

A Study of the Experiences of Post-Primary Students with Special Educational Needs in Ireland

Dr Garry Squires

University of Manchester

garry.squires@manchester.ac.uk

International literature

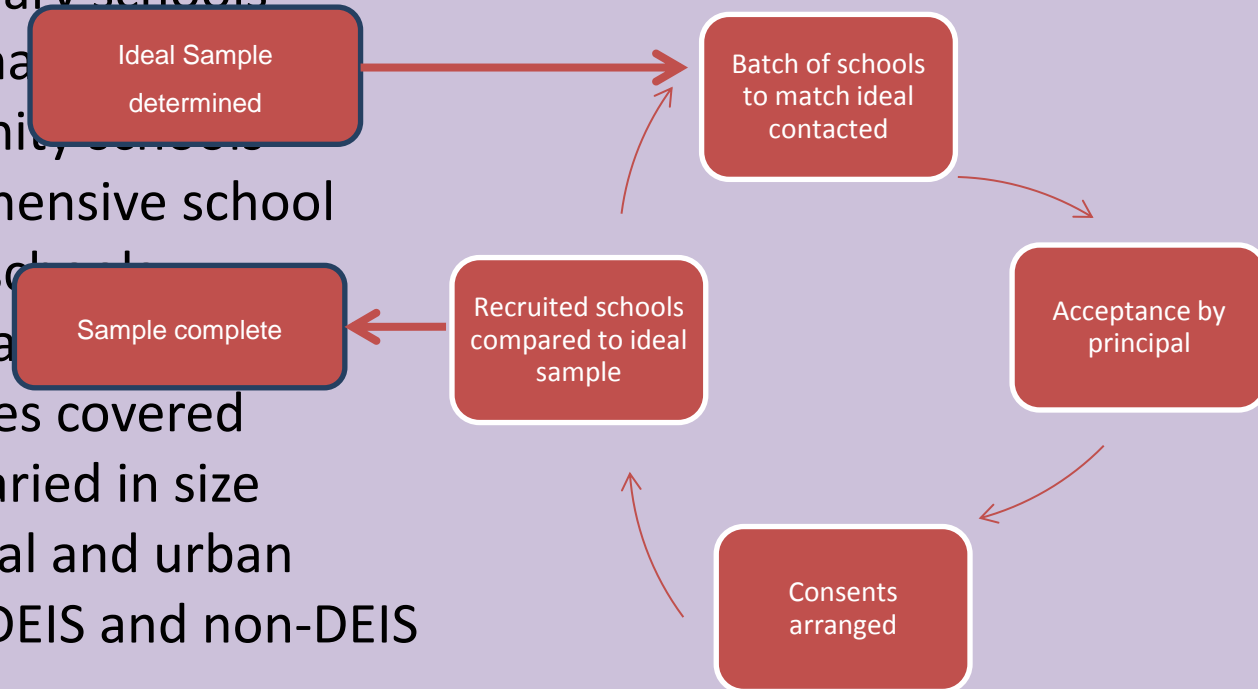
- Many issues for students without SEN and with SEN are similar
- Qualifications and developing literacy are important.
- Curriculum has to be relevant
- Inclusion is not necessarily seen as a good thing
- Autonomy and involvement in decision making was valued
- Friendships and support networks are important
- Relationships with teachers are important
- Students with SEN report experiencing bullying more than peers

Lessons from literature

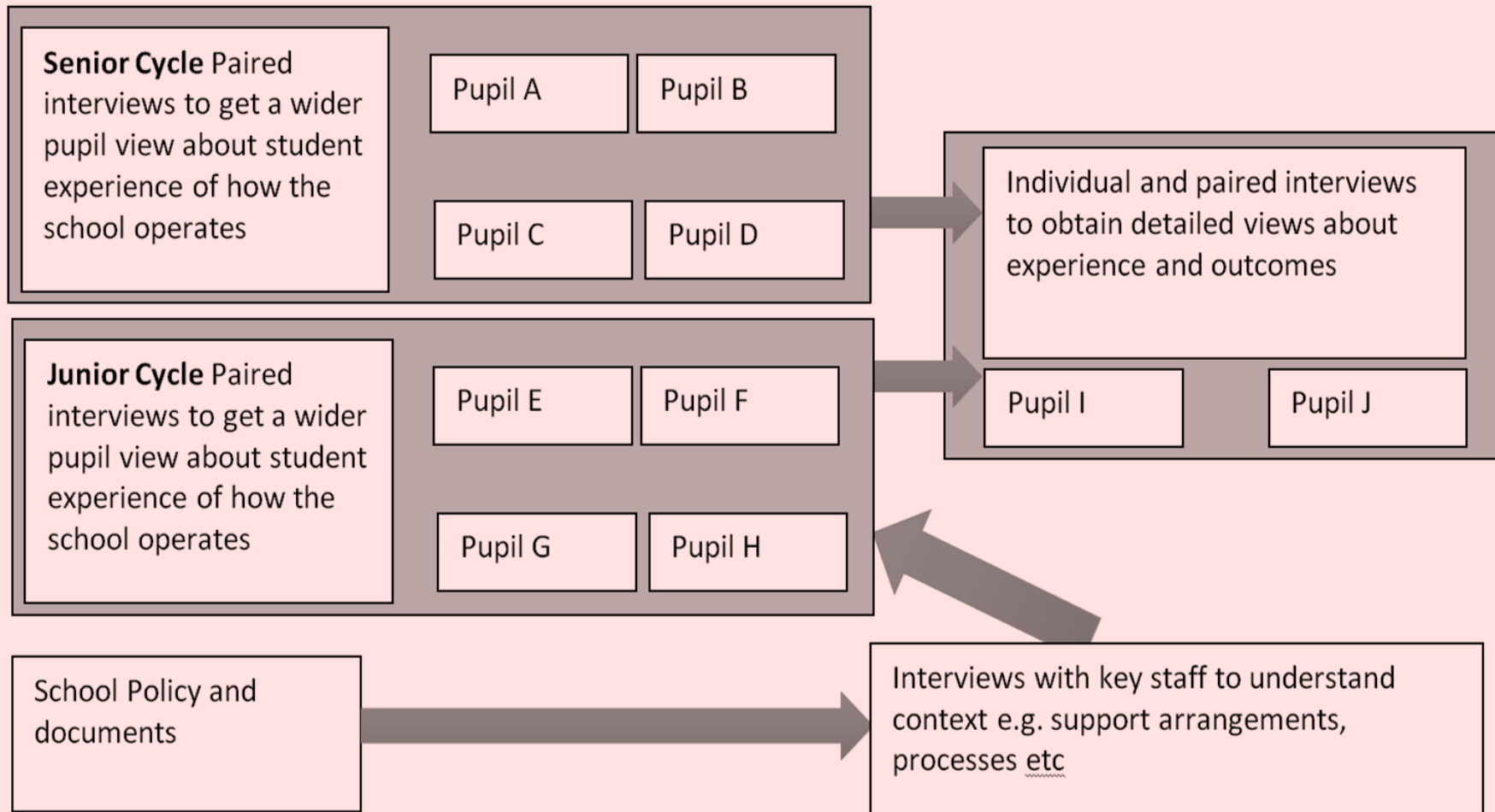
- Student views should be obtained and taken seriously
- Discussion with the student could help teachers understand how individual support can be arranged in ways which are less intrusive or obvious.
- Whole school approaches to helping students form friendships should be developed and schools will need to put more emphasis on helping students with SEN form friendships.

Methods

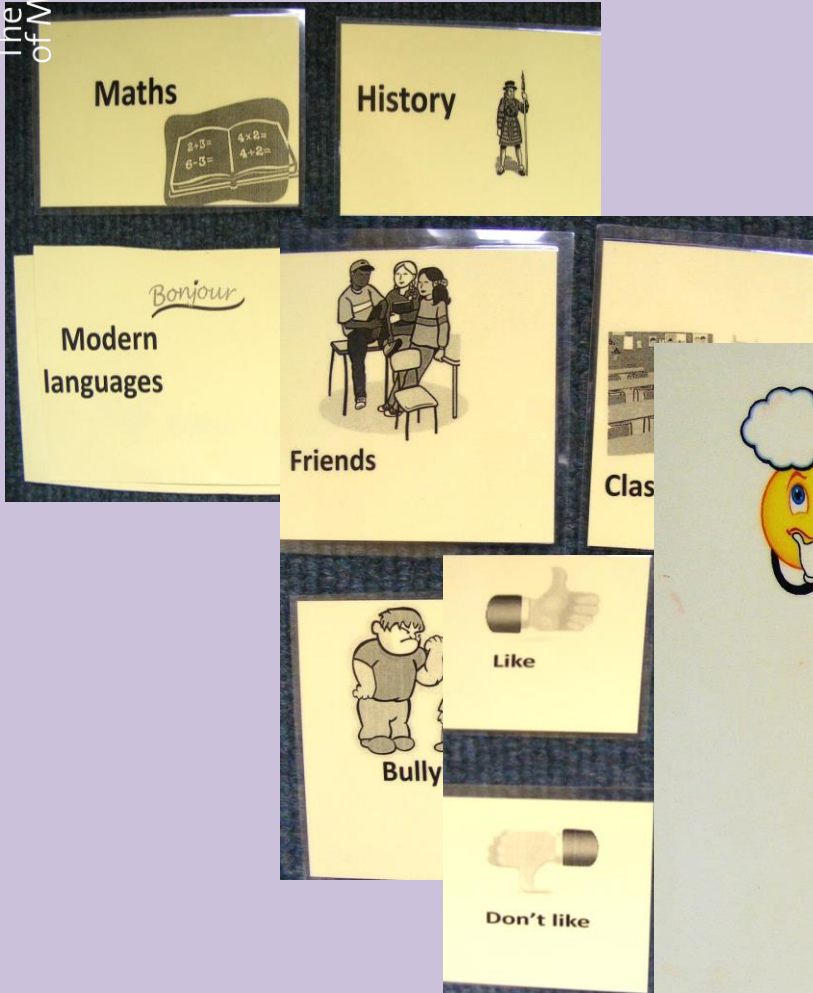
- 379 settings invited to participate using a sampling frame to ensure coverage by type of setting and geographical spread.
- 30 settings recruited:
 - 13 secondary schools
 - 9 vocational schools
 - 2 community schools
 - 1 comprehensive school
 - 3 special schools
 - 2 Youthreach schools
 - 16 Counties covered
 - Schools varied in size
 - Mix of rural and urban
 - Included DEIS and non-DEIS



Main study



Key visuals



Irish Students experiences

- The majority of students like school. Those who have changed settings prefer their current setting
- They value teachers who care about them as individuals and treat them with respect.
- Post primary settings were seen as being more flexible than primary
- It is important that schools reduce disruptive behaviour that interferes with learning.
- Rewards that encourage positive behaviours are valued – but have to be attainable by all
- Sanctions based on tariffs were experienced as unfair
- Peer pressure could undermine school systems to manage behaviour

Curriculum

- Having a choice of subjects was valued.
- Some mainstream students felt that the pace of the curriculum moved too quickly. In all 3 settings there was an appreciation that a more relaxed pace was conducive to learning

Resource rooms

- Valued as places where mainstream students could receive more intensive support. They were also perceived by some students as providing emotional safety.
- Did not always help students who needed support in particular subjects. There was a lack of synergy between what happened in the resource room and what happened in mainstream classrooms.

Support

- Special classes, ambiguous views.
- Additional teachers needs good communication between the teachers.
- Some students with SEN did not want to be singled out for support.
- Students in special schools and some in YR reported that transition from primary to post primary had highlighted inadequacies in mainstream support at primary

Social networks

- Good relationships with teachers were perceived as occurring when teachers were friendly, fair, knew the student well, fostered a sense of trust and allowed difficult issues to be dealt with.
- Friendships were important, particularly beyond the boundaries of the school. This was more difficult for special school students because of the geographically larger catchment area – but some staff were creative in overcoming this issue.
- Examination pathway choices can be influenced by friendships and can also interfere with friendships.

Impact on participation and engagement

- Engagement was helped by having teachers who made school interesting and who took an interest in students and treated them with respect.
- The experience of the transition year was ambiguous – some students liked it, some wanted to avoid it all together.

Engagement

- Students in all settings were ambitious and aspirational.
- School councils were viewed with ambivalence
- Bullying was mentioned by students across all 3 settings and they valued strategies used by schools to tackle bullying.

Building on literature

- The findings of this study echo those of previous.
- Students had a preference for assessment based on a portfolio rather than a written examination.
- Some students commented on the stress of taking too many examinations at the same time.

Building on the literature

- The transition year was not always valued
- Students felt that teachers in special schools and special classes were more supportive than those in mainstream classes.
- Students reported that they were not involved in decision making about how support was organised;
- Some schools were able to use support flexibly to the benefit of students
- SNA support that was too specific to the individual interfered with development of peer relationships.

Building on the literature

- Technological support seemed to improve engagement.
- Some students preferred more general support such as a resource room.
- Resource rooms allowed more opportunity to focus on skill development, however, there were not always good links between small group teaching and mainstream class teaching.
- SNAs were able to work flexibly and beyond their care role to support more students with SEN.

Building on the literature

- School climate is defined through relationships between members of the school community, tone, and attitudes of staff and students.
- Students across all settings wanted to be treated with respect.
- Similar to other studies, students valued teachers who seemed committed to engage with teaching and learning.
- The physical environment of the school was also important for student engagement and inclusion.

Building on the literature

- There is a tension in defining SEN with teachers using a looser definition than the 14 categories of disability used by the DES.
- In common with other studies, positive relationships with teachers were found to be important to students. Teachers were seen to be a key factor in student engagement.
- Similarly, peer relationships and friendships were seen as being important, both in school and beyond school. Maintaining friendships from school in the local community seemed easier for mainstream students than for special school students.

Lessons that might improve experiences

- Students should be in the centre of decisions made about them and actively involved in the process.
- School leaders need to consider how they can create a culture and climate in their schools that is supportive of all students, especially those who are vulnerable or have special educational needs.
- When different teachers are involved in teaching an individual student or group of students there needs to be good communication between the teaching team so that consistent approaches are used and opportunities for skill generalisation are developed.

Lessons that might improve experiences

- Friendship development and maintenance is harder for some students with SEN. Schools need to continue to explore how they use a range of strategies with vulnerable students.
- Schools should reflect on how they manage bullying in their school and pay particular attention to students with special educational needs.
- School buildings need to be audited in terms of accessibility with the aim of improving access for different groups of students.