difficulty . . . ’. Ali wanted to work as a typist in the government sector, but was currently unemployed. Waheed and Ahsan who had completed 12 years of education were not employed. Ahsan wanted to work as a computer operator, file manager, or an office boy, and hoped that the not-for-profit training might help him in gaining employment. Majid was temporarily helping his father at his small family-run shop, and had applied for a job as a waiter. Majid said that, ‘ . . . we don’t get a job even after doing a graduation. There is no financial support from the government . . . ’ Majid elaborated that, ‘ . . . in other countries governments hire interpreters for deaf people who convey the issues such as related to jobs . . . they help them (muawanant kartey hain)’. Arsalan was also of the view that:

> ‘ . . . people with hearing impairment lacked unity (unity ka fuqdan hai), whereas . . . blind people and physical disabled are way ahead of us. They are in touch with the government regarding their issues, they keep meeting them. But there is no one amongst us who can be in touch with the government’.

All young men wanted to leave Pakistan for education and employment. Mohsin said that, ‘There are very few opportunities in Pakistan for my development, so I want to go abroad to study and do computer designing . . . ’ Majid felt that, ‘If I remain unemployed (faarigh) after getting educated then I am a burden on them [my family]. If I go abroad and do a good job and financially support them then they will feel happier’, and ‘ . . . my viewpoint will be given importance (meri har baat ko ahmiyat ki nigha se dekha jai ga). I will be listened to and they will accept what I say (meri har baat ko mana jai ga)’. Abdul highlighted the dilemma faced by young people and said, ‘Pakistan is my country and I work hard in this county but we are not encouraged over here, especially related to jobs’. Adding that, ‘We don’t have any support [from the government]. That is why I want to go abroad’. Ahmed also had plans of going abroad because, ‘In Pakistan computer or any kind of education for the deaf is not good or better. In other countries the quality of education is better that is why I want to go there’. He added that, ‘So I want to go there for education and a job’. Like other young men, Mohsin also said that, ‘I want to complete my education and then support my family'. Rizwan was not satisfied with the quality of education for young people with hearing impairment in Pakistan and said that:

> The standard of education in Pakistan is not good. My aspiration is to study abroad. After getting the education, just like people from abroad come to educate us, I want to study abroad and then come back to educate my own community [deaf community].

While the not-for-profit education provided a platform of learning to access that develop young peoples' organisation skills and confidence, it remained limited in converting these skills in local employment for young people which led to their aspiration to move away for quality education and better employment opportunities, supported by technology, to financially contribute towards their community and family.

## 5. Discussion

The society's learning pathways of strong and weak knowledge and education centralised the voice of the marginalised young people to evaluate the support they received from parent enablers of education [8]. This respectful research places controls on the political listening of voice [11] to overcome the risk of preserving the concentration of power in knowledge [9] with subsequent rejection of young peoples' entry in institutions of education and employment [10]. The centralised voice of young people as an automated mechanism of continuous linguistic reflection, textual observation, and strategic reflexivity on parent enablers of education provided scaled evidence on both access to learning and learning to access that is transferrable in facilitating the development of their independent skills that are supported by technology [7] across conditions [12].

The study has shown that in the learning pathway of strong knowledge, the binding together of family support in education to society closed the voice of young people with hearing impairment with a focus on their ability to learn and develop [37]. While the father motivated young men to gain education, these men were mainly oriented towards working with the father to fulfill their family responsibility, alongside completion of education, and young women towards traditional employment where any aspiration for non-traditional work was prevented by the father [18]. This exacerbated the intergenerational stress [13] with an increased dependence of young people on society that influenced the formation of their equal but different identity in adult life [14]. This separate identity emphasised their difference in needs rather than sameness which made them look more closely towards society for information and knowledge that shaped their views on gender. While the young men compared women with and without impairment in relation to work at home and marriage, they ignored their own self, and young women provided traditional views on gender in which women were regarded as more compassionate and men held more information about the outside world [36]. The young people, however, wanted to overcome their sense of dependency by opting for the social choice of impairment over poverty where their internal practices [19] of observation and passion for learning were facilitated by for-profit provision of access to learning in education. This provision developed young peoples' confidence and helped them to achieve reasonably high levels of education, but remained restricted in translating these skills in employment outside the family sphere [35]. Most young men and women remained unemployed (and unmarried), and which required their inclusion in pathway of weak knowledge and education [12,20].

In learning pathway of weak knowledge, the family support was disconnected from the society which opened the voice of young people on society but with increased dependence on the government where the father did not permit them to do a government job. This disconnection influenced the identity of young men in which they felt the same but were treated unequally by society making them look towards technology to gain more information and knowledge. The strained awareness that came about shaped young peoples' views on gender in which they regarded the communication issues of men and women with hearing impairment to be the same, but contrasted their freedoms. The young men highlighting that men were free to move around and women lacked this freedom of movement in public spaces [21] which limited their participation in education and employment restricting their intellectual capabilities. The education of family was centralised [23] in enabling young women to gain employment on their own and in resolving their own issues and challenges in society. The young men's unrelenting efforts [2] triggered their autonomous communication network through technology to induce political change in society [27] by collecting information on their rights and government programmes from different countries. These global networks oriented these young people towards imagined future [28,29] facilitated by the not-for-profit platform of learning to access that developed their organisation skills and confidence, but remained limited in converting these in local employment for them [44]. All young men aspired to move away from their families and society [30,31] to gain quality education and employment supported by technology to financially contribute towards their community and family but which raises questions on the legal reforms in governance of public education [32,33,42].

The most significant finding from the study showed that in pathway of strong knowledge and education, the internal practice of observation and passion for learning was difficult for for-profit education to translate in employment outside the family, and in the pathway of weak knowledge and education, the external information about rights and government programmes from other countries was challenging for not-for-profit education to convert in local employment.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, this research has shown that binding together of family support in education with society places young people as a product of family rather than society, and family support in education that is disconnected from society positions young people as the product of society rather than family. While as a product of family increased the dependence of young people on society, as a product of society, the young people showed an increased dependence on government for employment. This caused stress and strain in young peoples' identity in which they were either separated in their needs from the society or entangled in their freedoms with society. This requires overcoming the theoretical vacuum of equity in the capability of knowledge and empirical gap of equality in the context of education to centralise the voice of young people for respectful research that is with reference to gender. This centralisation of voice is able to overcome the learning crisis often located in educational institutions where parents and teachers are held responsible for the lack of learning and development of children and young people, especially those with an impairment. This location raises questions on the role of public education and its reforms such as through private means with subsequent challenges of retaining the marginalised children in education without incentives and their regular entry in employment. This study, therefore, recommends the centralisation of young peoples' voice to facilitate the application of right to learning in international mandate of Sustainable Development Goals on education, partnership and inequalities in which a range of stakeholders can be included. The study also recommends a further exploration of the relationship between for-profit and not-for-profit education to set a clear direction on the sustainability of government programmes that are linked to parent enablers of education support for young people with hearing impairment in Pakistan.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** This study was conducted according to the Policy on the Ethics of Research Involving Human Participants and Personal Data, University of Cambridge.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from the participants of the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data is archived in the library of University of Cambridge.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Alavi, H. Pakistani women in a changing society. In *Economy and Culture in Pakistan*; Palgrave Macmillan: London, UK, 1991; pp. 124–142.
2. Andrews, A. Downward accountability in unequal alliances: Explaining NGO responses to Zapatista demands. *World Dev.* **2014**, *54*, 99–113. [CrossRef]
3. Aslam, M. Islamism and masculinity: Case study Pakistan. *Hist. Soc. Res./Hist. Soz.* **2014**, *39*, 135–149.
4. Bacchi, C. Policy as discourse: What does it mean? where does it get us? *Discourse Stud. Cult. Politics Educ.* **2000**, *21*, 45–57. [CrossRef]
5. Bashir, R. Students with hearing impairmnet in inclusive classrooms. In Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Inclusive Education: Innovations in Inclusive School Development, Hong Kong, China, 18–19 October 2005.
6. Blum, L.M. Mother-blame in the Prozac nation: Raising kids with invisible disabilities. *Gend. Soc.* **2007**, *21*, 202–226. [CrossRef]
7. Castells, M. *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*; Polity: Cambridge, UK, 2013.
8. Chevalier, A.; Harmon, C.; O'Sullivan, V.; Walker, I. The Impact of Parental Income and Education on the Schooling of Their Children. In *Working Paper*; The Department of Economics, Lancaster University: Lancaster, UK, 2010.
9. Connor, D.J.; Cavendish, W. Sharing power with parents: Improving educational decision making for students with learning disabilities. *Learn. Disabil. Q.* **2018**, *41*, 79–84. [CrossRef]
10. Cumming, T.M.; Marsh, R.J.; Higgins, K. *School Connectedness for Students with Disabilities: From Theory to Evidence Based Practices*; Routledge: London, UK, 2018.
11. Cusworth, L. *The Impact of Parental Employment: Young People, Well-Being and Educational Achievement*; Routledge: London, UK, 2016.
12. Easterly, W. The political economy of growth without development: A case study of Pakistan. In *Paper for the Analytical Narratives of Growth Project, Kennedy School of Government*; Harvard University: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2001.
13. Edwards, B. Thick problems and thin solutions: How NGOs can bridge the gap. In *Future Calling Think Piece*; HIVOS: The Hague, The Netherlands, 2011.
14. Eger, C.; Miller, G.; Scarles, C. Gender and capacity building: A multi-layered study of empowerment. *World Dev.* **2018**, *106*, 207–209. [CrossRef]
15. Fairey, T. Whose photo? whose voice? who listens? giving, silencing and listening to voice in participatory visual projects. *Vis. Stud.* **2018**, *33*, 111–126. [CrossRef]
16. Farquhar, S. Narrative identity and early childhood education. *Educ. Philos. Theory* **2012**, *44*, 289–301. [CrossRef]
17. Fatima, G.; Hussain, A.; Malik, M. Instructional practices used by special education teachers in classrooms of young children with deafness. *Bull. Educ. Res.* **2017**, *38*, 89–100.
18. Grindle, M. Good enough governance revisited. *Dev. Policy Rev.* **2007**, *25*, 533–574. [CrossRef]
19. Guinee, N. Empowering women through education: Experiences from Dalit women in Nepal. *Int. J. Educ. Dev.* **2014**, *39*, 173–180. [CrossRef]
20. Haider, I.S. Pakistani teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of students with special educational needs. *Pak. J. Med. Sci.* **2008**, *24*, 632–636.
21. Hammad, T. Education of people with disabilities: A capability-context framework of culture. *Disabil. Soc.* **2018**, *33*, 685–704. [CrossRef]
22. Hammad, T. Mothers as educational enablers: Examining the journeys of young women with disabilities in Pakistan. In *Education and Disability in the Global South: New Perspectives from Asia and Africa*; Singal, N., Lynch, P., Johanssa, S.N., Eds.; Bloomsbury Publishing: London, UK, 2018; pp. 290–307.
23. Hammer, E. Temporality and the culture of modernity. In *Responsibility in Context*; Ognjenovic, G., Ed.; Springer: Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2010.
24. Hanmer, L.; Klugman, J. Exploring women's agency and empowerment in developing countries: Where do we stand? *Fem. Econ.* **2016**, *22*, 237–263. [CrossRef]
25. Hornby, G. Inclusive special education: Development of a new theory for the education of children with special educational needs and disabilities. *Br. J. Spec. Educ.* **2015**, *42*, 234–256. [CrossRef]
26. Hornby, G.; Lafaele, R. Barriers to parental involvement in education: An explanatory model. *Educ. Rev.* **2011**, *63*, 37–52. [CrossRef]
27. Hsiao, Y.J. Parental stress in families of children with disabilities. *Interv. Sch. Clin.* **2018**, *47*, 50–55. [CrossRef]
28. Kendall, E.; Buys, N.; Larner, J. Community-based Service Delivery in Rehabilitation: The Promise and the Paradox. *Disabil. Rehabil.* **2000**, *22*, 435–445. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
29. Khan, A. *Women and Paid Work in Pakistan: Pathways of Women's Empowerment*; Collective for Social Science Research: Karachi, Pakistan, 2007.
30. Lam-Cassettari, C.; Wadnerkar-Kamble, M.B.; James, D.M. Enhancing parent–child communication and parental self-esteem with a video-feedback intervention: Outcomes with prelingual deaf and hard-of-hearing children. *J. Deaf. Stud. Deaf. Educ.* **2015**, *20*, 266–274. [CrossRef]
31. Malik, S.; Coutnesy, K. Higher education and women's empowerment in Pakistan. *Gend. Educ.* **2011**, *23*, 29–45. [CrossRef]
32. Mushtaq, R.; Reba, A.J.D. Capacity building initiatives for hearing-imapired children's education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *Dialogue* **2017**, *12*, 38–48.

33. National Deaf Children's Society. Access Arrangements for Your Child's Examinations. National Deaf Children's Society. Available online: www.ndcs.org.uk/information-and-support/education-and-learning/getting-additionalsupport/gettingadditional-support-wales/exam-access-arrangements/ (accessed on 18 July 2021).
34. Peters, S. Education for All? A historical analysis of international inclusive education policy and individuals with disabilities. *J. Disabil. Stud.* **2007**, *18*, 98–108. [CrossRef]
35. Powdthavee, N.; Vignoles, A. Mental health of parents and life satisfaction of children: A within-family analysis of intergenerational transmission of well-being. *Soc. Indic. Res.* **2008**, *88*, 397–422. [CrossRef]
36. Powers, S. Investigating good practice in supporting deaf pupils in mainstream schools. *Educ. Rev.* **2001**, *53*, 181–189. [CrossRef]
37. Selwyn, N. *Is Technology Good for Education?* Polity: Cambridge, UK, 2016.
38. Simkiss, D. Education of children with hearing impairment. *Paediatr. Child Health* **2013**, *23*, 434–437. [CrossRef]
39. Thornquist, E.; Kirkengen, L. The quantified self: Closing the gap between general knowledge and particular case? *J. Eval. Clin. Stud.* **2014**, *21*, 398–403. [CrossRef]
40. Walby, S. *Theorizing Patriarchy*; Basil Blackwell: Oxford, UK, 1990.
41. Warrington, M. Challenging the status quo: The enabling role of gender sensitive fathers, inspirational mothers and surrogate parents in Uganda. *Educ. Rev.* **2013**, *65*, 402–415. [CrossRef]
42. Weiss, A.M. *Interpreting Islam, Modernity, and Women's Rights in Pakistan*; Palgrave Macmillan: New York, NY, USA, 2014.
43. Williamson, B. Silicon startup schools: Technocracy, algorithmic imaginaries and venture philanthropy in corporate education reform. *Crit. Stud. Educ.* **2018**, *59*, 218–236. [CrossRef]
44. World Development Report. *Learning to Realize Education's Promise*; The World Bank: Washington, DC, USA, 2018.

education sciences

MDPI

*Article*

# Intersectional Aspects of Education at the Nexus of Disability and Forced Migration: Perspectives of Parents, Educational Experts, and School Authorities in Greater Vienna

**Seyda Subasi Singh [1,*], Camilla Pellech [2], Alexandra Gutschik [2], Michelle Proyer [2] and Iris O'Rourke [3]**

[1] Department of Education, University of Vienna, 1090 Vienna, Austria
[2] Center for Teacher Education, University of Vienna, 1090 Vienna, Austria; camilla.pellech@univie.ac.at (C.P.); alexandra.gutschik@univie.ac.at (A.G.); michelle.proyer@univie.ac.at (M.P.)
[3] Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna, 1090 Vienna, Austria; iris.orourke@gmail.com
* Correspondence: seyda.subasi@univie.ac.at

**Abstract:** Although Austrian statistics inform about the distribution of students among different school types based on either their special education needs or their (forced) migration background, the group facing the disadvantages of both situations is almost invisible in the national context. There is a lack of data about the intersection of the kind of schooling (integrative setting, inclusive settings, or special education classes), gender, nationality, or first language use. In order to learn about the current educational practices and challenges in the Austrian context, parents of disabled children from a refugee background as well as educational experts and school authorities were interviewed. Findings showed that there is only a little awareness of the intersectional aspects of disability and forced migration among educational experts and school authorities, while the diagnosis of special education needs suffers from the complexity of the situation. Additionally, parents' lack of information, as well as the need to improve collaboration and increase the availability of translation services, multilingual counseling, or service provision in general were other aspects that this study found. Parents perceived school choice as a key decision and findings underlined that their worries, also as a result of past experiences, affected current decision-making regarding their children's education.

**Keywords:** inclusive education; migration and disability; special education needs (SEN); SEN diagnosis

**Citation:** Subasi Singh, S.; Pellech, C.; Gutschik, A.; Proyer, M.; O'Rourke, I. Intersectional Aspects of Education at the Nexus of Disability and Forced Migration: Perspectives of Parents, Educational Experts, and School Authorities in Greater Vienna. *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 423. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11080423

Academic Editors: Michael Shevlin and Richard Rose

Received: 20 June 2021
Accepted: 6 August 2021
Published: 11 August 2021

## 1. Introduction

According to UNHCR, an estimated 65.3 million people around the world fall into the category of refugees, asylum seekers, or internally displaced persons [1]. The recent refugee influx into Europe has increased the number of people in that category in Europe in an unprecedented way. In Austria, the number of asylum seekers peaked in 2015 with 88,340 and reached 274,163 over the last ten years [2].

Refugees, asylum seekers, or internally displaced people are mainly homogenized in reference to their challenges, and their background in terms of gender or disability receives less attention [3]. The intersectional challenges that they face are seldom recognized, although conflicts and wars increase the risk of developing a disability or having a disability increases vulnerability during warfare. The UNHCR data show that, in 2018, more than 10 million people were affected by disability and forced migration at the same time [1]. Considering that half of the forcibly displaced population are children, the number of forcibly displaced children with disability is also expected to be high [4]. However, the numbers of disabled children from a refugee background are hardly available at any national level.

Similarly, the intersection of disability and forced migration receives little attention in academic research and there remains to be limited to a few studies [5–9]. Addressing the combination of disability and forced migration in the context of education occurs very rarely, although the educational context would benefit from this intersectional approach in terms of responding to diverse needs and managing educational provisions. Research findings point to the fact that in the majority of cases, only one of the two factors is addressed in the context of the provision of social or educational services. There is a lack of communication between facilities addressing the specific needs of either of the groups, which could lead to problems or a misunderstanding of the needs [10]. Organizations catering to children with disabilities may lack the necessary language and cultural skills to deal with forcibly displaced children and their parents, while those offering support to families affected by forced migration lack specific knowledge of the (educational) needs of children with disabilities.

As Amirpur [11] explains, transcultural competencies are crucial for supporting families from diverse cultural backgrounds. Existing facilitators for families of children with disabilities, however, lack cultural adaptations for immigrant parents or a unified conceptualization of disability [12]. The recent arrival of large numbers of people affected by forced migration in Europe has emphasized the need to understand the specific educational needs of this group and to pay more attention to the background of newly arrived people. As an Icelandic study demonstrated, perceptions of and expectations from the education system vary among parents affected by forced migration according to their cultural backgrounds [13]. In addition, the levels of parents' involvement in and knowledge of educational contexts vary depending on their background, which makes it very significant to reach parents.

The effect of parents' backgrounds gains additional importance in the case of children with disabilities transferring from one educational system to another, as the understanding and provision of schooling in the context of a disability are subject to the subjective realization of school authorities. The spectrum covers a range of approaches, where children with disabilities may attend special education schools on the rather segregated end of the spectrum or, instead, dual, integrative or even inclusive systems towards the other end of the spectrum. Parents' knowledge and involvement can factor into whether a pupil benefits from inclusive education settings, as the system has the tendency to push such disadvantaged groups to segregated settings in an overrepresented way [14].

Considering that both concepts, disability and forced migration, are complex in their own way, the intersection of disability and forced migration as well as its impact on educational settings remains under-researched. This also applies to the cause-effect relationship between the two experiences. However, as Fiddiah-Qasmiyeh et al. [15] explained, disability may be the result of warfare or other causes of forced migration, it may also occur during malnutrition, violence, accidents, etc., or after traumatization, etc., the process of fleeing, and affect the family long-term. The impact of such stress factors should be considered and recognized in the educational context. An intersectional approach would be helpful to apply while planning the educational provisions for students who have been affected by both forced migration and a disability.

As intertwining oppression mechanisms, disability and forced migration should be understood as social constraints that shape people's lives. Focusing on the complexity of the intersections of these mechanisms is valuable as they refer to friction and conflict, but also opportunities to achieve change by attracting attention to intersectional discrimination [16]. A focus on normalcy may lead to marginalizing points of views on some people or groups. However, when people are oppressed as a consequence of two or more combined grounds for discrimination, such as forced migration and disability, their oppression is farther reaching and more difficult to overcome [17], and hence more urgent to discuss in the academic context and research in the field.

Therefore, this study aimed to reach out to parents as well as to other involved actors, providers, and facilitators in order to shed light on the process of accessing educational rights for forcibly displaced families with disabled children and to explore how the intersecting oppression mechanisms are experienced and understood.

### *The Austrian Context*

Students with special education needs (SEN) can be schooled in different school settings in Austria including special education schools, special education classrooms in mainstream schools, integrative classrooms together with students without SEN, and, in some regions, in inclusive classrooms. The special education curriculum consists of a simplified curriculum that can be adapted based on students' needs. Austrian statistics on the distribution of students with SEN in the school year 2018/19 reveal that 14,630 out of 1,135,143 pupils were taught with a special education curriculum [18]. In Vienna, this affected 3482 pupils out of 241,802 in total [16]. Overall, this means that 1.3% of all pupils in Austria and 1.4% of pupils in Vienna are taught in a special education school or following a special education school curriculum in a mainstream school.

In Austria, a student can be referred to special education after a process of mutual consultation and involvement of several actors such as teachers, school directors, school psychologists, special education experts, or school inspectors. However, studies have shown that the referral process can be characterized as vague and bound to many exceptions [5,14], as will also be shown in this study. Usually, referral to special education is suggested after mainstream school support systems (i.e., grade repetition, flexible assessment tools, parent-school cooperation, or additional attention to student) have failed to improve a student's situation. In this case, referral to special education is the expected outcome after a period of observation in the classroom and consultation with educational experts and parents.

In line with the Education Documentation Act 2002 (Bildungsdokumentationsgesetz) [19], the data on the overall population of pupils are not disaggregated by social background, type of SEN, or curriculum classifications. The analyses in the triennial National Report on Education (published in 2018) are, thus, limited to the type of support (integrational or inclusive settings or in special education classes), place of support (school type), gender, nationality, and everyday language use [20]. Apart from this, there is no detailed information about which curricula pupils with SEN are taught or which type of special education needs they have. However, school statistics do show that about one third of pupils with SEN (36.9%) are taught in special education schools in Austria and about two thirds of pupils with SEN are taught in integrative settings. By contrast, in Vienna, in 2018/19, only 48% of pupils with SEN were taught in schools other than special education schools [18], thus, a larger than average number (more than half) were taught in special education schools. Table 1 shows the distribution of pupils with SEN by class type in compulsory schools providing general education (Allgemeinbildende Pflichtschulen) in Austria, its capital (and, by population size, largest federal state) Vienna, and in Austria's second-largest federal state that surrounds Vienna, Lower Austria. While special education schools are considered to be non-inclusive settings, pupils with SEN attending primary, middle, or polytechnic schools are taught in integrative settings such as integration or special education classes. As Table 1 shows, the percentage of pupils with SEN in special education schools is significantly higher in Vienna (52%) and Lower Austria (46.4%) than the Austrian average (36.9%), which points to much fewer pupils with SEN in special education schools in the other federal states, considering Vienna and Lower Austria are the two most populous states in Austria.

**Table 1.** Distribution of pupils with SEN by school type.

| Class Type | Austria | Vienna | Lower Austria |
|---|---|---|---|
| Special education school | 10,759 (36.9%) | 2302 (52%) | 2698 (46.4%) |
| Primary school | 6342 (21.8%) | 1398 (21.4%) | 1023 (17.6%) |
| Middle school (NMS) | 10,905 (37.4%) | 1618 (24.7%) | 1799 (31%) |
| Polytechnic school [1] | 1121 (3.8%) | 128 (2%) | 290 (5%) |

[1] Polytechnic school is a one-year compulsory general school for the 9th grade. Its primary purpose is vocational preparation [16].

One of the few aspects of the intersection of disability and (forced) migration in the context of education that have been researched is the potential prevalence of assigning SEN to groups of pupils with nonlocal first languages and/or a migration background [14,21]. This is especially significant when the tests used to determine SEN are not culturally sensitive and administered in local languages only.

According to the Vienna School Board (2019) [19], a lack of knowledge of the language of instruction (German) is not an official criterion for determining SEN. Nevertheless, the distribution of SEN according to everyday language use (Table 2) shows that in the transition from primary to lower secondary school, pupils with SEN and an everyday language other than German are less likely to make the transition to a different type of school than pupils with SEN and German as the everyday language. Regarding the transition from lower secondary school (5th–8th grade) to secondary school 2 (9th–12th/13th grade), statistics show that there is no real difference between pupils with SEN according to their everyday language use [18]. A reason for this could be that many pupils with SEN do not attend upper secondary school, but complete their compulsory education (9 years of school) in a special education school.

**Table 2.** Transfers of pupils to the next school level depending on the language used in everyday life and school type in Austria.

| **Type of Primary School Attended** | **Type of Secondary School 1 Attended (5th–8th Grade) 2018/19** | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Middle School (NMS) | General Secondary School (AHS) | Special Education School * |
| | | Use of German in everyday life | |
| Primary school | 32,558 (58%) | 22,173 (39.4%) | 118 (0.2%) |
| Special education school * | 191 (18.5%) | 8 (0.8%) | 750 (72.7%) |
| | | Use of a language other than German in everyday life | |
| Primary school | 15,459 (64.3%) | 6960 (28.9%) | 138 (0.6%) |
| Special education school * | 101 (15.8%) | 2 (0.3%) | 501 (78.3%) |
| **Type of secondary school 1 attended** | **Type of secondary school 2 attended (9th–12th/13th grade) 2018/19** | | |
| | Vocational school (BHS) [1] | General secondary school (AHS) | Special education school |
| | | Use of German in everyday life | |
| Middle school (NMS) | 13,361 (37.4%) | 3371 (9.4%) | 83 (0.2%) |
| General secondary school (AHS) | 7287 (33%) | 13,490 (61.1%) | – |
| Special education school * | 9 (0.7%) | 8 (0.6%) | 631 (49.2%) |
| | | Use of a language other than German in everyday life | |
| Middle school (NMS) | 4291 (25.8%) | 1186 (7.1%) | 83 (0.5%) |
| General secondary school (AHS) | 1308 (27%) | 2926 (60.5%) | – |
| Special education school * | 5 (0.7%) | 2 (0.3%) | 377 (51.4%) |

* The data on special education schools also includes pupils who are taught in school types other than special education schools, but utilising a special education school curriculum [18]. [1] Vocational secondary school (BHS) is a five-year school form that provides a general education, and also higher vocational training and concludes with a school-leaving certificate and diploma examination. The diploma examination grants access to the respective professions.

Given the importance that is currently attached to German language acquisition in the Austrian school system, the following passage from the Schooling Act as quoted by the Vienna School Board [19] needs to be investigated further:

> *"(...) Under Section 8(1) of the Compulsory Schooling Act 1985, there is a special education need if a pupil is unable to follow lessons at a primary school, new secondary school or polytechnic without special education support as a result of a not merely temporary physical, mental or psychological functional disability or disability of sensory functions and is not exempted from attending school under Section 15 of the Compulsory Schooling Act 1985".* [19] (p.1)

Due to its vague phrasing, this passage leaves room for interpretation and the procedure of diagnosing SEN remains unclear. Thus, the nature of potential interrelations between labeling procedures, school type, and educational practices, as well as disability and forced migration, respectively, need to be investigated further. Therefore, an empirical study involving educational experts and parents of pupils with SEN, who themselves have a forced migration background, was conducted, in order to learn more about possible interlinkages of levels of linguistic proficiency and whether, for example, traumatic experiences are considered in the process of labeling children with disabilities affected by forced migration in Austria.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Different parties were chosen in order to look at the intersection of disability and forced migration from different perspectives. Due to the complexity of the topic and ethical concerns, children themselves were intentionally not interviewed. Semi-structured interviews with educational experts were conducted focusing on the diagnosis procedures of the specific group, the start of a procedure to determine SEN, the communication with parents, and open questions related to good practices and challenges during the process were raised.

The interviews were conducted in German with all participants. At that time, the parents held an upper intermediate German level and were offered the opportunity to switch to Arabic or English in case they had any difficulty expressing their opinions in German.

At the beginning, an educational expert from the Vienna School Board (E1) was asked to provide initial insights and point to other educational experts who would be willing to participate, this led to one interview with a school-based expert (E2) and one principal of a special education school (E3). As some of the findings pointed to the importance of the role of parents, this group was, then, included in the data collection as well. As approaching parents through a network meeting and contacts with an organization representing parents were not productive, two families known to two of the authors from another research context were approached and agreed to be interviewed (P1 and P2). The interviewing process was a concurrent process where different groups of participants were interviewed at the same period of time. Snowball sampling was used to reach data-rich sources. The project team, thanks to long-time engagement in the refugee education working group in the city's education council, could identify the earlier data rich sources. Preliminary findings were later discussed with two additional experts (diversity managers) from the Vienna School Board (E4 and E5). The dataset is derived from a small sample due to the limited number of interview partners available (regarding both parents fulfilling the intersectionality and language requirements as well as the small number of educational experts appointed to work on refugee-related issues by the education board). However, the individual experiences of key stakeholders could be accessed qualitatively and these experiences provided valuable insights into a rarely discussed topic. Table 3 summarizes the study participants.

**Table 3.** Study participants.

| Interviews Conducted | Interviewee |
|---|---|
| 1 | Expert of Vienna School Board (E1) |
| 2 | School-based expert (E2) |
| 3 | School-based expert/Principal of a special education school (E3) |
| 4 | Parent of a child in kindergarten with SEN (P1) |
| 5 | Parent of a student with SEN (P2) |
| 6 | Expert of Vienna School Board (E4) |
| 7 | Expert of Vienna School Board/Diversity Manager (E5) |

The participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity by the researchers through an informed consent form. Data collection started with obtaining the signed informed consent from the participants. The consent form was explained in detail to the parents in case they needed help understanding this formal document. The suggested ethical procedures of the institution employing the researchers were followed. Data were stored in a password-protected external hard disk that only the researchers had access to. No one other than the researchers was involved in the transcription or analysis of the data. The first five interviews were audiotaped, partly transcribed, anonymized, and analyzed simultaneously. The initial interview with a representative of the Vienna School Board was intended to set the scene and identify main issues of concern as the subject matter was embedded in a variety of different political developments at the time that involved ongoing administrative reforms. This interview was analyzed in accordance with thematic analysis by Mayring [22] in order to reduce data [23], get a general data-driven thematic overview as well as derive relevant dimensions/categories for the development of a coding frame focused on the intersection. From these main categories, the guidelines for the four semi-structured interviews with parents and school-based experts were derived with the process of identifying, diagnosing, and labeling students with SEN at the center of interest. These were analyzed applying a coding procedure according to Schmidt [24]. This method is well-suited for the analysis of guideline-based interviews and covers both the deductive coding process as well as the interpretative angle. While the initial analysis with Mayring opened up the research field and showed the broadness and complexity of the data obtained, the research process showed the methodical need for interpretational elements. The combination of both methods allowed the data to gain both broadness and depth. The findings from the two additional interviews were used to contrast and complement the findings. Figure 1 depicts an overview of the main topics identified from the analysis process for the different groups.

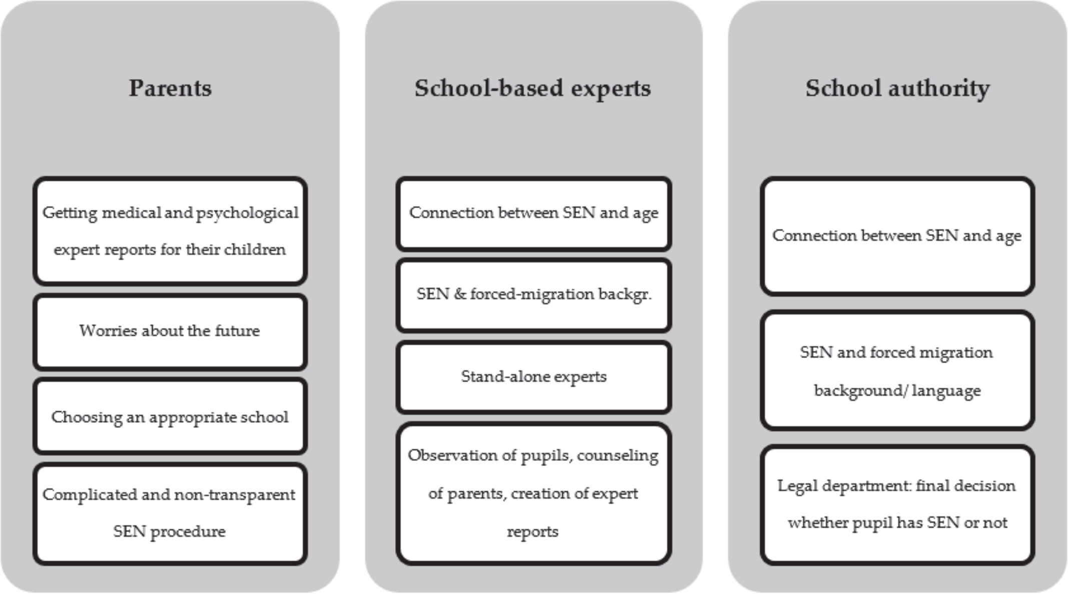
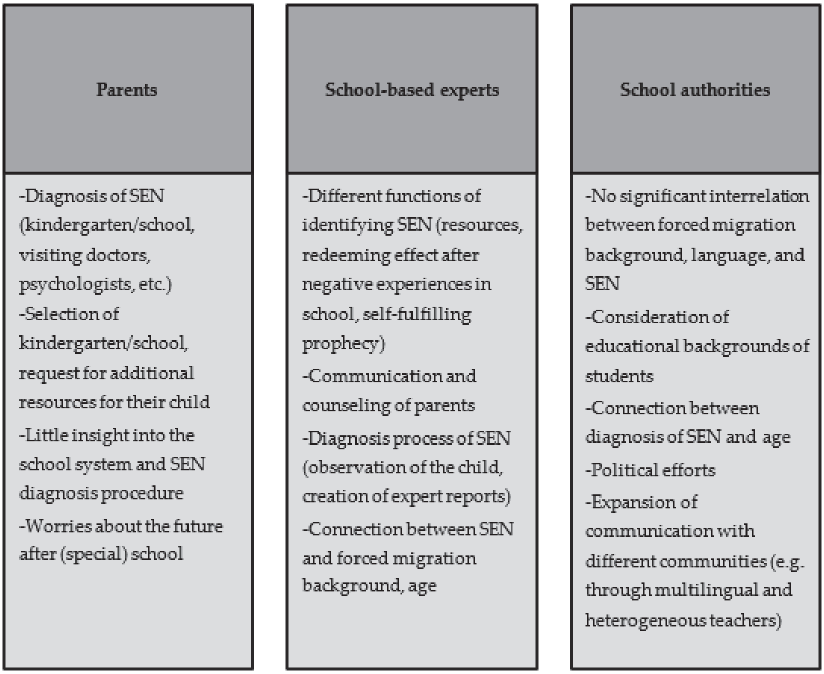


**Figure 1.** Overview of main topics identified.

Figure 2 depicts central findings across the three groups of interviewees for an intersectional view.



| Parents | School-based experts | School authorities |
|---|---|---|
| -Diagnosis of SEN (kindergarten/school, visiting doctors, psychologists, etc.)<br>-Selection of kindergarten/school, request for additional resources for their child<br>-Little insight into the school system and SEN diagnosis procedure<br>-Worries about the future after (special) school | -Different functions of identifying SEN (resources, redeeming effect after negative experiences in school, self-fulfilling prophecy)<br>-Communication and counseling of parents<br>-Diagnosis process of SEN (observation of the child, creation of expert reports)<br>-Connection between SEN and forced migration background, age | -No significant interrelation between forced migration background, language, and SEN<br>-Consideration of educational backgrounds of students<br>-Connection between diagnosis of SEN and age<br>-Political efforts<br>-Expansion of communication with different communities (e.g. through multilingual and heterogeneous teachers) |

**Figure 2.** Main findings.

Findings from the interviews with parents are presented first, followed by the school-based experts, and concluded with the perceptions of the school authority representatives. The presentation of the findings includes contextual information wherever relevant and needed. This embedded information aims to explain the context referred to by the participants.

## 3. Results

### *3.1. Parents' Perspectives*

While the children of both caregivers interviewed were diagnosed with SEN at different points in their lives (one was diagnosed in kindergarten, the other was diagnosed during the transition from kindergarten to compulsory schooling), and therefore faced different challenges and expressed different concerns, the analysis did show some overarching categories. This concerned (1) the (diagnosis of) SEN, (2) the selection of kindergarten/school as parental responsibility, and (3) worries about the future, which are detailed in the following sections.

#### 3.1.1. Diagnosis Process

The interviewed parents have a child with a diagnosed SEN, and both fled, with their children, to Austria in the course of the forced migration movement around 2015. While the diagnosis of SEN and the long way there played a big role in the interview with P1, whose daughter was about two years old when she first consulted with clinical professionals for a diagnosis, the process of the SEN diagnosis of P2′s son seemed to happen quite fast.

As the kindergarten places were fully booked and only the last year of kindergarten is compulsory in Austria, P1 remembered talking to an educator beforehand and expressed her fear of her daughter not being "like the other kids" (P1, L 86). She further elaborated that her daughter was nonverbal back then and that, according to P1, she was not very independent. She also stressed her fear of "not knowing what to do with her" (P1, L 91).

P1 felt lucky to get a place in kindergarten for her daughter when she was two years old "despite her difficulties" (P1, L 97) and stressed "I don't know how other families can do that, maybe it's even harder" (P1, L 102–103).

When her daughter started kindergarten, P1 took her to several doctors and psychologists, after which it took about one and a half years before she finally received the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The meantime consisted of waiting and her belief that things were not supposed to take this long, as P1 intended to give her daughter better support than she had previously been able to, and wanted to know what to do, which steps to take, and how to further encourage her development. P1 also expressed that if she had been gainfully employed or wealthier, she would have paid privately for quicker appointments with specialists instead of waiting for the regular appointments granted by regular health insurance, which points to another aspect of how her forced migration background impacted the situation. During this time, her main focus of attention centered around taking care of her daughter, with no time left to work outside the home, attend German classes, or engage in other activities:

> *"I wanted it faster, faster, my daughter—I had to do something for her, but later I noticed, that I can do a lot for her. That she needs my love and support, not only the doctors, they can't do everything ... and I haven't taken a German course, I was at home with her for two years, without course, without anything"*. (P1, L 444–449)

Here, P1 stressed her change of perspective, and also provided insight into the hardship she put up with over the years. According to P1, one of the main problems delaying the diagnosis was that ASD is not usually diagnosed for children under three years of age and that there were not enough available appointments that prioritized older kids. P1 described it as a "shock" (P1, L 444) and expressed her sadness about it.

P2′s son was diagnosed with a complex disability during the transition from kindergarten to compulsory schooling, when she received the school authority's "administrative decision" (P2, L 146). P2 explained that, in the last year of kindergarten, there was a conference regarding her son and the principal decided that her son would not be allowed to continue on to primary school. Even if this decision was guided by a conversation with P2 and several other people, P2 did not fully understand the decision. In the interview, she expressed her feelings in the following way:

> *"He had to go to a special education school. (...) It's for kids with physical problems and this was really bad for me. I had, mhm, really, when this principal said that he had to go to that school. Because this school was just for kids, like a hospital, the kids couldn't do anything (...). And I already talked to a friend of mine. (...) Because my son speaks Arabic really well and he can understand. Why does he, my son, have to go to this school?"*. (P2, L 160–174)

Later on in the interview, P2 said that she "accepted" special schooling (P2, L 269), but not the selection of this specific hospital-like school. P1 and P2 both expressed acceptance of the diagnosis, which sounded more like giving up. For most of the interview, it seemed as if P1 had impatiently awaited the diagnosis and welcomed it in order to access better support for her daughter's development and also her educational pathway/career. Yet, some parts also showed ambivalence in the process of accepting a child with SEN, which did not seem completed at the time of the interview: "She is learning, but slower but-, yes, good" (P1, L 454–455).

Some lines could even be read as doubt of the future need of the SEN diagnosis, "sometimes I say she is ok, she is normal, well, she is like other children, she, she, it is like, these conflicts . . . . For me it was hard. Well (sighs) but yes" (P1, L 460–462). Briefly, after that, "there were times when I could not talk about my daughter in this way, or I would cry" (P1, L 470/474).

### 3.1.2. (Pre)school Selection as an Individual/Parental Responsibility

When talking about the school first assigned, P2 always talked of it as hospital-like and came up with a new category of schools when she said. "at first it was really bad for me, because it is, the first school was like a hospital, only like a hospital. Not normal or like a special education school" (P2, L 185–186). The school, according to P2, neither fit her description of a regular school, nor a special education school.

Several times, P2 talked about this hospital-like school before she went on to explain that she managed, with the help of a friend, to get authorization for her son to attend another special education school between the administrative decision and the start of the school year, so that her son did not have to go there in the first place, "I accepted it [special education school], I accepted it. But I haven't accepted a school like a hospital. (...) I was sure it doesn't fit my son's needs" (P2, L 269–273/310). According to P2, a friend of hers helped her find a school more fitting to her son. She described previously having a "bad feeling" (P2, L 302) and also being "unsatisfied" (P2, L 298). When asked whether there was just one school up for selection or a range of schools, P2 replied that there was this administrative decision by the school authorities, "because the, the principal said, isn't, my son isn't allowed to go to a primary school" (P2, L 155–156). One interpretation of this interview sequence is that the reason for SEN was not properly explained to P2 (as she referred to the administrative decision and the principal's decision only), and also that there was not a wide range of opportunities (such as various options for several schools, counseling, etc.). P2 said that a friend had helped her to get her son into another school, which included visiting a school looking for a better option, accompanying her to the meeting with the principal, and helping with getting the authorization for the new school. Due to P2′s initiative, the re-selection of the school took place in the summer before the child started school, and therefore he did not have to change settings, school surroundings, or friends later on.

When elaborating on the selection process, P2 also mentioned that she was interested in some private schools. One of them, which she found especially fitting, would have cost about 500 euros a month, which is why she could not further consider it.

Receiving the diagnosis was required in order to request an additional educator skilled in autism spectrum disorder and with the knowledge on how to ideally support autistic children. Better support and looking for answers were some of the reasons why P1 kept in touch with specialists for a long time before the diagnosis was made. When the proposal for an additional educator was denied by the municipality, P1 organized a special educator for three hours a week at her own expense.

According to P1, the regular kindergarten, even with the additional educator, did not fit her daughter's needs. P1 justified the change of kindergarten, which is about to take place in the near future, by talking to "parents of kids, acquaintances, Austrian acquaintances" (P1, L 186–187), and family friends and expressed finding "it" (L 187) very hard as she saw herself of not having enough experience. The sequence in the interview itself does not give clear information about what the difficulty was. Referring to "it" as a difficult experience, P1 could either mean (1) talking to family friends, (2) deciding to change the kindergarten, or (3) the selection of the kindergarten in particular. Interpretation one, reading the phrase as if the conversation itself were difficult, could show the stigma of a SEN diagnosis. As there is no indication in this sentence of her friends being Austrian or Syrian (in the passage mentioned above she is explicitly referring to her Austrian acquaintances), interpretations about the cultural differences of seeing the diagnosis/disability as stigma cannot be made. If interpretation two or three are taken into consideration, they could show the need for (further) institutional counseling when it comes to the selection of the kindergarten and/or an educational expert to help guide life-impacting decisions like these. Additionally, a change of residence in Vienna led to the daily commute to the former kindergarten becoming unreasonably long. Due to these reasons, P1 was looking for a change in kindergarten for her daughter and decided on a kindergarten for children with special needs. According to P1, a regular kindergarten would not fit her daughter's needs as "she wears diapers, [and] she speaks even less" (P1, L 290).

Looking for guidance, P1 asked an educational expert at a center for child development,

> *"And she was examining my daughter and decided that therapy, child development therapy, she decided that this is better for her. And I don't have that much experience in Austria. I can't decide. I tried it with a regular kindergarten but she is developing very very little"*. (P1, L 314–320)

As P1 is fond of inclusive (pre)schools, which she expressed a few times, she chose a kindergarten where the kids are "mixed" (P1, L 235), at least in the afternoon. However, this option is only available to gainfully employed parents, which currently does not apply to P1. She is hoping to find a job soon in order to apply for the inclusive setting.

#### 3.1.3. Worries about the Future of the Child

Worries concerning the past were also intermingled with the categories described above. Worries about the future, however, were expressed from both caregivers and seemed to be of utter importance.

P1 cared intensively for her daughter over the last years and also endured some privation to accommodate her daughter's needs, "My whole time was for her and (sighs), yes, well, it is, she is ok, she is singing, she is dancing, she is learning, but slower but-, yes, good" (P1, L 454–455). While finding a job was personally important for P1 as well as in order to get her daughter admitted to a more inclusive setting in kindergarten, P1 also worried about whether she would be able to take care of her daughter (e.g., taking her to school) once she was employed, "yes there is a bus. And I, I can't imagine how I can work later" (P1, L 252–253). Spending most of her time caring for her daughter over the past couple of years had impacted P1′s thinking about a future where this might collide with the wish for a job.

As mentioned earlier, P1 is currently not employed. As her Syrian teacher training is not fully recognized in Austria, P1 is currently in requalification training and aims to work as a secondary school teacher soon. P1′s requalification measures also impacted the process of the SEN diagnosis and later the decision on the kindergarten, according to her,

> *"The certificate courses really helped me a lot (...) and I had experiences with topics, which concern me personally. About forced migration, about kids, about intersectionality, about such things. I experienced it a lot and in the school where I am doing my internship right now, there are such kids (...) this gave me the feeling my daughter will go to a normal school later. A good feeling"*. (P1, L 474–483, 487, 495)

P2 also stressed how worried she is about her son's future, "I always ask myself that, for example, What can my son do in the future? Because I am afraid, really, about the future of my son" (P2, L 499–501). Furthermore, she stresses a dilemma, which pupils with disability in Austria currently face,

> *"Yes, these kids need to be independent in the future. Not for example, when my son is 14 years old, staying at home, because I think this school is up to an age of 14 for these kids"*. (P2, L 514–516)

The interviews both touched on topics such as decision-making, insecurities about the future, as well as insecurities on the process so far, and personal/parental engagement. Despite totally different family histories, different SENs with the diagnosis at different point of times, and other circumstances, both interviews show similarities when it comes to the process of choosing a new education institution out of a feeling that the current educational institution does not fit the needs of the respective child as well as struggling to find guidance in the decision process. P1 and P2 both managed the change of school locations despite these struggles. In P2 and her son's case, she rejected the school recommended by the school authority, raising the question of why parents and authorities diverge on the best school choice for a pupil with SEN.

The parents' perspectives stressed their wish for the best school possible for the further development of their child. Yet, difficulties of compatibility with the child's special needs, the lack of suitable and available schools that are also reachable by a reasonable commute, and difficulties with job compatibility also became clear.

### *3.2. School-Based Experts' Perspectives*

In the interviews with school-based experts (E2 and E3), the following categories were developed in the field of SEN, language, and forced migration background: (1) the different functions of identifying SEN, (2) the connection between SEN and language/forced migration background, (3) the role of parents as persons to be advised by experts (such as teachers, expert reviewers, and consultants), and (4) the diagnosis process of SEN.

#### 3.2.1. Different Functions of Determining SEN

In the interview with an expert on special needs education, three different functions of SEN were identified. The first one was SEN as a "resource hub" (E2, L 206). In Austria, the identification of SEN is associated with the approval of certain resources, for example, additional teachers and also the possibility to graduate from compulsory schooling (E2, L 209–210). Therefore, pupils need the label SEN in order to receive the support they need in school. In addition to seeing SEN as a resource for additional support, the identification of SEN can also have an effect of redemption and opportunity for pupils. Pupils who receive SEN status must first fail in the Austrian school system and the general curriculum. This means that these pupils need to undergo many negative experiences during their educational career before they get SEN status.

Because the feeling that their performance is not sufficient extends to the whole person, the educational experts stated that after all these negative experiences, the SEN status can have a redeeming effect for many pupils. By creating a more comfortable and positive class experience through, for instance, a different curriculum, pupils would not be constantly confronted with the feeling of their own failure (E2, L 163–167). In contrast to this positive aspect of SEN status, the diagnosis of SEN could also turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. In this regard, once a pupil's information about SEN gets registered in their general school data, their performance, without ever seeing this pupil in class, may be appraised worse than it actually is by teachers. One special education expert explained,

> *"because you know then self-fulfilling prophecy and when a pupil has got something like that [SEN] in his file yes well then (...) he is appraised worse than he is"*. (E2, L 318–321)

The conclusion that can be drawn from the special education expert's assumption is that the diagnosis of SEN must be well considered and supported by special education expert opinion(s).

#### 3.2.2. The Role of Parents as Advisees

In Vienna, a pupil's parents apply for their children to receive SEN status (L 407–408). However, the impetus comes from teachers or diversity managers. The interviewed educational expert stated that parents often consider it very bad news when they are informed of their child's special education needs,

> *"Uh I have a consultation with the parents there. When I am there, I am the bad news person. The second-worst thing (after death) that can happen in the life of parents ( . . . )"*. (E2, L 333–337)

The news that a child has special education needs offends many parents. This can be due to the fact that many parents are not knowledgeable about SEN and its consequences for the educational career of their child. The complex process of determining SEN and difficulties in understanding the procedure itself as well as the consequences of SEN due to language or culture could be reasons for parents' lack of knowledge or rather an unawareness, according to the educational expert. This unknowingness and, to a certain extent, powerlessness on the part of parents often arises from the fact that they are not able to accept offers (e.g., advice on SEN or school choice) for various reasons. These reasons could be, for example, language difficulties or their own psychological problems such as traumatization or simply feeling overwhelmed with the situation (E2, L 859–863).

E3 refers to parents' lack of information regarding the location of available school types and disability. She associates this with levels of involvement, cultural backgrounds, and language knowledge. Identifying disability at the onset and distinguishing disability from behavioral issues poses special challenges. It was only after being asked for a specific example and being tempted by the use of the term trauma that E3 referred to the importance of considering psychological issues and the specific challenges posed to the families at their arrival. Transdisciplinary collaboration, also during transitional phases, for example, between kindergarten and school, plays an important role in coping with the specific challenges of these children.

### 3.2.3. Diagnosis Process of SEN

During the interview, E2 outlined the diagnosis procedure of identifying SEN, which is also depicted in Figure 3. Special education experts working in special education centers in the school region or special education teachers at the school are contacted by the principal or teacher(s). After receiving the call that the school needs their advice, the key data (background information, grades, teachers' observation and assessment) of the respective pupil is provided to the special education expert (E2, L 113–114). After that, a short anamnesis interview with the class teacher (E2, L 421–423) about the pupil occurs where they try to clarify whether the child is unable to cope with the demands of the curriculum (a) owing to a special situation (e.g., trauma, family) or (b) would there also have been problems otherwise and to clarify whether there was previous school attendance and whether the pupil has a first language (E2, L 473–485). Checking whether the pupil has a first language is important according to E2, because there are some pupils who do not have any first language at all (E2, L 484–485). Interestingly, the special education expert decisively raised the question of the pupil's (first) language in connection with the diagnosis process of SEN. After this short anamnesis interview, the expert observed the pupil in class and single setting to check the child's skills in terms of school-level requirements and their individual abilities (E2, L 126–130).

After observation, the special education expert tries to classify the pupil into one of the following groups: (1) Pupils where the "problem" (E2, L 240) is so virulent that something has to be done promptly because the child cannot be frustrated any further (E2, L 240–242); (2) pupils where the SEN is already apparent because of, for example, medical reasons (E2, L 253–257); (3) there are difficulties regarding the pupil and the requirements of the curriculum, but no SEN status is required (E2, L 276–280); (4) as a fourth group, the special education expert mentioned pupils with considerable problems related to certain categories, for example, SEN in language, and, if that is the case, the experts refers them to another expert (E2, L 281–286).

While a special educaiton expert prepares a kind of special education report on the pupil, the aptitude of the pupil is also assessed by a school psychologist. The special education expert finds this procedure and especially the test formats of this psychological report highly problematic (E2, L 176–180).

In a further step, the special education expert gives their recommendation to the class teacher or principal on how to proceed, although the special education expert does not officially have an advisory function (E2, L 289–292). Once two special education expert opinions have been drawn up, the application for proceedings is forwarded to the legal department of the Vienna School Board which is responsible for issuing the administrative decision.

After a child has received SEN status by the legal department of the local school board, the special education expert, together with the school management of the respective district of the pupil, takes care of the choice of school. In most cases, if a pupil is in primary school and gets SEN status, they remain in their class (individual integration), and if not, the special education expert looks for a suitable school in consultation with parents and principals of different schools (E2, L 328–333). Once a place at a school has been found and the procedure has been completed by the Vienna School Board, the parents have to sign the decision. E3 defines the moment of visiting the prospective school as vital in the decision-making process. Seeing the premises and understanding school provision seems to play an important role for some parents to understand the concept of special education schools. If they refuse to sign, theoretically the local school board may initiate legal proceedings, but in most cases, parents eventually sign the SEN decision.

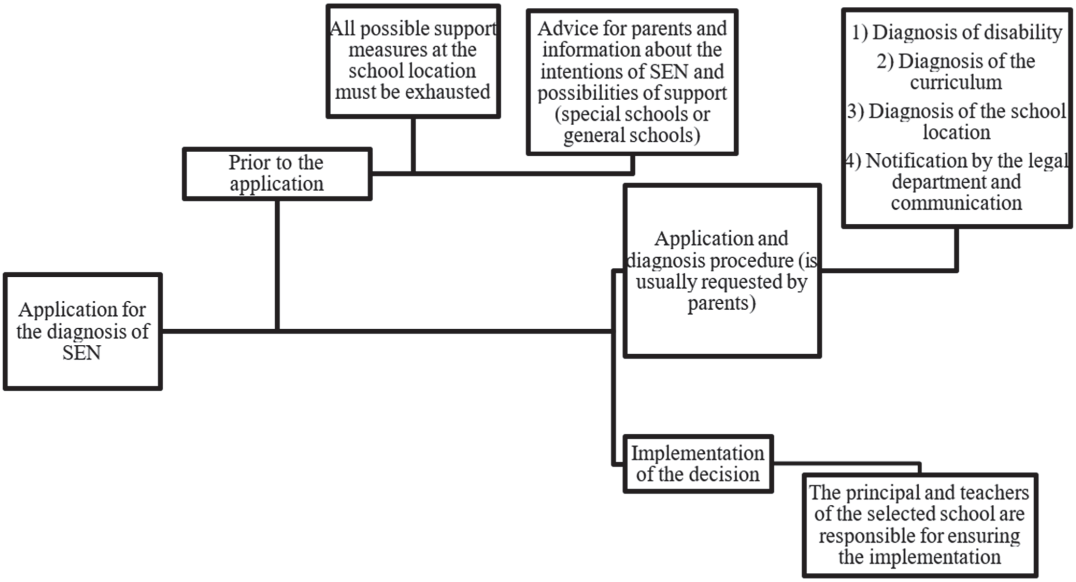


**Figure 3.** Diagnosis procedure of special education needs (SEN).

### 3.2.4. Age at the Time of Diagnosis

The school-based experts both perceive the age at the time of the allocation of SEN status as pivotal. E3 also points out that in some cases, the exact diagnosis of a child's age is not possible due to missing documents. Most often, SEN status is allocated during primary school. In some cases, however, SEN status is already identified in kindergarten. In this case, many expert opinions, especially psychological assessments, have already been obtained and a so-called integration status (E2, L 362) in kindergarten usually leads to pupils receiving the curriculum for pupils with increased support needs at school (E2, L 361–368). In these cases, the school-based expert is called regarding children starting school in order to advise parents on the choice of school or special preschool classes with intensive support (E2, L 382–388). Regarding SEN diagnosis during primary school, the educational expert stated that, actually, there is a rule that the identification of SEN may only be applied for the first time during primary school (E2, L 715–716). However, there are some restrictions during primary school, as well as no applications for SEN should be made during the first year of school, except when absolutely necessary, in order to allow the pupil to arrive at school (E2, L 712–715).

There are exceptions to the rule to only identify SEN by the end of primary school in the case of children with a forced migration background, for example, if they arrive in Austria during secondary school or at the age of a secondary school pupil (E2, L 716–720).

### 3.2.5. Interconnectedness of SEN, Language, and Forced Migration

One category that could be identified as connecting SEN, language, and forced migration background concerns the so-called German language support classes and courses in Austria. According to E2, it is important to invest in the field of language support, but this fails to be implemented. The problem begins with the fact that only pupils with insufficient German language skills attend German language support classes, and therefore no remedial effect can be achieved by learning from each other. The educational expert is also critical of the way in which the German language support classes are allocated. The so-called MIKA-D procedure, a language test, does not differentiate between language groups regarding the pupil's first language, and therefore disadvantages pupils because of the levels of relatedness of their first language to German (E2, L 997–1005). According to the educational expert, a further weakness of the German language support classes is that there are no subject lessons and the pupils, therefore, cannot follow the requirements of the curriculum after their return to regular classes because of their lack of basic subject matter knowledge. The nexus between German language support classes and SEN is that after two years, the status of extraordinary pupils is invalidated and they return to the regular classes. After this return, some teachers call the educational expert to discuss whether these pupils do have SEN (E2, L 939–942). In most cases, the educational expert can calm the teachers and tell them that the respective pupils do not have SEN, but in some cases, after two years in German language support classes, the SEN diagnosis process is initiated. Nevertheless, apart from the disadvantages of the German language support classes, the educational expert makes it clear that teachers who teach in these classes do their best and, although it is not the optimal solution, there is currently no alternative. Ideally, the educational expert would like to see a model in Austria where a maximum of 30% of pupils in class have language difficulties or first languages other than German, in order to enable them to learn from each other and benefit from the remedial effect mentioned above (E2, L 960–962).

Another connection between SEN and language is that in most of the educational experts' cases, the pupils in question actually do have a first language other than German (E2, L 499–501). Although both the Vienna School Board and educational experts stressed (several times) that the mere fact of having a first language other than German does not lead to SEN status, educational experts stated that the combination of SEN and other first languages is very common. Reasons for this could be that a lot of pupils with SEN and a first language other than German have often been absent from kindergarten, don not visit an all-day school, or grow up in a family environment with illiteracy (E2, L 741–744).

To follow the lessons in school, the educational experts believe that a degree of linguistic competence is necessary, and therefore tries to strengthen the awareness of pupils and parents of how important language is for school (E2, L 511–513). Therefore, parents are encouraged to ″speak to their children in their first language' (E2, L 519) in order to enable them to learn German as a second language after the first language has been consolidated. By this attempt to raise awareness, the educational experts claim that there is a connection between language and culture, since they believe that learning a language means opening up to a certain culture and that it is problematic if there are milieus that refuse to do so (E2, L 746–749). However, educational experts considers parents to be responsible, and also the Austrian education system, as they find it irresponsible that language and origin can exert such great influence on the educational careers of pupils and "that so many pupils in such a rich country [like Austria, amendment AG] have the cards stacked against them moving forward″ (E2, L 732–733). Because of the function of schools as signposts for further educational careers, it is increasingly the case that parents who have the opportunity to do so are more likely to choose schools where the best possible support is guaranteed, which unfortunately often means that especially in Vienna, selecting schools with a small proportion of pupils with first languages other than German, ″because school has long been marketable, of course, and parents choose and uh nobody puts their child into a setting uh where it is clear that uh the element that is conducive to learning is not guaranteed for their own child" (E2, L 966–968).

Parents of pupils who do not have the possibility to choose between different schools are often parents of pupils from socioeconomically weak milieus or pupils with a forced migration background (E2, L 101–106). The educational experts had to consider the connection between forced migration background and disability/SEN very carefully. The educational experts stated that there certainly are pupils who come to Austria traumatized as a result of their past, but there are also those who have not been traumatized (E2, L 827–830). In connection with forced migration background and severe trauma, the educational experts argued that learning can often be very healing for these pupils (E2, L 836) and that in some of these cases so-called protective SEN status is granted, which is often later revoked, after it is no longer necessary. The intention of this protective SEN status is to give pupils time to participate in school without constant rejections and feelings of failure (E2, L 843–845) and also to give pupils the opportunity to obtain a positive compulsory school leaving certificate (E2, L 870–871).

## *3.3. Perspectives of School Authorities*

The initial interview with an educational expert from the Vienna School Board (E1) pointed towards the following topics of main interest, many of which are directly related to what has been pointed out above.

### 3.3.1. Strong Orientation towards German (Monolingual Approach)

Asked about the main challenges pupils with disabilities and a forced migration background face, the educational experts focus on the strong orientation of the school system towards fostering language proficiency in German and not fostering (other) first languages, where only little support is provided in the Austrian school system for students [25,26]; however, teachers who are teaching this specific group of students do not get support [27].

### 3.3.2. Focus on Migration, Less on Forced Migration Background

Throughout the interview, only a few aspects seemed to be directly ascribed to the group of pupils affected by forced migration. The aspect of migration background itself seemed more pressing. This especially concerned Austria's neighboring countries. With open borders among member states of the European Union, new communities became a part of Austria's educational landscape. Sometimes, pupils in their teens attend school in Austria for the first time and, in case of having a disability, they may have experienced only little or no schooling at all in their countries of origin. It is also important to point out that the educational experts referred to the fact that the specific educational backgrounds of the pupils, families, and school systems of the specific countries of origin have to be taken into consideration.

### 3.3.3. Dependence on Age of Arrival and/or Transfer and/or Type of Labeling

Similar to the school-based experts and in accordance with Section 3.2.4, the educational experts refer to the fact that the age of arrival in the Austrian educational system and the time of diagnosis of SEN plays an important role. The later students arrive, the more challenging the situation.

### 3.3.4. Political Efforts

Political efforts in terms of the integration of persons with a (forced) migration background were raised. The educational experts added the following to a discussion on the unavailability of multilingual support structures and counseling with reference to the political climate (at the time of the interview) in Austria, "If you do not want people to stay, you will happily withhold information" (audio material). The lack of information available in the languages of immigrants or newly arrived people was suggested by the educational experts as a common practice in Austria including the educational context, but also other areas where such information is needed. This lack of access to information in their language makes (everyday) life more challenging for immigrants and, as the educational experts explained, is sometimes used as a strategy to discourage people from staying in Austria.

### 3.3.5. Parents: Networking with Communities

An important fact pointed out in the literature is that collaboration with local communities would need to be fostered, for example, through the support of multilingual language teachers, but also through promoting heterogeneity among teachers [26].

Additional interviews with two experts from the Vienna School Board are added to the discussion part of the paper.

## 4. Discussion

This study aimed to highlight the intersecting challenges of having special education needs and forced migration background by reaching parents, educational experts, and school authorities. Using qualitative methods, the study revealed the experiences and perceptions of parents as well as service providers.

One of the main aspects raised across the groups interviewed was the focus on the German language in both schooling and also the SEN diagnosis procedure. The findings underlined the need for further resources in terms of validated translation and counseling services, as well as the provision of first-language teachers at schools. These findings were in line with the findings of research on immigrant families [5,12,28].

In contrast to the educational experts' and school authorities' views, parents focus on topics related to the SEN (such as (pre)school selection and future of the child) instead of merely the diagnosis procedure itself. The long term effects of a wrong educational decision of a child was a concern for the parents. In addition to the diagnosis of SEN, the consequences of selection of the (pre)school, procedures of changing a suggested school, and worries about future school and job opportunities also came up in the interviews. The process of diagnosing special education needs, placement into the schools, and how decisions are communicated were found problematic. Parents themselves perceived the choice of school as pivotal and findings underline that their worries, also regarding the past, affect current decision-making in the context of education. The importance given to academic success and school-based achievement among immigrants [14,29,30] was visible in this study as well. The traumatic experiences of the parents during their journey during conflict can be understood as a stimulus for the wish of stable and promising education career for their children.

The findings showed that parents want to be involved in their children's education, and therefore that the vague diagnosis process and the lack of communication with school authorities during the school placement was challenging for them. The notion that immigrant parents have little interest in the education of their children has been shown to be a common misunderstanding [31], which the findings of this study do not support. The interviewed parents were eager to be involved in the education of their children and very disappointed by the lack of opportunities to do so. Educational experts were aware of the importance of transparency during the process of diagnosis and school replacement, however, it did not exist most of the time. They seemed to accept it and not to have the intention to act for change.

Entangled in these topics, self-advocacy for their child, uncertainty, and the struggles of figuring things out on their own were other issues for parents. Overall, one could conclude that parents (and even more so, parents with a forced migration background, as they often lack local networks or other ways to access informal information) have little say when it comes to the diagnosis and lack of information about future opportunities for their child. The exercise of power by the schools on the parents [32] made parents feel powerless during the process.

Parents are perceived as being the ones who need support, while at the same time, means of communication are cut short. The data clearly show that parents lack information and it is likely that they will follow the path laid out (however little guidance there is) if they do not themselves ask for alternative schools/options and question the reason behind certain steps taken. There is reason to assume that both parties (parents and school authorities) want the best for every individual child and their future career path. Yet, P2′s interview and her wording calling the school hospital-like demonstrate a certain gap between what parents and what school authorities assume to be the best for the child.

The findings also point to the fact that educational experts have only little notion or awareness of the intersection of disability and forced migration in the school context, or little recognition of this intersection. School authorities refer to the migration background more often than the fact that families had to flee or the pupil's disability. This can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, this could point to the fact that there is little experience, awareness, or rather ignorance of the interaction of these two dimensions of diversity. On the other hand, it implies that other factors are considered more important. Among these is the complexity of the process of assigning SEN status. Additionally, parents' lack of information, as well as the need to improve community-based collaboration, also across disciplines, has been pointed out, and wider availability of translation or multilingual counseling or service provision in general has been referred to as relevant. The lack of understanding of the specific individual backgrounds of families with a forced migration background could directly impact the (educational) biographies of the children themselves and their families at the same time. Whether the aspect of forced migration is actively factored out, ignored, or has become an integral part of the discourse comprising the intersection with a disability remains subject to further analysis.

Additionally, future studies should consider the importance of in-school collaboration among teachers, a point that is considered pivotal in the context of inclusive teacher training [33]. Acting as a team in the school would benefit not only the child but it would help to find the best ways of schooling for the child.

Similarly, there is a need to generate further tools for recognizing the specific needs such as [34]'s approach to trauma-sensitive language acquisition that could be broadened by the prospective needs of children with disabilities. In addition, transcultural approaches need to move beyond the intercultural paradigm where specific cultural contexts might be dealt with in similar ways without considering diversity within communities.

**Author Contributions:** Writing—original draft, S.S.S., C.P., A.G., M.P. and I.O. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** The authors received no financial support for conducting the interviews and the research process. This manuscript has been published with the Open Access Funding of University of Vienna.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Based on the institutional regulation, ethical review and approval were waived for this study as the study did not include any minors.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The datasets for this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

**Acknowledgments:** We would like to thank all our interview partners for their willingness to tell us about their experiences, their openness, and their flexibility.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## References

1. UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees]. Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2019. Available online: https://www.unhcr.org/5ee200e37/ (accessed on 17 June 2021).
2. Ministry of Internal Affairs BMI. Asylstatistik 2019. Available online: https://www.bmi.gv.at/301/ (accessed on 16 June 2021).
3. Pisani, M.; Grech, S. Disability and forced migration: Critical intersectionalities. *Disabil. Glob. South* **2015**, *2*, 421–441. [CrossRef]

4. UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund]. *The Growing Crisis for Refugee and Migrant Children*; Unprooted; UNICEF: New York, NY, USA; Available online: https://data.unicef.org/resources/uprooted-growing-crisis-refugee-migrant-children/ (accessed on 17 June 2021).
5. Bešić, E.; Hochgatterer, L. Refugee Families with Children with Disabilities: Exploring Their Social Network and Support Needs. A Good Practice Example. *Front. Educ.* **2020**, *5*, 61. [CrossRef]
6. King, J.; Edwards, N.; Correa-Velez, I.; Hair, S.; Fordyce, M. Disadvantage and disability: Experiences of people from refugee backgrounds with disability living in Australia. *Disabil. Glob. South* **2016**, *3*, 843–864.
7. Otten, M.; Farrokhzad, S.; Zuhr, A. Flucht und Behinderung als Schnittstellenaufgabe der Sozialen Arbeit. *Gem. Leben* **2017**, *4*, 197–206.
8. Steigmann, F. Inclusive Education for Refugee Children with Disabilities in Berlin—The Decisive Role of Parental Support. *Front. Educ.* **2020**, *5*. [CrossRef]
9. Walton, E.; McIntyre, J.; Awidi, S.J.; De Wet-Billings, N.; Dixon, K.; Madziva, R.; Monk, D.; Nyoni, C.; Thondhlana, J.; Wedekind, V. Compounded Exclusion: Education for Disabled Refugees in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Front. Educ.* **2020**, *5*, 47. [CrossRef]
10. Westphal, M.; Wansing, G. *Migration, Flucht und Behinderung: Herausforderungen für Politik, Bildung und Psychosoziale Dienste*; Springer: Wiesbaden, Germany, 2008.
11. Amirpur, D. Migration und Behinderung in der inklusionsorientierten Kindheitspädagogik. In *Migration, Flucht und Behinderung*; Westphal, M., Wansing, G., Eds.; Springer: Wiesbaden, Germany, 2019.
12. King, G.A.; Esses, V.M.; Solomon, N. Immigrant and refugee families raising children with disabling conditions: A review of the international literature on service access, service utilization, and service experiences. In *US Immigration and Education: Cultural and Policy Issues across the Lifespan*; Grigorenko, E., Ed.; Springer Publishing Company: New York, NY, USA, 2013; pp. 179–206.
13. Ragnarsdóttir, H.; Hama, S.R. Refugee Children in Icelandic Schools: Experiences of Families and Schools. In *Icelandic Studies on Diversity and Social Justice in Education*; Ragnarsdóttir, H., Lefever, S., Eds.; Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle Upon Thyne, UK, 2018; pp. 82–104.
14. Subasi Singh, S. *Overrepresentation of Immigrants in Special Education: A Grounded Theory Study on the Case of Austria*; Klinkhardt: Anzing, Germany, 2020.
15. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E.; Loescher, G.; Long, K.; Sigona, N. *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2014.
16. Sloan, M.L.; Joyner, C.M.; Stakeman, J.C.; Schmitz, L.C. *Critical Multicultural and Intersectionality in a Complex World*; Oxford University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2018.
17. Walgenbach, K. *Heterogenität, Intersektionalität, Diversity*; Verlag Barbara Budrich: Toronto, ON, Canada, 2017.
18. Statistik Austria. *Bildung in Zahlen. Tabellenband*; Verlag Österreich GmbH: Wien, Austria, 2020.
19. Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung BMBWF. *Richtlinien zur Organisation und Umsetzung der sonderpädagogischen Förderung. Rundschreiben Nr. 7/2019*; Teutsch, R. o.V.: Wien, Austria, 2020.
20. Oberwimmer, K.; Vogtenhuber, S.; Lassnigg, L.; Schreiner, C. *Nationaler Bildungsbericht Österreich 2018, Das Schulsystem im Spiegel von Daten und Indikatoren*; Leykam: Graz, Austria, 2019.
21. Kronig, W. Das Konstrukt des leistungsschwachen Immigrantenkindes. *Z. Erzieh.* **2013**, *6*, 126–141. [CrossRef]
22. Mayring, P. *Einführung in Die Qualitative Sozialforschung*; Beltz: Weinheim, Germany, 2015.
23. Schreier, M. *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*; Sage: London, UK; Thousand Oaks, CA, USA; New Delhi, India; Singapore, 2012.
24. Schmidt, C. Auswertungstechniken für Leitfadeninterviews. In *Handbuch Qualitative Forschungsmethoden in der Erziehungswissenschaft*; Friebertshäuser, B., Langer, A., Prengel, A., Eds.; Juventa: Weinheim, Germany; München, Germany, 2010; pp. 473–486.
25. Kremsner, G.; Proyer, M.; Biewer, G. *Inklusion von Lehrkräften nach der Flucht. Über universitäre Ausbildung zum beruflichen Wiedereinstieg*; Verlag Julius Klinkhardt: Bad Heilbrunn, Germany, 2020.
26. Luciak, M. Education of Ethnic Minorities and Migrants in Austria. In *The Education of Diverse Student Populations. Explorations of Educational Purpose*; Wan, G., Ed.; Springer: Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2008.
27. Gitschthaler, M.; Kast, J.; Corazza, R.; Schwab, S. Resources for Inclusive Education in Austria: An Insight into the Perception of Teachers. In *International Perspectives on Inclusive Education—Resourcing Inclusive Education*; Loreman, T., Goldan, J., Lambrecht, J., Eds.; Emerald: Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 2021; pp. 67–88. Available online: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346586354_Teachers%27_and_parents%27_attitudes_towards_inclusion_of_pupils_with_a_first_language_other_than_the_language_of_instruction (accessed on 12 June 2021).
28. Millar, J. An interdiscursive analysis of language and immigrant integration policy discourse in Canada. *Crit. Discourse Stud.* **2013**, *10*, 18–31. [CrossRef]
29. Finnie, R.; Meng, R. Minorities, cognitive skills and incomes of Canadians. *Can. Public Policy* **2002**, *23*, 257–272. [CrossRef]
30. Kanas, A.M. *The Economic Performance of Immigrants: The Role of Human and Social Capital*; Utrecht University: Utrecht, The Netherlands, 2011.
31. Darmody, M.; McCoy, S. *Barriers to school involvement: Immigrant parents in Ireland, In The Changing Faces of Ireland: Exploring Lives of Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Children*; Darmody, M., Tyrrell, N., Song, S., Eds.; Sense: Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 2011; pp. 145–163.

32. Weinstein, J.; Raczynski, D.; Pena, J. Relational trust and positional power between school principals and teachers in Chile: A study of primary schools. *Educ. Manag. Adm. Leadersh.* **2018**, 1–18. [CrossRef]
33. Scruggs, T.E.; Mastropieri, M.A. Making Inclusion Work with Co-Teaching. Teach. *Except. Child.* **2017**, *49*, 284–293. [CrossRef]
34. Plutzar, V. Sprachenlernen nach der Flucht. Überlegungen zu Implikationen der Folgen von Trauma und Flucht für den Deutschunterricht Erwachsener. [Learning languages after refuge. Considerations for implications of consequences of trauma and refuge for German lessons for adults]. OBST (Osnabrücker Beiträge zur Sprachtheorie), Flucht. Punkt. *Sprache* **2016**, *89*, 109–132.

education sciences

MDPI

Article

# “There Isn’t Really Anything around Here ...”: Autism, Education and the Experience of Families Living in Rural Coastal England

**David Preece [1] and Ivana Lessner Lištiaková [2,*]**

[1] Independent Researcher, Northampton NN3 9DS, UK; davidrpreece@gmail.com
[2] School of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Suffolk, Ipswich IP4 1QJ, UK
* Correspondence: I.LessnerListiakova@uos.ac.uk

**Abstract:** Autism affects over 2% of the school population in England. Education has proven to be an effective intervention strategy that improves the quality of life of children with autism and their families. However, governmental austerity policies have increased disadvantage in coastal areas of England with a detrimental impact on people with disabilities. This qualitative study explored the lives of families living with autism in rural coastal England. Mothers, fathers, grandparents and young people from 21 families living with autism in West Norfolk and Cornwall shared their experience through semi-structured interviews that were conducted in early 2019. Families identified positive and negative aspects of living in these areas, including barriers preventing access to and inclusion in education. Barriers were related to poor infrastructure, sparse specialised services (resulting in diagnostic delay and difficulties), limited autism awareness, lack of trained professionals, and the impact of austerity across health, social care and education. Families’ struggles are amplified by the intersectionality of (a) autism-specific needs, (b) physical distance and small-community life related to rurality and (c) the seasonal and peripheral nature of coastal life. Access to education for children with autism in rural coastal areas of England could be improved by acknowledging and addressing the intersecting factors intensifying their marginalisation.

**Keywords:** autism; marginalisation; rural coastal areas; inclusion

**Citation:** Preece, D.; Lessner Lištiaková, I. “There Isn’t Really Anything around Here . . . ”: Autism, Education and the Experience of Families Living in Rural Coastal England. *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 397. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11080397

Academic Editors: Michael Shevlin and Richard Rose

Received: 8 July 2021
Accepted: 27 July 2021
Published: 2 August 2021

## 1. Introduction

Autism is a lifelong developmental disorder with a prevalence of 2.25% within the school population in England [1]. Research has identified that living with autism can place all family members under significant levels of stress [2–4]. The characteristic difficulties of autism can present families with many challenges and stressors. These may affect all aspects of family life, education, work and social inclusion and can lead to experience of stigma and social isolation [5,6]. Families’ experiences are subject to a range of variables that can variously act as mediators and moderators. These include housing [7], family finances/employment status [8,9], relationships with schools [10] and the availability of formal and/or informal support [11].

The financial crash of 2008 and the election of the UK coalition government in 2010 led to a period of austerity which continues to this day. Wages have fallen in real terms, while welfare benefits and public spending at central and local governmental levels have been cut. Statutory services are under increasing pressure, while third-sector organisations, particularly those working with vulnerable children such as those with autism, have experienced significant funding reductions which have led to staffing and service cuts [12]. Cuts and raised thresholds have resulted in reduced access to health, educational and social care support; diagnostic assessments failing to be carried out within required timescales and one-third of families with disabled children (including autism) reporting that they are worse off as a result of benefit changes, with 90% experiencing anxiety and stress [13].

Austerity has not impacted equally across the UK, and disparities exist regarding access to services and support. It is usual to think of the 'North–South' divide [14] or to contrast leafy suburbs with disadvantaged inner-city communities [15]. Less consideration, however, has historically been given to coastal disadvantage. Nonetheless, coastal communities (local authorities with coastal borders) face greater hardships than inland areas, with higher economic and social deprivation, low pay, elevated unemployment and health issues [16]. Moreover, the gap between coastal and non-coastal areas is widening. Problems of achievement, educational outcomes and isolation have been identified within coastal schools [17,18], while large populations of older people in coastal areas place pressure on social care and health services [19].

Research in the UK regarding coastal communities has focused mainly on struggling towns experiencing high deprivation [20,21] or the south east, where EU migrant numbers are high [22]. Although indicators of child health are more positive in less urbanized coastal areas [23] and research has identified the positive impact of coastal environments on health and wellbeing [24], the experience of those living with disability in such communities has not been identified. Furthermore, while research from Australia, Canada and the USA has explored the experiences of families living with autism in rural areas, identifying significant challenges regarding the availability of diagnostic, educational and support services [25–27], information about families living in rural communities in England—defined as those with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants [28]—is extremely limited.

## 2. Methods

This study was undertaken to begin to address this identified shortfall in research by seeking to give voice to the experiences of families living with autism in predominantly rural coastal England. A qualitative methodology was utilised to explore what life was like for families living with autism in rural coastal areas of England; what the challenges, barriers and benefits of these locations were; and what was their experience of informal and formal support. In this paper, we focus particularly upon the experiences of families with respect to their daily lives and their interaction with education services.

Using the Social Market Foundation [16] and Government Statistical Service [28] definitions of coastal and rural communities and taking account of the scope of the extant literature, two comparable and predominantly rural coastal areas of England were identified as research sites: Cornwall in the south west and Norfolk in the east. Cornwall comprises one local authority: participants were recruited from across the county. Within Norfolk, participants were recruited from two coastal local authorities: King's Lynn/West Norfolk and North Norfolk.

### *2.1. Research Tools*

Three semi-structured interview schedules (for parents/carers, siblings and children/young people with autism) were developed. Questions were open-ended and interviewers used appropriate prompts/probes. All tools were trialled and piloted within a different local authority before use within the research population.

### *2.2. Sample*

Interviews were carried out by the authors with mothers, fathers, siblings (as appropriate within the individual family context), and, where possible, the child/young person(s) with autism themselves. Access to families was negotiated via local National Autistic Society groups: NAS Cornwall and NAS West Norfolk. Twenty-one families were recruited to the study in autumn 2018: eight from Cornwall (23 individuals) and thirteen from Norfolk (25 individuals). In total, 34 semi-structured interviews were carried out with 48 participants. One father in Norfolk identified as White Gypsy; the remainder identified as White British. Further information is shown in Table 1. Participants comprised the following:

- Eleven young people on the spectrum—aged 9–22 years;
- Five typically developing siblings—aged 5–15 years;
- Twenty-one mothers—four of whom were on the autism spectrum;
- Nine fathers—two of whom were on the autism spectrum;
- Two grandparents with carer responsibilities.

**Table 1.** Demographic information regarding families.

| Family ID | Settlement | Family Composition | Family Members Interviewed |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Cornwall** | | | |
| C1 | Coastal, pop. c. 16,000 | Mother, father, 12-year-old brother, 9-year-old male with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)/Pathological Demand Avoidance Syndrome (PDA) | Mother (telephone interview) |
| C2 | Inland, pop. c. 350 | Mother, father, 19-year-old male twins with ASD | All family members (telephone interview) |
| C3 | Inland, pop. <100 | Mother with Asperger Syndrome (AS), 12-year-old male with ASD/Tourette's Syndrome, 8-year-old brother | Mother |
| C4 | Inland, pop. <4000 | Mother, father, 5-year-old male and 2-year-old male (both undergoing assessment for ASD), 7-month-old female | Mother and father |
| C5 | Coastal, pop. >20,000 | Mother, father, 9-year-old female with ASD, 8-year-old brother, 5-year-old sister | All family members |
| C6 | Coastal, pop. <8500 | Mother, father, 14-year-old male twins with ASD, 12-year-old brother | All family members |
| C7 | Coastal, pop. <2500 | Mother, mother's partner, maternal grandmother and grandfather, 7-year-old male with ASD | All adults |
| C8 | Coastal, pop. >20,000 | Mother with AS, 15-year-old male on diagnostic pathway | All family members |
| **Norfolk** | | | |
| N1 | Coastal, pop. <800 | Mother, father, 14-year-old brother, 11-year-old male on diagnostic pathway | Mother, brother |
| N2 | Inland, pop. <700 | Mother, father with AS and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), 12-year-old male with ASD/ADHD, 10-year-old male with ASD/PDA | Mother |
| N3 | Inland, pop. 1500 | Mother, 10-year-old sister, 8-year-old male with ASD, 5-year-old twin sisters with physical disabilities | Mother, 10-year-old sister |
| N4 | Inland, pop. <1500 | Mother, father, 8-year-old male with ASD, 4-year-old male with ASD | Father (telephone interview) |
| N5 | Coastal, pop. c. 100 | Mother with AS, father with AS, 19-year-old male with PDA, 16-year-old female with ASD, 15-year-old male with ASD/ADHD | Mother, father, 16-year-old and 15-year-old; + 19-year-old (written response) |
| N6 | Inland, pop. <2500 | Mother, 22-year-old male with ASD, 20-year-old male with ASD/Severe Learning Disabilities (SLD) | Mother, 22-year-old |
| N7 | Inland, pop. <10,000 | Mother with ASD, father with ASD, 5-year-old girl with ASD, 2-year-old sister | Mother, father |
| N8 | Inland, pop. <10,000 | Mother, father with AS, 10-year-old female with ASD/ADHD, 8-year-old male with ASD/Global Developmental Delay (GDD) | Mother |
| N9 | Inland, pop. <2000 | Mother, father, 19-year-old male with AS/ADHD, 15-year-old female with undiagnosed AS, 8-year-old male with GDD | Mother, father, 19-year-old and 15-year-old |
| N10 | Inland, pop. >20,000 | Mother, 10-yr-old male with ASD/SLD, 7-year-old brother | Mother |
| N11 | Inland, pop. >20,000 | Mother, father, 8-year-old female with ASD/SLD, 6-year-old brother | Mother |
| N12 | Inland, pop. <5000 | Mother, father, 9-year-old male with ASD/ADHD/SLD/physical disabilities, 5-year-old sister | Mother and father |
| N13 | Coastal, pop. <100 | Mother, 9-year-old male with ASD | Mother |

More than three-quarters of families participating in the study lived in rural communities as defined by the UK government, i.e., settlements with a population below 10,000 [29]. Six families (29%) lived in settlements with a population of 1000 or fewer; seven (33%)

in settlements between 1001 and 5000; and three (14%) in settlements between 5001 and 10,000. The remaining five families lived in small seaside or market towns: one (5%) in a settlement between 10,001 and 20,000 and four (19%) in settlements of more than 20,000.

Where children on the autism spectrum were interviewed, preliminary contact was made with families to identify any adaptations or supports required to facilitate participation. One young man chose to provide written answers to interview questions rather than participate in a verbal interview. Seven Cornish families were interviewed during a six-day field trip undertaken at the end of January 2019. As a result of severe snowstorms on the final day of the field trip, it was impossible to reach the homes of the two families due to be interviewed that day. These final five interviews were carried out via telephone in February 2019. Twelve of the thirteen interviews with 12 Norfolk families were undertaken face-to-face during February and March 2019. The final interview—with a parent who had recently moved out of the area—was undertaken via telephone due to the distance involved.

### *2.3. Ethics*

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Northampton—where both authors were employed at the time of the fieldwork—and the research was carried out in accordance with the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines for Education Research [30]. Informed consent was obtained from all adults and young people who participated in the study; parents of all young people also gave permission for their children's participation. Participants were aware that they could withdraw from the process at any time. All participants have been anonymised in this article, and direct quotes are selected to ensure that sources are not identifiable.

### *2.4. Analysis*

Qualitative data were subjected to thematic content analysis [31], supported using NVivo software. Provisional codes, which were drawn from the aims and objectives, served as an initial template. Coding was iterative as further codes emerged during analysis. Segmentation and coding were undertaken by both researchers, with initial coding undertaken together and a sample of further transcripts multiply coded. Researchers audited samples of each other's coding for completeness and appropriateness. Codes were reviewed for overlap and redundancy and reduced into matrices to develop final themes.

### *2.5. Validation*

Workshops were held in Cornwall and Norfolk in January 2020, at which the authors fed these findings back to audiences of families, professionals and local politicians in both locations. These workshops served both to validate the data and findings and to provide local stakeholders with the opportunity to discuss the research and its key messages.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Data analysis identified that families' experiences were shaped by the intersecting impacts of geographical factors—relating to living in rural areas and to coastality—and to the underpinning impact of autism upon family life. In this section, these factors are first presented separately before considering how their intersectionality amplifies the marginalisation experienced by these families. Direct quotes from family members are identified by the family identification number as in Table 1.

### *3.1. Benefits of Rural and Coastal Living*

#### 3.1.1. Rural Benefits

The belief that living in the countryside can provide a 'rural idyll' is both long-standing and pervasive [32]. Rural living is typically contrasted to the fast-paced 'urban jungle' and mythologised as offering a slower-paced and higher-quality lifestyle, set in a pastoral landscape and experienced within close-knit, supportive communities [33–35].

Such narratives regarding rural living were voiced by many interviewees, including both individuals who had chosen to move to rural coastal areas and those who had lived their whole lives there.

> *It's a more relaxed attitude down here, whereas up country it's always very busy and you are always working really hard. There is always something you want to be doing or somewhere you have to be. Down here, everything seems to be at a very slow pace.* (C2: young autistic adult)

> *I have access to those spaces and when I lived in the Midlands I never, ever . . . I used to feel so stressed. I never, ever felt I had anywhere to breathe. You feel like wherever you go, even the woods in the Midlands still didn't feel enough because you could still hear all the background noises . . . and the traffic to get to it, stressing you out to get there. Here we don't have that.* (C3: mother with AS)

> *The location generally, it's picturesque, it's pretty, we don't have loads of gangs around. There's not crime or graffiti; it's just nice.* (N2: mother)

Families identified aspects of rural living, which they felt were particularly beneficial regarding autism. The closeness of community life meant that the needs of their child with autism were acknowledged and accepted, providing a sense of security, while the low population density allowed physical space and opportunities for seclusion. The openness of the physical space is especially important for individuals with autism who might have specific sensory needs and might feel anxious or overwhelmed in crowded urban environments [36].

> *Everyone knows everyone, which isn't always a good thing, but I know if he got out and walked down to the farm one of the tractor drivers or the farmer would bring him back.* (C4: mother)

> *Being rural it's quite quiet so we can go to places that are quiet and so he can just do his thing - there's not lots of people getting in his way or distracting him or whatever, and I know where the safe places are. That's beneficial.* (N4: mother)

#### 3.1.2. Coastal Benefits

As with rural spaces, coastal areas are idealised in similar—though different—ways, with the idyll of the fields replaced by that of the beach and sea [37]. Research has identified positive associations between 'outdoor blue spaces' and mental health and wellbeing [38,39]. Wheeler et al. [40], by analysing English census data, suggest that good health is more prevalent closer to the coast and noted important opportunities for stress reduction and physical exercise. Coastal spaces can be conceptualised as 'therapeutic landscapes', providing benefits at physical and social—as well as at more abstract and symbolic—levels [24]. The positive impacts of living by the sea, particularly regarding addressing sensory sensitivities and anxiety in autism, and thus the need for physical and social space, were strongly identified in many interviews.

> *I like the open space; I know the boys do too. It's just nice that if they are close to meltdown you can just pile them in the car and chuck them down on a beach or go out to some woods and it's all easy access. So that's what we like here, that's why we live near the coast and then we have the access – we've got woods literally a mile one way and less than a mile I've got the sea. So if they're struggling it's great, or if I'm struggling, I'll just go for a walk, clear my head.* (C3: mother with AS)

> *When things are getting stressed, he can go and have a walk down to the beach and he does that lot, just to go and let off some steam. He'll go and take a long walk down to the beach. He always comes back feeling ten times better.* (N5: mother)

> *It's very quiet, there's not a lot of traffic. When I go into a city now, I can't handle the noise and all the people. I'm like, 'How do people live like this?' I'm so used to it being really quiet.* (N8: mother)

> *There's surfing, fresh air . . . when I go up country, sometimes I can hardly breathe.* (C8: 15-yr-old)

Similarly to rural spaces, the strong sense of community inherent in coastal settlements is also noted both in the literature [41] and by interviewees. Reduced anonymity provided them with feelings of safety and support regarding the child with autism.

> *Lovely, it's absolutely lovely . . . It's a lot safer here. Before, if he got out the door—he's a runner and he'd run and round here you've got the odd car which comes down, but he seems to be a lot calmer round here as well because it's quiet . . .* (N13: mother)

> *People say when you come to Cornwall it's like stepping back in time. It is. And it's more of a community feel here, which is a lot more beneficial. But I think the natural . . . 'healing' is the wrong word, but the natural therapeutic element of this place I think is the big difference.* (C5: mother)

> *They all know I'm living with an autistic brother and they're quite supportive of that. At nights he'll go and play outside, shouting loudly even though I tell him not to. And they'll be angry, but they won't be that angry with him because they know he can't help it.* (N1: brother)

### *3.2. Negative Factors Associated with Rural and Coastal Living*

#### Rural and Coastal Disadvantage in the Literature

Research regarding living in rural areas also identifies several characteristic disadvantages. Rural areas have more limited availability of services per capita, as well as generally lower socio-economic and educational levels [42]: regarding education in the UK, the attainment gap—the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers—is greatest in rural areas [43]. Antezena et al.'s 2017 review of studies from around the world identifies that families living with autism in rural areas face multiple challenges that can lead to more unfavourable outcomes for children and families alike. These include delays in screening and diagnosis, low autism awareness in the community in general and service providers and fewer services providing interventions and support [27].

Characteristic examples of coastal disadvantage are also discussed in the literature. The economies of many UK coastal areas were significantly impacted by the advent of cheap foreign travel and holidays in the 1970s. Many towns that had developed as holiday destinations lost much of their purpose and already highly seasonal local economies were affected by a permanent loss of business and jobs [20]. Coastal communities are among the lowest-ranked areas of the country with regard to health, education, employment and earnings, and the economic gap between coastal and non-coastal communities has grown in recent decades. Local job opportunities are limited and often low-skilled and poorly paid, making it difficult for school-leavers to 'get on' without moving away [16]. At the same time, house prices are often high in areas that attract second homeowners, retirees and holiday lettings. As well as being problematic for local people seeking accommodation, this can also cause problems regarding recruitment and retention in professions such as education, as housing may be priced beyond what, e.g., a newly qualified teacher moving into the area could afford [44]. Ovenden-Hope and Passy [44] further identify that challenges resulting from geographical remoteness, socioeconomic disadvantage and a lack of cultural diversity (as well as the lack of local cultural and higher education opportunities) can negatively impact such communities. Again, the impacts of these factors are to be found in the narratives of the families interviewed in this project.

### *3.3. Barriers to Educational and Social Inclusion*

Interviewees' responses identified multiple barriers impacting everyday life and preventing access to and inclusion in education. These included the characteristic issues outlined above regarding rural and coastal disadvantage. Barriers existed at systemic and individual levels: analysis led to their being grouped within the following themes.

### 3.3.1. Infrastructural Issues

The physical isolation that is part of the appeal of rural and coastal areas can also mean that settlements are far away from services [45]. While this may be an issue for families in general, this can impact even more greatly upon families with children with autism, who may both need access to specialised services and also find accessing general services difficult because of the needs of their children. Infrastructural difficulties compound the problems faced by families in both regions. Public transport is limited and often inadequate.

> *Public transport is an issue. The entire system is very bizarre. There is very, very little and the public transport that is there only connects certain places: it takes you places you don't need to go. It's actually easier for me to go to Plymouth* (in the neighbouring county) *than to go somewhere else in my county.* (C2: mother)

> *There are things I'd like to do, but because of where we live and difficulties with transport, like getting there . . . There's absolutely no youth groups in this village at all. The nearest one's about seven miles that way, or eleven miles that way, or fifteen miles that way. So it's just the transport. If we can't get the transport, we can't get anywhere.* (N1: brother)

Difficulties resulting from poor public transport services were intensified by the characteristic sensitivities and intolerances of autism.

> *Transport is a huge issue for me, because public transport is literally hellish, but I have to rely on it. You can get a bus to King's Lynn or a train. If I need to go to Norwich, I have to get a train to Ely and then another to Norwich, which is a lot of stress for me. Am I going to get a seat or space for a pushchair? Will someone argue with me about putting the pushchair there? Will I get off at the right stop? It's very nerve-racking and very noisy. A lot of the time I will get on the train and there will be stuff on the floor, and someone eating a sandwich that smells really bad. It's too much, really, but I have no other choice. One time, me and the two girls were trying to go to Cambridge, but the train stopped at Ely and kicked us all off. There were no trains going to Cambridge and the time was passing and the platform was really crowded. I ended up having a meltdown on the platform.* (N7: mother with AS)

Dependence upon inadequate public transport negatively impacted upon children's experience of education, while a lack of flexibility and understanding from service providers regarding these infrastructural issues could lead to increased anxiety and problems.

> *When he catches the bus, it means he's late for college, because there's only one bus an hour and the first bus to King's Lynn normally gets there for 8.45. His classes start at 8.45 and he's just getting off a bus. The college always do the register bang on 8.45, and by the time he's got in the classroom it's gone that. Therefore, he's classed as absent when he's not. He's late, but it can't be helped. He's now on his final warning for attendance.*
>
> (N5: mother)

In addition to poor public transport, respondents spoke of the problems of small, slow roads that, in addition to being used by local farm traffic, became flooded by traffic during the holiday season between Easter and September. Travelling even a short distance at this time could become extremely time-consuming, presenting significant difficulties for individuals on the autism spectrum who had low tolerance for such delay.

> *If you get stuck behind a caravan and then a tractor, you don't get a lot done.* (C2: mother)

> *In Cornwall, it might not be a great deal of miles between places, but the road network isn't the best. So ten miles could take you forty-five minutes, depending on the time of year. You'll double your travel time if not more, depending on where you are going. A nice sunny day, you'll sit in traffic.* (C4: father)

### 3.3.2. Marginality

Part of the appeal of rural coastal areas is the romantic idea of 'living at the edge' [37]. The impact of this idea upon access to services for residents in such areas is identified above.

However, the experience of marginalisation is intensified for families who live not only in rural coastal areas but also in areas that are at the margins in terms of county boundaries and local authority areas. For many of these families, services within their own authorities were far distant. However, formal services located in their nearest towns— which they used for shopping and social activities—were mostly inaccessible to them because they were in different local authorities. This systemic inflexibility increased the pressures and stresses experienced by such families.

> *Our biggest issue being up here near Plymouth is that we're Cornish in terms of our post code but everything, all the provisions and all the special schools and all the things that we could benefit from accessing are down in Truro* (50 miles away). *There's just nothing up here. We are occasionally allowed to use Plymouth services . . . but there are some services that they just completely say no, you have to use the Cornwall service. So for nearly everything I'm going to have to take him all the way down there. That's already something he'll find quite stressful, and Plymouth is just across the bridge . . . so that's not being done in the best interest of the child.* (C1: mother)

> *We are out on a limb here. We are as far as you can get from Norwich. Because we're in West Norfolk, there is support but it is Norwich, Great Yarmouth and that way* (55 to 70 miles away). *A lot of the services that we could go to are not in this county; they are in Lincolnshire or Cambridgeshire, so we are ineligible. The border is literally the road that runs behind here. So, anything we do, we have to travel to . . . and that is a catch 22, because we can't really travel without support. There is very little in King's Lynn . . . and because my son has high-functioning autism, that precludes us from about 90% of what's there. Everything appropriate is based in Norwich. It is quite frustrating in that respect.* (N3: mother)

### 3.3.3. Low Autism Awareness

A lack of diversity, regarding, e.g., race, sexuality and disability has been noted in research regarding rural and coastal communities in the UK [46,47]. Limited awareness of autism was reported consistently by parents, grandparents, siblings and individuals with autism alike. The general public was felt to have a narrow and often stereotypical attitude towards issues relating to disability and neurodiversity.

> *There's a definite lack of understanding of autism and other special needs. It's very much a case of unless it's visible, like a wheelchair, you don't have a problem, according to a lot of them.* (C2: young autistic adult)

The 'invisible' nature of autism also led to the difficulties that individuals and families faced being misunderstood and misinterpreted and some families being stigmatised and made to feel unwelcome within their local communities.

> *Our old neighbours used to bang on the wall. If she was having one of her tempers, they used to bang on the wall at us. One of them even came charging round once and was like, 'We are going to report you to Social Services . . . '. because they thought we were abusing her.* (C5: mother)

> *We had problems with a neighbour across the road. He said he was going to get me out. He made my life a living hell, like he'd sit in his car and he'd record what we were doing.* (N13: mother)

The limited understanding of autism noted within the general public was also shared by many of the teachers and education specialists with whom children with autism and their families came into contact. Professionals' failure to understand the condition impacted parental confidence in the education system and services.

> *The education consultant hadn't ever read anything about autism. He actually said, 'I've never read anything about autism!' So, you think to yourself, 'Oh, bugger!'* (C2: mother)

Particular difficulties regarding professional understanding were reported when autism was not accompanied by an intellectual or language impairment, as the inconsistent cognitive profile typical of autism [48] seemed particularly problematic for professionals.

> *They thought she was very clever, and they didn't think that autistic people were clever. They were thinking if she was autistic, she wouldn't be talking and would be rocking in the corner and wouldn't be playing.* (N7: mother with ASD)

Situations resulting from the characteristic autistic difficulties with social communication and interaction and the need for predictability were often misinterpreted, and this often resulted in parents being labelled as poor parents and blamed for their child's 'poor behaviour'. Even when parents who were themselves on the autism spectrum sought to explain the underlying reasons for their child's behaviour, professionals sometimes rejected their perspective.

> *I got into a lot of trouble with teachers because of a lack of understanding and me not understanding them, which was quite irritating. I spent a lot of time in internal exclusion because a teacher would make a rule for someone and then they would change it for me and I would argue, because I didn't see why it was changing. I got in a lot of trouble from not understanding situations to not reading people properly, so not realising when I was annoying someone. But rather than help me fix the problem, they just continued to punish you and think that will sort itself, which is not really helpful if you don't know what you are in trouble for.* (C2: young autistic adult)

> *Her teacher in reception was very combative of everything we said. If I said, 'I think she is having a hard time because of X, Y, Z', she would say, 'Oh, I don't think it's because of that.'* (N7: mother with AS)

#### 3.3.4. Delays and Difficulties Regarding Diagnosis

Accessing autism-specialist services or having the right to 'reasonable adjustments' [49] within mainstream educational and work settings are often dependent upon a confirmed diagnosis. However, the difficulties in accessing diagnostic services and in obtaining a diagnosis of autism are consistently identified in research regarding families living in rural areas worldwide [50,51], and lengthy delays and dead ends were commonly reported by interviewees.

> *It took six years—from age four to ten. Including going down the Autism Pathway in Cornwall three times and being told no. One of them, they said they had to say no to autism because he wouldn't engage in the tests. But as Great Ormond Street said, that alone should have red-flagged for them.* (C3: mother)

> *He was on the pathway to being assessed, but still fifteen or eighteen months down the line, nobody had seen him; there was nothing happening, and things were becoming really bad at home.'He was on full school refusal at this point; it was just dreadful.* (N2: mother)

In order to expedite matters, some families sought to get their child assessed privately. However, this too could be problematic. Parents spoke of travelling to London or even further afield for the assessment. However, even when a diagnosis was made, this did not guarantee the provision of services. Parents in both areas spoke of their frustration in the cases where children were diagnosed with Pathological Demand Avoidance Syndrome (PDA) [52] as this diagnosis was not recognised in either area.

> *I brought up the idea of PDA very early on because I had done a huge amount of research myself and felt that it kind of fit the bill and it was very much, 'PDA doesn't exist; it's not a real thing.'* (C1: mother)

> *I arranged to go private. We were seen in four or five weeks, and I was presented with a report a week or so later which said he has ASD/Pathological Demand Avoidance Syndrome. I took that back to the NHS to the paediatrician and said, 'Look, I've saved you money. You can take him off your pathway now; you don't need to put him through*

> *it; I know things are so completely backlogged and he has a diagnosis now'. And they refused to agree that he had a diagnosis. They said, 'We don't recognise PDA, so he can't have that diagnosis.'* (N2: mother)

Until a diagnosis was obtained and accepted, gaining access to appropriate support and services was identified as extremely difficult. This caused particular frustration for families given the importance and associated benefits attributed to early intervention in autism [53].

> *It does take many years . . . So, all those years of early intervention, you just couldn't get it. And that links into the fact that under this new Education, Health and Care Plan system, and the new funding system for schools, they wouldn't give children support unless they had a diagnosis. So, you've got this double whammy of nothing for several years of their lives . . .* (N6: mother)

#### 3.3.5. Lack of Appropriate Services

Even where an autism diagnosis had been obtained, families continued to face barriers to and problems regarding education. As identified above, funding for local councils had been reduced over the last decade, and these funding cuts have impacted upon the availability of services.

> *They've got no money and that's what you are told every time you go to a meeting with county. The first thing you are told is that there is no money. You feel guilty. You get this instant reaction of 'If we are going to end up spending this much on your son, then we don't have money available for other children'. It may sound awful but that's just not our problem.* (C2: mother)

Specialist services were limited and located in population centres. For those living in rural areas, simply getting to and from school could be time-consuming and difficult. Moreover, these services were generally targeted at children who had a learning disability alongside their autism, and many parents of more able children on the spectrum were concerned about their suitability.

> *The special needs school they wanted to put him in wasn't very stimulating . . . They just group the children together and I don't think that now they can meet all the individual needs. It's really quite sad. And a lot of the children weren't mobile may be good for some children but not for our sons. But I was told there were no places at any other special school or unit in our area. The next nearest one would have been Redruth, which is nearly an hour drive away.* (C4: mother)

Often these children had to cope as best they could within mainstream settings where there was limited support and limited understanding of their needs. This often led to fraught relationships between school and family, and the words 'fight' and 'struggle' were used by the majority of respondents to describe their experiences.

> *So it has been a case all along of me shouting very, very loudly and being constantly on the phone and complaining at every stage. And luckily having the level of knowledge to be able to make myself heard. But I equally know of a huge number of parents who don't have that.* (C1: mother)

Difficulties regarding recruitment and retention of staff in rural coastal areas have been identified in the literature [44]. These issues were noted by families within both Cornwall and Norfolk, leading to increased waiting times and communication problems as well as negatively impacting the consistency needed by individuals on the autism spectrum.

> *Turnover here is quite ridiculous. And for someone like our son . . . he doesn't trust us, let alone anyone else, he has big issues with paranoia because his mental health difficulties are quite complex. So, he has huge issues with trust. And then when you walk into an appointment, it's a different person every time.* (C2: mother)
>
> *CAMHS* (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) *sent a letter saying, 'We've spoken to the school and done the initial bit of his diagnosis'. So I thought we were getting*

> *somewhere regarding diagnosis. But when I spoke to the school, they said they hadn't heard from them; CAMHS had got in contact with his old school. So I rang to speak to his caseworker before Christmas, but she never got back to me. In January they said she would ring me back. I called again last week, and they said, 'She's on annual leave and not returning to this post'. So I can't find out anything until he gets assigned a new case worker, which could be whenever . . . So, the timescale is just extending. But I can't really ring up and kick up because it's not really going to do anything is it? I'm just resigned to the fact that we have to wait now.* (C7: mother)

> *Currently he's on his fifth headmaster and ninth deputy head . . . and every headmaster that comes in makes big changes.* (N5: mother)

Specialist support—from educational psychologists or autism specialists—was limited and was based around population centres. Caseloads and waiting lists were large, as were the sizes of the professionals' 'patches', and again, problems regarding recruitment and retention meant that many children and families received only limited support.

> *Psychologists will go in if the schools request it, but there's a very long waiting list. They did try to bring somebody in to give her anger management support. They put her on a waiting list, and she was on the waiting list ten months and then left school. So they sent a letter—six months after she'd left school—to say that as she had now left school, they had taken her off the list.* (N5: mother)

Exclusion from school was common, as was school refusal on the part of young people with autism; consequently, many children within families interviewed had spent significant periods of time out of education.

> *We've had trouble at school from where he was excluded from the age of four, after a day and a half in a mainstream school. He was out of school until he went to the special unit: he was there for about a year, and they reintegrated him back into school just before the summer. He went back in September and was there for a day and a half. Some kids threw his hat over the fence and everything went downhill. They called for us to pick him up; and so when he was aged 7, he was permanently excluded.* (C7: mother)

> *When he was in Year 2* (7 years old) *he went into full school refusal. They wouldn't put any support in place for him because they felt he didn't need any. I had to de-register him from school because they were saying they were going to take us to court and fine us if he didn't attend. We couldn't physically get him in; there was no way he would agree to going in. It was the way they were handling things; it was just so bad for him, he couldn't cope. That was three years ago.* (N2: mother)

The impact of austerity policies upon services was clearly identified, particularly by older autistic individuals or those with older children, who could contrast what was currently and previously available.

> *The Council cut the funding . . . they cut all the short breaks, they closed down short break homes, cut all of our access to respite, cut everyone's packages . . .*

> *There are all sorts of services that have been closed that people have been relying on and that have been going for years.* (C4: mother and father)

> *There used to be different services, like there used to be outreach for children with behaviour and any learning difficulties, they've all gone. They've all been dissolved . . . And the school budgets are shrinking all the time.* (N1: mother)

### 3.3.6. Underpinning Impacts of Autism

The characteristic differences and difficulties of autism—both in the core domains of social interaction/communication and restricted/repetitive behaviours and regarding sensory sensitivities [54]—underpinned the lived experiences of all the families within the study. These placed restrictions upon all aspects of social and educational inclusion, and negotiating daily life required adapting to accommodate these characteristics. Adaptations existed on a continuum and ranged from the relatively minor—such as doing all shopping while the child with autism was at school—to the acceptance of much greater constraints.

> *If it's dark, we are not allowed the main light on. We have that light up there, which is a blue light; and she wants the candle lit, which is a red candle. No other lights are allowed on. That's nice in the winter! We bathe her at night-time, but I have to get in the bath with her. She will not get in the bath without me . . . And then my husband has to dry her with the lights off. We now have to turn the bathroom lights off, so I'm left in the dark in the bath while my husband dries her. Then she has to walk up and down the stairs several times and go back in and out of the rooms that she needs to.* (N11: mother)

Families' ability to engage and interact within the rural coastal environment also existed within a continuum. As identified above, families identified many ways in which rural coastal spaces were beneficial to those with autism. For many, a significant challenge lay in the autistic need for sameness and predictability. Seasonal differences within popular holiday areas meant, for example, that access to beaches, or ecological factors such as noise, crowding and heat, changed throughout the year. As a result, families' abilities to engage with the environment could be limited.

> *It restricts a lot of the things. Like if the beach is too busy, we can't go to the beach. Soft play . . . can't do soft play, it's too busy. Too much noise they don't like. So yes, it does become difficult. And I think it's hard for the boys because they go to these places when they're quiet; and then they're full of people and it's like, 'Why are all these people here?' They don't understand it's a different season . . .* (C4: mother)

> *If you just wrap him up and take him to the beach, he is happy to go in the winter. But it can be tricky in the summer because he doesn't deal well with sitting in traffic jams and crowds. You couldn't go to Hunstanton on a busy summer's day. I would just avoid things like that; I wouldn't take him on a hot day in the summer holidays. I would just stay in the garden.* (N10: mother)

Some families were able to engage successfully with the rural coastal environment whilst adapting their expectations to the constraints imposed by autism.

> *It would be nice to go exploring more. Cornwall is stunning and it would be nice to explore the West, but it's just a little bit too far because he can't really manage that. You can plan events and you find that you get there, and he doesn't want to do it . . . and you can't make him.* (C2: father)

However, for others, the impact of autism profoundly restricted their interaction with their surroundings. Families living within idyllic villages a few miles from the sea spoke of being effectively housebound due to factors such as their child's extreme social anxiety or the severity of their behavioural challenges.

> *He is too stressed out to go out of the house. He really refuses to. He won't even go for a walk with the dog or a bike ride or any fun things. He won't go out and play in the garden. He just won't leave the house. It's just so sad. He will sit on his X-Box, PC or iPad solidly for fifteen hours and get very, very cross and angry at it most of the time. So, it's not a nice place to be. It's not a quiet place to be.* (N2: mother)

> *There are two workers who provide a few hours' support, but they refuse to take him out into the community. I have to be present in the house, and I have had to intervene a few times; so it's not a true break really. We can't go out. We don't do things as a family. The twins have never been to a soft play centre or anything. We can't travel in the car. There is no way that he will stay in the car: he doesn't mind travelling up the A47 at 70 miles an hour and opening the door to get out.* (N3: mother)

## 4. Conclusions

This study has identified that families living with autism often seek to live—or choose to remain—in rural coastal areas in order to experience the benefits typically associated with such spaces and that many such families and autistic individuals are indeed able to enjoy the characteristic advantages of rural and coastal living. However, equally characteristic disadvantages have been identified with regard to these areas, and these have impacted heavily upon the families in this study.Whilst the barriers and problems associated with rural living and coastal living are in many ways similar, the experience of families living in areas that are both rural and coastal is one of amplification and compounded difficulties. The problems facing families living with autism in rural areas relating to physical distance, infrastructure and small community living are increased by virtue of the seasonal, peripheral and often expensive nature of coastal living. The pressures resulting from a paucity of service provision are compounded when high housing costs restrict the recruitment of much-needed professionals.

Furthermore, the barriers facing families are further amplified and compounded by the intersectionality of these factors with the characteristic challenges associated with autism. For some, their experience of daily living and social and educational inclusion was a balance in which they acknowledged the trade-offs made and the need to tolerate the negatives in order to experience the associated positives.

> *We're equally blessed and cursed, because it's a nice way of life, but then when you want things to happen …* (C4: father)

For others, however, the severity of the impact of a specific factor—the severity of the individual's autism, diagnostic delay and the inadequacy of services—could push families into a situation in which the impact of negative factors was so overwhelming that any positives associated with living in a rural coastal location were lost.

The experiences of these families stand in stark contrast to the typical narratives regarding such areas as rural idylls or of coastal beauty; conflicting and contrasting narratives run side by side in these spaces. The impact of intersecting marginalities, such as those discussed here, is an issue that requires acknowledgement and further activity from both service providers and researchers. It is vital that service providers—not only within education but also across health, social care and more other areas—acknowledge and seek to address the intersecting factors that serve to intensify the social and educational marginalisation experienced by families and young people with autism in rural coastal areas. Further research is also urgently required within this under-researched area and the knowledge base would benefit from the perspectives offered by implementing interdisciplinary collaboration, for example, by involving researchers from geographical as well as education and social science backgrounds. Such collaboration would provide opportunities to better understand and address the needs of those living with intersecting marginalities.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, D.P.; methodology, D.P.; validation, D.P and I.L.L.; formal analysis, D.P. and I.L.L.; investigation, D.P. and I.L.L.; data curation, D.P. and I.L.L.; writing—original draft preparation, D.P. and I.L.L.; writing—review and editing, D.P. and I.L.L.; visualization, D.P. and I.L.L.; supervision, D.P.; project administration, D.P.; funding acquisition, D.P. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the British Academy/Leverhulme Small Grant Award No. SRG170268. This support does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the funding body cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** This research was conducted according to the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association, and approved by the University of Northampton's Faculty of Education and Humanities Research Ethics Committee on 16 May 2018 (Reference no.: 18/5/2).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data are available in a publicly accessible repository [CC-BY-NC licence]. Data are available at: https://pure.northampton.ac.uk/en/datasets/experience-of-families-living-with-autism-in-rural-coastal-areas. Data set citation: Preece, D. (Creator), Lessner Listiakova, I. (Creator) (2021). Experience of families living with autism in rural coastal areas of England. DataCite. The_experience_of_families_living_with_autism_in_rural_coastal_areas_of_England_dataset(.zip).

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

1. McConkey, R. The rise in the numbers of pupils identified by schools with autism spectrum disorder (ASD): A comparison of the four countries in the United Kingdom. *Support Learn.* **2020**, *35*, 132–143. [CrossRef]
2. Engstrand, R.Z.; Roll-Pettersson, L.; Westling Allodi, M.; Hirvikoski, T. Needs of grandparents of preschool-aged children with ASD in Sweden. *J. Autism Dev. Disord.* **2020**, *50*, 1941–1957. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
3. Tsermentseli, S.; Kouklari, E.C. Impact of child factors on parenting stress of mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability: A UK school-based study. *Early Child Dev. Care* **2019**. [CrossRef]
4. Lawson, L.P.; Richdale, A.L.; Haschek, A.; Flower, R.L.; Vartuli, J.; Arnold, S.R.C.; Trollor, J.N. Cross-sectional and longitudinal predictors of quality of life in autistic individuals from adolescence to adulthood: The role of mental health and sleep quality. *Autism* **2020**, *24*, 954–967. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
5. Mitter, N.; Ali, A.; Scior, K. Stigma experienced by families of individuals with intellectual disabilities and autism: A systematic review. *Res. Dev. Disabil.* **2019**, *89*, 10–21. [CrossRef]
6. Deguchi, N.K.; Asakura, T.; Omiya, T. Self-stigma of families of persons with autism spectrum disorder: A scoping review. *Rev. J. Autism Dev. Disord.* **2021**. [CrossRef]
7. Nagib, W.; Williams, A. Towards an autism-friendly home environment. *Hous. Stud.* **2017**, *32*, 140–167. [CrossRef]
8. Cidav, Z.; Marcus, S.C.; Mandell, D.S. Implications of childhood autism for parental employment and earnings. *Pediatrics* **2012**, *129*, 616–623. [CrossRef]
9. Hedley, D.; Uljarević, M.; Hedley, D.F.E. Employment and living with autism: Personal, social and economic impact. In *Inclusion, Disability and Culture. Inclusive Learning and Educational Equity*; Halder, S., Assaf, L., Eds.; Springer: New York, NY, USA, 2017; Volume 3, pp. 295–311.
10. Preece, D.; Howley, M. An approach to supporting young people with autism spectrum disorder and high anxiety to reengage with formal education—the impact on young people and their families. *Int. J. Adolesc. Youth* **2018**, *23*, 468–481.
11. Seymour, M.; Giallo, R.; Wood, C.E. Perceptions of social support: Comparisons between fathers of children with autism spectrum disorder and fathers of children without developmental disabilities. *J. Intellect. Disabil. Res.* **2020**, *64*, 414–425. [CrossRef]
12. National Children's Bureau. *Beyond the Cuts: Children's Charities Adapting to Austerity*; National Children's Bureau: London, UK, 2016.
13. British Academy of Childhood Disability/British Association for Community Child Health. *Counting the Cost BACCH and BACD Survey: Impact of Austerity Measures on Families with Disabled Children*; British Academy of Childhood Disability: London, UK, 2014.
14. Morgan, K. Devolution and development: Territorial justice and the North-South divide. *Publius* **2006**, *36*, 189–206. [CrossRef]
15. Whitley, R.; Prince, M. Are inner-cities bad for your health? Comparisons of residents' and third parties' perceptions of the urban neighbourhood of Gospel Oak, London. *Sociol. Health Illn.* **2005**, *27*, 44–67. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
16. Corfe, S. *Living on the edge: Britain's Coastal Communities*; Social Market Foundation: London, UK, 2017.
17. Ofsted. *Unseen Children: Access and Achievement 20 Years On*; Ofsted: London, UK, 2013.
18. Future Leaders Trust. *Combatting Isolation: Why Coastal Schools Are Failing and How Headteachers Are Turning Them around*; Future Leaders Trust: London, UK, 2015.
19. Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission. *The Social Mobility Index*; Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission: London, UK, 2016.
20. Centre for Social Justice. *Turning the Tide: Social Justice in Five Seaside Towns*; Centre for Social Justice: London, UK, 2013.
21. Centre for Local Economic Strategies. *A Summary of Austerity in the North West and a Case Study of Blackpool Council*; Centre for Local Economic Strategies: Manchester, UK, 2014.
22. Smith, D.P. The social and economic consequences of housing in multiple occupation (HMO) in UK coastal towns: Geographies of segregation. *Trans. Inst. Br. Geogr.* **2012**, *37*, 461–476. [CrossRef]
23. Wood, S.L.; Demougin, P.R.; Higgins, S.; Husk, K.; Wheeler, B.W.; White, M. Exploring the relationship between childhood obesity and proximity to the coast: A rural/urban perspective. *Health Place* **2016**, *40*, 129–136. [CrossRef]
24. Bell, S.L.; Phoenix, C.; Lovell, R.; Wheeler, B.W. Seeking everyday wellbeing: The coast as a therapeutic landscape. *Soc. Sci. Med.* **2015**, *142*, 56–67. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
25. Murphy, M.A.; Ruble, L.A. A comparative study of rurality and urbanicity on access to and satisfaction with services for children with autism spectrum disorders. *Rural Spec. Educ. Q.* **2012**, *31*, 3–11. [CrossRef]
26. Hoogsteen, L.; Woodgate, R.L. Embracing autism in Canadian rural communities. *Aust. J. Rural Health* **2013**, *21*, 178–182. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
27. Antezena, L.; Scarpa, A.; Valdespino, A.; Albright, J.; Richey, J.A. Rural trends in diagnosis and services for Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Front. Psychol.* **2017**, *8*, 5. [CrossRef]

28. Government Statistical Service. *The 2011 Rural-Urban Classification for Output Areas in England*; Government Statistical Service: London, UK, 2011.
29. The Countryside Agency/Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs/Office of the Deputy Prime Minister/Office for National Statistics/Welsh Assembly Government. *Rural and Urban Area Classification 2004: An Introductory Guide*; Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs: London, UK, 2004.
30. British Educational Research Association. *Ethical Guidelines for Education Research*, 4th ed.; BERA: London, UK, 2018.
31. Clarke, V.; Braun, B. Thematic analysis. *J. Posit. Psychol.* **2017**, *12*, 297–298. [CrossRef]
32. Bell, D. Variations on the Rural Idyll. In *Handbook of Rural Studies*; Cloke, P., Marsden, T., Mooney, P., Eds.; Sage: London, UK, 2006; pp. 149–160, ISBN-10: 076197332X.
33. Munkejord, M.C. Challenging Discourses on Rurality: Women and Men In-migrants' Constructions of the Good Life in a Rural Town in Northern Norway. *Sociol. Rural.* **2006**, *46*, 241–257. [CrossRef]
34. Watkins, F.; Jacoby, A. Is the rural idyll bad for your health? Stigma and exclusion in the English countryside. *Health Place* **2007**, *13*, 851–864. [CrossRef]
35. Shucksmith, M. Re-imagining the rural: From rural idyll to Good Countryside. *J. Rural Stud.* **2018**, *59*, 163–172. [CrossRef]
36. Rapp, A.; Cena, F.; Schifanella, C.; Boella, G. Finding a secure place: A map-based crowdsourcing system for people with autism. *IEEE Trans. Hum. Mach. Syst.* **2020**, *50*, 424–433. [CrossRef]
37. Osbaldiston, N. Chasing the Idyll Lifestyle: The Seachange Problem. *Soc. Altern.* **2010**, *29*, 54–58.
38. White, M.P.; Alcock, I.; Wheeler, B.W.; Depledge, M.H. Coastal proximity, health and well-being: Results from a longitudinal panel survey. *Health Place* **2013**, *23*, 97–103. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
39. Gascon, M.; Zijlema, W.; Vert, C.; White, M.P.; Nieuwenhuijzen, M.J. Outdoor blue spaces, human health and well-being: A systematic review of quantitative studies. *Int. J. Hyg. Environ. Health* **2017**, *220*, 1207–1221. [CrossRef]
40. Wheeler, B.W.; White, M.; Stahl-Timmins, W.; Depledge, M.H. Does living by the coast improve health and wellbeing? *Health Place* **2012**, *18*, 1198–1201. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
41. Beaumont, E.; Brown, D. It's the sea and the beach more than anything for me: Local surfers and the construction of community and communitas in a rural Cornish seaside village. *J. Rural Stud.* **2018**, *59*, 58–66. [CrossRef]
42. Hartley, D. Rural health disparities, population health, and rural culture. *Am. J. Public Health* **2004**, *94*, 1675–1678. [CrossRef]
43. Department for Education. *Outcomes for Pupils at the end of KS4 by Geography: Ad hoc Statistics (June 2019)*; Department for Education: London, UK, 2019.
44. Ovenden-Hope, T.; Passy, R. *Educational Isolation: A Challenge for Schools in England*; Plymouth Marjon University and University of Plymouth: Plymouth, UK, 2019.
45. Graham, K.; Underwood, K. The reality of rurality: Rural parents' experiences of early years services. *Health Place* **2012**, *18*, 1231–1239. [CrossRef]
46. Burdsey, D. Strangers on the shore? Racialized representation, identity and in/visibilities of whiteness at the English seaside. *Cult. Sociol.* **2011**, *5*, 537–552. [CrossRef]
47. Local Government Association. *Health and Wellbeing in Rural Areas: Case Studies*; Local Government Association: London, UK, 2017.
48. Mandy, W.; Murin, M.; Skuse, D. The cognitive profile in autism spectrum disorders. In *Autism Spectrum Disorders. Phenotypes, Mechanisms and Treatments*; Leboyer, M., Chaste, P., Eds.; Karger: Basel, Switzerland, 2015; pp. 34–45.
49. Equality and Human Rights Commission. *Reasonable Adjustments for Disabled Pupils: Guidance for Schools in England*; Equality and Human Rights Commission: London, UK, 2015.
50. Hutton, A.M.; Caron, S.L. Experiences of families with children with autism in rural New England. *Focus Autism Other Dev. Disabil.* **2005**, *20*, 180–189. [CrossRef]
51. Alkhalifah, S.; Aldhalaan, H. Telehealth services for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders in rural areas of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Overview and recommendations. *JMIR Pediatrics Parent.* **2018**, *1*, e11402. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
52. Newsom, E.; Le Maréchal, K.; David, C. Pathological demand avoidance syndrome: A necessary distinction within the pervasive developmental disorders. *Arch. Dis. Child.* **2003**, *88*, 595–600. [CrossRef]
53. Noyes-Grosser, D.; Elbaum, B.; Wu, Y.; Siegenthaler, K.M.; Cavalari, R.S.; Gillis, J.M.; Romanczyk, R.G. Early intervention outcomes for toddlers with Autism Spectrum Disorder and their families. *Infants Young Child* **2018**, *31*, 177–199. [CrossRef]
54. Fletcher-Watson, S.; Happé, F. *Autism: A New Introduction to Psychological Theory and Current Debate*; Routledge: Abingdon, UK, 2019.

*education sciences*

MDPI

*Article*

# Children's Right to Belong?—The Psychosocial Impact of Pedagogy and Peer Interaction on Minority Ethnic Children's Negotiation of Academic and Social Identities in School

**Deirdre McGillicuddy [1,*] and Malgosia Machowska-Kosciak [2]**

[1] School of Education, University College Dublin, Dublin 4, Ireland
[2] Centre for Human Rights and Citizenship Education, Dublin City University, Dublin 9, Ireland; malgosia.machowska-kosciak@dcu.ie
* Correspondence: deirdre.mcgillicuddy@ucd.ie

**Abstract:** Migration across the OECD this decade is reflected in increasingly diverse societies. Although migration into Ireland remains relatively low, increasing pupil diversity is evident in the physical, pedagogical, curricular, and socio-relational aspects of schooling. While the intensity of such changes are evident in teacher pedagogy, children's social worlds, and classroom/school dynamics, most notable is the lack of policy development to support school practices. Drawing on two in-depth case studies, this paper aims to foreground minority ethnic children/young people's voice(s) as they negotiate the complexity of identity (re)formation and belonging in school. It explores whether mis/recognition impacts teacher pedagogical practices through ability grouping, and minority ethnic children's navigation of social spaces within/between the classroom. Using a children's rights lens, this paper interrogates whether minority ethnic children's right to education preparing them "for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace (and) tolerance" (Article 29 (1), UNCRC, 1989) is being realised. Findings indicate the need to foreground minority ethnic children's voices and rights to ensure how they "do"/"feel" learning is in their best interests and affords them equal opportunities in their school lives.

**Keywords:** identity; belonging; misrecognition; primary school; children's rights; pedagogy; ability grouping; minority ethnic; childhood; migrant children; multilingualism

**Citation:** McGillicuddy, D.; Machowska-Kosciak, M. Children's Right to Belong?—The Psychosocial Impact of Pedagogy and Peer Interaction on Minority Ethnic Children's Negotiation of Academic and Social Identities in School. *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 383. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11080383

Academic Editors: Michael Shevlin and Richard Rose

Received: 17 June 2021
Accepted: 22 July 2021
Published: 27 July 2021

## 1. Introduction

Migration is "the movement of persons away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a State" [1] (p. 137). Patterns of migration across the OECD have grown over the past decade with 1 in 10 people identified as foreign-born [2]. While migration was historically low in 2020 due to COVID-19, it is expected to increase post-pandemic [3]. The flow of migrants across the globe, driven by the economic market, educational opportunities, familial reunification, and humanitarian need [3], contributes to population diversification reflected not only in societies, but also within education systems and schools.

Migration into Ireland has resulted in an increasingly diverse pupil population in schools [4,5]. Although rates of migration into Ireland remain relatively low [3], increasing diversity is reflected in physical, pedagogical, curricular, and socio-relational aspects of schooling. While the intensity of such changes are evident in teacher practices, children's social worlds, and classroom/school dynamics [6,7], most notable is the lack of contemporary policy development to support school practices. Most concerning are patterns and experiences of racism in Ireland, most recent figures for 2020 identifying an increase in reporting, particularly hate speech which doubled since 2019 [8]. Largely absent from discourse are minority ethnic children's voice(s) to understand how they navigate their identities in the education system while engaging with pedagogical practices shaping how they "do" and "feel" learning. This paper seeks to contribute to the dearth of research foregrounding minority ethnic children's experiences and voices.

### *1.1. UNCRC, Minority Ethnic Children's Rights, and the Spaces to Belong in School*

While the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides a clear measure against which state parties can be held accountable for ensuring they are working in the best interest of children under their jurisdiction, it is rarely used within education to interrogate whether school practices are promoting children's right to be treated in a fair and equitable manner. Indeed, the UNCRC provides a useful measure against which pedagogical practices can be evaluated as working in children's best interests, ensuring equal opportunities to learn [9]. Article 29.1 of the UNCRC is especially important when considering children's right to belong where state parties must ensure "the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin". Lundy (2019) [10] argues that "human rights are under fire right across the world" (p. 595) stating the unequivocal importance of using a child rights lens, not as pity, but rather to interrogate how children experience their rights in their everyday lives.

While it is incumbent on educators to develop pedagogy which teaches children about their "rights and responsibilities" [11], this paper argues that children understand who they are through/in/with everyday pedagogical interactions. It is within these pedagogical sites that children's rights have the potential to be contravened/realised. Responsiveness to student diversity is at the core of rights-respecting pedagogy [12,13]. Such an approach nurtures student voice and partnership contributing meaningfully to active participation in learning and the realisation of their full potential [12].

Rau and Ritchie (2011) [14] argue pedagogy is critical to affirming minority ethnic group identity within the learning environment. This is enshrined in UNCRC Article 8;

> *"States Parties undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognized by law without unlawful interference" and "where a child is illegally deprived of some or all of the elements of his or her identity, States Parties shall provide appropriate assistance and protection, with a view to re-establishing speedily his or her identity".*

Educators and researchers have a responsibility to advocate for these rights by creating spaces for children to access and recognise their minority identities [14]. It is imperative children's rights are placed at the heart of experiences and practices in school [15], something expressed by children themselves with 'feeling cared for' highlighted as important [16]. This paper argues that it is vital that schools create safe spaces for minority ethnic children to belong and failure to do so contravenes their right to engage in a spirit of freedom and understanding.

### *1.2. Minority Ethnic Children, Cultural Identities, and Belonging in School*

Identity is "multiple, changing, overlapping and contextual, rather than fixed and static" [17] (p. 133). It is constantly in flux, entwined with the affective [18], and formed through discourse where individuals play roles expected of them. Identities are re/negotiated and re/constructed at both macro (educational/economic experiences) and micro levels (private decisions about ways of living) [19]. Language (including the mother tongue) constitutes an important marker of social and ethnic identity, existing as "the default medium of their (individual) self-concept, their self-awareness, their consciousness, their discursive thinking, and their agency" [20] (p. 202).

Otherness arises from "a lack of wholeness which is filled" through our own imagining of ourselves as seen by others [21]. If a child is perceived as different, they are likely perceived through the lens of that difference and ultimately develop "self-as-Othered" [22] (p. 17). Belonging to the majority group in Ireland is associated with middle-class values, status, and ability to access ordinary privileges [23]. As such, aligning to the majority ethnic group is associated with upward mobility. Consciously adapting majority ethnic youth behaviours in line with social norms and beliefs increases greater acceptance of minority young people as peers [6]. Adopting bicultural identity increases social acceptance by peers and there is less preference for within-ethnic friendships, particularly among older children [24]. Indeed, cross-ethnic friendship is associated with reduced peer rejection from same and cross-ethnic peers [25]. At the heart of crossing this identity boundary is the need to change values to be accepted instead of "othered". Cross-ethnic friendships are more likely to be evident in contexts where inclusive norms are actively promoted [26].

In Ireland, Eastern European children have been identified with the smallest friendship networks while African and Asian children also have fewer friends than their Irish counterparts [27]. Assimilationist practices offer minority ethnic children membership and belonging with outer/native communities [6]. While children can conform naturally to ways of acting, thinking, and speaking [28], entering new communities (as minority ethnic) means accessing new Discourses (D in the word "discourse" indicates it is more than 'just language') and requires taking on an identity that is congruent with the Discourse operating in a particular group, time, and place [29]. However, there is a "price" [30] for membership an individual pays in highly diverse contexts, as "the degree of a student's success in school . . . is a direct measure of the degree of first language and culture loss" [31] (p. 243). Key signifiers typical of racial and cultural difference/stereotype are often identified as skin colour, distinct accent, and facial features which act to exclude minority groups from belonging [32].

### *1.3. Schools as Sites of Mis/Recognition—Pedagogy and the Psychosocial*

Schools are critical sites for children as they engage in/with/through pedagogical practices that not only shape how they 'do' and 'feel' learning in school, but how they are mis/recognised as valued learners and peers within the classroom.

#### 1.3.1. Pedagogic Divisiveness

The pedagogic device [33] used by teachers as "specialised agents" [34] is considered as a key tool for social reproduction within societies. Within this framework, teachers engage in a process of sorting and classifying knowledge, defining the boundaries between what may or may not be transmitted through the pedagogical relationship between teacher and pupil [35]. Defining these boundaries within the socio-spatial structures of the classroom (such as implementing ability grouping) serves to classify and define learners, exposing them to different knowledge and ways of understanding their place in the world [36];

> "*By converting social hierarchies into academic hierarchies, the educational system fulfils a function of legitimation which is more and more necessary to the perpetuation of the 'social order' as the evolution of the power relationship between classes tends more completely to exclude the imposition of a hierarchy based upon the crude and ruthless affirmation of the power relationship* (p. 84)".

Ability grouping, conceptualised as an "act of symbolic violence" [37], shaping children's understanding of who they are and who they are expected to be through the "power of suggestion" [38]. Misassignment to an ability group level is of particular concern within the literature as it directly impacts on student trajectories and academic outcomes [37]. It has been reported that minority ethnic children often report being misassigned to lower ability group levels [37,39].

#### 1.3.2. The Emotionality of Learning and the Psychosocial

The emotionality of learning is particularly important when understanding how children 'do' and 'feel' learning and their social worlds within/between classroom environments [40]. The "psycho-social-affective-spectrum" [18] provides a lens through which we can understand the complex intersection between pedagogical practices and emotional realms of learning. It is characterized by feelings such as resentment, defensiveness, guilt, shame, envy, deference, contempt, arrogance, pride, rage, satisfaction, embarrassment, and pity [18]. The meaning-making intersection of learning and identity (re)formation is replayed in stories and emotions [41] shaping the embodied learner. It is within the complexity of the social encounter within the "figured world" [42] of the classroom that the psychosocial emerges [43]. Academic labelling contributes to how children understand themselves (and others) shaping expectations associated with who they 'are', who they 'should be', and how they should be treated [44] within this figured world. The "emotional labour" associated with negotiating the "social geographies of embodied encounters" [45] (p.499) is evident in the relational process of affecting and being affected. The socio-spatial practices in primary schools, such as grouping by ability, impact how children experience learning, how they negotiate their social worlds (belonging), and how such experiences are embodied and manifest as a psychosocial response.

This paper contributes to growing literature exploring the psychosocial impacts of pedagogical practices on children's sense of identity and belonging in school. There are particular implications for children who are on the margins of our society who have to work especially hard to negotiate their identities as valued learners/peers.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This paper draws on two Irish studies; an ethnographic study of identity with 4 Polish families and children aged 12–14 and a mixed methodological exploration of the implementation and perceptions of ability grouping drawing from a national survey (685 teachers) and intensive case studies in 3 primary schools (100 children).

### *2.1. The Polish Ethnographic Study*

The Polish ethnographic study explored how heritage language socialization (Polish) goals impact children's identity negotiation as they grow up in Ireland and try to find their place in a new country/society.

#### 2.1.1. Polish Ethnographic Study Sample

The sample encompassed four Polish immigrant children aged 13–15, their parents, and their teachers (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Polish ethnographic study sample.

| *Child Participants* | *Parent Participants* | *Teacher Participants* |
|---|---|---|
| Kasia (12) | Agata<br>Adam | Peter (previous English teacher)<br>Debra (current English teacher)<br>Ann (Maths teacher) |
| Wiktoria (12) | Ala<br>Rafal | Gretta (ESOL teacher)<br>Danuta (Polish teacher PWS) |
| Janek (14/15) | Ewa<br>Marek | Paul—Maths teacher<br>Ann—English teacher<br>Adam—Polish language and culture teacher (PWS) |
| Marcin (13) | Anna<br>Patryk | Debbie (Primary school teacher) |

Two broad educational contexts, English-speaking mainstream schools (EMS) and Polish weekend school English mainstream schools (PWS + EMS) were purposefully selected (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Polish ethnographic study—educational contexts.

| *Mainstream Schooling Context Monolingual Educational* | *Heritage Enriched Educational Context Bilingual Education* |
|---|---|
| English langugage mainstream school (EMS) (n = 2) | Polish weekend school and English language mainstream school (PWS + EMS) (n = 2) |

Mainstream Schooling Context—Kasia and Marcin

Kasia (12) attended first year at a newly established mainstream school within an interdenominational ethos catering for 450 students housed in temporary premises at a local hotel. Kasia was in the first year of the Junior Cycle and insisted that the researcher refrained from using Polish in any interaction with her in school. As such, it was decided that the researcher was to be presented to her classmates as a university trainee studying to be a teacher.

Marcin (13) attended a mainstream senior primary school (3rd–6th class) with a Catholic ethos in the eastern region of Ireland. The school was also newly established and had 12 mainstream classes. Marcin was undertaking the Irish primary school curriculum and engaged in numerous extracurricular activities (Green school, Christmas and Easter plays, international day).

Heritage Language Enriched Context—Janek and Wiktoria

Janek (14) and Wiktoria (12) attended both Polish weekend school (PWS) and EMS (Janek, first year of post-primary school/ Wiktoria final year of primary school). This heritage bilingual education aims to foster the minority language and culture in the child. Polish weekend schools in Ireland aim to develop Polish language skills to full proficiency and full biliteracy. Polish heritage language education takes place through weekend supplemental schools (n = 38) in Ireland (supported by Polish government) and is restricted to one day tuition per week. These schools connect the local Polish migrant community in Ireland with the Polish education system, providing a link between an individual's personal past and first-hand cultural and linguistic experience.

### 2.1.2. Methodology

The Polish ethnographic study encompassed an ethnographic approach including observations and in-depth interviewing. Discourse analysis was undertaken to facilitate emic and etic analysis of communication/discourse to examine "talk" as social action. The approach to data collection and analysis focused on exploring and collecting a wide range of materials without constraint from specific hypotheses. All audio recordings were transcribed and coded for narratives and small stories. This analytical process was informed by speech acts and actions (social acts) with a particular focus on stance-taking and social identity construction as it is negotiated over time.

Children's Narratives

Narratives, particularly small stories, constructed by children, were used as a tool for examining identity. Small stories research is a model for narrative analysis and forms the basis for interactive practice through which interlocutors elicit, explain, justify, tell, and solve problems; establish cultural norms, ideologies, and values; and negotiate their identities. Excerpts from small stories in this paper are combinations of saying-doing-being-valuing-believing. They are safe spaces where children negotiate and articulate their identity. The importance of fragments of these stories was evident in their reoccurrence in the children's narratives as they explored the various themes. Children's voices are central in this research process and the researcher becomes the new apprentice in the discovery process [6]. This methodological framework is grounded in Lundy's model providing children with affordances (space) to express their views (voice) while also creating opportunities for their voices to be listened to (audience) and acted upon (influence).

### 2.1.3. Discourse Analysis

The analysis in this study draws on Gee's theory of Discourse [29] as a lens through which we can identify "identity kits" comprised of appropriate costumes and instructions on how to act, talk, and write, how to interact, and what to believe and value in order to provide access to a social network. Every individual (including children) acts within a framework of mixed Discourses which define common or normative ways of doing, being, and feeling as part of operating within a common social group. As such, Discourses operate to include as "insider" or exclude as "outsider" or "other". Schools operate as meaningful sites where children negotiate these powerful Discourses and experience peer inclusion/exclusion.

## *2.2. The Ability Grouping Study*

The study of ability grouping in Irish DEIS primary schools adopted concurrent mixed methodological multiphase design encompassing national teacher surveys (n = 685) and in-depth qualitative case studies in three co-educational primary schools serving socioeconomically challenged communities in Ireland (Figure 1).

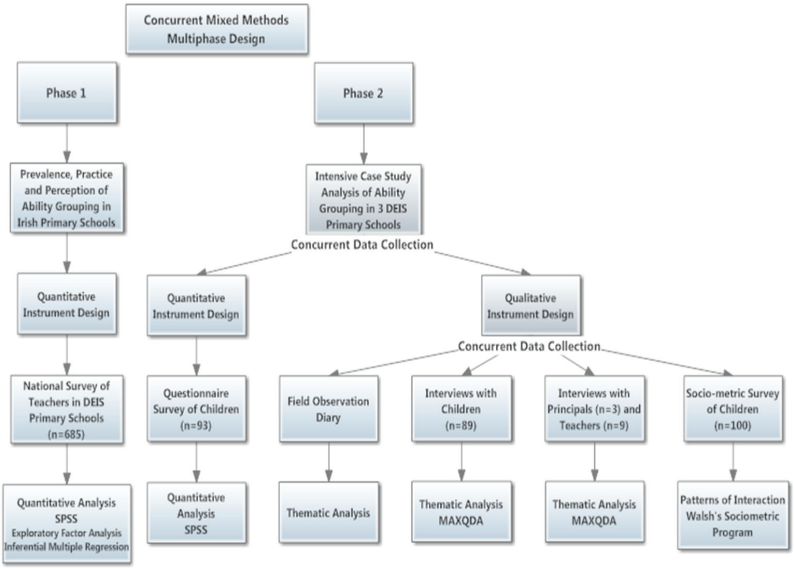


**Figure 1.** The ability grouping study research design and methodology overview.

### 2.2.1. National Survey of Teachers

Phase 1 encompassed a national survey of teachers working in DEIS schools across Ireland. A total of 1781 questionnaire surveys were posted to teachers working with 1st, 2nd, 5th, and 6th grades in 512 DEIS schools across the country. Of those, 685 questionnaires were returned representing a response rate of 38.4%.

### 2.2.2. The Case Studies

The second phase study encompassed three intensive case studies in DEIS schools (two senior/one junior). The perspectives of teachers (n = 9), principals (n = 3), and children (n = 100) were captured through interviews and through a questionnaire survey and sociometric measures with the children (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Ability grouping study—methods and instruments.

| **Quantitative Data Collection** | |
|---|---|
| **Instrument** | **Themes Explored** |
| National survey of teachers<br>(n = 685) | Demographics<br>• Teacher (age, gender, ethnicity, qualification, length of experience)<br>• School (level, DEIS categorisation gender composition)<br>• Pupils (age, gender, ethnicity, dis/ability)<br>Grouping practices & composition,<br>Ability group assignment<br>Curricular and pedagogical practices,<br>Definitions of "ability"<br>Pupil experiences of ability grouping |
| Child questionnaire<br>(n = 93) | Classroom organisational practices<br>Ability group practices<br>Child culture and peer dynamics<br>Self-image and self-perception<br>Teacher interaction and bonding to school |
| **Qualitative Data Collection** | |
| Child focus group interviews<br>(n = 89) | Ability group practices<br>Child culture and peer dynamics<br>Self-image and self-perception<br>Teacher interaction and bonding to school<br>Attitude to intelligence |
| Child sociometric survey<br>(n = 100) | Instrumental ties (three children chosen to help with work)<br>Expressive ties (three children chosen to sit beside)<br>Proxy of instrumental & expressive ties (three children chosen as your friend) |
| Teacher semi-structured interview<br>(n = 9) | Classroom organisational practices<br>Ability group practices<br>Child culture and peer dynamics<br>Self-image and self-perception<br>Teacher interaction and bonding to school<br>Attitude to intelligence<br>Pedagogy |
| Principal semi-structured interview<br>(n = 3) | Classroom organisational practices<br>Ability group practices<br>Pedagogy<br>Policy and external influences |

### 2.2.3. The Ability Grouping Study Sample

#### National Survey Sample

A total of 14,301 pupils were being taught by the 685 respondents. The majority of teachers (68.7%) were working in co-educational schools, 15.3% were working in all boys' schools and 16% in all girls' schools. The majority of schools in the sample were vertical (ages 5–12 years), 10.4% were infant/junior (ages 5–8 years) schools, and 19.1% were senior schools (ages 9–12 years). Finally, 30.6% of teachers were working in mixed aged classrooms (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Overview of school contexts.

| Category | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| **Gender Intake** | | |
| All girls | 109 | 16 |
| All boys | 104 | 15.3 |
| Co-educational | 467 | 68.7 |
| **Grade Level** | | |
| 1st | 123 | 18 |
| 2nd | 126 | 18.4 |
| 5th | 98 | 14.3 |
| 6th | 127 | 18.6 |
| Multigrade Junior | 78 | 11.4 |
| Multigrade Senior | 131 | 19.2 |
| **School Type** | | |
| Infant (Inf-1st) | 10 | 1.5 |
| Junior (Inf-2nd) | 61 | 8.9 |
| Senior (2nd/3rd–6th) | 131 | 19.1 |
| Vertical (Inf-6th) | 480 | 70.4 |

In the sample, 15.7% of respondents were male and 84.3% female, reflecting the proportion of male/female teachers (13.1%/86.9%) currently working within the profession in Ireland. Analysis revealed a younger, less experienced cohort of teachers who had not engaged in additional professional development (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Overview of teacher characteristics.

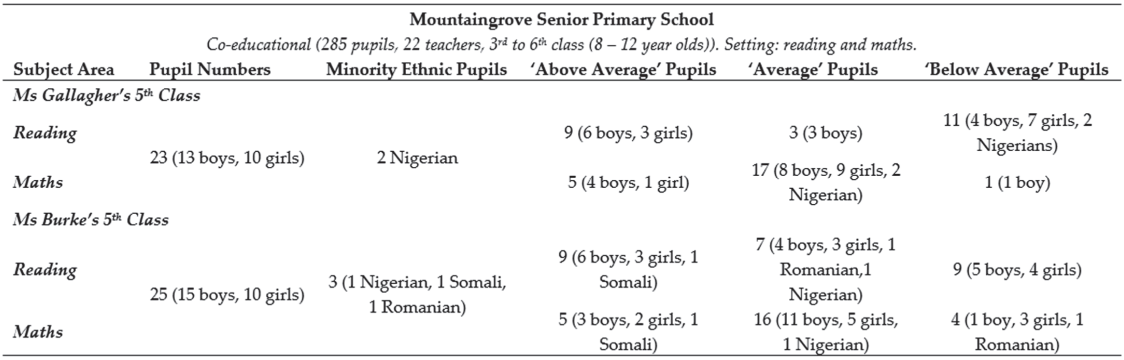
| Category | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| **Teacher Age** | | |
| 20–25 years | 137 | 20.1 |
| 26–30 years | 221 | 32.4 |
| 31–40 years | 136 | 19.9 |
| 41–55 years | 150 | 22 |
| 56+ years | 38 | 5.6 |
| **Length Teaching Experience** | | |
| Up to 5 years | 272 | 40.7 |
| 6–15 years | 202 | 30.2 |
| 16–30 years | 136 | 20.3 |
| 31+ years | 59 | 8.8 |
| **Additional Professional Development** | | |
| Yes | 231 | 33.5 |
| No | 451 | 66.5 |

Other contextual factors included class size (average 21 pupils), number of minority ethnic/migrant pupils (average 3 pupils), and prevalence of children with additional learner needs (average 2 pupils). A typical class consisted of 4 pupils classified as "high" ability, 10 as "mid" ability, and 7 as "low" ability. Such classifications were also informed by the ethnicity of the children with clear attributions of ability as high/low depending on the ethnic background of the pupil. Irish Traveller children and those from Romania, Slovakia, Brazil, and the Czech Republic were more likely to be identified as low ability, Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, and Nigerian children as average ability, and Filipino, Indian, Russian, and Chinese pupils as high ability.

### Case Study Sample

In the case study sample, 58.1% of children were male, the majority were in 5th class, aged 10–11 years (69.9%), and of majority ethnic (75.3%) background. Of those who were of minority ethnic groups, 12.9% of children identified African, 8.6% Eastern European, and 3.2% Traveller.

Group assignment patterns in Mountaingrove indicated gendered and ethnic patterns across groups (Figure 2). Boys and majority ethnic children were more likely assigned as higher ability, while girls and minority ethic children were more likely to be in a mid/low ability group.



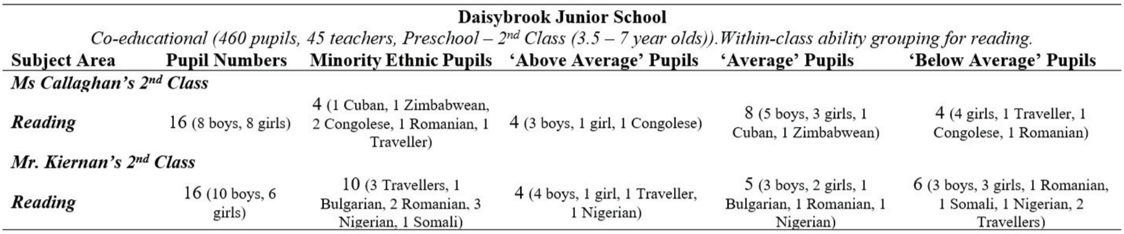
**Mountaingrove Senior Primary School**

*Co-educational (285 pupils, 22 teachers, 3rd to 6th class (8 – 12 year olds)). Setting: reading and maths.*

| Subject Area | Pupil Numbers | Minority Ethnic Pupils | 'Above Average' Pupils | 'Average' Pupils | 'Below Average' Pupils |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Ms Gallagher's 5th Class*** | | | | | |
| ***Reading*** | 23 (13 boys, 10 girls) | 2 Nigerian | 9 (6 boys, 3 girls) | 3 (3 boys) | 11 (4 boys, 7 girls, 2 Nigerians) |
| ***Maths*** | | | 5 (4 boys, 1 girl) | 17 (8 boys, 9 girls, 2 Nigerian) | 1 (1 boy) |
| ***Ms Burke's 5th Class*** | | | | | |
| ***Reading*** | 25 (15 boys, 10 girls) | 3 (1 Nigerian, 1 Somali, 1 Romanian) | 9 (6 boys, 3 girls, 1 Somali) | 7 (4 boys, 3 girls, 1 Romanian,1 Nigerian) | 9 (5 boys, 4 girls) |
| ***Maths*** | | | 5 (3 boys, 2 girls, 1 Somali) | 16 (11 boys, 5 girls, 1 Nigerian) | 4 (1 boy, 3 girls, 1 Romanian) |

**Figure 2.** Mountaingrove pupil cohort.

This gendered and ethnic pattern was again evident in Daisybrook, with boys and majority ethnic children more likely to be considered high ability while girls and minority ethnic children were assigned to mid and low ability groups (Figure 3).



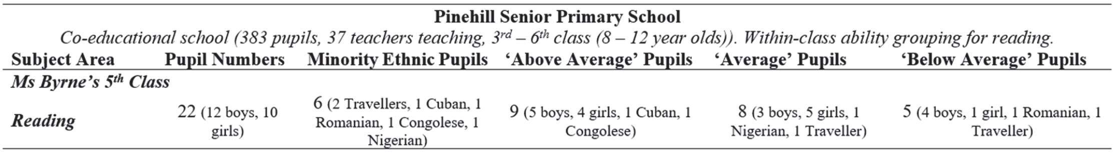
**Daisybrook Junior School**

*Co-educational (460 pupils, 45 teachers, Preschool – 2nd Class (3.5 – 7 year olds)).Within-class ability grouping for reading.*

| Subject Area | Pupil Numbers | Minority Ethnic Pupils | 'Above Average' Pupils | 'Average' Pupils | 'Below Average' Pupils |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Ms Callaghan's 2nd Class*** | | | | | |
| ***Reading*** | 16 (8 boys, 8 girls) | 4 (1 Cuban, 1 Zimbabwean, 2 Congolese, 1 Romanian, 1 Traveller) | 4 (3 boys, 1 girl, 1 Congolese) | 8 (5 boys, 3 girls, 1 Cuban, 1 Zimbabwean) | 4 (4 girls, 1 Traveller, 1 Congolese, 1 Romanian) |
| ***Mr. Kiernan's 2nd Class*** | | | | | |
| ***Reading*** | 16 (10 boys, 6 girls) | 10 (3 Travellers, 1 Bulgarian, 2 Romanian, 3 Nigerian, 1 Somali) | 4 (4 boys, 1 girl, 1 Traveller, 1 Nigerian) | 5 (3 boys, 2 girls, 1 Bulgarian, 1 Romanian, 1 Nigerian) | 6 (3 boys, 3 girls, 1 Romanian, 1 Somali, 1 Nigerian, 2 Travellers) |

**Figure 3.** Daisybrook pupil cohort.

The pattern varied in Pinehill where boys were more likely assigned to both the high and low ability group (Figure 4). Minority ethic children were distributed evenly across all ability levels.



**Pinehill Senior Primary School**

*Co-educational school (383 pupils, 37 teachers teaching, 3rd – 6th class (8 – 12 year olds)). Within-class ability grouping for reading.*

| Subject Area | Pupil Numbers | Minority Ethnic Pupils | 'Above Average' Pupils | 'Average' Pupils | 'Below Average' Pupils |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Ms Byrne's 5th Class*** | | | | | |
| ***Reading*** | 22 (12 boys, 10 girls) | 6 (2 Travellers, 1 Cuban, 1 Romanian, 1 Congolese, 1 Nigerian) | 9 (5 boys, 4 girls, 1 Cuban, 1 Congolese) | 8 (3 boys, 5 girls, 1 Nigerian, 1 Traveller) | 5 (4 boys, 1 girl, 1 Romanian, 1 Traveller) |

**Figure 4.** Pinehill pupil cohort.

Of particular note for this paper is the overall distribution of minority ethnic children across ability group levels. While Eastern European and Traveller children tended to be assigned to lower ability groups, majority ethnic children were more likely assigned to high ability groups. Ability grouping structures the social space of the classroom as a segregated space, not only in terms of "ability" but also in terms of ethnicity (Table 6) [40] (p. 4). Such identified groupings are not generalisable as they are limited by small numbers and parameters of the qualitative case study.

**Table 6.** Ethnic patterns of group level assignment.

| Ethnic Identity | N | % of Total | Above Average | Average | Below Average |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Majority Ethnic | 75 | 73.5 | 38.7 | 29.3 | 30.7 |
| Irish Traveller | 6 | 5.9 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 66.6 |
| African | 13 | 12.7 | 30.8 | 30.8 | 38.4 |
| Eastern European | 6 | 5.9 | 0 | 50 | 50 |
| Cuban | 2 | 2 | 50 | 50 | 0 |

#### 2.2.4. Analysis

Data from the teacher questionnaire (n = 685) and child questionnaire (n = 93) were inputted into SPSS Statistics 22.0 and analysed using descriptive and correlational procedures. Thematic analysis (TA) was employed when analysing interviews with children (n = 89), teachers (n = 9), and principals (n = 3) using MAXQDA 12. Initial codes were identified across the data and, through an iterative process, collapsed into broader themes. Network analysis (n = 100) was conducted using Walsh's Classroom Sociometrics 1.0, with a particular focus on centrality (number of realised/identified ties with others in the class) and reciprocity of nominations between peers.

Cross-cutting themes from the Polish ethnographic and ability grouping studies will be presented under the following headings:

1. Pedagogy and peers—Meaning making and re/negotiating identities in school, and
2. The psychosocial impact of working to belong.

## 3. Results

### *3.1. Pedagogy and Peers—Meaning Making and Re/Negotiating Identities in School*

Pedagogy emerged as a strong cross-cutting theme influencing and shaping how minority ethnic children experienced learning in class. Findings from the ability grouping study indicated that teachers were more likely to use ability grouping as pedagogical practice if minority ethnic/migrant children were present [37]. It is also notable that children from minority groups (Travellers/Eastern European) were more likely to be assigned to the lower ability level (Table 6). The positioning of migrant children as learners was further evident in the Polish ethnographic study.

Wiktoria (12) was a year older than her schoolmates when starting school (aged 8/9) and, as such, it was suggested to assign her to a younger class group as she would feel better with younger classmates. She was also assigned to a low ability group as she was perceived as struggling with English. Wiktoria's mother rationalised this decision:

"We decided, I mean there was such a suggestion from a teacher here in Ireland, that both of our children should be moved one year back so that they have a chance to learn the language. But all in all it was just Wiktoria who was moved back."

Differentiated pedagogical practices emerged in both studies with lower ability groups or when supporting minority language children. In the ability grouping study, teachers reported differentiated practices with children assigned to lower ability groups including lower expectations, less freedom for independent learning and increased reporting of behavioural management issues [37]. Teachers employed stringent differentiated and structured pedagogical approaches when working with the lower ability groups [37]. Such overt interactions between/within ability groups contribute children's embodiment of identity as learners and social actors within the classroom.

This was evident in the Polish ethnographic study where Wiktoria believed revealing her Polish identity aligned with different treatment:

> *"When you say you are Polish they just treat you differently, they talk to you less and they talk slowly so as you could understand" and she did not want to be treated that way, "I do not need this!"* (Wiktoria)

The "fixity" of learner identity had particular implications for minority ethnic children. A follow-up visit to the 2nd class/grade children when they were in 6th class identified the majority of children had remained in the ability group assigned to them four years previously (Table 7) [7] (p.11). Majority ethnic children benefitted from upward movement while minority ethnic children were more likely to experience downward movement.

**Table 7.** Patterns of movement between ability groups.

| **Ms Callaghan's and Mr Kiernan's Second Class** | | | **Reading Group Level** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Child's Name*** | ***Gender*** | ***Ethnicity*** | ***Second Class*** | ***Sixth Class*** |
| *Upward movement* | | | | |
| Shannon | Girl | Majority Ethnic | Average | High |
| Sophia | Girl | Majority Ethnic | High Average | High |
| Pól | Boy | Majority Ethnic | Average | High |
| *Same level* | | | | |
| Keane | Boy | Majority Ethnic | High | High |
| Odhrán | Boy | Majority Ethnic | High | High |
| Jamie | Boy | Majority Ethnic | High | High |
| Rose | Girl | Congolese | High | High |
| Gabriella | Girl | Majority Ethnic | High average | High average |
| Sally | Girl | Traveller | Below average | Below average |
| JoJo | Girl | Majority Ethnic | Below average | Reading unit |
| *Downward Movement* | | | | |
| James | Boy | Majority Ethnic | Average | Low average |
| Eric | Boy | Russian | High average | Low |
| Ryan | Boy | Majority Ethnic | Average | Low average |
| George | Boy | Majority Ethnic | Average | Low average |
| Tommy | Boy | Traveller | High | Low |
| Jeff | Boy | Majority Ethnic | High | Average |
| Princess | Girl | Nigerian | High | Average |
| Berry | Girl | Majority Ethnic | Average | Low |

This "fixity" in ability grouping assignment/learner identity was also evident in the Polish ethnographic study whereby Wiktoria remained in the low ability group for the duration of primary school.

Ability grouping, as a structured space, defined boundaries of social interaction between children contributing to meaning-making between peers within children's social worlds. Network analysis of patterns of interaction between children identified clear boundaries in inclusion/exclusion within peer networks, with particular implications for minority ethnic children [40]. Children assigned to higher ability groups and identified as majority ethnic were most likely chosen as a source of help (Table 8). In contrast, those assigned to lower ability groups, girls, and minority ethnic children (especially Traveller girls) were at the periphery as a valued peer in helping others [40] (p. 7).

**Table 8.** Patterns of exclusion and popularity—peer tutoring (n = 100).

| | | *Excluded* | | *Popular* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **n** | % | **n** | % |
| **Gender** | Boys | 14 | 25.5 | 7 | 12.7 |
| | Girls | 8 | 17.8 | 5 | 11.1 |
| **Ability** | High | 3 | 8.6 | 9 | 25.7 |
| | Mid | 3 | 11.1 | 2 | 7.4 |
| | Low | 16 | 43.5 | 1 | 2.9 |
| **Ethnicity** | Majority Ethnic | 17 | 22.4 | 9 | 11.8 |
| | Minority Ethnic | 5 | 20.8 | 3 | 12.5 |
| | Traveller | 3 | 50 | 0 | 0 |

A similar pattern was evident when the children were asked to identify those they would choose to sit beside. Again, minority ethnic children were more likely to be excluded from peers (Table 9) [40] (p. 7).

**Table 9.** Patterns of exclusion and popularity—seating partner (n = 100).

| | | *Excluded* | | *Popular* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **n** | % | **n** | % |
| **Gender** | Boys | 6 | 10.9 | 9 | 16.4 |
| | Girls | 5 | 11.1 | 7 | 15.6 |
| **Ability** | High | 3 | 8.6 | 8 | 22.9 |
| | Mid | 3 | 11.1 | 3 | 11.1 |
| | Low | 5 | 14.3 | 5 | 14.3 |
| **Ethnicity** | Majority Ethnic | 8 | 10.5 | 13 | 17.1 |
| | Minority Ethnic | 2 | 11.1 | 3 | 12.5 |
| | Traveller | 1 | 16.7 | 0 | 0 |

Friendships were especially important to children as "if you didn't have friends you would feel lonely" (Joey-HA-Pinehill). Analysis of sociometric data identified clear friendship patterns within/across ability group levels [40]. Most notable was the positioning of majority ethnic children as higher status and those from minority ethnic backgrounds (especially Traveller girls) more likely to experience exclusion (Table 10) [40] (p. 8).

**Table 10.** Patterns of exclusion and popularity—friendship (n = 100).

| | | *Excluded* | | *Popular* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **n** | % | **n** | % |
| **Gender** | Boys | 10 | 18.2 | 10 | 18.2 |
| | Girls | 7 | 15.6 | 4 | 8.9 |
| **Ability** | High | 6 | 17.1 | 8 | 22.9 |
| | Mid | 1 | 3.7 | 4 | 14.8 |
| | Low | 10 | 27 | 2 | 5.4 |
| **Ethnicity** | Majority Ethnic | 11 | 14.5 | 13 | 17.1 |
| | Minority Ethnic | 3 | 16.7 | 1 | 4.2 |
| | Traveller | 3 | 50 | 0 | 0 |

These status differences were depicted in the Polish ethnographic study as children invested in re/constructing their bicultural identities to fit in with majority peers. Kasia and Marcin resisted being positioned as "other" by affiliating strongly with Irish socio-cultural norms and seeking membership of Irish peer communities, while also distancing themselves from Eastern European peers. One teacher commented:

> *"It's funny as well that like in the second year groups those people arriving . . . those people who are from Eastern Europe the first year very much group together even though they are not from the same country [ . . . ] while Kasia would very much not at all—and she would be the opposite also."*

Marcin and Kasia's full participation in Irish children's social practices and adherence to majority language and cultural norms/values granted them membership to majority peer groups. They resisted "otherness" by assuming the identity of "insiders within majority", complying with primary discourses in Irish society.

Kasia, for instance, did not share her cultural identity unless asked. Debbie (Kasia's English teacher) stated "you would not know where she was from unless you would have asked her". Kasia never volunteered to share her cultural identity, frequently rejecting her Polish origin "not to draw attention" (extracted from fieldnotes). Kasia adopted several strategies to deconstruct her immigrant identity to gain access/actively participate in majority peer groups. Many involved rejecting her minority identity including negative stance-taking toward "Polishness", performing social acts (choosing English native speaker accent), diminishing her cultural heritage, favouring English over Polish, affiliating strongly with Irish peers, and avoiding contact with Eastern European schoolmates.

Marcin also de/constructed his identity as "insider" and "other". He used several strategies to achieve this goal, e.g., displayed strong allegiances with Irish ethnic identity; identified himself with a native speaking peer group; exerted conscious efforts to be mis/recognised as a native speaker; and positioned himself as a popular /good student. Marcin overtly participated with peers outside school, building strong ties with them.

Evident from the children's narratives in the two studies was the psychosocial impact of working to belong while engaging in the re/negotiation of their identities as valued peers within the classroom.

### *3.2. The Psychosocial Impact of Working to Belong*

Striking from both studies was children's engagement in the emotional labour of working to belong. What emerged was a psychosocial response to how children perceived themselves and others and how this shaped their experience of teasing, especially racism, in school.

Pedagogy (ability grouping) attributed status/value to social and academic structures in classrooms. Spaces occupied by high ability groups were defined as "smart", "good", "advanced", and "liked". In contrast, low ability spaces were considered "bad", "poor", "dumb", and "not liked". The dichotomous values attributed to these structured spaces as "good" (high ability) or "bad" (low ability) are also attributed to the children assigned to each one. Children negotiated learner identities defined by these structured spaces in terms of how they see themselves and how they think others see them as learners [7]. Children clearly communicated the spectrum against which they were measured as value(able) learners/peers (Table 11).

**Table 11.** Learner identities—positioning self and others.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ***The group to which I am assigned*** | | |
| **High** | **Mid** | **Low** |
| Boys | Girls | Eastern European |
| African | Mid and Low Ability | |
| High Ability | | |
| ***How I see myself*** | | |
| **High** | **Mid** | **Low** |
| Boys | Majority ethnic | Boys |
| Traveller | African | Mid and Low Ability |
| High Ability | Eastern European | |
| Younger Children | Girls | |
| ***How others see me*** | | |
| **High** | **Mid** | **Low** |
| Boys | Boys | Girls |
| Traveller | Majority Ethnic | Eastern European |
| African | Mid Ability | Low Ability |
| High Ability | | |
| Younger children | | |
| ***How teacher sees me*** | | |
| **High** | **Mid** | **Low** |
| Boys | Majority Ethnic | Girls |
| Traveller | Eastern European | Mid Ability |
| African | Mid and Low Ability | |
| High Ability | | |
| Younger Children | | |

The emotional labour of fitting into ability-defined structured spaces had particular implications for children assigned to lower ability groups (including minority ethnic pupils) who reported ability-related teasing "because when you are in the lowest everyone slags you" evoking a strong psychosocial response whereby "you just feel bad and all" (Edel-L/A-Mountaingrove).

The children embodied these feelings of shame as inferiority, "if you are in the lowest (group) they treat you like a low person" (Sebastian-H/A-Mountaingrove). The psychosocial spectrum ranged from "upset" and "shame" for children assigned to lower ability groups and feeling "proud", "happy", and "good" when identified as higher ability.

> *" ... that would probably make you feel ashamed that you are not in the higher group and especially if you were in the special group you would be 'why am I not in there? I know how to read!'"* (Robbie-M/A-Pinehill).

The psychosocial impact of being considered as low ability was expressed as "it would make someone else feel bad ... if you start going in, 'oh, we are in the highest group' it might make someone feel bad and they might get upset" (Joey-H/A- Pinehill). The powerful impact of the psychosocial was identified by Kyle(H/A-Pinehill) who voiced that such feelings could "get their confidence down and saying 'oh I am not a good reader'". The children reported a deeply psychosocial response to experiencing teasing, reporting feelings of shame, anger, and "it makes me feel sad and it makes me feel like I don't want to come to school" (Joyce-LA-Mountaingrove). Teasing was perceived to shape future aspirations for lower ability groups as "they could grow up thinking 'I am never going to amount to anything'" (Tom-M/A-Pinehill).

Perhaps most profound of all is the psychosocial dynamics impacting children as they negotiate their social worlds. As discussed earlier, pedagogy (ability grouping) directly impacts and shapes the nature of children's peer interactions, contributing to the emotional labour of working to belong. Such psychosocial responses were stark in how minority ethnic children across the ability group levels experienced patterns of exclusion from the majority. Wiktoria worked to be part of majority peer groups while also re/negotiating her position within two discourses (newly observed cultural norms and her moral standards). As a result, she was often withdrawn from social interaction, positioning herself outside dominating discourses underpinned by school norms/values drawing on her moral codes to justify her exclusion.

Wiktoria positioned Irish peers as "liars" or "just children". She adopted a negative, recurrent, and affective moral as "outsider", "other", and "novice". She consciously decided to remain outside of majority peer groups, rejecting dominant discourses that positioned her as "other" or "novice". Her small stories were heavily laden with disappointment and grief as earlier attempts to be included in peer groups were rejected. Wiktoria found it difficult to participate in peer discourses and, as such, felt excluded from their community. She deeply embodied these exclusionary experiences as fear, rejection, and worry.

Teasing emerged as a cross-cutting theme between the two studies. Teasing was of concern to the majority of children in the ability grouping study, particularly girls, older pupils, those assigned lower ability, and minority ethic children. Teasing was also reported in the Polish ethnographic study and was pertinent for Janek, with accent signifying difference from peers. Janek was the eldest participant and explicitly identified himself as "strange" or "other". He found pronunciation of short/long vowels challenging meaning "they tease me so when I say this word 'sheet'"; "they want to hear this [shit] word". Janek actively worked to disassociate himself from majority peers, deliberately avoiding adopting a similar accent and actively resisting "otherness". He positioned himself outside of their discourses, expressing having different interests, considering himself to be smarter (he was assigned to lower ability group), being bilingual/biliterate and proud of his Polish background. He was the only participant who openly used Polish with the researcher in front of his majority classmates. His agency was also manifested through "a lack of participation in the celebration of Irish holidays", "not writing enough for his English assignments", or by demonstrating a lack of interest in Irish socio-historical norms and traditions. Janek intentionally avoided celebrating St Patrick's Day and successfully rejected all aspects of Irishness infiltrating his life.

Most profound findings from the ability grouping study was that minority ethnic (Eastern European/African) children were significantly more likely to experience teasing ($p < 0.05$). The children reported racism as a form of teasing, further compounding exclusion/otherness from peers (Table 12).

**Table 12.** Minority ethnic children's experience of racist teasing in school.

| Racist Name Calling | Children's Quotes |
|---|---|
| 'their colour'<br>'a different colour'<br>Nigger<br>Black<br>Knacker<br>Brownie<br>Black Monkey<br>Black fat bitch<br>King Kong<br>Paki | "People that are black as well, they call them niggers and stuff" (Rachel-Mountaingrove-White-Irish).<br>"And like do you know different people, they are not from our country and some people slag them" (Paddy-Mountaingrove-White-Irish).<br>"Yes mainly 'cos of my colour or over something very stupid that doesn't even make sense. Like we're just friends and then they just slag you" (Tanisha-Pinehill-African). |

Rose (African-Daisybrook) spoke about being called "black" and that she "didn't like that". Such racist experiences evoked feelings of "sadness" (Jacob-Eastern European-Daisybrook) and anger ("wanting to punch them") (Ben-African-Daisybrook). Minority ethnic children reported that telling the teacher did not result in any affirmative action, to the point where they did not bother to report racism when it occurred "because they don't do anything" (Ben-African-Daisybrook).

This experience was echoed by Norma (African-Pinehill) who indicated that “I don’t bother anymore” as “she (the teacher) will just say, ’I will talk to him,’ but she doesn’t do nothing”. This lack of response from the teacher resulted in despondency and feeling “sad and angry” whereby “sometimes I just sit there and I say to myself, I hate this girl, I just want to get out of here” (Norma-African-Pinehill). Norma’s experience of othering was frustrating and her desire to “be like everyone else” was clear as she believed “I deserve better than this and you just want to leave and get away from it all”. Most concerning was her belief that “it is getting worse” as she is getting older as the perpetrators “know already what hurts you” which makes “themselves feel good after making you feel bad” (Norma-African-Pinehill). She was especially aware of profound consequences of racism sharing a story of a “boy in America, he was bullied a lot and one day his mum was calling him for dinner and when she went up to his room he hanged himself, and he got bullied and the teachers never did anything”.

Evident from the ability grouping and Polish ethnographic studies was the complex intersection of ethnicity, social, and academic position/value among peers informed and shaped by pedagogical practices (ability grouping) evoking a deeply embodied psychosocial response from children, particularly those from minority ethnic backgrounds.

## 4. Discussion

The intensification of migration across the OECD and into Ireland is increasingly represented in diversifying societal and school populations [3,4]. While research has highlighted the challenges migrant and minority ethnic children face when assimilating into a different school environment bound by cultural norms and protocols [5,6], little is known about how such experiences are embodied within the psychosocial, as these children engage in deeply emotional labour to belong in school. Children’s rights provide transformative possibilities for ensuring all children (including those most marginalized) are afforded agency and fully included within an education system which teaches about/through/for rights [46]. This paper problematises minority ethnic children’s experiences of “doing” and “feeling” learning challenging hegemonic discourse by applying a children’s rights lens to interrogate whether education systems are working in their best interests, affording them equal opportunities to learn, belong, and express their ethnic identity.

Echoing previous research [24–26], it is clear from the data that minority ethnic children work extremely hard to belong in school. The Polish ethnographic study highlighted the complex interplay between accepting/rejecting cultural/ethnic identity in order to belong among majority peers. The cost on the children’s heritage identities was evident. For one child, rejecting majority peer norms/values came at the cost of exclusion and being perceived as “other”/”strange”, resulting in teasing for sounding different. The other children, however, embraced majority ethnic discourses, at a cost to their heritage identities which they worked hard to overtly/covertly reject. The benefit of investing in cultural rejection was acceptance into peer groups for one child, while the other two children experienced rejection and exclusion, failing to affiliate with their peers. The emotional labour of belonging came at great cost to the psychosocial wellbeing of minority ethnic children, as well as to their ethnic identities which were, at times, perceived as burdensome to acceptance amongst their majority peers.

Pedagogy plays an integral role in shaping children’s experiences in spaces within/between classrooms. This is evident in the pedagogic device [33] where teachers as specialised agents [34] overtly adopt an approach which “funnels and filters” [37] children into groups based on perceived ability shaping how children experience learning and interactions (with peers and teachers) and re/negotiate their academic and social identities. Such practices profoundly impact minority ethnic children who were more likely assigned to lower ability groups and less likely to experience upward movement as they progressed through school. The peripheralization of minority ethnic children was further compounded by interaction patterns between/within classes. Minority ethnic children (particularly Traveller girls) were most likely to be excluded from peer interactions. While patterns of inter-ethic interactions are concerning, it is vital to consider the power of the pedagogic device in defining/compounding how children see themselves and others as valued social and academic members within the school community. It is imperative to question whether pedagogical practices (such as ability grouping) are working in the best interests of minority ethnic children and affording them equal opportunities to learn and to their ethnic identities. Evidence from this paper builds on previous research [30,31] highlighting the labour associated with working to belong at cost to heritage identity and/or exclusion from peers.

Most striking was the emotional labour associated with working to belong. Minority ethnic children defined how they saw themselves and others through the structured spaces of ability grouping, evoking an embodied psychosocial response which included "pride" and "happiness" associated with high ability and "shame" and "upset" when being considered low ability. Minority ethnic children's response to exclusion from peer groups was profound, embodied as "grief" and "fear". Perhaps one of the most profound findings was the significant level at which minority ethnic children were experiencing teasing. Given the increased reporting of racism in Ireland more generally [8], findings capturing children's experiences of racist teasing are concerning. Such experiences further compounded children's exclusion from peers evoking a deeply embodied psychosocial response characterised by anger, frustration, fear, and sadness. The implications for considering how children "feel" such experiences in school are profound and warrant immediate and swift attention. The paucity of updated policy informing intercultural practice and addressing racism in schools is especially stark and is, without doubt, a failure of the state to ensure children from minority ethnic backgrounds have their best interests and right to ethnic identity realised.

## 5. Conclusions

Changing patterns in migration across the globe due to economic, educational, familial, or humanitarian factors means that the presence of transnational families will continue to ebb and flow through our societies and school systems. We are duty-bound to ensure minority ethnic children have a right to an education which prepares them "for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin" (Article 29 (1), UNCRC, 1989). It is incumbent upon states to ensure that children of a minority ethnic background have a right to their identity, a right to belong, and a right to equal opportunities to engage in a system that works in their best interests. Findings presented in this paper would suggest the contrary. In a globalised world where people have the right and freedoms to move to/between countries, there is a moral and ethical imperative for our institutions within our societies to ensure all children of all ethnic backgrounds are cared for in an equitable and fair manner.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, D.M. and M.M.-K.; methodology, D.M. and M.M.-K.; software, D.M. and M.M.-K.; validation, D.M. and M.M.-K.; formal analysis, D.M. and M.M.-K.; investigation, D.M. and M.M.-K.; resources, D.M. and M.M.-K.; data curation, D.M. and M.M.-K.; writing—original draft preparation, D.M. and M.M.-K.; writing—review and editing, D.M. and M.M.-K.; visualization, D.M. and M.M.-K.; project administration, D.M. and M.M.-K.; funding acquisition, D.M. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** The ability grouping study was funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affaires, Ireland. The Polish ethnographic study received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The ability grouping study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of University College Dublin (HS-08-52). The Polish ethnographic study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of Trinity College Dublin.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data sharing not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

1. IOM. *International Migration Law N°34—Glossary on Migration*; IOM: Geneva, Switzerland, 2019.
2. Rendall, M.; Salt, J. The foreign-born population. In *Focus on People and Migration*; Palgrave Macmillan: London, UK, 2005; pp. 131–151. Available online: https://data.oecd.org/migration/foreign-born-population.htm (accessed on 30 May 2021).
3. OECD. *International Migration Outlook 2020*; OECD Publishing: Paris, France, 2020. Available online: https://www.oecd.org/migration/international-migration-outlook-1999124x.htm (accessed on 30 May 2021).
4. Kitching, K. *Childhood, Religion and School Injustice*; Cork University Press: Cork, Ireland, 2020.
5. Faas, D.; Foster, N.; Smith, A. Accommodating religious diversity in denominational and multi-belief settings: A cross-sectoral study of the role of ethos and leadership in Irish primary schools. *Educ. Rev.* **2020**, *72*, 601–616. [CrossRef]
6. Machowska-Kosciak, M. *The Multilingual Adolescent Experience: Small Stories of Integration and Socialization by Polish Families in Ireland*; Multilingual Matters: Clevedon, UK, 2020. Available online: https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.21832/9781788927680/html (accessed on 30 May 2021).
7. McGillicuddy, D.; Devine, D. 'You feel ashamed that you are not in the higher group'—Children's psychosocial response to ability grouping in primary school. *Br. Educ. Res. J.* **2020**, *46*, 553–573. [CrossRef]
8. Michael, L. *Reports of Racism in Ireland*; INAR: Dublin, Ireland, 2020.
9. Devine, D.; McGillicuddy, D. Positioning pedagogy-a matter of children's rights. *Oxf. Rev. Educ.* **2016**, *42*, 424–443. [CrossRef]
10. Lundy, L. A Lexicon for Research on International Children's Rights in Troubled Times. *Int. J. Child. Rights* **2019**, *27*, 595–601. [CrossRef]
11. Shier, H. Towards a new improved pedagogy of "children's rights and responsibilities". *Int. J. Child. Rights* **2018**, *26*, 761–780. [CrossRef]
12. Lundy, L.; Cook-Sather, A. Children's Rights and Student Voice: Their Intersections and the Implications Forcurriculum and Pedagogy. In *The Sage Handbook of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment*; Wyse, D., Hayward, L., Pandya, J., Eds.; SAGE Publication Ltd.: Uttarakhand, India, 2016.
13. Osler, A.; Solhaug, T. Children's human rights and diversity in schools: Framing and measuring. *Res. Comp. Int. Educ.* **2018**, *13*, 276–298. [CrossRef]
14. Rau, C.; Ritchie, J. Ahakoa he iti: Early Childhood Pedagogies Affirming of Māori Children's Rights to Their Culture. *Early Educ. Dev.* **2011**, *22*, 795–817. [CrossRef]
15. McCluskey, G.; Riddell, S.; Weedon, E. Children's rights, school exclusion and alternative educational provision. *Int. J. Incl. Educ.* **2015**, *19*, 595–607. [CrossRef]
16. Quennerstedt, A. Children's Human Rights at School—As Formulated by Children. *Int. J. Child. Rights* **2016**, *24*, 657–677. [CrossRef]
17. Banks, J.A. Diversity, group identity, and citizenship education in a global age. *Educ. Res.* **2008**, *37*, 129–139. [CrossRef]
18. Reay, D.; Crozier, G.; James, D. *White Middle-Class Identities and Urban Schooling*; Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, UK; New York, NY, USA, 2011.
19. Pavlenko, A.; Blackledge, A. *Introduction: New Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts*; Pavlenko, A., Blackledge, A., Eds.; Multilingual Matters: Bristol, UK, 2018; pp. 1–33. [CrossRef]
20. Little, D.; Dam, L.; Legenhausen, L. *Language Learner Autonomy: Theory. Practice and Research*; Multilingual Matters: Bristol, UK, 2017.
21. Hall, S. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*; SAGE in association with The Open University: London, UK, 1997; Volume 2.
22. Hall, S. The West and the rest: Discourse and power. In *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*; Hall, S., Held, D., Hubert, D., Thompson, K., Eds.; Blackwell Publishing: Hoboken, NJ, USA, 1996. Available online: https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Modernity%3A+An+Introduction+to+Modern+Societies-p-9781557867162 (accessed on 30 May 2021).
23. McIntosh, P. Reflections and Future Directions for Privilege Studies. *J. Soc. Issues* **2012**, *68*, 194–206. [CrossRef]
24. Rutland, A.; Cameron, L.; Jugert, P.; Nigbur, D.; Brown, R.; Watters, C.; Hossain, R.; Landau, A.; Le Touze, D. Group identity and peer relations: A longitudinal study of group identity, perceived peer acceptance, and friendships amongst ethnic minority English children. *Br. J. Dev. Psychol.* **2012**, *30*, 283–302. [CrossRef]
25. Kawabata, Y.; Crick, N.R. Direct and Interactive Links Between Cross-Ethnic Friendships and Peer Rejection, Internalizing Symptoms, and Academic Engagement Among Ethnically Diverse Children. *Cult. Divers. Ethn. Minority Psychol.* **2015**, *21*, 191–200. [CrossRef]
26. Tropp, L.R.; O'Brien, T.C.; Migacheva, K. How Peer Norms of Inclusion and Exclusion Predict Children's Interest in Cross-Ethnic Friendships. *J. Soc. Issues* **2014**, *70*, 151–166. [CrossRef]
27. Darmody, M.; McGinnity, F.; Kingston, G. The experiences of migrant children in Ireland. In *The Experiences of Migrant Children in Ireland*; Williams, J., Nixon, E., Smyth, E., Watson, D., Eds.; Oak Tree Press: Cork, Ireland, 2016.
28. Boas, F. *Anthropology and Modern Life*, 1st ed.; Routledge: London, UK, 2021. [CrossRef]
29. Gee, J.P. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*, 4th ed.; Routledge: London, UK, 2012.
30. Gee, J.P. Reading as situated language: A sociocognitive perspective. *J. Adolesc. Adult Lit.* **2001**, *44*, 714–725. [CrossRef]

31. Gunderson, L. Different cultural views of whole language. In *Critiquing Whole Language and Classroom Inquiry*; Boran, S., Comber, B., Eds.; National Council of Teachers of English: Urbana, IL, USA, 2001.
32. Yau, N. Celtic Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Exploring identity among second generation Chinese in Ireland. *Translocations* **2007**, *2*, 48–69.
33. Bernstein, B.B. ProQuest. In *The Structuring of Pedagogic Discourse*, 1st ed.; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2003; Volume 4.
34. Bourdieu, P.; Passeron, J.-C. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*; Sage: London, UK, 1996.
35. Bernstein, B. On the classification and framing of educational knowledge. In *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change*; Richard, B., Ed.; Tavistock: London, UK, 1973.
36. Bourdieu, P. Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change*; Brown, R., Ed.; Tavistock: London, UK, 1973.
37. McGillicuddy, D.; Devine, D. "Turned off" or "ready to fly"—Ability grouping as an act of symbolic violence in primary school. *Teach. Teach. Educ.* **2018**, *70*, 88–99. [CrossRef]
38. Bourdieu, P.; Thompson, J.B. *Language and Symbolic Power*; Polity in Association with Basil Blackwell: Cambridge, UK, 1991.
39. Machowska-Kosciak, M. "He just does not write enough for it"- language and literacy practices among migrant children in Ireland. In *Multilingual Literacy*; Breuer, E.O., Lindgren, E., Stavans, A., Van Steendam, E., Eds.; Multilingual Matters: Bristol, UK, 2021.
40. McGillicuddy, D. "They would make you feel stupid"—Ability grouping, Children's friendships and psychosocial Wellbeing in Irish primary school. *Learn. Instr.* **2021**, *75*, 101492. [CrossRef]
41. Timoštšuk, I.; Ugaste, A. The role of emotions in student teachers' professional identity. *Eur. J. Teach. Educ.* **2012**, *35*, 421–433. [CrossRef]
42. Rubin, B.C. Learner Identity Amid Figured Worlds: Constructing (In)competence at an Urban High School. *Urban Rev.* **2007**, *39*, 217–249. [CrossRef]
43. Hollway, W. (Ed.) *International Journal of Critical Psychology 10: Psycho-Social Research, Editorial. International Journal of Critical Psychology*; Lawrence and Wishart: London, UK, 2004.
44. Enriquez, G. Embodying exclusion: The daily melancholia and performative politics of struggling early adolescent readers. *Engl. Teach. Pract. Crit.* **2011**, *10*, 90–112.
45. Bunnell, T.; Yea, S.; Peake, L.; Skelton, T.; Smith, M. Geographies of friendships. *Prog. Hum. Geogr.* **2012**, *36*, 490–507. [CrossRef]
46. Mallon, B.; Martinez-Sainz, G. Education for children's rights in Ireland before, during and after the pandemic. *Ir. Educ. Stud.* **2021**, *40*, 285–294. [CrossRef]

MDPI
St. Alban-Anlage 66
4052 Basel
Switzerland
Tel. +41 61 683 77 34
Fax +41 61 302 89 18
www.mdpi.com

*Education Sciences* Editorial Office
E-mail: education@mdpi.com
www.mdpi.com/journal/education

MDPI
St. Alban-Anlage 66
4052 Basel
Switzerland

Tel: +41 61 683 77 34
Fax: +41 61 302 89 18

www.mdpi.com

ISBN 978-3-0365-4182-2