

**An investigation of perceptions of the key partners in
education on the spiritual development of children
experiencing special needs, with particular reference to
Sacramental preparation for Catholic Children**

By

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Abstract

The Education Order (Northern Ireland) 1996 requires all grant-aided schools, including special schools, to engage in daily collective worship and provide religious education. This study set out to investigate the perceptions of those involved with children experiencing learning difficulties in connection with their spiritual development. Research focuses on Catholic children attending special schools in the controlled sector within the Belfast Education and Library Board, who are placed at Stage five of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs Northern Ireland (1998).

A triangulation approach was employed incorporating the research instrument of (a) a questionnaire and (b) an evaluative interview. A qualitative research methodology to identify perceptions was used. The main aim of this approach was to identify different perspectives and contradictions to sacramental preparation, and the subsequent implications for the key educational partners namely, the home, school and parish.

A number of important issues emerge from the analysis of data.

- Human rights for all in education.

- The development of structured sacramental programmes to address the needs of children experiencing learning difficulties, in particular children with SLD and MLD, is a basic requirement for teachers in special schools.

- Schools and parishes ought to channel their energies in working together to support each child and where possible, to re-educate parent(s) in their unique responsibility to the spiritual development of their child.

The partnership of the home, school and parish is a positive model for the religious education of children. Schools and parishes should give priority to this, working together to promote community.

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Chapter One

Introduction and Literature Review

Religious Education, and therefore religious development of children, is significant to the holistic development of the child, young person and adult. Such growth is a life-long learning experience. For some children this can be challenged by the prevalence of a learning difficulty that requires identification and assessment. This learning difficulty may necessitate the presentation of a Statement of Special Educational Needs for the child. The religious development of these children is no less important than that of their peers who do not experience a learning difficulty and do not possess a Statement of Special Educational Needs. This research intends to address these children who are placed at Stage five of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs, Northern Ireland (DENI, 1998). In reviewing current literature it may be necessary to question whether present procedures are indicative of good practice and disclose areas that have progressed and areas that may not have fully matured in relation to the research question.

1.1 Introduction

The Warnock Report (1978) proposed that approximately twenty percent of pupils would, at some time in their schooling, experience special educational need. This figure includes children attending mainstream and special schools. The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 states that special needs provision for children (who have attained the age of two years) is,

educational provision which is additional to, or otherwise different from, the educational provision made generally for children of (*the same*) age in ordinary schools. (*p.6*)

It suggests that a Statement of Special Educational Needs for two percent of the school population, which will identify the child's needs and outline the provision, is to be made in order to meet these needs. The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs Northern Ireland (1998) addresses the identification and assessment of children (20%) experiencing special educational needs. Research data will focus on children who have received a Statement of Special Educational Needs and are at Stage five of the Code of Practice, attending special schools.

1.2 Education Legislation

The Warnock Report (1978) rejected the idea that some children could not be educated, recommending that the categorisation of pupils should be abolished. Warnock (1978 p.37) introduced the term *children with special educational needs* recognising ability and disability. The Report also drew attention to the demand for a continuum of provision where children should be given the opportunity to learn at their own pace and within their own capabilities. Reforms in the methods used to evaluate children with special needs were also recommended. Warnock's (1978) main concern was how children were assessed and what provision should be made for them. This would inevitably incorporate a more collaborative approach, engaging professionals within education, local and health authorities and parents. Warnock (1978) highlighted the fundamental need for parents to participate in their children's education referring to *parents as partners* (p.150) and calling for improved working relationships between parents, teachers and professional bodies.

The 1981 Education Act was the Government's response to the Warnock principles. It changed the focus from labelling children, to, identifying and assessing their specific educational need. The act also gave parents explicit legal power to participate fully in the assessment procedure and gave descriptors of new parental rights for their children. However, in practice this change of power proved problematic. Dale (1996) suggests that due to the diverse range of views and interests of parents and professionals it was difficult to find common ground for important decisions to be made. Given this problem the 1993 Education Act (Part III), dealing specifically with special educational needs, not only defines more clearly the role of the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) within the school but also the school's role in liaising with the parents. The 1989 Children's Act and the subsequent Children's (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, re-emphasised the value of parental partnership by introducing the concept of parental responsibility, referring to the duty and obligation which parents have toward their children, recognising them as the key agents in rearing their children, and focusing on the rights of the children. These acts have opened up new possibilities for participation in education. The Elton Report (1989) further accentuates the responsibility of schools to build on this through a detailed examination of the curriculum, in planning, classroom practice, mutual support among staff, exploration of teaching styles and positive relationships between the staff.

1.3 The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs

The introduction of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs in Northern Ireland, September 1998, provided a framework for schools to develop strategies for meeting pupils' special educational needs.

The basic principles indicate that the special educational needs of all children will be addressed and that each child should receive a broad and balanced curriculum as envisaged in the Northern Ireland Curriculum Programmes of Study and Attainment Targets, of which there is a specific document addressing Religious Education (1993). The Code of Practice Northern Ireland (1998) emphasises the value of children's spiritual development as part of their education and states that,

every child attending either a mainstream or special school must receive religious education and attend collective worship, unless this would be against the wishes of the parents or the pupil's statement indicates otherwise. (p.47)

The principles also recognise the necessity for a continuum of needs and provision albeit in different forms, to be met *in most cases* (p.2) in mainstream schools. Does this refer to a devaluing of special schools? The Green Paper (1998) (Meeting Special Educational Needs: A Programme of Action) disagrees, confirming the need for specialised provision offered by such schools. Dyson (1998) however, recommends a review of the role of the special schools in Northern Ireland and their relationship with mainstream schools in making provision for children experiencing special educational needs.

1.3.1 Five Stage Model

Based on the 1993 Education Act children are entitled to have their special educational needs identified, assessed and reviewed. The Code of Practice Northern Ireland (1998) provides a framework of procedures to fulfil this right. It outlines a five-stage model to identify, assess and provide for the needs of each child. Responsibility for pupils within Stages one to three remains with the school (with close involvement from outside professionals at Stage three). At Stages four and five the Education and Library Board shares responsibility with schools. Statutory

Assessment at Stage four will be proposed if the Education and Library Board (ELB) considers that it needs to ascertain the child's provision by making a Statement. However statutory assessment does not always lead to a Statement. At Stage five the ELB having obtained advice from significant others (teacher, SENCO, parents, education psychologist and the medical profession) makes a statement and *arranges, monitors and reviews provision* (p.3).

1.3.2 Parental Involvement

The relationship between the school and the parents of a child with special educational needs, is described by The Code of Practice Northern Ireland (1998) as having a,

crucial bearing on the child's educational progress and the effectiveness of any school-based action. (p.9)

It is important that the parents' knowledge, views, feelings and experiences of their child are listened to and accepted at all stages of the child's development and assessment (Wolfendale 1997, Quinn 2001, The Code of Practice Northern Ireland 1998). Parental involvement is essential for the well being of children and the school should try to ensure that they feel welcome and are included in every aspect of their education. Caldecott (1997) affirms that parents report that they are not always well informed about special educational needs, or of the school's ability to meet their child's needs. Information should be readily available to them, particularly for new parents, to enable them to become involved in special needs procedures from the beginning. It is envisaged that parents work in partnership with schools, ELBs and the significant professionals combining their expertise in different areas for the benefit of the child. Wolfendale (1997) argues that the lack of understanding about policies, decision-making procedures and available support may lead to conflict between

parents and schools and feelings of exclusion. This may ultimately have a negative effect on children's ability and confidence as a learner. The Code of Practice Northern Ireland (1998) also states that if possible (depending on maturity and understanding), the child experiencing special learning difficulties should be involved in the process of assessment. It is therefore considered important for the child to take responsibility for his/her learning and in doing so to develop self-esteem and confidence as a learner.

1.3.3 Inclusion

Schools in Northern Ireland should address and provide a curriculum and environment of inclusion. The guiding principles as outlined in the Council for Catholic maintained Schools (CCMS) document Special Educational Needs (1997) highlights this point. It promotes the concept of inclusiveness within the ethos of the Catholic school recognising that children are unique in their diversity and equal in their worth, irrespective of abilities (p. 2). However in Northern Ireland the majority of special schools are in the controlled sector and it is important to realise that within the maintained sector no provision is made for children with Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD) and Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD). All schools need a strong principal and management team committed to the principles of inclusive education, informing and involving parents, obtaining the child's view and creating awareness of a social model of education.

1.4 History of Religious Education

Historically religious instruction was the responsibility of the church taught through local church schools. The 1944 Education Act and the subsequent 1947 Education Act (Northern Ireland) strengthened the position of religion in the school curriculum. The 1944 Education Act raised the profile of religion as a subject preferring to use the

term religious education. Changes in teaching and learning styles affected the teaching of religion and the shift towards understanding and discovery learning had an impact on how religion was taught in schools. The 1944 Education Act stated that religion should be taught in all county schools and that collective worship should form part of the school day. Northern Ireland has operated a selective system of education since the 1947 Education Act (Northern Ireland). It differed from the selective system in the United Kingdom at that time, in that enrolment in Northern Ireland tended to reflect the two distinct Christian divides within society, each with primary and post primary schools. The 1988 Education Reform Act and the subsequent Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 brought a curriculum of entitlement. Religious education in the Northern Ireland Curriculum is afforded equal status with the other foundation subjects. This change in government legislation ensured that a religious education syllabus in line with other curriculum subjects would have to be drafted and implemented. As a result, a review of current practice was inevitable in the controlled sector each Education Board has appointed an advisor for religion to support and advise teachers. In the maintained (Catholic) sector religious education falls under the remit of the church, and, Diocesan Advisers (DAs) are appointed to examine practice and provide support and advice in Catholic schools at primary and post primary level. Religious education does not come under the control of the Inspectorate unless specifically asked by the Board of Governors of the particular school.

1.4.1 Development of Catechetical Programmes

Within the Northern Ireland Curriculum there exists equivalent Attainment Targets in religious education (1993) as for other subjects forming the Curriculum. Within the maintained sector religious education has always experienced the benefit of its own

existing programme, more than the equivalent to commercial schemes other subjects provide teachers with. Developments in the area of catechesis, has meant that the religious programme available in Catholic schools has been continually updated to meet the changing demands of secular education. The catechetical programme of the early nineteenth century was in the form of a catechism, a handbook of questions and answers that outlined the key teachings and practices of the Catholic Church. Schools used this to teach religion and prepare children for the sacraments. Therefore a complete programme was available for teachers, supported by the parents at home and by the Church at local parish level. The catechism was mainly deductive, following educational trends at the time and could be seen as somewhat doctrinaire at the expense of phenomenology involving rote learning. This posed problems for many children but particularly for those experiencing special educational needs. Changes in learning theories (Piaget 1955, Montessori 1964 and Bruner 1960) brought about a review of The Catechism as a means of teaching religion. The *kerygmatic* movement was the foundation for the religion programme *On Our Way* in the 1960's and early 1970's in Ireland, focusing on content and the teaching of the history of salvation. It attempted to incorporate a range of approaches in line with current educational thinking at that time. Again teachers had a complete programme for teaching religion supported by the home and the church. Educational research in the 1970's (Hirst and Peters, 1970) argued for the need to develop children's knowledge and understanding starting from the learner's experience. Therefore changes in catechetical instruction emphasised an experiential approach to teaching religion with the introduction of the *Children of God Series*. This programme has been re-presented twice since its introduction in 1976, the *Children of God Series a Re-presentation* 1983 and the *Alive-O* programme introduced in primary one 1996 and at present in primary six

September 2002. The content of the programme for each year group is directly related to the child's ability, moral and cognitive development and the religious development of the teacher and the child. Nelson (2000) refers to this as *symbolic catechesis* (p.168), encouraging people to draw on their life experiences and then reflect upon them.

In the world of catechetics, it has gradually been realised that God can be known intuitively as well as intellectually; that there is an affective way of thinking as well as a rational, and that there is a passive mode of consciousness as well as the active. (p.168)

Such an approach opens creative opportunities for teachers and others working with children experiencing special needs.

1.5 A Curriculum for Religious Education

Collective worship forms part of the school day, to provide a framework within which children can develop spiritually (1981 Education Act) and all children including those attending special schools are to attend and receive religious education as far as practicable (1993 Education Act). Such assemblies allow the child to observe and participate in a worshipping community. For the child with special needs involvement may be the experiencing of and witnessing to the atmosphere created by others in the school community. Proposals for a Core Syllabus in Religious Education in Northern Ireland were drafted in 1991 (following the 1989 Education Reform NI Order) and later implemented in 1993. The drafting group composed of primary, post primary and third level teachers, DAs, members from various Christian churches and identified personnel from ELBs, met to draw up a core syllabus for religion in all schools in Northern Ireland, addressing the entire comprehensive phrase commencing at Key Stage one finishing at Key Stage four. The Drafting Group's aim was to

establish a common entitlement for pupils and to compile a comprehensive programme to be used by schools to prepare a policy for religion. For many of the Catholic schools the current Veritas programmes *Children of God Series* and *Alive-O* incorporate the aims and content of the Core Syllabus for Religious Education in Northern Ireland and therefore they tend to use these texts as their religion programme. For the controlled sector the Core Syllabus for Religious Education 1993 provides a foundation on which their programmes are based, supported by the advisers from the ELBs. It highlights the need for a broad and balanced curriculum as outlined in the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 and suggests that religion has a role to play in creating this. Pupils should therefore gain a knowledge, understanding and appreciation of religious education appropriate to their development and background. In this instance Christian education remains predominant in Northern Ireland schools. The Core Syllabus for Religious Education in Northern Ireland (1993) aims to meet the needs of all children, making a contribution to the five dimensions required by the 1989 Order, which include the spiritual, moral, cultural, intellectual and physical developments of all pupils.

1.5.1 Religious Education

Religious education may be described as knowledge and understanding about our beliefs and experiences and from this a reaching out to others in love and empathy in light of Christian faith. The teacher leads the children out in response to, in this instance, the Christian story. For the purpose of this research the term religious education applies to the process of catechesis employed in schools and parishes. It may also be referred to as religious instruction or religion. Religious knowledge and understanding come from an *active/reflective* (p.145) knowing arising from life experiences, as described by Groome (1980). The role of the teacher is therefore to

lead, because as Dewey (1961) explains experience does not necessarily lead to knowledge. The Vatican II encyclical *Evangelisation in the Modern World* (*Evangelisi Nutandi*, 1975) suggests that teachers are effective educators if they are first witnesses to their faith, believing that children have experienced everything they need to encounter God. The teacher therefore should encourage and challenge the child to, express himself, to search and question, to learn to respect the beliefs and attitudes of others as stated in the Core Syllabus for Religious Education in Northern Ireland (1993).

The current education model does not necessarily meet the needs of children experiencing learning difficulties as it advocates, identifying and assessing their needs according to set Attainment Targets within Key Stages aimed at the child's chronological and mental age. Is this therefore a valid curriculum model for children experiencing learning difficulties? The child in special education may develop at a different pace and level than peers but as Longhorn (1993) advocates, this is not indicative of a limited awareness. Children will come to an understanding of themselves and the world around them in their own time but it does not make their understanding or the depth of their feeling any less assured. Development may not be seen in the preparation of the child but rather in the out-working of the child's life during compulsory education period and beyond into adulthood. The Core Syllabus for Religious Education in Northern Ireland (1993) does suggest that the religion class must address the needs of children, allowing them to respond at a level appropriate to the individual and therefore the outward demonstration of religious knowledge and understanding may differ according to individual ability. Yet the Code of Practice Northern Ireland (1998) five-stage model does not necessarily include this approach in drawing up statements for children with special needs, focusing on short-term

targets to monitor and assess children's progress rather than encouraging children to develop at their own rate according to their own ability in their own time. As Fr Patrick Cullen cited in Schwarz (1997) National Catechetical Reporter suggests

the beauty of the Catholic Church is that you're not just tied to words. God can communicate any way he wants, and you're not to evaluate whether it's effective or not from the point of faith. Just because you can't evaluate it, doesn't mean it's not going on.
www.natcath.com/NCR (Accessed 27 Sep. 2001)

Is there therefore a need to rethink the current five-stage model of identification and assessment for children experiencing learning difficulties?

1.6 School Ethos and the Aims of Religious Education

The aim of primary religious education in Northern Ireland is to help each child develop a reflective approach to knowledge, understanding, attitudes and skills within the framework of Christian faith. Brown (1992) draws upon the analogy of the child being presented with *the paint-box not the painting* (p.112), wherein each child is encouraged to use his/her experiences and gifts to express faith and belief in Christ. Part of the school's responsibility is to help each child express personal identity and search for the meaning and purpose of life through the Christian story. The Dyson Report (1998) accentuates the responsibility of the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) and ELBs with the help of principals and SENCOs to be in the forefront, supporting and training class teachers, helping them develop, maintain, evaluate and monitor a wide range of teaching and learning approaches. Special schools have much to offer their mainstream colleagues in the way of provision for special educational needs particularly in religious education. A General Inspection Report for Beechlawns Special School (November 1999) provides an excellent example of how such provision is made for children aged ten to sixteen. The key findings of the paper comment on the quality of teaching and planning for special

educational needs. Teachers are to be commended for their ability to plan effectively in matching pupils' needs educationally, their relationships with staff, *clear and succinct* pastoral care policies and strong links with the home and community www.deni.gov.uk (Accessed 28 November 2000). The report accentuates the significance of a strong community ethos, where relationships between staff, pupils and parents are vital for the development of all children. It is valuable to promote schools where provision for special educational needs is of a high quality and to use this as a basis for other schools to model their own. Every school should aim to contribute to the religious development of each child by providing a programme fostering positive attitudes towards Christianity and encouraging participation in the religious life of the school. It is important to value the development of the whole person through a well-balanced curriculum in a caring ethos, shared by the whole school as indicated by O'Brien (1998) and Brown (1998). The school's ethos must explore the quality of relationships, between staff, between pupils and each other to effectively provide for special educational needs. Brown (1998) contends that the ethos and teaching within a school provides

a backdrop for learning which can either ignore children's self-worth or make them feel a valuable member of the school family. (p.160)

Inspectorate reports for Northern Ireland reaffirm this, making deliberate reference to the quality of pastoral care, home school liaisons and healthy relationships between pupils and staff.

Perhaps as Brown (1996) suggests the greatest aim of religious education is to make it relevant and accessible to all pupils regardless of their ability or background. Brown (1998) concurs with a diversity of need addressing children's distinct needs, through the moral, social and cultural dimensions of pupils learning. The individual or special needs of each child do not necessarily come first, the common and distinct needs they

share with their peers must be addressed building confidence and self-esteem as a learner before teachers incorporate a variety of teaching strategies, to identify and improve specific learning difficulties. Lewis and Norwich (2001) citing Norwich (1996) distinguish three broad types of pedagogic need those common to all learners, specific or distinct needs to groups of pupils and those unique to individual learners. O' Brien (2002) uses the term additional educational needs (p.15) encouraging schools to examine what a learner requires as an individual, the common needs shared with peers and also the unique needs of each child. The school should therefore explore the quality of relationships between staff, between pupils and each other to effectively meet pupils' special educational needs within a community ethos.

It is also important to recognise and address the needs of Catholic children in special schools. In order to articulate their faith it is important for them to be introduced to sacramental symbols, Church teaching and doctrines through religious education programmes and sacramental preparation classes, allowing them to embrace the fullness of revelation with their worshipping community. This forms an important part of each child's spiritual development and is a fundamental human right for every Catholic child.

1.6.1 Attitudes, Skills and Concepts

Brown (1992) and Longhorn (1993) suggest that through religious education children should develop a range of skills, attitudes and concepts that will enable them to develop holistically. The skills highlighted are common to all areas of education namely communication, investigation and creativity as evident in the Programmes of Study (1996). However as Longhorn (1993) points out *the very special child* (p.12) may have difficulty learning these skills and therefore suggests a religious programme built on sensory experiences, sounds, smells, touches and bodily experiences. In this

instance *the very special child* refers to children with moderate and/or severe learning difficulties attending special schools. The research explores a multi-sensory approach to religious education helping children to deepen their awareness of religion enabling them to become more involved in school alongside other members of their family and community. As the Core Syllabus for Religious Education in Northern Ireland (1993) indicates children come to school with a set of values based on the family and community they belong to. Therefore schools as part of the wider community have a responsibility to ensure that attitudes and values are based on a whole school policy supported by the parents and the wider society. Schools in cooperation with staff and pupils will often draw up an institutional contract of rights which enable the children to feel secure and valued members of the school community. This is an important part of the ethos of the school, wherein an atmosphere of tolerance and respect is evident from the relationships in school and with the wider community. Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) in the Northern Ireland Curriculum is a cross-curricular theme, which aims to help schools develop this,

We understand Education for Mutual Understanding to be about self-respect, and respect for others, and the improvement of relationships between people of differing cultural tradition. (1992, p.5)

The EMU Promoting School report (1994) accentuates the responsibility of the whole school through the ethos, curriculum and community to meet the aims and objectives of EMU. It highlights a number of positive means; developing strong links with parents as partners in education forming part of the school community, engaging in active learning, commitment to pastoral care and positive discipline policies, encouraging and facilitating links with other schools through special events and celebrations and inviting a broad range of speakers and visitors into the school, particularly members of the clergy from different denominations. Although only

DENI schools since 1986, previously DHSS Care, the special school may be a better role model for the delivery of EMU than any mainstream exemplar as it lives and breaths EMU daily in all activities between all key players. The children are encouraged to explore their identity, come to understand the concept of others and take on a sense of responsibility as far as possible within the school. For children experiencing learning difficulties these concepts will be explored at different levels and in different ways, according to the capabilities of each individual child through imagination and experience.

1.7 School Policy for Religious Education

The implementation of the Core Syllabus for Religious Education in Northern Ireland (1993) is the responsibility of the teachers and the Board of Governors. The religious education policy statement should be included in the school prospectus having been approved by the Board of Governors. The Oakwood School and Assessment Centre established to address the needs of children experiencing SLD, in the age range four to eight and also charged with a home school liaison programme for children aged range rising one year to four, highlights the important role religion has in the school curriculum. It notes the legal requirements as stated in the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 for all children to participate in collective worship. The prospectus also explains how the Christian message addressed each Friday is reinforced through a range of subjects enabling the child to reflect on the theme of the assembly. The Oakwood School and Assessment Centre also provides a programme for Catholic children to prepare for the sacrament of Penance and the Eucharist guided by the school chaplain and the religious co-ordinator. The religious education co-ordinator must engage with teachers helping and advising them in their planning, assessing and recording. Their role in religion, as in other curricular areas, is to

review and implement the policy, provide resources and liaise with outside bodies. This may extend to working alongside Catholic teachers to prepare sacramental programmes for Catholic children attending the special school to meet their individual needs and in line with Church teaching. In special schools a religious education curriculum must be designed to match that of mainstream schools, otherwise it will as Brown (1992) suggests, exclude pupils from aspects of religious education which the wider community values. Therefore special schools in the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) tend to adapt catechetical programmes used in mainstream Catholic schools to meet the needs of Catholic children preparing for sacraments. Their attitudes, skills and concepts may not be developed to the same extent as those of children in mainstream but they will be taught and encouraged at a level appropriate to each child. As Longhorn (1993) points out any curriculum designed for *very special children* (p.12) must include provision for long term repetition in a variety of stimulating ways to encourage children to respond in a mode appropriate to them. Their apparent lack of response does not indicate success or failure and she calls for a balance of explicit and implicit experiences to enable each child to express his/herself. The role of the teacher therefore is to make religious education accessible to every child and part of this remit involves developing communication skills. The religion lesson quite often becomes a time when children are encouraged to express their feelings and emotions about certain issues. Brown (1992) suggests that teachers should monitor and evaluate their own teaching in religion making reference to a number of questions for the teacher to examine. They need to be sensitive and take time to listen and respond to the children creating a secure environment where they can express themselves in a personal way. Brown (1998) outlines a number of basic aims to be included in a religion scheme, which attempts to meet the needs of all

pupils. It advocates a mixed provision creating opportunities to experience stillness and activity, to reflect and share and enabled to respond personally in a creative and developmental way in an environment conducive to learning and respecting the individual child. Brown (1996) suggests that children should learn about religion and from religion, creating links with other subjects to reinforce religious concepts and attitudes. The Core Syllabus for Religious Education in Northern Ireland (1993) confirms this illustrating how other curriculum areas feed into religion. Whilst integrating across subject barriers is to be valued, also remember of equal value is recognition of the uniqueness of religious development and religious education in its own right.

1.7.2 Assessment

Within the framework of the religious education curriculum opportunities for recording and assessing should be made available. Recording pupils' progress can be difficult in religious education and especially so in special schools. In the classroom setting the teacher engages in internal and informal methods of assessment as outlined by Kyriacou (1991), prompting children to respond and think for themselves within their own limitations. Longhorn (1993) provides an example for continuous self-assessment '*I AM*' *Memory Chest* (p.29) consisting of records of achievements and experiences and events. However she admits that in order for this to be successful, each child needs to participate in a wide and varied range of religious experiences throughout their school life. Alongside this Longhorn (1993) provides a formal framework to record children's experiences and involvement in organised or spontaneous events. The planner makes representation of the main goals of each term, responses from the individual, the class and the school and acknowledges the need for further work. These proposals appear to meet the needs of children experiencing

moderate learning difficulties but do not necessarily address relevant assessment strategies for children experiencing severe learning difficulties.

1.8 Sacramental Initiation

In preparing children for sacramental initiation the combined cooperation of the home, school and parish is required. The school community recognises the parents as the first educators of their child and the home as the place where children will experience the example of Christ's love (Declaration on Christian Education 1965, Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994 and Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy 1963). It should be acknowledged that in reality many parents do not take responsibility for their children's religious formation or witness to their faith. The parish as the focal point for children's experiences of community celebration in the liturgy is therefore highly valued and the school relies on its support in preparing children for the sacraments. In Northern Ireland Catholic schools follow the current *Alive-O* and *Children of God* catechetical programmes which contain a series of set lessons outlining the central themes, concepts, attitudes and Church teaching on each sacrament in Key Stage one, namely the sacrament of Penance and Eucharist and in Key Stage two Confirmation. The sacramental schemes from each text are developed in line with the children's age (chronological) and stage of development (physical, intellectual, emotional). Resources including, stories, poems, songs and activities are adapted to meet the needs of children aged seven to nine and ten to eleven respectively. It must be noted that the programme makes reference to the fact that although there is an exact set of lessons pertaining to sacramental preparation, the foundation for liturgical and sacramental initiation is introduced gradually in the course of the primary religion programme beginning in primary one. Through the course of the year the text focuses on human values and attitudes which are deemed

central to knowledge, understanding and meaningful participation in the sacraments. Yet teachers interviewed in special schools involved in sacramental preparation in the BELB, stated that they felt they were unable to use the *Alive-O* and *Children of God* programme because the material was too difficult for the children and many had adapted various alternate catechetical resources in an attempt to meet their children's educational needs. Until 2000 children in the Down and Connor Diocese received First Holy Communion in primary three alongside the sacrament of Penance. The change to having one sacrament in each year, Penance in primary three and Communion in primary four, was to enable the teacher, parents and children to give more time to preparing for each sacrament and it was considered that children may have a greater understanding of the Communion programme a year later in primary four. It is fair to suggest that the current sacramental programmes for children do not address the needs of children experiencing learning difficulties as the *Alive-O* and *Children of God* programme and the Core Syllabus for Religious Education in Northern Ireland (1993) are developed to match their chronological age which does not necessarily map to maturity for mainstream children and causes further difficulties for children experiencing SLD and PMLD. This is a key issue highlighted by teachers in the special sector. The *Directory on Children's Masses* (1973) acknowledges that there will be a need for the Eucharist to be adapted for a number of different groups within the Christian community, to meet their needs. It highlights that the general principles outlined should form the basis for liturgy encouraging variation. The prevailing concern for teachers is the lack of a structured sacramental programme to assist them in preparing children experiencing learning difficulties for each of the sacraments.

1.8.1 The Eucharist

The Eucharist as described by the Code of Canon Law (1983) and the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) is the *Summit and source of all worship and Christian Life* (Ref 897). Therefore all Baptised members of the Christian community are invited to share in the Eucharistic celebration of the Church. For many children experiencing profound and multiple learning difficulties full participation (receiving Communion) may not be physically possible but by engaging in sacramental programmes they are able to experience full spiritual participation. The document *One Bread One Body* (1998) acknowledges that there are a number of ways in which people can participate in and benefit from the Eucharist. It addresses those people, for whatever reason, who may not be able to join fully in the celebration yet share fully in the Eucharistic sacrifice and become one with Christ as full members of the community. The Code of Canon Law (1983) states that

there can be the celebration of the Eucharist which truly gives grace, even when it is not possible to have full sharing that comes from receiving Holy Communion. (Ref. 42).

Preparation for the sacrament of the Eucharist must be given due attention. For many children and parents the Catholic school is the only place where preparation programmes are delivered. As Canon Law suggests it is the responsibility of the Bishops and the parish priest assisted by others to provide catechetical instruction for all, young and old. The local Catholic school as part of the parish community is the key contributor in the catechesis of children for the sacraments in Key Stage one and Key Stage two. In recent years the growing danger is that the school appears to do most of the work with little or no assistance from the parish community. Therefore, should there be more emphasis on parish programmes in support of the Catholic

school, where the children can witness community in action? For children experiencing learning difficulties attendance at the local parish school is not always an option. Many attend special schools outside their parish in the controlled sector where the preparation for the sacraments may not form part of the school religious education programme. Canon Law refers to the need for suitable preparation of the sacraments over a period of time for all children *as far as their condition allows* (Ref 777) which includes children with special educational needs. The CCMS Special Educational Needs document (1997) indicates that pupils from a Catholic background attending special schools, should have access to Catholic religious education and sacramental instruction if desired by parents. The problem however, is that of identifying those with roles and responsibilities in schools and in parish, including the recognised authority, and can through appropriate partnership meet the needs of the children.

1.9 Conclusion

Chapter one was an investigation into current thinking in relation to provision for special educational needs. Although positive progress has been made following the 1944 Education Act a number of important questions were raised from the research namely,

- the impact of current legislation and the Code of Practice for Northern Ireland on educational provision for children with special needs
- access to religious education and collective worship as part of the school curriculum
- the significance of the parent, school and parish model for religious education
- structured programmes which meet the needs of Catholic children experiencing learning difficulties preparing for the sacraments.

Also glimpsed in the presentation of this chapter are certain inadequacies relating to these issues. Chapter two will therefore set out a research methodology and highlight appropriate research instruments to examine these matters with regard to provision for sacramental preparation for children who are placed at Stage five of the Code of Practice (DENI, 1998). It will focus on sacramental access and examine how these inadequacies impact on present educational practice.

Chapter Two

Research Methodology

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this research is to (a) identify current practice and (b) assess the perceptions of those directly and indirectly involved in the preparation for reception of the sacraments for children with special needs. To avoid any bias a process of triangulation was employed incorporating the research instruments of (a) a questionnaire and (b) an evaluative interview. This would assist in the research instrument identifying different perspectives and contradictions to sacramental preparation, and the subsequent implications such may have on children, parents and teachers. Bell (1993) defines this multi-method approach as

cross-checking the existence of certain phenomena and the veracity of individual accounts by gathering data from a number of sources and subsequently comparing and contrasting one account with another in order to produce as full and balanced a study as possible.

(Open University E811 Study Guide 1988:54 as cited in Bell 1993, p.64)

Cohen and Manion (1994) argue that in a combination approach, each method compliments the other, and, that the results of one assist in the planning the next. Combining independent, yet complimentary, research methods tends to strengthen the validity and reliability of data.

Parents and guardians of Catholic children attending Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD) and SLD schools in the BELB were contacted and invited to complete the questionnaire and expand on the questions outlined. The school community was also invited to respond. The principal, the religious education co-ordinator and teacher(s) responsible for sacramental classes were invited to participate in the evaluative interviews and questionnaire. Other participants who may not be directly involved in

sacramental preparation in schools, parish priests and school chaplains, CCMS, DAs from each diocese in Northern Ireland and the BELB were contacted and were invited to respond. It is hoped that this sample will provide a clear picture and yield a balanced and truly representative viewpoint. In order to ensure anonymity for parents and children, names employed are fictitious.

2.2 Design of Study

Along the continuum of research there are two poles, namely qualitative and quantitative. In order to judge which methodological approach is best suited it is considered important to have some appropriate knowledge of both approaches.

Quantitative research is the collecting of quantifiable data in order to prove or disprove a hypothesis, and, is used to produce accurate and reliable measurements that permit statistical analysis.

Qualitative research looks beyond statistical evidence, Silverman (1997) citing Bryman (1975) suggests that,

the most fundamental characteristic of qualitative research is its express commitment to viewing events, action, norms, values etc. from the perspective of the people who are being studied. (p.64)

To achieve a balanced analysis of the different perspectives of the groups involved in this research, it was considered that the research instrument of a questionnaire supported by an evaluative interview were likely to prove most effective in achieving this.

The methodology has been sub-divided into the following for ease of reference:

- Survey sampling.
- Administration of questionnaire.
- Questionnaire design.
- Evaluative interviews.

➤ Data collection and analysis.

A qualitative research methodological approach to identifying perceptions and employing the instrument of a questionnaire supported and evaluative interview was used.

However there are some concerns with this approach to research. It is concerned with the respondent's story and as Miller and Glassner in Silverman (1997) suggest levels of representation may occur from the first experience of the event through to the writing of the report. Furthermore the interviewer may have an adverse effect on the respondent's responses, which may alter the shape of the story. Yet as Silverman (1997 p.103) citing Denzin in Schmitt (1993:130) points out *there is no way to stuff a real-live person between the two covers of a text* but it is possible to provide a fair and truthful account of the respondent's life experiences.

2.3 Surveying Sample

Originally it was intended to circulate the questionnaires to all SLD schools only within Northern Ireland, concentrating the focus on children experiencing severe learning difficulties. This proved to be inappropriate, given the limited number of SLD schools and the constraints of time and travel to wide ranging areas within the five ELBs. The choice of sample was taken from the special schools in the BELB to act as a representation sample of the perceptions of parents and schools within Northern Ireland. Although CCMS representatives and DAs from each diocese in Northern Ireland were part of the target group as it was considered important to secure feedback from a wider audience. The sample of priests involved in preparing children for the sacraments came from the Diocese of Down and Connor within the boundaries

of the BELB, who were associated with the schools selected, either as parish priests, curates or school chaplains.

The special schools identified within the BELB with children ranging from four to nineteen years were selected. The schools listed cover the controlled and maintained sector of the Board. A number of schools were purposely excluded from the selected sample. The Belfast Hospital School was omitted from the sample because it caters specifically for children in hospital for varying lengths of time depending on their stay in hospital. Greenwood House Assessment Centre is a co-educational controlled special school providing *an intensive programme of assessment, teaching and therapy for children with educational needs* (2001-2002, p.3) as outlined in the School Prospectus. The children aged four to seven attend for a period of one year, which may be extended to two years maximum. Therefore Greenwood House Assessment Centre may not have the opportunity to cater for children at sacramental ages. The principal however expressed a wish to be included in the sample and gave a clear indication that the school, if asked by parents, would become involved in helping children prepare for the sacraments of Penance and Communion. Teachers in previous years had helped children memorise prayers as part of the preparation programme and photographs of the sacramental celebrations were displayed in the school.

This small-scale survey considers the perceptions and experiences of a targeted group of people involved in special education and includes those from a Catholic background associated with the spiritual and sacramental development of children. In this study a *purposive* sample as described by Cohen and Manion (1994, p.89) was chosen as an appropriate research method. The target group focused upon Catholic parents and children in respect of children's religious development and from whom data could be elicited in respect of children experiencing special needs thus

recognising a sample. It is hoped that a collective response to the questionnaire will provide an insight into their thinking and attitudes on sacramental preparation for children experiencing special needs.

2.4 Administration of Questionnaire

As noted above, postal questionnaires were used for the purpose of this study.

Frequently, the postal questionnaire is the best form of survey in an educational survey.

(Cohen and Manion, 1994, p.94).

Best (1977) argues that they are also the most criticised. He refers to respondent's *contempt* (Best 1977, p.157) at having to complete long, time consuming questionnaires where questions may often be ambiguous which inevitably leads to a poor return. Yet Cohen and Manion (1994) counter argue that there exists

a myth about postal questionnaires and verify that response levels are not invariably less than those obtained by interview procedures; frequently they equal, and in some cases surpass, those achieved in interviews. (p.96)

Acknowledging this argument it was still considered necessary to support questionnaires with evaluative interviews to ensure a more balanced perception from those involved in the research.

Questionnaires were circulated to the parents and staff of the special schools within the BELB which for the purpose of this research will be reflected in corresponding agencies; parish priests, school chaplains, CCMS, DAs from each diocese in Northern Ireland and the BELB. A covering letter was attached to all questionnaires (Appendix 3). The letters addressed to those identified, were different, as some of the recipients only required one questionnaire. The questionnaires for the schools were sent together requesting that principals make contact with interested parents whose children have been and/or are involved in sacramental preparation classes. The covering letter indicated the aim of the research and included clear instructions for returning the

questionnaires giving a specific return date and reply-paid envelopes. The date of return differed as it was considered necessary to give the schools sufficient time to distribute and collect the questionnaires from parents.

In total 96 questionnaires were distributed. The first mail distribution did not provide an overall 40% representation as suggested by Bell (1993) and Cohen and Manion (1994), although the response from agencies outside the schools involved was very high, 82%, nine out of eleven returns.

2.4.1 Questionnaire Design

Pilot questionnaires were initially distributed to a sample number of parents, priests and educationalists known to the researcher. The aim of this exercise was to ensure that a select number of representatives were involved in the process and provide feedback to confirm the appropriateness of the approach. The questionnaires were revised over six stages of piloting.

2.4.2 Piloting

Bell (1993) and Cohen and Manion (1994) stress the value of careful piloting. In devising the questionnaire it was considered important to ensure that the respondents were motivated to answer questions and felt uninhibited in expressing their perceptions. As a result two questionnaires were devised. Questionnaire one (Appendix 1) was designed for the parents of children experiencing learning difficulties, referring to *my child*, as it was considered important they feel the questions were directed towards their particular experiences as careers. In Questionnaire two (Appendix 2) the questions referred to *children experiencing learning difficulties* as the respondents may have a wider range of contact with children experiencing MLD, SLD and/or PMLD. Bell (1999) emphasises that the wording of the questions should be the same and for the purpose of this study it was

considered necessary to design two questionnaires, thus addressing the experiences of the respondents and ensure maximum response.

Piloting began four weeks before the questionnaires were distributed to allow for review, modification and reconstruction before distribution. As suggested by Cohen and Manion (1994) and Bell (1993) it was considered necessary to ensure viability therefore questionnaires were accompanied by a series of questions. Thus inviting the respondents to examine the length of time it took to complete the questionnaire, the clarity of wording particularly for questionnaire one, ensuring that questions did not overlap thus eliciting the same response, the layout was easy and attractive, that questions were in sequence and whether anything significant was omitted for distribution. Davidson (1970) as cited in Cohen and Manion (1994) states that the ideal questionnaire should be

Clear, unambiguous and uniformly workable...a questionnaire has to help in engaging interest, encouraging (people's) co-operation, and eliciting answers as close as possible to the truth. (p.92)

A number of relevant issues were developed as a result of the piloting. The number of questions was increased from twenty-six to twenty-seven as question eight was divided into two, asking respondents about the right to choose schools for children. From the piloting it was observed that questions be arranged into a set sequence to make the questionnaire clearer for respondents to address the issues and then move systematically across them. The sixth piloting suggested that a number of open-ended questions be included. However it was felt unnecessary, as this was the purpose of the second instrument namely the evaluative interviews. Cohen and Manion (1994) argue against the use of open-ended questions as they take more time to complete and are deemed a *less satisfactory way of eliciting information* (p.94). It was considered more important that respondents provided a synopsis of their views, which would be best achieved through a series of quick replies to a set of structured questions in order to

gauge perceptions. The views of children experiencing learning difficulties are also significant and therefore parents/guardians were asked to complete the questionnaire with their children where appropriate.

As far as the child's level of maturity and understanding will allow, all reasonable efforts should be made to ascertain the views of the child or young person about his or her own learning difficulties and education.

(Code of Practice (NI) 1998, p.10)

The questionnaire examined peoples' perceptions and therefore it was considered that the Lickert five-point scale was the most productive method to gauge responses referring to, *strongly agree, agree, don't know, disagree and strongly disagree*. In the original pilot the answers included *uncertain* as part of the range however this was thought to be misleading and the phrase *don't know* was deemed more suitable. It was presumed that this simple combination of questions and answers would maximise the number and quality of responses.

2.4.3 Design

The aim of a questionnaire as defined by Bell (1993) is

to obtain answers to the same questions from a large number of individuals to enable the researcher not only to describe but compare, to relate one characteristic to another and to demonstrate that certain features exist in certain categories. (p.10)

Therefore the questionnaire was sub-divided into five sections:

- Access
- Sacramental preparation
- Structure
- Individual
- Social

2.4.4 Access

Within this section the principal objective was to determine what access children experiencing learning difficulties have to the sacraments and preparation classes. This section comprised seven questions ranging across the concepts of facilities and resources open to children in the school and parish were appropriate, to meet their specific needs and if this had any impact on their right to choose. Question number seven was a direct quote from the Declaration of Human Rights (1948) encouraging respondents to consider the broader picture and the implications of this document for children experiencing learning difficulties receiving the sacraments. Response to the question could also indicate an absence of knowledge and understanding concerning the Declaration.

2.4.5 Sacramental Preparation

Within this section the overall attitude of respondents to sacramental preparation was sought and in particular views on where this should take place having most benefit for the children involved. A question inviting respondents to consider that sacramental preparation may be seen as discriminating between children was purposefully set to facilitate development to a question on whether the child's local parish school should have responsibility for preparation classes. It also aimed to study the views of teachers working within the controlled sector in special schools where this may be problematic for some classes. The last two questions in this section asked respondents to choose between the local parish and the special school's parish for sacraments. This may be a concern for a number of parents living large distances from their child's placement school under the statement of Special Educational Needs (Code of Practice Northern Ireland 1998).

2.4.6 Structure

The researcher wished to ascertain whether or not communication is forthcoming between the key partners namely, the special school and surrounding parish, the local parish school and surrounding parish and the Bishop of the diocese. Although the parents form part of this partnership this section examines the links between those working in the school and parish communities. The final question in this section focused on how the parish attends to the needs of children experiencing learning difficulties, which may cause an emotional response from respondents.

2.4.7 Individual

It was considered important to evaluate how the schools and the local parishes could meet individual children's needs. The attention of this set of questions focused on the individual child and how the current sacramental programmes were structured and implemented to meet their different needs. Question 24 was intended to encourage the respondents to consider the level of spiritual understanding a child experiencing learning difficulties may have, and how this is addressed.

2.4.8 Social

The social needs of children experiencing learning difficulties and their families is a key issue and therefore three questions relating to the social needs of each child was included as part of this survey. Questions 25-27 focus on whether or not these are addressed particularly in the liturgical life of the church.

2.5 Evaluative Interviews

A set of preliminary interviews with principals and teachers working in special schools proved useful in helping to identify issues and in narrowing the focus of the

research question. These did not form part of the evaluative interviews, which were used in support of the questionnaire and were conducted after the first returns.

To establish a broad and unbiased range of responses, evaluative interviews were drawn from parents, schools and outside agencies (Appendix 4). Bell (1993) advocates interviews as a valid research tool as

the interview can yield rich material and can often put flesh on the bones of questionnaire responses. (p.91)

Individual interviews were therefore held to clarify and expand upon the answers received from the questionnaires. Interviews with parents and members of staff were conducted during directed time in the school. Principals, where possible, made accommodation for interviews to take place during school hours. For respondents from outside agencies, interviews were held at a time and place convenient to the interviewee. For reasons of practicality one interview was undertaken by telephone.

The primary aim of each interview was to elicit purposeful responses from the interviewees. Silverman (1997) outlines a number of distinct problems in the interviewing process namely, social distance, lack of trust, misunderstanding of the questions asked and where the respondents may purposely mislead the interviewer. Efforts were therefore made not to ask leading questions or to influence the answers given. In respect to the perceived need of the interviewee to be comfortable with the process, the variation in wording did not detract from the purpose of the question. In some instances the interviewee partly answered questions before they were asked in which case prompts were made to define answers and alternate follow-up questions came from these. Non-directive prompts were also used to check understanding, confirm responses and clarify opinions.

Cohen (1976) in Bell (1993) uses the analogy of a fishing trip to stress the importance of careful planning and preparation for each interview,

like fishing, interviewing is an activity requiring careful preparation, much patience, and considerable practice if the eventual reward is to be a worthwhile catch. (p.92)

It was therefore considered important to pilot the questions for the interviews. A series of questions were drafted and given to three different respondents involved in education and/or religious formation of young people. Questions were changed according to their responses. This process helped to minimise the amount of bias by carefully drafting and formulating relevant questions yet allowing for some degree of flexibility. As argued by Kitwood (1977) in Cohen and Manion (1994)

the more the interviewer becomes rational, calculating and detached, the less likely the interview is to be perceived as a friendly transaction, and the more calculated the response also is likely to be. (p.282)

By using a variety of open-ended questions in contrast to the more closed questions in the questionnaire it was possible to be more flexible, to probe respondents, to clarify any misunderstanding regarding any specific questions, to engage in a conversation which helped to relax the respondent and gain a deeper insight into their thoughts and experiences. As Kitwood (1977) cited in Cohen and Manion explains

if the interviewer does his job well (establishes rapport, asks questions in an acceptable manner etc.), and if the respondent is sincere and well-motivated, accurate data may be obtained. (p.274)

In each interview the respondent was given the opportunity to have the session recorded on tape for easier analysis. As suggested by Cohen and Manion (1994) *listening to the interview for a sense of the whole (p.293)* was deemed valuable. The recording was therefore used to correlate and categorise various themes and if respondents agreed to note exact quotations in the research report. For those who

choose not to have the interview recorded, notes were taken during and after, in order to record the data as precisely as possible. The interviews conducted followed guidelines outlined by Tuckman (1972) in Cohen and Manion (1994). A brief introduction and statement was given to make the respondent feel at ease, summarising the nature and purpose of the exercise. The respondent was also given the choice to either have the interview recorded on tape or for the researcher to make notes throughout the session.

2.6 Data Collection and Analysis

No coding system was used in the administration of these questionnaires in an attempt to respect the confidentiality of the respondents and to assist the percentage of return. However due to the amount of questionnaires given to schools in comparison with other respondents it can be noted that those returned in large envelopes belonged to the parents and staff members of the selected schools. Questionnaire one is distinctly marked parents for ease of reference. In an attempt to maximise response rates principals of schools and outside agencies were contacted by telephone to explain the purpose of the research and to advise them of the forthcoming questionnaire.

The information from the data collected, reflective of the triangulation approach employed, was divided into three sections namely,

1. Parents
2. Schools including principals, religious co-ordinators and teachers
3. Outside agencies including priests, DAs, CCMS and Religious Advisers from the BELB

2.7 Conclusion

This study sets out to investigate the perceptions and experiences of parents, teachers, principals and others working with children experiencing special needs involved in receiving the sacraments of Penance, Eucharist and Confirmation.

In order to gather and analyse information a qualitative approach was employed. The research instruments included the use of questionnaires and evaluative interviews to ascertain respondent's perceptions and to provide a balanced view. As expressed by Miller and Glassner in Silverman (1997)

those of us who aim to understand and document others' understanding choose qualitative interviewing because it provides us with a means for exploring the points of view of our research subjects, while granting these points of view the culturally honoured status of reality. (p.100)

And as Charmaz (1995) in Miller and Glassner in Silverman (1997) states *we start with the experiencing person and try to share his or her subjective view. (p.100)*

In chapter three the findings of the research will be analysed and will support and conclusions drawn in Chapter Four.

Chapter Three

Analysis and Discussion of Results

3.1 Introduction

The results of the research are detailed below and the findings of the questionnaire and evaluative interviews carried out with three groups can be viewed in Appendix 1, 2 and 4. The results represent the findings from a sample group of parents, teachers and other participants who may be directly involved, parish priests and school chaplains and also those indirectly involved, CCMS, DAs from each diocese in Northern Ireland and the BELB in the sacramental process in schools and parishes.

The results for analysis have been divided into the following sections:

- Analysis of the postal questionnaire
- Analysis of Evaluative Interviews
- Conclusion

3.2 Analysis of the postal questionnaire

The survey response rate was 56% (n=54) and according to Cohen and Manion (1994) this validates the study, *a well-planned postal survey should obtain at least a 40 per cent response rate...* (p.98). A follow up letter to schools was used to maximise the response rate. Table one shows both the number and percentage of returns from each of the target groups.

	Schools	Parents	Outside agents
Number of posted Questionnaires	35	50	11
Number of Questionnaires Returned	19	26	9
Percentage of Returns	54%	52%	82%

Table 1 the percentage of questionnaires returned by each sample

3.2.1 Demographic Information

The special schools in the Belfast Education and Library Boards were selected as part of the sample. However as discussed in Chapter 2 (p.27) the Belfast Hospital School was excluded, as it caters for children attending the Royal Hospital for Sick Children. Two other schools Greenwood Assessment Centre and Saint Francis De Salles also chose not to become involved in this research project. Greenwood Assessment Centre provides educational experiences for approximately 58 children, age ranging between 4 and 7 for one year, however in some cases this may be extended to a second year. Although the school does teach religion the principal indicated that it does not offer programmes for sacramental preparation. Saint Francis De Salles is a maintained school for hearing impaired, providing educational opportunities for approximately 15 children and also has nursery facilities. The principal chose not to become involved in this research as the children are placed in alternative schools after a short period of time.

Eight schools in the BELB took part in the survey, two of these schools, Oakwood School and Assessment Centre and Glenveagh School, provide for children experiencing SLD. Oakwood School and Assessment Centre accommodates almost 65 children in Key Stage one (age 4-8) whereas Glenveagh has a capacity for 136 children ranging from Key Stage two to Key Stage four (age 8-19). It was considered that parents from these schools would provide a breadth of experience of all three sacraments, Penance, Communion and Confirmation. The target group for this research is members of the Catholic denomination. Whereas the local parish school will be a Catholic school staffed by committed Catholic teachers, the special schools will have staff of many denominations. Staff in the special schools who were not of the Catholic faith were not excluded, and indeed as they work directly

with the children in a truly EMU environment, were openly offered the opportunity to engage with the research. In order to ensure anonymity for parents and children, names employed are fictitious.

The postal questionnaire was designed using a five point Likert scale. To assist analysis it was considered important to take each section in order, as outlined in Chapter Two, and total the number of agreements (including *strongly agree* and *agree*) within the three groups of respondents. The results are displayed in the tables below and give an indication of where differences in opinion may occur.

3.2.2 Sacramental Access

The following information details the results regarding items 1-7 on children's access to sacramental preparation classes and the facilities and resources available.

Statement	Total number in agreement to issue	Parents	Schools	Outside agents
1. Your child should have the same right of access to the sacraments with any other child in the parish school.	52 96%	24/26 92%	19/19 100%	9/9 100%
2. Facilities and resources available to teach children experiencing profound and multiple learning difficulties pose a problem for the parish school.	39 72%	15/26 58%	16/19 84%	8/9 89%
3. Facilities and resources available to teach children experiencing profound and multiple learning difficulties pose a problem for the special school.	15 28%	3/26 12%	7/19 37%	5/9 56%
4. Your choice was restricted due to a lack of opportunities in either the local parish or in the school.	16 30%	9/26 35%	3/19 16%	4/9 44%
5. Your child who has already been baptised is entitled to be an altar server.	40 74%	14/26 54%	17/19 89%	9/9 100%
6. Your child is entitled to receive the Blessed sacrament at home.	42 78%	20/26 77%	17/19 89%	5/9 56%
7. Article 18 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. <i>Everyone has the right either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.</i>	52 96%	24/26 92%	19/19 100%	9/9 100%

Table 2 Agreed responses to items 1-7

Discussion

Concerning item 1, there was a high percentage 96% (n=52) of respondents from all three groups who *agreed* that children experiencing learning difficulties have equal right to the sacraments. Therefore respondents generally feel that regardless of where the children are prepared, or where the services are held, all children are entitled to receive the sacraments of the Catholic Church.

Although schools from all sectors tend to criticize lack of funding for curriculum areas, it was generally agreed that facilities and resources posed less of a problem in the special schools 28% (n=15) than in the mainstream parish schools 72% (n=39). This may have an effect on parental choice and the mainstream school's ability to provide for children experiencing learning difficulties in relation to the sacraments. However parents were divided on the issue of choice, 13 disagreed suggesting that they felt the opportunities in the parish school were not necessarily different to those offered in the special school. Nine of the parents were concerned about the lack of opportunities offered by the mainstream school while two were unsure. The majority of teachers were unsure or showed concern 30% (n=16) about the lack of opportunities offered while a balanced number of those working outside the school either agreed n=4 that parental choice was restricted or disagreed n=3.

Item 5 is concerned with respondents' opinion on whether children experiencing learning difficulties should be welcomed to serve Mass alongside the priest. Although a significant majority agreed 74% (n=40), one teacher commented that it '*depends on (the child's) specific difficulty*', which was reinforced by a parent who disagreed stating that, *it would not be practical or my personal choice*. Consequently there may be valid reasons why some children experiencing learning difficulties do not choose to become altar servers, although as baptised members of

the Church they are entitled to do so. Parents and teachers have articulated concerns about bringing children experiencing learning difficulties to Mass due to the reaction of others in the church. They express genuine feelings of anxiety and embarrassment if the child is unable to remain quiet throughout the celebration and if he/she is physically unable or in some cases refuses to receive the Eucharist.

Item 6 suggests that children experiencing learning difficulties should be entitled to receive the Eucharist at home as is common practice for other members of the community who may be ill or are unable to attend Mass. A significant majority of respondents agreed 78% (n=42) however one parent stated quite strongly that,

my son attends Mass with the family. He makes noises and can distract (others) at times during the Mass. Normally no more than the average toddler. I have had comments at times where the priest greeting people after Mass (has said) "I heard Mark before I seen (saw) him". I have also had it mentioned on one occasion "maybe its time to have Mark receive the sacraments at home".

I disagree I feel Mark is entitled to attend chapel with all the family. We do not go every week but we attend the same Mass and sit on the same seat as Mark needs things to be familiar and consistent. I know the congregation nearby don't mind. This has paid off as Mark is now very quiet and will now sit, stand and respond at his own level, especially at the sign of peace.

One teacher also disagreed commenting that a child experiencing learning difficulties should only receive the Eucharist at home if he/she is sick, suggesting that the child should be part of the celebration in the Church with the parish community.

Item 7 highlights the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). A significant majority of respondents agreed 96% (n=52) and of this 41 strongly agreed suggesting that mainstream opinion acknowledges the rights of everyone, including children experiencing learning difficulties to, manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance (Article 18 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, 1948) publicly or privately.

3.2.3 Sacramental Preparation

The data detailed below outlines respondents' opinion on the responsibility of preparing children experiencing learning difficulties for the sacraments and where preparation for these should take place.

Statement	Total number in agreement to issue	Parents	Schools	Outside Agents
8.It is your wish that the special school would provide sacramental preparation as part of the RE programme.	46 85%	21/26 81%	16/19 84%	9/9 100%
9.Your baptised child is entitled to attend sacramental preparation in your parish or parish cluster.	45 83%	17/26 65%	19/19 100%	9/9 100%
10.Your parish should provide support for your child in conjunction with preparation for the sacraments in school.	48 89%	20/26 77%	19/19 100%	9/9 100%
11.Parents are willing to play an active role in helping their parish set up appropriate structures to prepare for the sacraments.	28 52%	14/26 54%	9/19 47%	5/9 56%
12.Sacramental preparation classes in special schools could be seen as discriminating between children and should be left solely to parishes.	6 11%	4/26 15%	1/19 5%	1/9 11%
13.Parents and children have the right to choose to be prepared for the sacraments in the parish school.	24 44%	7/26 27%	12/19 63%	5/9 56%
14. Parents and children have the right to choose to be prepared for the sacraments in the parish in which the special school is based.	35 65%	12/26 46%	16/19 84%	7/9 78%

Table 3 Responses to items 8-14

Discussion

In relation to item 8 and 9 a high majority of respondents 85% (n=46) agreed that the special school should provide sacramental programmes for Catholic children while 83% (n= 45) suggested that children experiencing learning difficulties are also entitled to attend preparation classes in the children's parish. All the schools

involved in this survey from the BELB have sacramental programmes for the children. In relation to this issue 19% (n=5) expressed that they did not know if the parents wanted their child's school to provide programmes and 30% (n=7) disagreed or were uncertain about joining the child's parish for sacramental classes. One parent suggested that it depended on the needs and choice of the child and the parents. Yet, none of the parents from the sample disagreed with sacramental preparation classes in the special school religious curriculum, which is in direct contrast to two teachers who suggested that the special school should not necessarily provide programmes. One of the teachers commented that it *depends on whether or not it is considered that staff should do this*. As sacramental preparation does not form part of the religion syllabus in controlled schools it may be that, Catholic teachers in the school are given the added task of organising and implementing programmes outside the school timetable. Mainstream teachers from the parish school may also feel that there is an added burden on them to accept children from the special school for sacramental preparation.

In the study over 89% (n=48) of respondents felt that the parish should provide support in conjunction with school based preparations and in the case of teachers and outside agents there was a 100% agreement (n=19, n=9). This is a significant response rate and indicates the strength of feeling among respondents that catechesis for sacramental preparation should be parish led. It is interesting to note that only 52% (n=28) of the respondents from the three groups agreed that parents were willing to take an active role in helping the parish organise appropriate programmes for children experiencing learning difficulties. It is fair to say that although parish programmes are indeed very important, it is often difficult for many priests and parish representatives to plan and implement programmes without full assistance

from parents and others who work with children experiencing learning difficulties. Clergy and religious who may have little or no experience of working with such groups could therefore feel intimidated and anxious about doing so. One parent stated clearly that *parents of children without learning difficulties expect this provision and often do not play an active role. We should expect this provision.* The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales *Valuing difference* (1998) reinforces this suggesting that

this is a particular priority for families in which there is a child with a disability; they should have first call on parish time and energy.
(p.20)

Such parents may themselves be expecting much from the school and the parish whilst they themselves may be lapse practitioners. Another parent however commented that there were issues of concern when organising parish based programmes for children experiencing learning difficulties including, *vetting procedures and lack of specialist knowledge* in the areas of *spirituality and disability*, adding that, *although there are a lot of good willed people, knowledge and experience of working with children experiencing learning difficulties is important.* A model of community cooperation between parents and parish representatives may be a positive way forward.

Regarding item 12 respondents clearly disagreed with the statement that, sacramental programmes for Catholic children attending special schools was considered discriminating, only 11% (n=6) agreed. One teacher suggested that *yes it does discriminate but that it should not be left to the parish*, she adds,

Why does the Catholic Church not recognise the right of Baptised Catholics with learning difficulties to receive a Catholic Education in a Catholic school i.e. why are there no CCMS schools for children with severe learning difficulties?

This is a sensitive issue whereby schools for the majority of Catholic children experiencing moderate and severe learning difficulties are part of the controlled sector. In contrast to this a comment from one of the parents suggests that religion classes and in particular sacramental preparation classes provide, a *perfect opportunity for exploring different cultures and religions, while promoting greater understanding and acceptance* (of one another). As discussed in Chapter One (p.15 and 16), EMU is part of the special school's ethos and the results indicate that the majority of respondents do not see sacramental preparation classes as having a negative effect on individual children or on the whole school.

Items 13 and 14 are concerned with parental choice for receiving the sacraments. Over 44% (n=24) of respondents suggested that parents and children had the right to choose the local parish school for sacramental preparation while 65% (n=35) agreed with their right to choose the parish connected with the special school. This may suggest that respondents felt that the children, having been prepared in their own school, would benefit from receiving the sacraments in their school's parish with their peers.

3.2.4 Structure

This section of the questionnaire is concerned with respondents' perceptions on the level of communication between the key partners involved in sacramental preparation.

Statement	Total number in agreement to issue	Parents	Schools	Outside Agents
15. Some communication between the local parish and the special school would be useful.	46 85%	19/6 73%	18/19 95%	9/9 100%
16. Some communication between the local parish <i>school</i> and the special school would be useful.	47 87%	21/26 81%	18/19 95%	8/9 89%
17. Bearing in mind a Bishop's responsibility for the spiritual welfare of all children in his diocese, do you think that there should be strong links with the special school?	52 96%	25/26 96%	18/19 95%	9/9 100%
18. The local parish promotes good working relationships between all of its members in particular children experiencing learning difficulties.	23 43%	9/26 35%	9/19 47%	5/9 56%
19. The local parish does not promote programmes to meet the spiritual needs of the child experiencing learning difficulties.	20 37%	13/26 50%	4/19 21%	3/9 33%

Table 4 Responses to items 15-19

Discussion

Items 15 and 16 confirm the idea that communication is an important factor in preparing children for the sacrament. A majority of respondents felt that interaction between the child's parish and the special school 85% (n=46) and between the local parish school and the special school 87% (n=47) was valuable. However one parent simply asks the question *why?* in response to item 16, suggesting that communication between the child's special school and the local parish school is not essential in order for the child to receive the sacraments.

Respondents from all three groups were asked whether they felt the Bishop should maintain strong links with the special schools in his diocese, to which a significant majority agreed 96% (n=52). One teacher commented that considering his responsibility for the spiritual welfare of all Catholics within his diocese *he should see that these pupils are entitled to be educated in a CCMS school.*

Items 18 and 19 focus on parish programmes which promote good working relationships between members and which meet the spiritual needs of all parishioners, particularly those experiencing learning difficulties. A majority of respondents 73% (n=34) had some concerns about whether parish programmes met the needs of children experiencing learning difficulties and 67% (n=31) had concerns about their relationships with the parish clergy, *I have always made initial contact* stated one parent, but in order to receive the sacraments *I had to go out of the parish to be accommodated.*

3.2.5 Individual

The data detailed below outlines opinion on how individual children's requirements are met by the schools and local parish. It also highlights respondents' attitudes to the distinct needs of children experiencing learning difficulties in relation to their faith.

Statement	Total number in agreement to issue	Parents	Schools	Outside Agents
20.Existing preparation programmes in <i>special school</i> do not meet the needs of children experiencing learning difficulties because the level of work is too difficult.	16 30%	11/26 42%	3/19 16%	2/9 22%
21. Existing preparation programmes in the <i>parish school</i> do not meet the needs of children experiencing learning difficulties because the level of work is too difficult.	22 41%	11/26 42%	8/19 42%	3/9 33%
22.Seven/eight years of age is an appropriate age in all instances to receive the sacraments of penance and communion.	25 46%	16/26 62%	6/19 32%	3/9 33%
23.A child experiencing learning difficulties is able to receive the sacrament under one species (bread or wine).	35 65%	19/26 73%	10/19 53%	6/9 67%
24.I believe that children experiencing learning difficulties are capable of a deep sense of God that is often misunderstood.	38 70%	18/26 69%	13/19 68%	7/9 78%

Table 5 Responses to items 20-24

Discussion

In relation to items 20 and 21 results show that respondents were of the opinion that the programmes taught in the special school were more likely to meet the needs of children with special needs. This may be due to the fact that the mainstream school does not have to provide for a large number of children experiencing learning difficulties and therefore does not imply that the mainstream school could not offer a developed programme for sacramental catechesis for these children. As a

respondent from CCMS suggests *these are usually adapted to meet the needs of all children*. As The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (1998) points out,

The most important feature is not so much expert adaptation of catechetical materials, though that is needed, but active involvement in a group of loving and caring people who enable someone with a learning disability to experience what the sacrament means. (p.22)

It is interesting to note that in respect of the two questions the response percentage of parents was equal 42% (n=11), suggesting that almost half of this group were content with the existing programmes or did not know if the programme in the special school 16% (n=3) or in the parish school 32% (n=6) would meet the needs of their child.

In the case of the parish school programmes, parents may not have had any reason to examine preparation programmes in their parish school, particularly if the special school that their child attends offers sacramental classes. It is important therefore that existing good practice within the BELB and the diocese of Down and Connor is acknowledged and recognised, ensuring that the future development of sacramental programmes for children experiencing learning difficulties is appropriate and realistic and that such information would also provide positive feedback to each teacher.

Chapter One (p.20) highlights the recent change in the Down and Connor Diocese's age for children receiving the sacraments of Penance and Communion. Children from this diocese, which includes special schools in the BELB, receive the sacrament of Penance in primary three (6/7 years old) and the sacrament of Communion in primary four (7/8 years old). In this study over half 54% (n=29) of overall respondents suggested that this change in age should be reconsidered, although 62% (n=16) of parents considered it a suitable age for all children to receive the sacraments of Penance and Communion. From this perspective it would

seem acceptable to think that this group of parents want their child to receive the sacraments at the same age as all other children.

Item 23 reconfirms the idea that all children are entitled to receive Communion as 65% (n=35) suggested that children experiencing learning difficulties should be able to receive Communion under the species of bread and/or wine. One parent commented, *I had to approach the parish priest to work out a solution to meet Mary's needs*, suggesting that parents and parish clergy need to communicate to ensure that children experiencing learning difficulties are given the opportunity to choose, particularly if they are unable to receive the host in its entirety or not at all.

The document *Valuing Difference* (1998) highlights the importance of the community and the individual in preparation for the sacraments.

People with learning disabilities may need assistance from those who understand and know them well enough to recognise their faith and desire, which is often very deep and intuitive. (p.19 and 20)

A 70% (n=38) majority reported that children experiencing learning difficulties were capable of a deep sense of God that may be misunderstood. One parent reported *my child has a deep sense of God that is understood* in contrast to a teacher who stated *I feel this would depend on the age of the child*. This is an important issue and there are obvious differences of opinion, as indicated from the above comments, which will be explored further in the evaluative interviews.

3.2.6 Social Aspects

The last section of the questionnaire relates specifically to the social needs of children experiencing learning difficulties and their families.

Statement	Total number in agreement to issue	Parents	Schools	Outside Agents
25.Children experiencing learning difficulties find it difficult to form friendships with children from the local parish because he/she is educated in a different area.	29 54%	17/26 65%	8/19 42%	4/9 44%
26.It is important for the child experiencing learning difficulties to feel that he/she has an opportunity to take an active role in the liturgy and in the life of the parish.	41 76%	16/26 62%	17/19 89%	8/9 89%
27.Your parish clergy ensure that children experiencing learning difficulties are welcome to take an active part in the celebration of Mass on Sunday and on other special occasions throughout the year.	33 61%	19/26 73%	8/19 42%	6/9 67%

Table 6 Responses to items 25-27

Discussion

The issue of forming friendships in your own community whilst attending school in a different area can be a complex one. One respondent suggested that this is *the same argument used against Catholic education to promote integrated education* and as one teacher pointed out much *depends on the child, the family and their sense of community*. Out of those surveyed 65% (n=17) of parents felt that their child did have difficulty forming friendships with others in the parish community as they did not attend the local parish school and their own school friends often lived long distances away, making it difficult to arrange contact time outside of school hours. This correlates with the analysis of item 26 indicated by the strength of feeling among respondents 76% (n=41) on how important active communication and involvement is in the life and liturgy of the parish. A positive response was indicated by all of the

respondents 61% (n=33) that a significant number of parish priests throughout the diocese ensure that all children are welcomed to take an active part in liturgical celebrations.

3.2.7 Summary

The issues that have arisen from the questionnaire analysis have determined the nature and substance of the follow up interview questions. Therefore, the evaluative interviews will focus specifically on the five areas from the questionnaire.

3.3 Analysis of Evaluative Interviews

On the basis of the questionnaire response 56 % (n=54), nine interview schedules were subsequently arranged. As Cohen and Manion (1994) point out one of the advantages of the interview, as a research tool is that it *allows for greater depth than is the case with other methods of data collection* (p. 272). Therefore it was considered important to support the data collected from the questionnaire with follow up interviews.

3.3.1 Demographic Information

The nine interviewees were selected from each of the three groups of respondents to the questionnaire. They were selected as Silverman (1993) cited in Silverman (1997 p.100) argues to, *generate data which give an authentic insight into people's experiences*. In order to get breadth and balance the interviewees were selected according to their experience and expertise. A larger number of interviewees were therefore selected from group three those directly or indirectly involved in preparation programmes as they had a wider range of experience within their own discipline. To gain a broad perspective of different experiences the following were chosen for interview,

- (i) two teachers from special schools in the BELB;

- (ii) two parents, one whose child attends a special school in the BELB and the other whose child is over 19 years, having completed her formal education;
- (iii) two priests who have had experience of working with children with special needs one as a former chaplain to a special school and the other as a parish priest;
- (iv) two DAs from the Down and Connor Diocese currently working with schools in the BELB; and
- (v) a senior official within CCMS associated with special needs, who indicated that the interview was offered in a personal capacity.

This later information is offered to address the ethical concerns and constraints experienced in this research.

3.3.2 Interview Schedule

Due to a number of demands all interviews were held at a time and place convenient to the interviewees. To ensure that the proper focus was maintained each interview question reminded the respondent to give owned opinions and elaborate on answers from the questionnaire. The same conditions, as far as possible, were maintained throughout each interview regarding the pace of questioning and the recording of comments. Each respondent was briefed on these conditions and agreed to the researcher taking notes during the interview. The possibility of a tape recording was discussed, 25% (n=2) of the respondents agreed to have the interview taped while the remainder preferred a written record.

3.3.3 Sacramental Access

The two questions relating to sacramental access focus on resources and facilities available for children experiencing learning difficulties and on respondents' perspective of Article 18 in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights (1948).

The data from the questionnaire indicated that 72% (n=39) respondents were of the opinion that facilities and resources in the special school were of a high standard. Information gathered from the evaluative interviews would suggest that respondents valued the class teacher from both schools as *the greatest resource*, as indicated by both DAs and the parish priest. It appeared that many of the programmes for children experiencing difficulties had to be adopted to meet pupils' needs, which as one of the teachers interviewed stated *the present Alive-O and Children of God programmes are too difficult and I have to create new worksheets each year for the children* while the other teacher pointed out that,

oral and visual booklets have to be produced which involves a lot of time spent in consultation with each of the children's class teachers, as the parents like to see written work as part of their sacramental programme.

The DAs agree that *more work needs to be done in this area* but also indicated that with their ever-increasing workload it is difficult to find time and resources.

One parent interviewed was quite irate and made the point that her child's school did not provide a sacramental programme and therefore no contact was made until the child was nine years old, when they were the age to receive the sacraments of Penance and Communion. The diocese at this stage offered a ten-week programme for the parents and the child, which took place approximately twenty miles away on a Saturday morning. Although the classes were well organised the decision was taken by the Diocesan Committee that First Communion take place in November in yet another parish 10 miles away which, as the parent pointed out

It was not our home parish and she (her daughter) did not know any of the others. The timing was also problematic as it was freezing cold for the children to wear communion dresses and the committee was waiting until they gathered a number of children with learning difficulties so they could have it on the same day.

This is not an ideal situation but was the only option available at the time. As the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (1998) highlights the Eucharistic celebration is *for the community of the faithful, the sign and sacrament of unity* (p.21) however, in this case the concept of community was lacking. Although this question generated much discussion on the different programmes offered in schools, parishes and at diocesan level, it was considered important that the wider community including the parents working together in the interests of the children is the most positive model. One of the respondents hoped to see greater involvement from the wider parish community in sacramental catechesis acknowledging that *we are not there yet but there is a stronger move towards this*.

In relation to the question on the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights (1948), one interviewee stated that the Catholic Church needs to explore this in relation to its teaching on Social Justice where *everyone is different but rich in diversity to accept, celebrate and embrace human rights*. As one parent clearly highlighted this Declaration is *very good in theory but is not necessarily followed through*, a point which was reiterated by one of the DAs suggesting that *often the spirit of the Declaration is lost in many treaties and it needs to be highlighted for the benefit of all*. When analysed collectively, the data from both the questionnaire and the interviews would indicate that an overwhelming majority of respondents are very aware of the issue of human rights and how it affects them.

3.3.4 Sacramental Preparation

Sacramental programmes for children experiencing learning difficulties are important as the Bishop' Conference of England and Wales (1998) stresses,

the Church's teaching continually emphasises that preparation for sacraments is a communal responsibility and that sacraments should, wherever possible, be celebrated in the public life of the parish. (p.19)

Therefore it was considered necessary to include questions regarding responsibility for sacramental preparation classes and the support offered by the parish community.

In answer to the question, *where should children experiencing learning difficulties receive sacramental catechesis and who had responsibility for teaching them*, interviewees gave a mixture of responses. The majority of respondents from each group agreed that the school working collaboratively with the parish and the parents was the best way forward. One DA pointed out that *the parish should be aware of children's needs but in reality many children feel isolated in the parish and the school provides an arena for them to be prepared with their friends*, this was reinforced by the parish priest who highlighted the importance of community,

it is not just in the parish that we find community, children experience a sense of spirituality by being with each other. It should be a dual preparation where the parents are involved, supporting and reinforcing the work of the teacher in the school.

The priests and parish representatives also need to work and co-operate fully with the school and the home, to learn and support parish based preparation programmes. Respondents referred to Special Religious Education (SPRED) and Faith and Light as examples of parish initiatives, which care for people experiencing learning difficulties and their families. Faith and Light in particular responds to the needs of parents and family members offering special retreats to sustain them in their role. Other follow up programmes mentioned were special masses throughout the year for people experiencing learning difficulties, as one priest commented

special masses are held once a month and they make it like the African experience, a real celebration of the senses, which is something that we loose on a Sunday, but for these special masses nothing is spared.

This experiential approach is crucial in engaging all children but particularly for children experiencing learning difficulties, many of who understand the power of sensory experiences. The evaluative interviews therefore support the data collected from the questionnaires in promoting a community model for preparing and receiving the sacraments engaging the three key partners, parents and their children, the school and the parish.

3.3.5 Structure

Good communication between all interested parties is essential to the success of a sacramental programme. This section of the interview focuses on the levels of communication, which exist between the key partners and the role of the Bishop in promoting and supporting sacramental catechesis in his diocese.

All of the interviewees expressed concern about the lack of communication between the home, school and parish suggesting that at present the school does most of the work. One of the parents commented that the priests of the parish do not go into the special school, while the priests and DAs reported that they are not always made welcome in some of the schools, depending on its location and the percentage of Catholic children in attendance. This poses a serious problem for all concerned.

In relation to the role and responsibility of the Bishop, it was suggested by the DAs and teachers that although he has ultimate responsibility for catechesis in his diocese there needs to be a more proactive structure, to support children experiencing learning difficulties and their families. One interviewee commented that there should be a greater awareness of the need for more involvement from the laity at all levels,

the word special excludes and we need to allow this section (people experiencing moderate and severe learning difficulties) of the community to lead. There are different ministries in the Church involved for example in Faith and Light and they should be inclusive of

the whole community, leading others in prayer and service rather than be seen as something only those with MLD and SLD do.

Considering the Church's present dilemma of the decline in numbers to religious vocation, it would seem fair to suggest that a more radical move towards greater lay involvement is imminent. Fewer numbers of clergy in parishes may well change our understanding of community and it may be necessary to allow different lay ministries including people with special needs, to lead. Therefore Bishops ought to be more proactive in promoting the lay apostolate, encouraging greater involvement from all members of the community.

3.3.6 Individual

The interview questions relating specifically to each individual focus on the children's level of cognitive understanding of the sacramental programmes and on their ability to actively take part in the Eucharistic celebration. Interviewees, although somewhat unsure on the subject of the cognitive level of understanding that children experiencing learning difficulties have, did state that they felt these children have some kind of awareness of the importance of what was happening and that the sacraments were an occasion for celebration. The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (1998) highlights that,

people with learning difficulties...may express faith in the Eucharist through manner, gesture, or reverential silence rather than verbally, and that,

...those who know the person are frequently able to understand signs and sounds which show appreciation and reverence for the mystery of the sacrament, and a desire to share in it. (p.22)

In the Irish language the phrase *duine le Dia* is used to describe people experiencing learning difficulties, the literal translation the person who is with God presupposes insight into the natural spirituality within each person. One interviewee suggested that children with learning difficulties have a fuller insight into things that we make

so complicated. If they have a sense of Christ and of the sacrament then surely that is enough. This point was reinforced by the experience of one of the diocesan advisers working with children in the hearing unit in Holy Trinity Primary School, where the theme of the lesson was we are all held in the palm of God's hand. An eight-year-old girl asked how could God hold all of us in the palm of his hand? to which another child in the class answered, simple, just like he shares himself in the bread. Often children experiencing learning difficulties are uncluttered in their thinking, using their instincts to guide them rather than trying to find the correct answer. One of the parents felt that her daughter's understanding of sacraments came from her awareness of the family's commitment to her and that she could relate to sensory experiences particularly the music. This was reiterated by a comment from the priest who stated that children experiencing learning difficulties learn by their experiences, and that working from the relationship built with parents and family children can move on to understand the love God has for each of us. As highlighted by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (1998)

the faith of families in which there is a child who has a disability can also be greatly strengthened by the sign of acceptance of their child that reception of communion gives. (p.22)

Therefore it is our duty as catechists to enlighten their experiences, to support and guide them on their journey toward a deeper relationship with God the Father.

The evaluative interviews did reveal concerns that after the initial receiving of each sacrament, families do not practice their faith on a regular basis or in some cases not at all, which erodes the children's understanding. Although the preparation classes and participation in the first Penance, Communion or Confirmation celebration is valued there does not seem to be the same importance attached to bringing the child back to the church. This poses a problem for catechists, as children may not have a

significant role model if their parents are not practicing Catholics. One interviewee suggested that sacramental programmes should provide instruction before and after the initial celebration to help children come to a deeper understanding of the sacrament. This would echo the point made from one of the priests who stated that,

the Catholic Church and the school lets parents ‘off the hook’ in Ireland when compared with other countries. In many European countries parents take much more responsibility for their children’s spiritual formation and in particular preparation for the sacraments.

It may be important therefore for those involved in sacramental preparation to include follow up programmes in school and in the parish to support children whose parents are not practicing Catholics.

3.3.7 Social Aspects

Liturgy is open to everyone. In many Catholic parishes throughout Ireland there are renewed initiatives to organise and conduct liturgies specifically for children. Church representatives from each parish invite the children to take an active role in preparing and participating in Sunday Mass. This can be organised a number of different ways,

- children leave Mass during the homily for classes based on the Scripture readings
- a group of families come together to organise one of the Sunday Masses each week
- children form part of a children’s liturgy group organised by the parish representatives and a children’s Mass is celebrated each week.

The interview responses seemed to suggest that the invitation to join the children's liturgy groups was open to everyone. One of the parents commented that although she acknowledged this inclusive policy, her child was physically unable to participate in the same way as other children in the parish. Yet it would be fair to suggest that involvement at any level by children experiencing learning difficulties would also nourish the spiritual life of the parish community

3.4 Conclusion

As with all the responses from the interviews it should be noted that these are personal perceptions from a small sample study. Therefore throughout the data analysis it was considered important not to generalise or assume too much from one particular set of results. It is fair to say that the evaluative interviews have clarified more clearly the strength of each group's response to the issues discussed. As Silverman (1997) suggests,

*The analyst's reports do not summarise and organise what interview participants have said, as much as they 'deconstruct' participants' talk to show the reader both the **hows** and the **whats** of the narrative dramas conveyed. (p.127)*

From the analysis it is possible to interpret that respondents from all three groups agree in principle that successful sacramental programmes for children experiencing learning difficulties must involve effective communication between the three key partners namely the home, school and parish.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

4.1 Introduction

This study has examined in detail the perceptions of parents, teachers and those significant others, who work directly or indirectly with children experiencing learning difficulties, on sacramental access for children with special needs. It was anticipated that information from this study would provide insight into the development of sacramental programmes in special schools and the cooperation of the home, school and parish in preparing children experiencing learning difficulties for sacramental life in the Catholic Church. The aim of this concluding chapter is therefore to review the research aims and draw together the issues emerging from the data to be addressed by those involved with children experiencing learning difficulties. The main objective is to briefly present a back- cloth to each issue and to encompass a particular paragraph teasing out the conclusion being drawn at the end of each section.

4.1.1 Review of Aims

This study, conducted within the Belfast Education and Library Board, has sought to,

- examine perceptions on sacramental access for children experiencing learning difficulties
- reflect on current practice
- and consider how the home, school and the parish can work together to provide support and guidance for children with special needs in this area.

4.2 Development of the Study

The literature review sought theoretical justification for the establishment of a Core Syllabus for Religious Education Northern Ireland (1993) and sacramental programmes for Catholic children experiencing learning difficulties, and the impact of legislation and practice on provision for special educational needs. Qualitative methods were selected for data collection incorporating the research instruments of (a) a questionnaire and (b) an evaluative interview. The figures presented in this chapter represent the overall number of agreements (including *strongly agree* and *agree*) from the three groups of respondents, unless otherwise stated.

A detailed analysis of the questionnaire and interview returns revealed the existence of three common themes,

- access to sacramental programmes which meet the needs of all children,
- a community model incorporating the home, school and parish, and,
- the social implications for children experiencing learning difficulties and their families.

Each of these will now be addressed.

4.3 Sacramental Programmes - Meeting Individual Need

This theme became evident when analysing data on the rights of each individual and on children's access to sacramental programmes in the school and parish. There were two aspects to this theme, namely,

- the right to choose, and,
- sacramental access

4.3.1 The Right to Choose

The issue of Catholic children's human right to become involved in the sacramental life of the Church was explored and a majority (n=52), 96%, (Chapter 3, p 4 & 6), agreed that children experiencing learning difficulties were entitled to participate in preparation programmes as part of their religious formation. The local Catholic school forming part of the wider parish community provides religious education and sacramental programmes for children who attend. As there are no specific Catholic schools providing education for children experiencing SLD and PMLD they have to attend special schools within the controlled sector.

This poses a challenge for Catholic parents who would like to have the opportunity to send their children to a Catholic school and the Catholic teachers. It is also arguable that children experiencing learning difficulties require specialist arrangements, which can only be met by a special school. As O'Brien (2002) highlights, *How morally defensible would it be for someone to take that right and choice away from you?* (p.12). Although in theory respondents agreed that children experiencing learning difficulties have the right to sacramental instruction, the choice to receive this with their peers in the local parish school is not always a viable option and that ultimately limits their right to choose. Therefore in examining the child's right to participate in the sacramental life of the Church the concept of right is often challenged by the opportunities of access.

4.3.2 Sacramental Access

The findings from this research suggest that special schools should offer sacramental preparation programmes for Catholic children who request it (n=46), 85%, (Chapter 3 p.7) and that children should also be entitled to attend parish preparation classes (n=45), 83%, (Chapter 3 p.7). All the special schools in the BELB provide access to

sacramental programmes however not all the surrounding parishes offer preparation classes. In particular, two aspects rose for attention.

The questionnaire returns revealed that 89%, (n=48) of parents and respectively 100% (n=19, n=9) of teachers and outside agents believe that the parish should provide support in conjunction with the school preparation programmes. A number of respondents referred to a SPRED group operating in their parish, specifically for people experiencing learning difficulties. SPRED is a catechetical programme for people of all ages with special needs recognising the human experience closest to the experience of faith is friendship. It emphasises that it is important for people experiencing learning difficulties to realise that they belong to a community. Liturgy is essential to the faith development of members of the SPRED group. Their aim is to integrate their unique community of believers into the larger worshipping community, to celebrate liturgy. Many SPRED liturgies form part of the weekly schedule in parishes and the members are active participants in these celebrations. The catechists involved in the programme along with members have explored ways to express liturgy through words, mime, gesture, movement, light, colour, sound and symbol.

Some Catholic parishes are making a conscientious effort to address the problem of access to the sacraments by introducing children's liturgies and groups for children to become involved in Sunday Eucharist. A more radical renovation of parish involvement in sacramental programmes is needed.

As debated in Chapter 1 (p.11) by Dewey (1961), experience does not necessarily bring knowledge and therefore the main problem encountered by catechists is that of helping children experiencing learning difficulties to understand and learn the sacred dimension of sacrament, in order to fully participate in the sacramental life of the Church. Through Baptism it is the human right of each Catholic to receive a full

explanation of sacred symbols at a level appropriate to their ability. *The Directory on Children's Masses* (1973) suggests that principles for adaptation can be drawn to increase participation and understanding.

Data gathered from the evaluative interviewees Chapter 3 (p.22) suggests that teachers feel that the current *Alive-O* and *Children of God* Programme for Catholic schools is too difficult for the children they teach and therefore, much of their time is given to modifying the materials. Some of the teachers interviewed commented that they often follow the SPRED sessions as part of preparing children for the sacraments. They suggested that the structure is easier to follow and since some of the children attended SPRED in their home parish they can relate to the programme in school. The teachers who use the programme suggest that they, nevertheless, had to adapt some of the sessions to meet the needs of the individual children they teach. Each session begins with the lived experiences of the individual person and the particular feelings associated with such an event. As a group the members are helped to explore these feelings together and come to a group awareness of how they feel. They relate this to aspects of liturgy, they listen to the Word of God and each person receives a blessing. Although this model may benefit children experiencing moderate learning difficulties it remains a challenge for many with SLD and /or PMLD where communication and interaction is often problematic.

An alternative programme for use with children experiencing learning difficulties, from Glasgow City Council (anticipated issue, September 2002) which combines the sacraments of Penance, Communion and Confirmation and is known collectively as the sacraments of Initiation in primary four (age 7/8 years). Although not current sacramental practice in Ireland it is feasible to separate each programme for use with different age groups. The programme focuses on a set structure for each lesson

including visual artefacts, activity, key points of the lesson, a simple prayer experience and a section entitled at home to facilitate interaction with the parents/guardians, (Appendix 5). Music and prayer are key ingredients of each lesson, which is significant as a number of interviewees involved in this research commented on the positive effect music had on children experiencing learning difficulties. One parent whose child experiences profound and multiple learning difficulties stated that *I notice that she enjoys the music and can relate to a sensory experience of things.* The aim of the programme is to encourage the children to focus on their sensory experiences and to participate in a personal way with the group. Longhorn (1993) referred to in Chapter 1 (p.14) has clearly indicated this point regarding the need to develop a multi-sensory approach to religious education for children experiencing learning difficulties. Again it is difficult to assess the success of this programme at this stage, but it is a positive move forward for parents of children experiencing learning difficulties and teachers.

Addressing this issue promotes a critical debate on the availability of preparation programmes for teachers in the special sector. At present no structured programme for sacramental preparation is used in special schools in the BELB and teachers asked if the purpose of this research was to create and resource a specific programme, to meet the needs of children experiencing learning difficulties. Teachers interviewed commented that they often feel isolated and suggest that teachers in mainstream Catholic schools receive more support and guidance. From the perspective of professional experience it is possible to agree with this response, acknowledging that there are specific DAs for primary and post primary schools in the Down and Connor Diocese. There has not been an official appointment made to specifically address the needs of children experiencing learning difficulties in the special schools and to

support the teachers. One possible way forward may be to accommodate a cluster group comprising the religious education co-ordinator and/or Catholic teachers responsible for sacramental preparation. This may provide opportunities to examine and identify good practice, promote discussion on the development of sacramental programmes and address problems in a supportive environment.

Evidence gathered for this research shows that there appears to be positive progress in some schools and parishes, to provide access to sacramental programmes for children experiencing learning difficulties.

Greater awareness is needed within the Church and indeed at local parish level that children and adults with special needs are part of the community and as St. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians 1:6-7 describes, *...receiving the word in joy they became an example to all.*

4.4 A Community Model

Every human being has a basic double need, to be recognised as an individual and to belong to a community. One is fulfilled through the other. Religious education is the perfect integration of both.

The Core Syllabus for Religious Education in Northern Ireland (1993) clearly specifies the need for each individual to develop spiritually, to communicate and participate in celebration. Children observe the worshipping adults within their school, who show an example of what it means to be a disciple of Christ through their response and expression of His teaching and Word. The *Alive-O* programme used by Catholic schools emphasises that not only should the children witness the school community at worship but that this should be widened to include the parish community, parents/guardians and members of the local parish in attendance at school assemblies and prayer services supported by the school chaplain. Schools in the

controlled sector invite members of each Christian denomination, including the clergy, to join in the Christian celebrations of the school. One of the problems highlighted by the religious co-ordinator in a special school is that although many are invited few come to the assemblies for a variety of reasons. One suggestion put forward was that while the school provides for children experiencing severe and multiple learning difficulties, many of the clergy are anxious about how to react to the children and tend to feel intimidated by them.

Although beyond the remit of the dissertation, the controversial question of provision of developmental courses for clergy and religious with regard to people experiencing learning difficulties remains a challenge. How can they be expected to address the needs of people experiencing learning difficulties in the parish or school without relevant knowledge or experience? Opportunities to interact with people experiencing learning difficulties should be introduced as part of the pastoral formation of clerical students and in-service courses should be provided for ministering clergy. This has obvious repercussions for the school community and in particular for the children, many of who are unable to participate fully in their parish liturgy.

4.4.1 Education for Mutual Understanding

Chapter One (p.15 and 16) addresses the issue of EMU in schools, highlighting the need for respect for diversity within the school community and ethos. The analysis of data indicates that a majority of respondents 89% (n=48) disagreed with the statement that sacramental classes for Catholic children were considered discriminating. By nature of its catchment, the special school community is one, where EMU is central to the working school day. The Proposals for the Revised Primary Curriculum and its Assessment Arrangements (2002) highlight the importance of mutual understanding in the local and wider community as part of Personal Development (p.123). For Key

Stage one and two this aspect includes the theme of my school and my community, focusing on celebrations and traditions as a possible topic for this age group (p.129-131). Children come to understand community through their experiences of being with each other. Within the framework of the Curriculum Review, the special school is in a unique position to deliver a balanced view of mutual understanding. The school and the wider community can now experience the opportunity of working collaboratively through ensuring an invitation to celebrate the sacraments of Penance, Communion and Confirmation with the Catholic children. In this fashion the invitation is open to all members of the school community. Teachers interviewed commented that although they were responsible for preparing the children for the sacraments other members of staff, parents and children from different denominations were willing to support the Catholic children and attended their celebration of the sacraments.

4.4.2 Parental Involvement

Within the evaluative interviews it became apparent that parents were supportive and willing to play a key role in preparing their children for the sacraments. Over half of questionnaire respondents 52% (n=28) indicated that parents were willing to take an active role in parish programmes for their children. One teacher commented that the parents of her communion class were highly receptive and in one example, the parent set up a prayer corner at home with different sensory stimuli to enable her child to experience prayer on a daily basis. The analysis of data reflects the strength of feeling among parents, for their children to receive the Church sacraments. The Code of Practice for Northern Ireland (1998) states clearly that parental involvement is to be highly valued and that *account is taken of what parents say and that their views and anxieties are treated as intrinsically important* (p.9). Preparation for and participation

in the sacramental life of the Church is of great concern to parents. Schools and parishes need to address this.

The evaluative interviews revealed concerns regarding a change in attitude among parents after the child received the sacrament for the first time. The opportunity for the child to continue receiving the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist could depend greatly upon the conscious determination of the parent(s) to continue personal practice of the faith. This lack of support from one of the central players in education may have a detrimental effect on the spiritual development of the child and places a greater onus on the teacher and the parish to work together. This point was discussed in Chapter 1 (p.11) in which Longhorn (1993) argued that children experiencing learning difficulties develop at a different pace and level than their peers. It was argued that understanding and development of faith might not be visible at the time of preparation but later through the child's life experiences. A further more detailed examination is required to provide conclusive evidence regarding the effect this has on children experiencing learning difficulties. Nevertheless, the experience of celebrating the sacrament can be very dynamic and it is valuable to provide every child with positive experiences of knowing they are loved by God as an individual and as part of a community.

It is therefore considered necessary that mainstream and special schools interact with each other, their respective parishes and parents to promote a community model for preparing and receiving the sacraments. It could also be argued that the development and implementation of follow-up programmes in the parish would have a positive effect and support children whose parents are not practicing Catholics.

Critically addressing this presents a further debate. It is questionable whether any sacramental preparation programme can continue to exist without the support of the family. Therefore religious educators have to face the dilemma of whether to opt out of working with children in preparation for the sacraments or use it as an opportunity to re-educate parents of their responsibilities in their own spiritual formation.

4.5 Social Implications

This theme became evident when analysing data on the social needs of children experiencing learning difficulties and their families.

Research data collected from parents highlighted a number of social issues namely, the difficulties involved in attending school away from home and active involvement at local parish level. Questionnaire returns indicate that 54% (n=29) of respondents felt that children experiencing learning difficulties who attend a special school away from their home found it difficult to form friendships in their local parish. Of this figure 65% (n=17) were parents. Although it could be argued that much depends on the relationship the family has with friends and neighbours in their community it is fair to say that this may be a problem, particularly if the child experiences learning difficulties.

Opportunities to meet and socialize with other children may prove difficult and parents have expressed concerns about leaving their child with other parents who may not understand the nature of their child's learning difficulty. They therefore face a difficult decision when choosing a school which best suits the needs of their child. This is also confirmed by the fact that interviewees commented on the lack of tolerance some parishioners had for children experiencing learning difficulties who made noise during the celebration of Mass on Sunday.

Although respondents did specify that it is important for children experiencing learning difficulties to have the opportunity to become actively involved 76% (n=41), more than half 61% (n=33) indicated that parish clergy adopted an inclusive policy of active involvement. This would suggest that respondents felt that their parishes were moving forward in promoting and responding to the needs of children experiencing learning difficulties and their families, particularly in the daily celebration of the Eucharist, Sunday Mass and on other special occasions throughout the liturgical year. With the high profile emphasis on human rights in today's society it may be fair to suggest that people are beginning to become more aware of the needs of others in their community.

4.6 Summary

The aim of this study was to ascertain the perceptions of people involved with children experiencing learning difficulties regarding religious development and sacramental preparation. Practitioners and researchers alike must be adaptable and reflective not only in their thinking but also in their approach to developing suitable programmes for children experiencing learning difficulties. In order to gain a greater insight, the use of a broader range of schools throughout the five Education and Library Boards would be recommended comparing links between the home, school and parish with particular reference to rural communities. The partnership of the home, school and parish is a positive model for the religious education of children and schools should give priority to this.

Reflecting within a professional role, and determining an element of criticality in respect of the conclusions, Chapter 4 highlights the following issues.

- The issue of human rights must be addressed. Opportunities to receive religious education and sacramental preparation in both mainstream and special schools should be provided to allow parents freedom of choice.
- With the combined co-operation of clergy and laity through parish councils, some parishes are taking action in promoting inclusive liturgy for all children. Whilst this is a positive move forward more parishes ought to be aware of the need for such programmes.
- The development of structured sacramental programmes to address the needs of children experiencing learning difficulties, in particular children with SLD and MLD, is a basic requirement for teachers in special schools. The appropriate authorities ought to provide the necessary support and human resources to draft preparation programmes.
- The model of the home, school and parish working together as community is a positive and valued one. Considering the difficulties encountered in the special sector with regard to their catchment area, recognition must be given to those schools that promote and sustain this partnership.
- The dilemma for educators is the realisation that many parents do not witness to their faith. Schools and parishes ought to channel their energies in working together to support each child and where possible, to re-educate parent(s) in their unique responsibility to the spiritual development of their child.
- Whilst there is a growing awareness of the rights of children experiencing learning difficulties within communities there is still a long way to go. Every effort should be made by parish communities to promote awareness and address their needs.

As Mark Chapter 10:15 highlights, Christ calls on us to be child-like, open to discovery.

Children (experiencing learning difficulties) are still capable of discovery, fantasy and openness to what is not yet. The invitation of Jesus to become as children is among other things, an invitation to imagination, creativity and freedom. (Groome, 1980 p.187)

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Appendix One

Questionnaire Number One for Parents/Guardians

Please complete this questionnaire with your child by ticking the appropriate () response.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Your child should have the same right of access to the sacraments with any other child in the parish school.					
2. Facilities and resources available to teach children experiencing learning difficulties pose a problem for your child's school.					
3. Facilities and resources available to teach children experiencing learning difficulties pose a problem for your parish school.					
4. Your choice was restricted due to a lack of opportunities in either the local parish or in the school.					
5. Your child who has already been baptised is entitled to be an altar server.					
6. Your child is entitled to receive the Blessed Sacrament at home.					
7. Article 18 Universal Declarations of Human Rights. <i>Everyone has the right either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.</i>					
8. It is your wish that the school your child attends would provide sacramental preparation as part of the RE programme.					
9. Your baptised child is entitled to attend sacramental preparation in your parish or parish cluster.					
10. Your parish should provide support for your child in conjunction with preparation for the Sacraments in school.					
11. You are willing to play an active role in helping your parish set up appropriate structures to prepare for the sacraments.					
12. Sacramental preparation classes in Special schools could be seen as discriminating between children and should be left solely to parishes.					
13. If you had the choice you would prefer your child to be prepared for the sacraments in your local parish school.					

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
14. If you had the choice you would prefer your child to be prepared for the sacraments in the parish of the school he/she attends.					
15. I feel that some communication between my parish and my child's school would be useful.					
16. I feel that some communication between my parish school and my child's school would be useful.					
17. Bearing in mind a Bishop's responsibilities for the spiritual welfare of all the children in his diocese, do you think that there should be strong links with your child's school?					
18. Your parish promotes good working relationships between all of its members in particular children experiencing learning difficulties.					
19. Your parish does not promote programmes to meet the spiritual needs of your child.					
20. Existing preparation programmes in school do not meet the needs of my child because the level of work is too difficult.					
21. Existing preparation programmes in your parish do not meet the needs of my child because the level of work is too difficult.					
22. Seven/eight years of age is an appropriate age in all instances to receive the sacraments of Penance and Communion.					
23. Your child is able to receive the sacrament under one species (bread or wine).					
24. I believe my child is capable of a deep sense of God that is often misunderstood.					
25. Your child finds it difficult to form friendships with children from the local parish because he/she is educated in a different area.					
26. It is important for your child to feel that he/she has an opportunity to take an active role in the liturgy and in the life of the Parish.					
27. Your parish clergy ensure that your child is welcome to take an active part in the celebration of Mass on Sunday and on other special occasions throughout the year.					

Thank you for your co-operation.

Appendix Two

Questionnaire Number Two

Please complete the questionnaire by ticking () the appropriate response.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.Children experiencing learning difficulties should have equality of access to the sacraments with any other child in the parish school.					
2. Facilities and resources available to teach children experiencing profound and multiple learning difficulties pose a problem for your child's school.					
3. Facilities and resources available to teach children experiencing profound and multiple learning difficulties pose a problem for the special school.					
4.This choice is restricted due to a lack of opportunities in either the local parish or in the school.					
5.A child experiencing learning difficulties and who has already been baptised is entitled to be an altar server at Mass.					
6. A child experiencing learning difficulties is entitled to receive the Blessed Sacrament at Home.					
7. Article 18 Universal Declarations of Human Rights. <i>Everyone has the right either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.</i>					
8.The special school a child attends would provide sacramental preparation as part of the RE programme.					
9.Every baptised child is entitled to attend sacramental preparation in his/her parish or Parish cluster.					
10.Every local parish should provide support for children experiencing learning difficulties in conjunction with preparation for the Sacraments in school.					
11. Parents are willing to play an active role in helping your parish set up appropriate structures to prepare for the sacraments.					
12.Sacramental preparation classes in special schools could be seen as discriminating between children and should be left solely to parishes.					

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
13. Parents and children have the right to choose to be prepared for the sacraments in the parish school.					
14. Parents and children have the right to choose to be prepared for the sacraments in the parish in which the school is based.					
15. Some communication between the local parish and the special school would be useful.					
16. Some communication between the local parish <i>school</i> and the special school would be useful.					
17. Bearing in mind a Bishop's responsibilities for the spiritual welfare of all the children in his diocese, do you think that there should be strong links with your child's school?					
18. The local parish promotes good working relationships between all of its members in particular children experiencing learning difficulties.					
19. The local parish does not promote programmes to meet the spiritual needs of the child experiencing learning difficulties.					
20. Existing preparation programmes in school do not meet the needs of the child experiencing learning difficulties because the level of work is too difficult.					
21. Existing preparation programmes in the local parish do not meet the needs of the child experiencing learning difficulties because the level of work is too difficult.					
22. Seven/eight years of age is an appropriate age in all instances to receive the sacraments of penance and communion.					
23. A child experiencing learning difficulties is able to receive the sacrament under one species (bread or wine).					
24. I believe the child experiencing learning difficulties is capable of a deep sense of God that is often misunderstood.					
25. Children experiencing learning difficulties find it difficult to form friendships with children from the local parish because he/she is educated in a different area.					
26. It is important for the child experiencing learning difficulties to feel that he/she has an opportunity to take an active role in the liturgy and in the life of the Parish.					

27. Your parish clergy ensure that your child is welcome to take an active part in the celebration of Mass on Sunday and on other special occasions throughout the year.

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Thank you for your co-operation.

Appendix Three

**St Mary's University College
191 Falls Road
Belfast
BT12 6FE**

Dear

I am a lecturer in the Religion department at Saint Mary's University College and am in the process of completing research for my M.Ed. Degree at Queen's University. From my work here with student teachers I have discerned that there is a need to examine and improve educational provision for special needs with regard to religion.

To that end I am trying to establish current practice and thus would invite you and your staff to help me with my research by completing the questionnaire provided. In addition I have included a separate questionnaire for parents whose children have been involved in sacramental preparation classes. I would appreciate your assistance in asking some of the parents whom you believe may be interested to complete one of them.

I would be grateful if you would return these on or before 19th January to assist me in meeting research deadlines. Thank you for your time and co-operation regarding this matter. Enclosed is a stamped addressed envelope for your convenience.

Yours sincerely,

Sharon Treanor

**St Mary's University College
191 Falls Road
Belfast
BT12 6FE**

Dear

I am a lecturer in the Religion department at Saint Mary's University College and am in the process of completing research for my M.Ed. Degree at Queen's University. From my work here with student teachers I have discerned that there is a need to examine and improve educational provision for special needs with regard to religion.

To that end I am trying to establish current practice and thus would invite you to help me with my research by completing the questionnaire provided.

I would be grateful if you would return these on or before 15th January to assist me in meeting research deadlines. Thank you for your time and co-operation regarding this matter. Enclosed is a stamped addressed envelope for your convenience.

Yours sincerely,

Sharon Treanor

Appendix Four

Evaluative Interview Questions

ACCESS

1. What facilities are available to help children in the preparation for the sacraments and afterwards in the school and/or parish community?
2. What is your understanding of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights?

SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION

1. Should children experiencing learning difficulties celebrate the sacrament in their parish or in their school's parish?
2. What support does your home parish offer children experiencing learning difficulties?
3. Does your parish offer follow up programmes?
4. Who should provide sacramental programmes for children experiencing learning difficulties?

STRUCTURE

1. Are you satisfied with the level of communication between the school, the parish and the parents/guardians?
2. What is your understanding of the Bishop and the parish priest's role in preparing children experiencing learning difficulties for the sacraments?

INDIVIDUAL

1. Are you satisfied that children experiencing learning difficulties have a satisfactory level of understanding Re Sacraments?

2. Do you believe that they should make their sacraments at the same age as children attending mainstream schools?
3. Do you think that children should receive the sacraments at ages 7/8 Reconciliation and Eucharist and 10/11 for Confirmation?
4. Is the physical ability of children experiencing learning difficulties taken into consideration when they receive the Eucharist on Sunday or at special celebrations for example Christmas and/or Easter?
5. Do you believe that children experiencing learning difficulties have an awareness of God's presence and love?

SOCIAL ASPECTS

1. If children experiencing learning difficulties go to school in a different parish are they given the opportunity to feel that they belong to their home parish?
2. Do children experiencing learning difficulties have the opportunity to play an active role in the parish liturgy?
3. Is SPRED available in your parish?
4. Is there a special children's liturgy in your parish and if so do children experiencing learning difficulties have the opportunity to become actively involved?

Appendix Five

Example copy of lesson notes for the preparation of primary four pupils in SEN schools and units, Glasgow Archdiocese.

The Sacrament of Confirmation

Lesson 5

Called By Name At Baptism

Aims:

- To develop an awareness in each child that they were given their name at Baptism.

- To develop an awareness that their name was used during the Baptismal Ceremony.

Set the Scene:

- A display of each child's name or signifier, symbol, object of reference.

Activities:

- Play a name game that will elicit a response from each child, as appropriate.

- "Baptise" a doll with water in the classroom to show the children what happens at this part of the ceremony. Use the photographs (Numbers) as appropriate.

Points to be highlighted:

- How the children got their names (*Parents asked beforehand*)

- The parts of the Baptism ceremony at which the child's name is used

- Welcoming a t the beginning of the ceremony

- Pouring of the water: " _____ I baptise you..."

Prayer Time:

- Cloth, Candle, the children's names displayed, the Bible

Teacher (as the candle is lit)

As we light this candle, we remember that God is always with us.

Teacher

(reading from a piece of paper within the Bible)

In the Book of God's Word it says this:

"I have called you by your name, you are mine".

The teacher goes to each child, makes the Sign of the Cross on their forehead and says,

"_____, you belong to God. God has called you by your name."

As this is happening, the Song of Baptism can be played.

Sign of the Cross

At Home

- Talk about why you choose your child's name.**
- Prayer: God, we thank you for loving _____ (child's name). We are happy that you have called her/him by name. We are happy that he/she belongs to you and to us. Amen**