Autism-Friendly Schools: Including the Voices of Autistic Students in Primary and Post-Primary Education in Ireland

Summary Report

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Autism-Friendly Schools: Including the Voices of Autistic Students in Education in Ireland

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability or difference which relates to how a person communicates and interacts with others, and how they experience the world around them (AsIAm, 2025). Under Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, autistic[1] children have the right to be fully included in mainstream educational settings, with individualised supports and accommodations in place to maximise their academic and social development at school (United Nations, 2006). Despite this, many autistic children continue to experience exclusion and barriers to inclusive education which can result in lifelong difficulties. Notably, the views and experiences of autistic children and young people are not currently included in the development of educational policy and practices for them.

Inclusion in education refers to the process of identifying and removing barriers to the presence, participation and achievement of all students (Ainscow et al., 2006). This study aimed to undertake the first systematic investigation of the experiences of autistic students in primary and post-primary schools, in both mainstream and special school provision, in Ireland to create new knowledge that would lead to clearly implementable supports for inclusive education policy and practice in Ireland. This study also aimed to examine the wider school community's understanding of autism, and attitudes to inclusion, to provide an evidence base for educational policies and guide inclusive education practices.

Rationale

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Specifically, target 4.5 aims to ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations. This project specifically aligned with SDG 4 by aiming to provide missing data that would identify and address persistent barriers to inclusive education for autistic children and young people in Ireland.

Experiences of education from the perspective of autistic children and young people themselves are a significant gap in the evidence base that informs policy development on inclusive education, and there have been increasing calls for consultation with members of the autistic community on issues of importance to them in research, policy and practice (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Milton et al., 2014). In the context of an international movement towards inclusive education, as enshrined in the Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) and the *'education for all'* movement (within the Education 2030 Framework for Action initiative) (UNESCO, 2015), it is critical that we understand how autistic students view and experience current educational provision, which ranges from mainstream classrooms, special or autism classes in mainstream schools, or special schools.

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1   There are many terms used interchangeably when discussing autism however, we have selected the identity-first term 'autistic' based on reported preferences from autistic adults within the UK (Kenny et al., 2015) and in line with United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006).

Aims and Objectives

International research on the experiences of autistic adolescents in mainstream provision suggests that many students find post-primary mainstream school a demanding social experience and may experience isolation, peer rejection and bullying (Goodall, 2018a; Horgan, Kenny, & Flynn, 2023). However, research on the experiences of younger autistic students in primary school and across educational settings (e.g. special classrooms and special school contexts) is very limited, with the experiences of autistic children who do not communicate through speech particularly under-represented in the literature (Lynam, Sweeney, Keenan, & McNally, 2024). Instead, research has mostly focused on adult-centric reports or by-proxy accounts from parents and teachers or expert knowledge (Goodall, 2018a; 2018b; Sarrett, 2018).

Finally, inclusive education requires whole-school support, including from parents and educators (Roberts & Webster, 2020). To inform the development of principles for inclusive education, it is thus important to know the current level of understanding of autism and the attitudes to inclusive education of the wider school community, including educators and parents.

This study aimed to systematically investigate the experiences of autistic students in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland to identify implementable supports for inclusive educational policy and practice.

The main objectives were:

1. Identify and examine the experiences of autistic students in primary and post-primary schools across a range of contexts (special schools, special classes, and mainstream classes) and levels of need

2. Identify and examine the experiences of parents and guardians of autistic students as they support their child through education

3. Identify and explore the attitudes to inclusive education, and understanding of autism, in the wider school community, including educators and parents.

There were two central research questions to this project:

1. What are the experiences of autistic students in primary schools and post-primary schools in Ireland?

2. How does the wider education community view inclusion of autistic students in education?

Methodology

A pragmatic approach underpinned the selection of methodologies, recognising the importance of open research questions and the use of methodologies that best allow for new, previously under-researched phenomena to be explored (i.e. the school experiences of autistic students). This approach recognises the 'complexity behind the rhetoric of giving voice' (Lewis & Porter, 2004, p. 196) which required careful planning and an openness to revising methodologies to meet the needs of participants.

To answer both central research questions a mixed-methods survey design was used.

The project comprised three main phases of work:

1. A scoping review of the international literature on the perspectives of autistic students in primary and post-primary schooling. This was published in the Sage journal, *Autism and Developmental Language Impairment* (ADLI) in 2024. In our review we found that the perspectives and experiences of autistic children in primary school were under-represented, as were children who did not communicate through speech. Our review also highlighted that masking, bullying, exclusion, and being misunderstood by peers and teachers were persistent barriers to inclusion reported by autistic students in the international literature (Lynam, Sweeney, Keenan, & McNally, 2024).

2. Adapted interviews, using participatory methods such as photovoice[2], with autistic students in primary and post-primary schools (attending mainstream and special school contexts or none) and their parents. This phase involved developing a flexible research protocol and offering a range of options, allowing students to take part in any study component and in a way that worked for them. Interviews took place in-person on the DCU campus or online to facilitate the participation of families in different parts of Ireland and to maximize comfort in the interview process through familiar surroundings at home, as preferred by several children. Pre-interview questionnaires were completed by all parents to share information that would help the research team to support the full participation of autistic students in the adapted interviews (e.g. a child's interests, sensory differences, and communication profile).

3. A survey on attitudes to inclusion and understanding of autism among school staff and parents was conducted in 45 schools. Schools were selected through stratified random sampling to obtain a representative sample of schools (e.g. mainstream/special, DEIS/non-DEIS, urban/rural, large/medium/small, language medium, and ethos). The Participatory Autism Knowledge-Measure (PAK-M; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2022) was used to assess levels of understanding of autism. The PAK-M is a 29-item scale developed in collaboration with autistic university students. The Teachers' Attitudes towards Inclusive Education Scale (TAIS; Saloviita, 2015) was used to measure attitudes towards inclusive education.

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2   Photovoice is a visual research methodology, where participants document, reflect upon, and communicate their experiences using cameras (Goodhart et al., 2006).

Community Involvement Statement

The role of autistic people in conducting, advising and guiding this study was pivotal to its robustness and its overall success. The project was designed and conceptualised by two non-autistic researchers; data collection, analysis and writing at key stages of the research was conducted by a team which included one autistic researcher. The study was also informed at all stages by two advisory groups, including three autistic young people, and autistic researchers and educational specialists.

Participants

Forty-three autistic children and young people took part in this study: 27 in primary-school and 16 in post-primary school.

The youngest child to take part was five years old, and the oldest was 19. There were 32 boys and 19 girls in our study[3]. Most children were educated in a mainstream class (n=35), six in an autism class, two in a special school, and five were at home. Three children were in mixed settings.

Twelve children and one adolescent chose to use photovoice as part of their interview. One child, a ten-year-old boy who was educated in a special school, used Augmentative and Alternative Communication to communicate in an adapted interview.

We also met with 51 parents. Some parents were interviewed alone where their child was too anxious to take part or where a parent felt their child would not be able to take part, even with adaptations.

Forty-five schools took part in our survey of attitudes to inclusive education and understanding of autism, with 661 school staff and parents completing the survey.

Reporting of Findings

We report on key findings from the interviews with autistic children, young people and their parents. Sample quotes are used to illustrate themes, but these are not exhaustive accounts of participants' contributions. A series of peer-reviewed publications (in preparation) will explore these themes further and these will be available to read at dcu.ie/autismfriendlyschools

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3   The experiences of eight students were captured through interview with their parent(s). This occurred when a student was too anxious to take part in interview but wanted their views shared, or if a parent felt their child was unable to take part, even with adaptations to the interview.

Key Findings

Autistic Children's Views and Experiences of Primary School:

> **"I don't like school but again I still kind of like school at the same time but I've ideas to make school better for everyone."**
>
> *7-year old male student in a mainstream class*

1. The **role of the teacher** was pivotal in autistic students' experiences in primary school in the following ways: the teacher's affect (e.g. tone of voice) and demeanour, the teacher's attentiveness and proactiveness in providing supports, the child's relationship with the teacher as 'make or break', and the extent to which teachers communicated with parents, especially where children were minimally-or non-speaking.

    a. **Kindness** was a key positive attribute of teachers in this study. Teachers described as strict were perceived negatively: *"Being strict is not going to help the child"* (12-year-old male student in an autism class)

    b. Children's **relationships with their teachers were "make-or-break"**. That is, the relationship was so pivotal to children that there were seldom any neutral feelings towards teachers.

    c. The **provision of authentically individualised supports and accommodations and 'micro-accommodations'** with a mix of both formal and informal accommodations throughout the school day were highlighted as important for autistic children: "I would like to have a kind of choice of maybe kind of stepping out of the lesson for like a bit until I feel calmer and then going back in it." (9-year-old female student in a mainstream class). Giving a "job" was reported by children as a thoughtful use of movement breaks.

Figure 1: From parent - *"[Child] wanted to show this heart that he made and was extremely proud of. He said 'I love school and teacher'.*

2. The **importance of friendships** in fostering a sense of belonging at school was clear. Many children described difficulties connecting with their classmates and finding shared interests. There were indicators of covert **peer exclusion:** *"People will have a laugh with other boys, but then they won't with me."* (12-year-old male student in mainstream class).

3. In general, children who mentioned friendships tended to relay more positive experiences of school: *"I would say probably friends [are important], because they're always there for you".* (12 year old male student in a mainstream class).

4. **Children often presented creative, yet simple solutions** to solve certain issues at school, but **these were not always taken on board.** For example, one child expressed frustration by the lack of response from his principal when he requested changes be made.

5. **Identifying children's learning needs and supporting children to reach their academic potential** was important to children and their parents. Where teachers **celebrated children's interests**, this made a very real and positive impact on children's experiences (e.g. one teacher made a child the *"computer expert"* in class which he loved). There was a desire by many children for there to be more students at school with similar interests to them.

6. **Homework was often a significant stressor.** Maths and Irish were frequently described as least favourite subjects and as difficult. Some children liked the challenge of maths, but none liked the challenge of Irish.
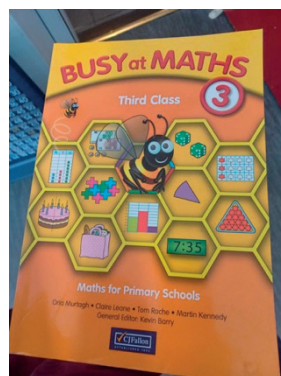

Figure 2. Primary school maths' books came up as a common image of a challenge.

7. Schools differed in how they **responded to children's challenges.** Some children reported disliking assemblies due to noise, crowds, or feeling unable to exit when needed, whereas a different child was supported by his teachers throughout the year to attend assemblies, which he listed as a challenge, but also described as "fun".

8. **The Physical School Environment** played a pivotal role in whether autistic children felt supported to fully participate in primary school. They identified (1) the classroom set-up (e.g. "lots of tables squashed together", (2) the availability of sensory rooms and quiet spaces (e.g. reading corners), and (3) consideration of the outdoor space (e.g. opportunities to run and wander) as important considerations for inclusion. Overall, children valued access to safe spaces within the classroom (e.g., reading corners), comfortable chairs and choice of seating (e.g., beanbags), and considerate use of outdoor spaces. Sensory rooms were very positive spaces for children, but it is important that they are used appropriately – one child described the quiet room as "the prison room" due to being locked inside during meltdowns (12-year-old boy attending an autism class).

9. **Experiences of Exclusion:** One child was on a reduced school day, even though he stated, "I want to go to school [...] I want to have a long day at school" and "see my friends, my teacher". Barriers described by the school were lack of autism classes and the child's inability to wear the uniform. One child was regularly sent home early from school, while another frequently missed out on the start of certain lessons due to the timing of his movement breaks which further impacted his learning in class.

10. **Experiences of Autism classes in Mainstream Schools:** The children who mentioned autism classes were largely in favour of them. Some children felt that, even within the autism class, teachers lacked understanding of autism.
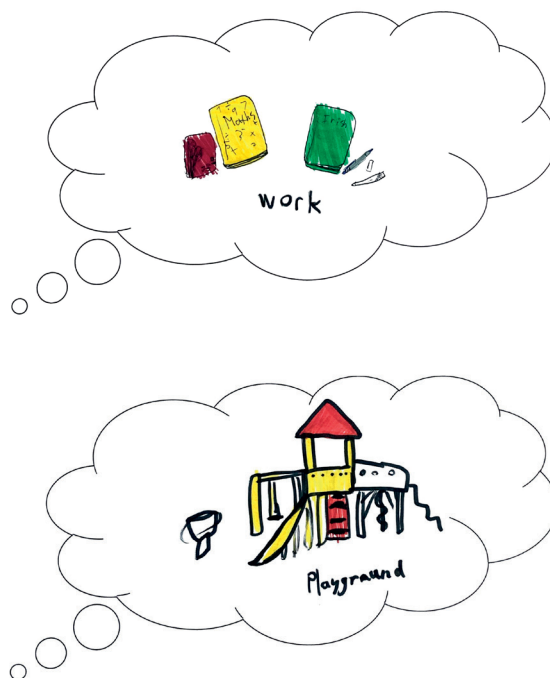

Figure 3. Pictures submitted by a primary school student on what they didn't like about school (top image) and their favourite place in school (bottom image).

Autistic Adolescents' Views and Experiences of Post-Primary School:

> **"Technically I'm still in it but I haven't been attending secondary school. I was barely in at all, because it was just really, really hard. […] If I had the choice, I would be in, but when I go in it's just, it's so hard."**
>
> *(13-year-old female student learning from home – previously in mainstream school)*

1. Autistic young people's participation in school was significantly impacted by the **behaviours and attitudes of peers and school staff.**

2. **Friendships** were important in school, as were **good relationships with teachers.** Friends were especially important in the context of experiences of exclusion, where having at least one friend made a positive impact on a student's school experiences. The positive impact of good relationships with teaching staff in secondary school was shared by several autistic students where they felt supported navigating post-primary education, valuing *"their emotional power to get us to where we want to be."* (19-year-old female student in mainstream school).

3. **Exclusion** was a significant theme in the post-primary cohort, with young people highlighting a fear of exclusion and being discriminated against and stigmatised. Instances of school non-attendance were also reported by students. Experiences of **subtle inclusion and exclusion** arose when teachers showed **neurotypical expectations** around school work for example, and a **lack of flexibility** from school and teachers regarding school rules. Schools appeared to be reluctant to provide supports or make changes to accommodate individual students, out of a concern that it would create a precedent requiring rule changes for all students. At other times, exclusion arose due to inadequate staff resources, and a 14-year-old male student was initially told he could not go on a school tour with his classmates.

4. **Several students shared experiences of bullying,** and bullying was more likely to be raised as a serious problem by female students. School policies for addressing bullying was raised as problematic and inadequate, and led to students feeling further humiliated when they reported the problem.

5. The **desire to fit in** was very evident in interviews with young autistic people. Unwanted attention drawn to students through inappropriate action on part of teacher or through teacher inaction came to the fore: *"I was stuck in a corner, because it was really loud and all the people were dancing and kept bumping into me, and all the music was loud."* (14-year-old female student in mainstream school).

6. **The sensory experience** was also a very vivid theme for autistic post-primary school students. **Uniforms were described as itchy and uncomfortable.** Students expressed the need for **greater flexibility around uniform policies,** with many recommending the removal of uniforms entirely: *"On behalf of all autistic people, remove uniforms from existence."* (17-year-old male student in mainstream school). **Sensory overload** was an issue raised by many students (noise, lights, scent etc.): *"I dislike the amount of students everywhere, how crowded it is […] the lights, I dislike how warm it is, I dislike the uniform. I often feel very sick there."* (16-year-old female student learning at home and in mainstream school).

7. As with primary school, **physical space** in the classroom and in the corridors and toilets was lacking and caused some students to feel claustrophobic. When asked about changes they would like in school, autistic students in post-primary schools mentioned a library, an art room and **more quiet spaces:** "My favourite probably within the school I'd say, I love my special ed classroom. I love the space that it provides for me and where I'm able to get the best support possible." (19-year-old female student attending mainstream school).

8. **School rules and structure** were important for students. Timetabling of breaks, access to lockers and ensuring time to eat and go to the toilet were changes that students highlighted as helpful for participation in school.

9. Lastly, **autistic students' love of learning** was a significant theme. This intrinsic motivation enabled students to learn independently. This ability to self-teach overcame the negative impact of ineffective teaching practices: *"The teaching style has a lot to be desired, so I'm better off just self-teaching that subject."* (17-year-old male student in a mainstream class). However, this sometimes highlighted a frustrating disconnect between their desire to learn and being under-estimated by teachers due to their diagnosis: *"He [a teacher] always treated me a bit different than everybody else, like I think in a way I wasn't as smart."* (14 year-old female student in a mainstream class).
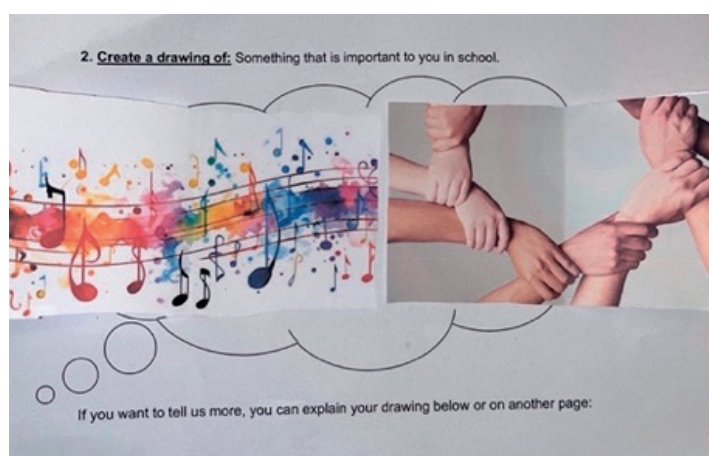

Figure 4. A collage made by a student depicting something of importance to them in school.

Parents' perspectives on autistic students' school experiences:

<div style="background:pink;">

"Inclusion should come from the top and not be tokenism"

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Parents' accounts of their child's experiences in school were largely similar to the experiences described by autistic students.

1. A more **flexible** approach to **rules,** including greater **accommodations** to minimise sensory overload, were highlighted by parents: "sensory issues are a major barrier".

2. Parents echoed students' views that **teachers had a significant capacity for good or for harm in the classroom,** and that **subtle adjustments** to the teacher-student relationship could foster significantly greater inclusivity. However, where children had accommodations, these sometimes brought **unwelcome attention** and children avoided using them in a mainstream classroom:

3. *"We are still really struggling with 'why can't I use a fidget' or why can't I go to the sensory room. [CHILD] really finds these questions and these pressures very difficult […] and chooses not to use them because of this constant questioning from the children".*

4. **School bullying policies** were highlighted as a barrier to inclusion as these were viewed as adding to the distress caused by the bullying. One parent described their experiences of bullying in school: *"I am not unhappy with the educational input but have been very unhappy with… the bullying that she has experienced as a result which has ended in her leaving school at this point. Whilst schools have appeared at times to support her during these difficult times, they have invariably shown equal concern with the children who were making school an incredibly difficult place for her to be. This has been extremely difficult for both her and the whole family and has resulted in mental health issues for her, as she has struggled to understand why it is happening to her."*

5. Parents were more likely than autistic students to focus on **resourcing challenges,** including access to teaching support staff, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, and psychologists in the school context. This was a strong theme across the parent interview and survey data, and considered a significant barrier to inclusion.

6. Parents highlighted instances of both excellent **communication with schools,** and conversely, very poor communication. **Communication breakdown** was viewed as a major barrier to the inclusion of their child.

7. Parents also highlighted **inconsistent attitudes to inclusion** among school staff, as well as across schools. This was particularly evident where children had moved school and found the school culture with regard to inclusion very different. **School leadership** and **attitudes to inclusion** were highlighted as pivotal in driving inclusive practices in schools: *"Well, we've had such a rollercoaster with the school system, you know. There's a lot of things that we need to improve in my opinion. And that's a lot to do with the systemic aspect of it rather than the delivery of the curriculum or anything like."*

8. **Teachers and principals were highlighted as valuable advocates** leading up to and immediately following diagnosis.

9. Parents believed that **a sense of belonging in school** for all children should be fostered and taught at all levels and ages, starting with very young children.

10. **Inclusive education** was conceptualised by many parents **as including their child in the classroom to the fullest extent possible.** Parents highly valued the opportunity for their child to learn alongside neurotypical peers. Parents strongly felt that they wanted their children to be 'offered the same chances as others' academically and socially. However, parents also highlighted the changes required for fully inclusive education, and indicated a preference for special schools and autism classes in the face of what they described as significant changes required: *"I think we'd have to redesign the entire structure of a school, the idea of a school, in order to meaningfully include children in their local communities, in their local school. Like are you going to have occupational therapists, psychologists in every local school? Because that's what's needed, you know? Say one set of therapists and experts per parish, per five, six, seven schools, you know? […] So, yeah, I think it would require a massive reimagining of the entire infrastructure of education in the country".*

11. Several parents reported **low expectations among school staff** for their child: *"The expectation doesn't seem to be there, because parents just feel… they're downtrodden […] I'm not looking for a babysitting service here, I don't need one, I want my child educated."*

12. Several parents wanted policy makers to know more about **children's anxiety and masking** as key issues as they felt that both had a significant impact on their children's experiences of school. Parents described how schools were 'totally ill-equipped to support children with autism who are masking to survive socially', particularly for girls. *"What I see in [my child] is that her fear is the real fear of things she knows there really exist in school, from her experiences (noise, stares, lights, limited toilet access, yard time pressure, masking pressure, list goes on). The children know from their experience that the school setting is dangerous […]."*

13. Parents also highlighted their child's experience of mainstream schooling to 'be very **isolated** at times'. Special schools and autism classes were viewed positively as a haven from overwhelm that could occur in mainstream schools: *"When they can't cope with mainstream to the point of damaging them physically, mentally and emotionally, another option that supports children who are similarly traumatised and to aid recovery would be good to have".*

Findings from the Wider School Community (Staff and Parents):

> **"Those who receive places in the autism classrooms are extremely well supported however those who don't, do not receive the same level of support"**
>
> *(Teacher in a Mainstream Post-Primary School)*

1. In a survey of 45 schools (a total of 661 school staff and parent respondents), **knowledge of autism was high** and **attitudes towards inclusion were broadly positive.**

2. **Scores on the knowledge of autism measure,** the PAK-M (M = 4.2 for the full sample), were **higher than those reported internationally.** This may reflect highly visible advocacy from organisations in Ireland (e.g. *AsIAm*, a charity which includes in its objectives working to change public attitudes towards autism).

3. Respondents with a **close personal connection to autism** (self or close family member) demonstrated **more accurate autism knowledge.**

4. Scores on the **attitudes towards inclusion measure,** the TAIS (M = 3.0 for the full sample) were **slightly higher** than those reported by Saloviita (2020) in Finnish teachers (n = 1764, M = 2.8), but lower than scores reported in Italian classrooms and support teachers (n = 153, M = 4.1 to 4.3) (Saloviita & Consegnati, 2019). This might reflect differences in educational policies between Ireland and Italy: in Italy, autistic students attend mainstream education at all levels, from pre-primary to upper secondary education.

5. When asked about inclusion in their own schooling contexts, **68% of school staff reported that autistic students of any level of need can attend their school**

6. **81% of school staff felt that autistic students in their school are well-supported.**

7. However, **only 31% reported that their school had sufficient resources to include autistic students with complex needs.**

8. This points to a mismatch between a school's commitment to inclusivity in principle and the practical implementation of inclusive education for all autistic students.

9. This disconnect was also reflected in parent respondents, as **69% or parents believed that their child's school is inclusive** for autistic students, but only **26% believed that the Irish education system is inclusive.**

Conclusion and Recommendations

This comprehensive study provides novel in-depth insights gathered directly from autistic children and adolescents about their lives in schools, their experiences of inclusion, and the factors that would make their lives better and support them to thrive with the school environment. While many of the children and adolescents included in this research spoke of positive experiences within their school system, many also told stories of exclusion, sensory overload, lack of connection, lack of understanding, and the absence of authentic supports and simple adjustments that would make their lives better.

Parents indicated resourcing in mainstream schools and classrooms as a significant barrier to autistic children's full inclusion in local schools. They also highlighted inconsistent attitudes to inclusion among school staff, and inadequate or ineffective bullying policies as barriers to their child's inclusion in education. Several parents shared significant concerns that mainstream contexts that did not meet the needs of autistic students had had significantly adverse effects on their child in terms of experiencing burnout, anxiety or distress, and ultimately exclusion from school.

In the wider school community, only one in four parents, and just over one third of teachers, viewed the Irish education system as inclusive, further highlighting serious concerns around the current provision of education for autistic children. Our findings provide compelling evidence that the wider school community in Ireland has a generally good understanding of autism, and that challenges in inclusive education for autistic children are systemic rather than based in negative attitudes towards inclusion.

Overcoming barriers to inclusive education is the most important means of developing quality education systems for all children (Ainscow, 2020). Therefore, developments in educational policy and practices need to respond to the barriers identified by autistic students in Ireland and their parents and reported here.

Policy Recommendations

Our findings indicate five key recommendations for policy:

1. System-wide changes are required to ensure resources, including staff resourcing and specialist in-class resources, and structural supports are in place to facilitate inclusive practices in all schools.

2. Inclusive cultures should be developed and nurtured in schools, with external policy support. School leadership is critical in developing an inclusive culture, and schools should work towards a shared understanding of inclusion to gain buy-in from all members of the school community for the development of inclusive cultures.

3. The principles of inclusion and equity should be actively promoted by policy makers to guide the work of teachers, principals and the wider school community.

4. Initial teacher education and continuing professional development should include learning opportunities about autism, with understanding of sensory differences and masking as key areas for learning.

5. The active participation of autistic children and young people, and their caregivers, in the development of school policies should be facilitated within schools.

Our recommendations, informed by in-depth interviews with autistic learners and their parents, are consistent with and extend recommendations for inclusive education policy in Ireland and more widely (e.g. National Council for Special Education, 2024; Kenny, McCoy, & O'Higgins Norman, 2023; Ainscow, 2020), highlighting the importance of actively seeking the views and perspectives of autistic students and their families in policy development for inclusive education.

Practice Recommendations

To guide this important work and to utilise the insights from autistic students, we have developed a framework for autism-friendly schools informed by autistic students and which can be adopted by schools (available to download at https://www.dcu.ie/autismfriendlyschools).

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