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Inclusion within the classroom – Transition Planning for Youths with Special Education Needs
(Mild Intellectual Disability) in Trinidad and Tobago

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Doctor of Philosophy in Education

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Abstract

My interest in preparing for life after school as part of transition planning and special education, originated in Trinidad where my brother, Micah, and I attended compulsory schooling. During childhood, I witnessed the differential treatment of Micah, who has a mild intellectual disability, and my parents disregarding the recommendation of institutionalization by professionals, which resulted in them navigating uncertain pathways. This experience left an indelible mark on my life to where, as an adult, I wanted to see if these experiences were unique to our family. In co-designing this research with Micah, our conversations identified key participant groups – youths, educators and parents/legal guardians.

The aim of my thesis is to understand how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths (15-18 years) with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school. I wanted to know:

1. What are the experiences of youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability at special schools who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling?
2. What are the perspectives of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling?
3. What are the perspectives of parents and/or legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from compulsory schooling?

To understand their experiences and perspectives, I used Person-Centred Planning to develop focus areas, with follow-up questions and/or statements, for each participant group involved in the transition planning process. Sampling was purposive with a focus on special schools that have youths with a mild intellectual disability attending, as well as persons who can speak in-depth about their experiences and perspectives on a special school’s curriculum, programmes, and preparation as part of transition planning. I applied qualitative methodology and completed 20 semi-structured interviews, via Microsoft Teams, with participants from private, government and vocational schools in Trinidad and Tobago over three months. I used the framework method to report on findings at an individual, intragroup and intergroup levels of
data analysis (Gale et al., 2013). At the individual level of data analysis, I summarised participants’ responses to corresponding relevant related follow-up questions and identified their respective focus areas. I then used the individual level of data analysis for intragroup analysis.

At an intragroup level of data analysis, the experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability at special schools who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling revealed them as having supportive learning environments and being prepared for potential future jobs in the skilled trades. The perspectives of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling revealed them having a sense of pride, passion and purpose, and special schools having a curriculum focussed on skills-trade and remedial academics. The perspectives of parents and/or legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from compulsory schooling revealed them as having a positive outlook of special schools, and these schools having a role in transition planning and wanting their child to be happy. I then used the intragroup level of analysis for intergroup analysis.

At an intergroup level of data analysis, the process of transition based on youths’ experiences and parents/legal guardians and educators’ perspectives revealed person-centred practices, which were manifested in curriculum modifications and provisions of support. While the opportunities for youths with a mild intellectual disability confirmed uncertainty in post-compulsory school destinations, which were manifested in resource constraints and vague transition pathways.

The findings of my research can be used to close the gap in understanding how youths with special education needs are being prepared by special schools in Trinidad and Tobago for life after school. My research provides researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and decision-makers with topical information on how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school. The findings at an individual,
intragroup, and intergroup levels of analysis provide new information on the experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability, and the perspectives of parents/legal guardians and educators. I provided multiple examples to support findings and highlighted opportunities for change. I advocate for change through sector partnerships and provide five recommendations that can be used by different groups in preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school. The results of findings were discussed with Micah, which adds to the contribution of knowledge that my thesis affords.

The findings from my research and recommendations can be used towards identifying short- to longer-term changes in disability inclusion to understand what works and/or needs to change in learning environments, identification of alternate pathways for future vocational opportunities, and supporting mechanisms (e.g., resources) that can underpin the process of education at special schools to facilitate accessible, equitable and fair compulsory learning opportunities.
Lay Abstract

My interest in how youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability are being prepared for life after school is linked to my childhood experiences in Trinidad. During childhood, I witnessed the difference in the treatment of my brother, Micah who as a mild intellectual disability. Although Micah and I attended mainstream schools during compulsory schooling, our experiences differed in how the national curriculum was preparing us for life after school. Teachers used the national curriculum to prepare me for compulsory examinations, which upon successful completion would have ushered me into higher education or the world of work. In contrast, Micah’s request and my parents advocating for classroom supports for him were unfulfilled due to a lack of resources at school, and a need for him to ‘keep up’ with content. Although professionals (e.g., educators) recommended institutionalization, my parents decided against doing this, which meant they would face uncertainty as there was no classroom supports or services and provisions provided within the education system to help Micah during compulsory schooling. This unforgettable experience has contributed to my worldview in how persons with disabilities are perceived in terms of their potential within the compulsory education system and preparation for life after school. This childhood experience left an impression on me to where, as an adult, I wanted to see if these experiences were unique to our family.

The purpose of my research was to understand how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths (15-18 years) with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school. I wanted to understand the present-day experiences for youths with a mild intellectual disability, the views of their parents/legal guardians who are aware of their child’s experience, and educators who are using the education system to share knowledge and develop skills for youths with a mild intellectual disability. I interviewed 20 individuals (youths, parents/legal guardians, educators) from private, public and vocational special schools over three months.
The experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability at special schools who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling showed them as having supportive learning environments and being prepared for potential future jobs in the skilled trades. The views of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling revealed them having a sense of pride, passion and purpose, and special schools having a curriculum focussed on skills-trade and remedial academics. The views of parents and/or legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from compulsory schooling revealed them having a positive outlook of special schools, with special schools having a role in transition planning and wanting their child to be happy.

However, there is uncertainty in post-compulsory school destinations for youths with a mild intellectual disability due to resource constraints and after school pathways that are not always clear. Recommendations for policy and practice provide options for how policymakers, parents/legal guardians, youths and special schools in Trinidad and Tobago can collaborate to prepare youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school.
1 Introduction

1.1 Overview of Chapter

Transition is a common experience that we navigate, in that it can signal the exiting of one and the entering another stage in life (Rodriguez, 2015; Shevlin et al., 2020). Within the context of the education system, the process of exiting to entering another stage implies planning is undertaken to make it as seamless as possible for all involved participants (Allen et al., 1998). This preparation process, as part of transition planning, is understood as an individual going into another learning level within compulsory schooling and progressing from one life stage to another (Rodriguez, 2015). Sanderson et al. (2008) extends these life stages to beyond compulsory schooling, such as further/higher education or entering the world of work. Other researchers confirm that as part of transition planning, post-compulsory school destinations can include opportunities for further/higher education or entering the world of work for youths with a mild intellectual disability (Aston et al., 2021; Dee, 2006). Recognising we all experience a process of transition as we exit one and enter another stage in our lives, the transition process can be seen as more complex for persons with disabilities (Tisdall, 1997). This can mean that the transition from compulsory schooling to the world of work or further/higher education is not a seamless process for persons with disabilities (Tisdall, 1994). This calls into consideration how the education system is preparing learners with special education needs to transition from compulsory schooling to adulthood.

1.2 Research Topic

The focus of my research was to develop a deeper understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago (see Figure 1) are preparing youths with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school.

*Figure 1: Map of Trinidad and Tobago*
Trinidad and Tobago is a small island state (5,127 square kilometres/1,980 square miles) in the southern Caribbean region with a population of more than 1.3 million, predominantly comprising of Africans and South Asians, with a smaller distribution of mixed, White, Middle Eastern, East Asian and Indigenous races (Bacchus, 2008; Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2012b).\(^1\) Persons with disabilities account for approximately four per cent of the population, and within this population of persons with disabilities, more than six percent are children (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2018). Educational attainment reveals “29.8% of the population attained primary-level education” while “43.5% attained secondary and post-secondary” and “8.4% tertiary university-level education” (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2012, p. 18). These statistics do not provide disaggregated data on educational attainment for children with disabilities. However,

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\(^1\) Mixed groups include African and South Asians and other.
census data, over a period of 10 years, show an increase in the number of persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2018). This identifies a growing demographic of the population that will require specialised supports, service provisions and programmes throughout their lives to participate in and contribute to society.

Within the context of my research, I needed to select a particular age range for youths recognising this remains an undefined age group across jurisdictions. For example, the United Nations uses the range of 15 to 24, while Statistics Canada uses the range of 15 to 34 and Trinidad and Tobago uses the range of 10 to 35 (Government of Canada, 2018, 2019; Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2008, 2012a; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2014). I used the range of 15 to 18, as the compulsory school age for education ends at 16 in Trinidad and Tobago, and this age group is known as the “transition years” into post-secondary education or employment (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2012, p. III; Education Act, 1966). I apply this age range within the context of my research to refer to those who were preparing to leave compulsory schooling for the next stage in their lives.

In focussing on mild intellectual disability, the terms intellectual disability, “learning disabilities, learning difficulties” and intellectual impairment are often used interchangeably (Burton, 1997; World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011, p. 305). An intellectual disability is defined as a lifelong condition that presents limitations or challenges to an individual’s “conceptual, social and practical skills” such as language acquisition and everyday activities (American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2021; Katz & Lazcano-Ponce, 2008, p. 133; World Health Organization: Regional Office for Europe, 2021; World Health Organization, 2021). Similarly, Salvador-Carulla et al. (2011) explains intellectual disability as that which is caused “by significant impairment of cognitive functions” related to “limitations of learning, adaptive behaviour and skills” (p. 177). This manifests to where the person has difficulties in “verbal comprehension, perceptual reasoning, working memory and processing
speed” which are then demonstrated in behaviours such as “limitations in social, emotional and interpersonal relationships” as well as affecting “domains of learning” (Salvador-Carulla et al., 2011, p. 177). For example, a person with an intellectual disability can experience “difficulties understanding, learning, and remembering new things” as well as “applying learning to new situations” (World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011, p. 305). An intellectual disability can present from mild to profound to where an individual requires support infrequently to daily supervision (World Health Organization, 2021). Additionally, intellectual disabilities and other impairments can co-exist (Carvill, 2001). For example, persons with a mild intellectual disability may not have any speech and physical limitations and can transition into employment, while persons with a severe or profound intellectual disability require supports throughout their lives due to speech and physical limitations, and/or may not transition into employment (Katz & Lazcano-Ponce, 2008; Salvador-Carulla et al., 2011). This highlights the connection between an individual with a mild intellectual disability and the required supports to ensure their participation (Aston et al., 2021). I use the term mild intellectual disability in my research, focussing on youths (15-18 years) because of having a brother with this medical diagnosis.

1.2.1 Rationale for Research

My interest in preparing for life after school as part of transition planning and special education in Trinidad originated in childhood. I witnessed the differential treatment of my brother, Micah, who has an intellectual impairment. I understand differential treatment as that which occurs when individuals uphold systems that segregate individuals based on measured capability and pre-determined conditions of normality. During compulsory schooling, it was a common practice that our mother spent evenings and weekends helping us with our homework. During these one-on-one learning sessions, she noticed his difficulty with reading, spelling and re-collection of previously taught content. As he progressed through primary school, this issue persisted with his notebooks having incomplete handwritten class-notes, which proved to be difficult interpreting the content covered in class with futile attempts to review assignments. During discussions with his teacher, my parents were informed that the

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2 Micah and I attended regular or mainstream schools.
school did not have any resources to provide supports, and it was incumbent on each student
to ‘keep up’ with the content, as spending time with Micah who was struggling, meant not
focussing on the other students. My parents were advised to consult a medical practitioner,
who subsequently provided a diagnosis of Micah having a mild intellectual disability.
Professionals (e.g., educators) recommended institutionalization and staff at the institution
advised that Micah would live on-site with family visitation on weekends, and permission would
be required for him to visit and/or stay overnight at our home.³ My parents were provided with
the necessary paperwork to complete, a return date and a list of items that were permitted on
the premises for residents. I recall the discomfort and sadness knowing there was a possibility
that my brother would be institutionalised, and not understanding why his impairment meant
he had to be separated from our family.

However, my parents’ decision not to have Micah live at an institution meant they
would navigate uncertain territories, as there was no service provisioning that they could rely
on and no network of support for guidance, which meant he continued attending a regular
school. The lack of support and negative perceptions of Micah’s ability coupled with the
uncertainty faced by and decision of my parents in trying to find alternative pathways for Micah
was not uncommon (Harry, 2020). Although my parents followed the advice of educators and a
medical practitioner, they decided they knew their child best and opted for another pathway,
one that was uncertain with limited supports (Habib, 2018; Shevlin & Rose, 2022). I view their
actions as protective in their recognition of Micah’s impairment and concern of how society
values persons with disabilities (Habib, 2018; Harry, 2020). Micah is an individual who has
potential, is intelligent, and given the opportunity, thrives in a personal and professional
capacity (Stalker & Connors, 2004).

I recognize Micah as an expert on his own experiences, being a person with an
impairment who attended compulsory schooling in Trinidad, and leveraged our sibling
relationship in co-creating the design of my research to understand the “present-day realities”

³ At the time of visitation, my understanding is that this institution was not a special school.
of youths with special education needs transitioning from compulsory schooling (Chalachanová et al., 2020; Coyne & Carter, 2018b, p. 3; Crotty, 1998a; Water, 2018). Co-creation can be interpreted as related to participatory (action) research in placing reliance on the voice of a participant, such as a person with a disability, as an expert with their active role visualised on continuum ranging from recognition to co-researcher to disability led participant research (Aldridge, 2019). Co-creation is flexible in application and interpretation, and can be linked to (non)inclusive research practices in how a person with a lived experience can contribute to research but not necessarily be a co-researcher (Smith-Merry, 2019). It is argued that participatory research is a collaborative effort amongst academics, persons with disabilities (e.g., learning disability) and practitioners sharing in all aspects of research from design to reporting (Seale et al., 2015). In locating my stance, I view co-creation as a shared experience in terms of including persons with disabilities in research to amplify their voices, while allowing a researcher the opportunity to understand a participant’s experiences and the flexibility to determine the extent of collaboration.

In co-creating the design of my research, I included Micah at the initial (i.e., design) stage to get a better understanding of his experiences during compulsory schooling in Trinidad. For example, our discussions revealed him forming and using friendships to cope with day-to-day classroom teaching, advocating to his teachers for classroom support and him reflecting on the limited teacher-student interaction. Co-creation is not uncommon in disability studies, as involving and/or relying on an expert at different stages (e.g., design, data collection, reporting) can be seen as a collaborative approach to research, such as me involving Micah to understand his experiences (Messiou, 2019). Involving Micah at the design stage can demonstrate my recognition of him as an expert through his active participation in the sharing of his experiences and perspectives (Coyne & Carter, 2018b). Co-creation was limited to the design of my research, as I did not engage and/or identify Micah as a co-researcher, such as collaborating with him with other research components such as data collection and analysis and reporting. I reflected that this decision may be viewed as a constrain to my research, but opted for this approach as it ensured that Micah’s voice was captured in design stage, which allowed me to
understand his experiences. For example, co-designing with Micah allowed me to gain insights from his experiences to understand what compulsory schooling in Trinidad was like for him, how he navigated it, his views of his teachers. Our sibling relationship gave me an opportunity to see his worldview and allowed me to understand the decisions my parents made in not adhering to the recommendation of professionals. For example, during our discussion about interview questions for youths, two groups (i.e., youth, educator) were identified and we decided to include parents/legal guardians because of their decision-making and advocacy for their child. Micah’s involvement at the design stage was appropriate and did not hinder my research as our collaboration meant we co-created questions for each participant group and areas of focus. The decision not to have Micah as a co-researcher was my choice, as the focus of my research was to develop a deeper understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school.

However, I view co-creating with Micah as an inclusive approach to my research in relying on the experiences of a person with disability to design and get a better understanding of his experiences. Understanding meant practising active listening by asking questions, suspending my judgment, not interpreting what was being said and having an open mind. Micah’s insights are instrumental in highlighting his experiences, which were dissimilar to mine, but can reflect the experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago. Although Micah was not a co-researcher, his contributions in co-creating my research by sharing his experiences and knowledge, added value to my understanding of a person with a disability navigating compulsory schooling in Trinidad (Nind, 2016; Seale et al., 2015). Our conversations identify a non-traditional approach to undertaking research by having Micah give insights as a subject-matter expert on his childhood experiences (Jones & Gillies, 2010). This approach provides a unique methodological contribution by relying on his experiences and knowledge and incorporating them as part of an inclusive research design (Nind, 2014; Seale et al., 2015).
In applying this approach to my research design, I understand that my reality varies to that of others, including Micah, based on the different ways we see and experience the world. For example, our experiences during compulsory schooling revealed that our interactions with teachers were different. Micah shared that at primary school, he was placed to sit at the back of the class or ignored and not provided the necessary supports (e.g., notetaker) within the learning environment. He revealed he formed strategic friendships with students who helped him during classes, such as sharing their notes because he wrote slower, and the teacher erased the content from the classroom blackboard before he finished writing it in his notebook. In contrast, during primary school I chose my seat, received one-on-one supports from my teachers when I had questions, and considered how teachers were using the national curriculum to prepare me, and not him, to write the formal Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA).^4

In reflecting on my compulsory education, I saw a pathway from primary to secondary school with a transition to post-secondary or the world of work. While for Micah this pathway was unclear or uncertain based on his experiences during primary school. In reflecting on the role of my parents, I saw them advocating for Micah by disclosing he required classroom supports as he often had incomplete notes and being told that the school did not have the resources, nor could the classroom teacher focus all their attention on him. I saw my parents using, but not relying on the advice of professionals and opting instead to navigate uncertain pathways in planning post-compulsory school transition for Micah. The experiences of my family illustrates a deeper societal issue about perceptions of disability and the value of persons with disabilities in relation to the education system (Barnes, 1996; Harry, 2020). This alludes to perceptions or “deficit assumptions” of persons with disabilities being seen as ‘lesser than’ their peers (Ainscow, 2005, p. 117; Glasgow-Charles et al., 2017).

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^4 This was previously known as the Common Entrance Examination.
Decades have passed since our family migrated to Canada where we continued our compulsory education.\textsuperscript{5} However, this experience in Trinidad left an indelible mark on my life to where, as an adult, I wanted to understand the present-day experiences for youths with a mild intellectual disability, and the perspectives of their parents/legal guardians who are cognizant of their child’s experience, and educators who are navigating the education system and imparting knowledge and skills to youths with a mild intellectual disability. My rationale was to see if there are similarities or if these experiences were unique to our family. However, I decided not to use a similar approach in the co-creation of my research and data analysis, as I did not have familial relationships with prospective participants, did not want to co-create knowledge based on their experiences and it was not feasible for me to travel internationally during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic.\textsuperscript{6}

1.2.2 Research Questions

In applying this context to my focus, which was to develop a deeper understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths (15-18 years) with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school, I wanted to know:

1. What are the experiences of youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability at special schools who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling?

2. What are the perspectives of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling?

3. What are the perspectives of parents and/or legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from compulsory schooling?

1.2.2.1 Person-Centred Planning Theoretical Framework

I relied on the theoretical framework of Person-Centred Planning to create focus areas with follow-up questions or statements for each participant group – youths, educators, educators, educators,

\textsuperscript{5} Although Micah and I initially attended a regular or mainstream school in the Province of Ontario, he finished his compulsory education at a special school.

\textsuperscript{6} The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on Wednesday 11\textsuperscript{th} March 2020. Webpage accessed on Thursday 20\textsuperscript{th} April 2023.
parents/legal guardians. I involved multiple participant groups that have a shared interest in preparing, as part of transition planning, youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school.

Person-Centred Planning focuses on what matters to an individual (i.e., youth) while leveraging the expertise of his/her network (e.g., parents/legal guardians, educators) to collaborate and coordinate so that he/she can achieve his/her goals (Mansell & Beadle-Brown, 2005). The intent is to centre a youth in the conversation as the expert in his/her life and for networks to work together, so that a youth achieves his/her goals and independence. In Person-Centred Planning, the process of transition planning includes preliminary planning conversations, creating and implementing a plan, as the individual exits one and enters another stage in life (Sanderson et al., 2008). The transition from compulsory schooling for youths have implications for their future, such as further/higher education and employment (Dee, 2004). At this junction in their lives, there is consideration for what is involved in this preparation, such as knowledge and skills acquisition and pathways to learning (e.g., co-op). In focussing on youths, I asked about their likes and dislikes, pathways to learning and future planning. For example, corresponding follow-up questions were used to ask youths about what they liked or did not like about their schools, subjects they were enrolled in, and their dreams and nightmares upon leaving school. This approach contributed to giving agency to the voices of youths with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago who are either absent from or overlooked in disability research, as well as provided an advocacy platform for parents/legal guardians and educators who are part of youths’ networks of support.

Parents/legal guardians play an important role in their child’s life, for example decision-making that shapes their child’s identity during his/her formative years. One area in which parents/legal guardians’ decision-making happen is in choosing a school their child attends during compulsory schooling. In some instances, they may choose a special school based on several factors (e.g., location, resources, specialisation) and/or under the advisement of education practitioners. In my research, I wanted parents/legal guardians to share their
perspectives of their child’s learning experiences, to know whether a learning environment accommodates their child’s needs and is supportive in helping him/her get the knowledge and skills across different areas. Understanding their child’s learning experiences was part of my Person-Centred Planning focus area. Similarly, parents/legal guardians play a role in the future planning, such as what is planned next for when their child exits compulsory schooling and can provide insights into their perspectives of how they have and continue to navigate transition planning for their child (Gardner & Randall, 2012). I asked about their future planning to understand how they envisioned their child’s life after school. For example, this can be parents/legal guardians wanting youths with a mild intellectual disability to be independent upon leaving school, which speaks to the role of special schools, as transformational spaces of learning, in preparing them for post-compulsory school transition by adapting the curriculum and providing necessary supports to accommodate learners with disabilities (Shevlin, 2010). Doing this demonstrates differentiated approaches to teaching with a focus on learner literacy, and providing youths with skills and knowledge to be participatory and independent citizens (McPhillips et al., 2010). Their perspectives can allude to a recognition of the importance of literacy and skills-based programmes in determining post-compulsory school pathways for their child. It can suggest wanting their child to be happy and develop life skills to be an independent citizen. For example, being independent can refer to being able to support him/herself in making his/her own decisions and choices, create and maintain social relationships, participate in gainful employment opportunities.

Education can be understood as a process of learning in which skills and knowledge are developed and shared in preparing an individual to be independent in life (Krishnamurti, 1981). This means that in the process of learning, an individual is equipped with competencies that enable him/her to have a fulfilling life and participate in all aspects of society (Osborne, 1991). In discussions with educators, I asked about their perspectives on pathways to learning at special schools for youths with a mild intellectual disability. I wanted to know the options available to (e.g., co-op, on-the-job training) and ways in which schools were developing youths through different learning options. This allowed me to learn about how schools were
introducing youths to opportunities for them to consider, in preparing them for life after school. For example, on-the-job training or apprenticeships that developed youths’ competencies in a particular skilled trade that can be used in further education or employment pursuits. I asked about pathways to learning recognising it can be used to prepare youths for life after school. This is important as schools play an important role in accommodating and preparing learners with special needs for post-compulsory school transition (Dee, 2006).

Across the three groups, there were similar focus areas, for example, youths and parents/legal guardians were both asked about their dreams and nightmares. I did this because I wanted to compare responses to see how youths envisioned (i.e., dreams) their future selves and what their parents/legal guardians wanted (e.g., dreams) or did not want (e.g., nightmares) for them. Similarly, youths and educators were both asked about pathways to learning, which allowed me to compare responses to see areas of interests for youths and whether special schools had these options available to youths that allowed them to identify and/or explore based on their interests.

1.2.2.2 Other Area of Focus

I used an Other area of focus to build rapport through conversational prompts with participants. I chose to have an Other area because I did not know participants and having recently met them as part of my research, I did not want to be seen as a distant researcher conducting interviews online. Having an Other area of focus allowed me to intersperse general questions to start a conversation or transition to another question. An Other area of focus was asking parents why they selected a particular special school. By doing this, I wanted participants to guide the conversation by disclosing information based on their preference. Other areas of focus included asking youths about their views on teachers, while for parents/legal guardians I asked about their perspectives on the special school attended by their child, and for educators I asked about the school’s curriculum and their perspectives on their career and teacher training. Each Other area of focus had corresponding follow-up questions. For example, in focussing on a
special school’s curriculum, I asked about the about subjects available to youths with a mild intellectual disability.

Both Person-Centred Planning and Other areas of focus helped me to understand how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago were preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school.

1.2.2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Sampling was purposive with a focus on persons who can speak in-depth about their experiences and perspectives on the school’s curriculum, programmes, transition planning as well as those who have youths attending special schools. My research was designed with a COVID-19 lens. Although online data collection was not a preferred choice from the onset, it was a practical option based on COVID-19, travel restrictions and special school closures in Trinidad and Tobago. I used one instrument (semi-structured interviews) for data collection due to restrictions on international travel, closure of special schools and legislated lockdowns with added constraints for physical and social distancing. I used multiple participant groups that share a central focus on preparation for life after school, as part of transition planning, for youths with a mild intellectual disability. A strength of this option is it allowed for in-depth understanding of preparation for life after school, as part of transition planning, from the experiences and perspectives of 20 participants across the three different types of special schools (private, government, vocational) in Trinidad and Tobago. While the data collected is not generalizable to the population of students with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago, it is representative of the groups. I applied qualitative methodology to complete 20 semi-structured interviews with participants.

My three research questions provided the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths (15-18 years) with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school. Each research question was linked to a respective participant group, and I had sub-questions within
each group that linked to and supported the overarching focus of my research. I used the framework method for analysis of my qualitative data, following a step-by-step process from transcription, familiarisation with interview, coding, creating and testing a preliminary analytical framework and using the framework to interpret the data (Gale et al., 2013). This method for analysis of my qualitative data enabled me to complete three levels of analysis – individual, within (intragroup) and across groups (intergroup) (Gale et al., 2013).

1.3 Definitions of Terms

In the following, I briefly discuss the terminology used in my thesis and locate my stance.

1.3.1 Disability

Disability remains a contested term in legislation and social domains across jurisdictions (D’Alessio, 2008; Harry, 2020). One can reason that divergent definitions can be problematic in understanding disability can be seen to how it is understood, for example either as an individual problem to overcome or created through disabling institutional, behavioural and environmental barriers (Haller et al., 2010; Slee, 1996; Taylor et al., 2015). There is also consideration for how the term disability can be contextually defined, such as historically, socially, culturally, economically with each having implications for a person with a disability, for example in the creation and implementation of policies and programmes (Chimedza, 2008; D’Alessio, 2008; Oliver, 1996).

One school of thought explains disability and impairment are not synonymous. Disability is as a result of disabling barriers within society that serve to exclude persons with visible and/or non-visible impairments from accessing spaces (e.g., classroom) and places (e.g., public building) (Oliver, 1996; United Nations, 2006; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). In this dichotomy, impairment is inherent to the human body such as “physical, mental, intellectual or sensory” while disability arises from “interaction with various barriers” that limit “full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (United Nations, 2006, p. 4). This interaction becomes the focus where limitations are not
relegated to the person, but externally to societal barriers that are impediments to equal access and fair participation in “social, political and economic environments” (D’Alessio, 2008; Drake, 1996, p. 149; Harpur, 2012; Kinsella & Senior, 2008). Unequal access and inequitable participation are exemplified in “limited access to basic necessities like housing, healthcare, education and jobs” (Gayle-Geddes, 2015; Taylor et al., 2015, p. 23). This is due to “society’s failure to adapt to the needs of the impaired person,” which needs to be “socially and historically” contextualised and understood (Abberley, 1996, pp. 61, 63). Within this context, the discourse has shifted towards positioning barriers to access and participation as a result of societal barriers, and advocating for inclusion of persons with disabilities within society with evidence of this discourse embedded in seminal declarations including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), human rights and disability/anti-discrimination legislation (Stein & Stein, 2007).

However, it is argued that definitions of disability are constructed by society with a leaning towards a medicalised perspective, which is premised on individual ability and/or symptoms inherent to the body with the onus on the individual to overcome (Haller et al., 2010; Singal, 2010). This is evident in another school of thought equates disability and impairment to be the same, and in doing so, places the onus on the individual to overcome through rehabilitation in order to have equal access to all facets of society (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2018; Equal Opportunity Act, 2000). Ascribing disability to the individual (i.e., inherent to the person) can be problematic as it adopts a “medicalised thinking” or “medicalization of disability” to where “the problem” is “situated in the child with disabilities” with a focus on “fixing the problem through additional resources aimed at making them as normally functioning as others” (Oliver, 1996, p. 18; Singal, 2010, p. 48). This positions disability inherent to the individual and a pre-determinant for “competency and cognition” as opposed to adopting a “holistic and dynamic view” of the learner’s strengths, learning environment and accommodations (McPhillips et al., 2010, pp. 215-216).
In locating disability as inherent to the individual can give rise to a clinical diagnosis with an accompanying stigma and discrimination premised on individual limitations (Barton, 1996; D’Alessio, 2008; Keaveny, 2017). This is exemplified in the Government of Trinidad and Tobago’s National Policy on Person with Disabilities (2018) which defines disability as “any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal” (p. viii). This language is problematic as it defines disability as something abnormal or as a deviation from typical with an underlying subtext of ‘othering’ an individual with a disability, which gives rise to “a form of oppression” that impacts an individual’s “self-identify and esteem” (Barton, 1996, p. 8; Slee & Allan, 2001). Barton (1996) explains “disability, like race, is part of an overarching structure of domination” in that it “entails social restrictions” on individuality through “disablist assumptions and discriminatory practices” (pp. 8, 10). This connects disability to inclusion in advocating for equitable access to all with consideration for provisions of support and accommodations for neurodivergent learners (Forlin, 2010).

1.3.2 Inclusion

Inclusion is broadly understood as having a sense of belonging and being able to participate in society. However, understanding and application of this term in the global North and global South can include, but is not limited to, representation and participation of vulnerable and marginalised groups or populations in the social, political and economic spheres (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2018; Harry, 2020; Rose, 2010; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019).

Inclusion is not limited to persons with disabilities and can include children in care, amongst other marginalised and vulnerable groups or populations (De Lisle et al., 2017; Forlin, 2010; Richards Mayo, 2017; Roffey, 2010). The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, UNCRPD and United Nations Rights of the Child espouse for the inclusion of marginalised and vulnerable groups, such as children with disabilities, refugees and those in state care (United Nations, 1948, 1989, 2006). These seminal declarations advocate for reasonable
accommodation in the social and humanitarian domains for persons with disabilities, so they can achieve their potential, as part of fostering a fair society (United Nations, 1989, 2006). In the same vein, seminal reports such as “Education for All (1990), Salamanca Statement (1994), Dakar Framework for Action (2000) and most recently the Sustainable Development Goals (2015)” are indicative of global “top-down policy initiatives” that continue to advocate for and espouse inclusion in education for students with special education needs within nation-states (Marshall, 2017, p. 124).

In the context of education, inclusion should be at the core of an education system guiding “all educational policies and practice” with the aim of equitable outcomes for all learners (Ainscow & Miles, 2009, p. 6; Messiou, 2006). Building on the World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtien 1990), the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) reinforces inclusion as associated with Education for All being a fundamental human right, seen to be a process and a journey, not a destination (Ainscow, 2005; Harry, 2020; UNESCO, 2000; United Nations, 1948). For example, making the built environment of a school accessible for a student with a disability is not tantamount to fair and equal access to the curriculum. As such, Education for All is a “comprehensive view of education and its critical role in empowering individuals and transforming societies” through “universal access to learning” (UNESCO, 2000, p. 11). This implies the same access to learning opportunities for all learners, which includes students with special education needs.

Ainscow (2005) explains “educational inclusion” as “identification and removal of barriers” so that all learners, including those with special education needs as well as those “at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement” are supported within the mainstream classroom (pp. 109, 118-119). This speaks to collaboration and ongoing supports across systems and structures to facilitate the process of inclusion (Ainscow & Miles, 2009; Forlin, 2010; Rose, 2010). Similarly, Ainscow and Sandill (2010) and Kinsella and Senior (2008) recognise that inclusion does not occur as a natural part of school development and advocate for inclusion to be a collaborative process amongst diverse stakeholders such as teachers, administrators,
parents/guardians and support services. In this process, inclusion adopts a “systems-thinking” or “ecological approach” as there is a recognition of “mutuality of influence between the individual and the system and between the system and the environment” (Kinsella & Senior, 2008, p. 659). Conrad and Brown (2011) explain this interconnectivity as teachers accommodating the student with special education needs through differentiated approaches to lesson planning, relying on the guidance of parents and professionals, using support services as well as undertaking continuing professional development. This approach is indicative of an “inclusive culture” as there is a shared outlook towards collaborating and service provisioning across structures and systems with a focus on adapting the learning environment to accommodate students with special education needs (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010, p. 405; de la Haye, 2015). It emphasises the need for inclusion in practice to be strengthened by resources, such as educator professional development opportunities, classroom support, parent-teacher partnerships, modified curriculum, student support provisions (Gadour, 2008).

Although the ideology of inclusion is welcomed, there remains variations in interpretations across jurisdictions which influence how it is practiced within a learning environment (Florian & Rouse, 2010). Florian and Rouse (2010) discuss two schools of thought on teacher preparation for inclusion, one being incorporating special education within teacher training and continuing professional development with a focus on “disabilities and difficulties,” and the other being “only special education teachers can teach special needs children” (pp. 189-190). They propose that both schools of thought can act as barriers to inclusion and advocate that a fundamental element in inclusive practice is teachers “believing that all children can learn” with mechanisms in-place to facilitate the process of inclusion through necessary teacher education, professional development and supports (Florian & Rouse, 2010, p. 192). Inclusion as a process can include local communities of practice in the process of “cooperative teaching” such as peer mentoring and coaching amongst teachers as well as “general and special education teachers working and teaching together in the same classroom,” which speaks to a shared professional learning environment that can foster ideas and best practices, as well as promote building professional capacity and contribute to knowledge
transfer (Deng, 2010, p. 207; Giangreco et al., 2010; Watkins & Meijer, 2010). This positions educator practice as demonstrating inclusive pedagogy. Disability and inclusion are connected to special education in viewing how neurodivergent learners receive their compulsory education within the same classroom as their peers and have access to the same learning opportunities (Forlin, 2010).

1.3.3 Special Education

The concept of special education emerged between the 19th and 20th centuries and can be attributed to educators and professionals who were concerned about the education of children, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) call for Education for All (Armstrong & Barton, 2008). Closely aligned with Education for All is special education which “refers to children and youth whose needs arise from disabilities or learning difficulties” (UNESCO, 1994, pp. 6-7). Under the umbrella of Education for All, the focus is on a child-centred pedagogy coupled with an inclusive approach in meeting the diverse learning needs of children with disabilities, or special education needs within the same classroom as their peers (UNESCO, 1994).

However, the emergence of special education is contextual to a nation-state in how it views and has dealt with the education of children with disabilities (Armstrong et al., 2005; Lavia, 2008; Phtiaka, 2008). Chimedza (2008) attributes this terminology being used to “distinguish groups of students in the school systems: normal students and special students” with a focus on special students as those who “require a special teacher, special school, special pedagogy, special curricula and so on” (p. 125). This alludes to “pathologizing educational difficulties as difficulties inherent within students” and can be viewed as a form of “subjugation” in labelling students with disabilities (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018, p. 13; Slee, 2008, p. 178). Some researchers expand special education needs to include language diversity in the classroom and students from a low socio-economic background as well as students with disabilities, while others argue special education retains its traditional outlook of not having students with diverse learning needs in the mainstream classroom, but in segregated learning

A traditional outlook of segregated learning environments can be attributed to environmental, behavioural and institutional factors such as inaccessible built spaces, deficit thinking that students with special education needs “might limit the level of academic success” of a school, and schools having limited resources to acquire supports and service provisioning for these students (Conrad & Brown, 2011; Glasgow-Charles et al., 2017, pp. 199-200; Parey, 2020; Shevlin, 2010). This speaks to the problematic nature of global commitments to Education for All translating to local level actions within a nation-state to where “the focus in special education is the child with disabilities and not the system of education” (Chimedza, 2008, p. 126; Rose, 2010). Singhal (2010) and Shevlin (2010) espouse a need for education reform towards accommodating learners with special education needs by recognising their potential and embedding inclusion into curriculum, lesson plan, school culture and teaching practices. For example, parent-teacher partnerships can provide a healthy learning environment for students with special education needs, such as using consistent approaches in “learning and teaching strategies” as well as transition planning (Ashdown, 2010, p. 96). Additionally, focussing on competencies and talents with the learner providing insights on differentiated approaches can mitigate removal of deficit thinking of students with special education needs (Kaikkonen, 2010; O’Neill, 2010).

Within the context of education, disability inclusion in principle differs to practice. For example, disability inclusion in principle can be manifested in government instruments and vocalised in reports, while in practice, students with special education needs receive their compulsory education in segregated learning environments and/or overlooked within mainstream/regular learning environments (Swain, 2008). It is argued that schools and society are connected, in that the former can contribute to furthering societal inclusion or exclusion for students with special education needs through its ethos and practice (Chimedza, 2008). This has implications when considering the interconnectivity of systems, such as education to
employment (i.e., labour market) and development of an individual to participate in and contribute to society (Armstrong & Barton, 2008; Oliver, 1996). This brings to the fore the flexibility in interpretation and application with a call for a deeper understanding of how students with special education needs are being prepared for life after school. This is important as youths with special education needs leaving compulsory schooling can face uncertainty in their transition to post-compulsory school destinations, such as employment (Slee, 1996).

Researchers argued that “a piecemeal” approach to inclusion is evidenced in ratifying international conventions, public commitments to disability inclusion through enactment of legislation and policies, but a continued absence of purposeful allocation of resources and modernisation of a colonial education system to include students with special education needs (Harry, 2020, p. 251). These factors contribute to segregated learning during compulsory schooling for students with special education needs, which has implications for their academic attainment and future opportunities.

1.3.4 Locating my Stance

Inclusive education means equal and equitable access to learning opportunities through necessary modifications and accommodations based on an individual’s needs (UNESCO, 1994; United Nations, 2006). There is consideration for how an individual’s learning needs are met within an inclusive learning environment (e.g., school). Special education needs remain a contested term to where researchers have used and/or expanded on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) definition of special education needs. UNESCO (1994) explains special education needs as individuals requiring learning supports because of an impairment or difficulty. Some researchers use this definition in positioning the lens of support on the learner and not a need for changing the system (Chimedza, 2008). While others position special education needs as a requirement of the education system to accommodate learners, thus removing the onus from an individual to the system to adapt (Dyson, 1990). Special education needs has been extended to include individuals who require supports, and not limited to only mean persons with disabilities
These definitions locate special education needs as an interplay between an individual and a learning environment (Dee, 2006). Within learning environments, inclusive practices refer to approaches used to ensure persons with a disability can have access to and participate in learning opportunities at school (Ainscow & Miles, 2009). This calls for an inclusive education system, recognizing the diversity of individual learning needs, including those identified with special educational needs. International conventions underscore the fundamental right to education for persons with disabilities in compulsory and further/higher education opportunities (United Nations, 2006). This right is important as persons with disabilities historically and presently encounter barriers to education, which can affect their post-compulsory school transition to further/higher educational or vocational opportunities.

I understand special education, within the context of the education system, to mean learners with visible, non-visible impairments and those who require necessary accommodations and supports in the mainstream classroom. I understand inclusion to mean all and within the context of education, the focus should not be limited to children with disabilities, but include children in state care, refugees, English as an additional language. I view disability and impairment as not being synonymous. I understand impairment to be physical, mental, intellectual or sensory and relational to the individual. Disability is caused by exclusionary practices that are manifested behaviourally (e.g., ideologies, attitudes), institutionally (e.g., policies, legislation) and environmentally (e.g., built spaces and places). In the context of my writing, I will use the term disability recognising the interaction between the individual and society can result in exclusionary practices and create barriers that impede a person with an impairment from accessing the same spaces and places as their peers. In my thesis, I use the term inclusive and special education within the context of education and my scope will be on youths (15-18 years) with special education needs (mild intellectual disability).

1.4 Preview of Thesis Chapters

My thesis comprises of six chapters. In this my Introductory chapter, I discussed my rationale for research, identified my research aim and questions and areas of focus. I gave an
overview of Person-Centred Planning and the framework method for data analysis. I defined terminologies as they relate to my research, and located my stance as well as gave a preview of thesis chapters.

My second chapter, Literature Review, sets the context of Trinidad and Tobago’s education system with a focus on special education. I explain my theoretical framework of Person-Centred Planning. I discuss inclusive and special education and learning environments. I focus on special education needs and transition as it relates to perceptions of educators, experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability, perceptions of parents/legal guardians, outcomes for students with special education needs and future jobs. I identify how my research contributes to knowledge. I summarise this chapter and conclude with a transition to my third chapter – Methodology.

My third chapter, Methodology, explains my approach in designing, planning, implementing and reporting on my research. I begin by outlining my research paradigm and following this, I discuss my research design. Building on this, I explain how I applied an ethical approach throughout my research. Then, I explain my approach to recruitment and account for my approach to data collection. Next, I speak to how I embedded quality in my research design and identified how my qualitative research is trustworthy. I summarise on how I achieved the aims of my research and conclude with a transition to my next chapter – Data Analysis and Results.

My fourth chapter, Data Analysis and Results, presents how I analysed the data collected during interviews. I begin with discussing my approach to data analysis, and report on findings within groups. Following this, I account for the perspectives of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling. Next, I report on the experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling. Then, I describe the perspectives of parents/legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from
compulsory schooling. After which, I report on the findings across the three groups. I summarise this chapter and conclude with a transition to my next chapter – Implications for Policy and Practice.

My fifth chapter, Implications for Policy and Practice, explains the significance of my research findings within the context of how they may be important for policy and practice as it pertains to preparing youths with special education needs in Trinidad and Tobago for life after school. I reflect on my personal family experience and what I learned from Micah. I summarise key findings, interpret and reflect on linkages to discussions in my Literature Review chapter, as well as include suggested recommendations for decision-makers. I draw this chapter to a close and transition to my last chapter – Conclusion.

My sixth chapter, Conclusion, discusses the overall contributions my research has made to knowledge about the experience of transition from compulsory schooling for youths with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago. I outline the limitations of the research and based on my findings, I make recommendations for policymakers and practitioners in Trinidad and Tobago. Then, I identify future research in this area and close my thesis.

1.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I gave an overview of the broader aspects of my research topic within the context of preparation for life after school, as part of transition planning, for youths with a mild intellectual disability. I explained my research topic, including discussing my rationale for undertaking research based on my family’s experience. I outlined my research question, Person-Centred Planning theoretical framework and highlighted the framework method for data analysis. I defined concepts as they applied to my research and located my stance. I provided a preview of the forthcoming chapters in my thesis. I now pivot to my next chapter – Literature Review.
2 Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Chapter

In my Introduction chapter, I explained my research topic, including discussing my rationale for undertaking research based on my family’s experience. I gave an overview of my research aim and group questions, Person-Centred Planning theoretical framework, the framework method for data analysis, defined terminologies as they related to my research and located my stance.

In this chapter, I begin in section 2.2 setting the context of Trinidad and Tobago’s education system with a focus on special education. Then, in section 2.3, I explain my theoretical framework of Person-Centred Planning and life after compulsory schooling. Following this, in section 2.4, I discuss inclusive and special education as well as learning environments. Next, in section 2.5, I focus on special education needs and transition as it relates to perceptions of school leadership and educators, experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability, perceptions of parents/legal guardians, outcomes for students with special education needs and future jobs. Moving into section 2.6, I identify research gaps and how my research contributes to knowledge. Finally, in section 2.7. I summarise this chapter and conclude in section 2.8 with a transition to my third chapter – Methodology.

In setting the context, I rely on the scholarly publications of historian, Dr Carl C. Campbell as they give an in-depth account of Trinidad and Tobago’s education system. 

2.2 Education System in Trinidad and Tobago

Trinidad was colonised by the Spanish, French and British, while Tobago was colonised by the Dutch, French and British, with both islands being used for agricultural purposes (Campbell, 1996; Harry, 2020). The islands’ population comprised of various races, ethnicities

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7 Dr Campbell’s books, "The young colonials: A social history of education in Trinidad and Tobago 1834-1939" (2000) and "Endless education: Main currents in the education system of modern Trinidad and Tobago 1939-1986" (1997) delve into the education system from colonisation to independence.
and religions because of enslavement and indentured labour during colonisation (Campbell, 1997; Lavia, 2008). The children of enslaved peoples were not educated, but at the abolition of slavery in 1834, Britain as the coloniser, was tasked with developing an education framework (Campbell, 1996).

In April 1851, Lord Harris, launched an education framework consisting of a board of education (Campbell, 1996). The Roman Catholic church and the Church of England were significant contributors to the development of the dual education system – denominational and secular – in Trinidad, while the Methodists and Moravians controlled the primary education system in Tobago (Campbell, 1996). Although education of the indentured labour population from the Indian subcontinent was the primary responsibility of the Canadian Presbyterian Church, the education system was used by all churches to maintain social order, morality and Christianize (Campbell, 1996).

After the union of Trinidad and Tobago in 1889, the education system was integrated and focussed on assimilation to British culture and language across primary and secondary schooling (Campbell, 1996; Paul, 2011). The primary school curriculum focussed on reading, writing and arithmetic, while access to secondary schools was based on gender (male), class (middle and upper) and wealth, with systemized and competitive examinations introduced to mitigate the increasing need for education demands across a racialized population (Campbell, 1996). However, special education was not included in the design of the education system, as the inherited colonial education system was “focused on rewards for small percentages of the brightest citizens” which resulted in the continued “marginalisation and oppression of people with special needs” as many remained within their homes (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017, p. 35; Harry, 2020; Lavia, 2008).

Post-independence (1962), changes to the education system saw the handover from a board of education to directors of education and finally to an elected official (Campbell, 1996). Equalisation of opportunity was envisioned as the same access to free compulsory education
irrespective of gender, race and class (Campbell, 1997; Harry, 2020). The mainstream/regular education system (see Figure 2) has four stages: early childhood care and education (ages three to four), primary (ages five to eleven plus), secondary (ages eleven to eighteen) and tertiary (age eighteen plus) (Caribbean Examinations Council, 2021a, 2021b; Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education, 2021c, 2021d, 2021a).

![Figure 2: Stages in Trinidad and Tobago's Education System](image)

References: (Caribbean Examinations Council, 2021a, 2021b; Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education, 2021c, 2021d, 2021a)

Early childhood care and education signals entry into the formal education with progression to primary school that culminates in a formal examination, the SEA. The SEA grades determine who accesses which secondary school, and similarly, entry requirements to tertiary institutions are based on academic performance in secondary national examinations. However, students with special educational needs continue to be educated at special schools, although special education is under the purview of the Ministry of Education (Harry, 2020; Pedro & Conrad, 2006).

### 2.2.1 Emergence of Special Education

Researchers confirm philanthropic organisations created special schools, formerly institutional schools (see Table 1), which emerged in the early 1940s to address the absence of government’s inclusion of children with special education needs within the formal education
system (Conrad et al., 2010; Felix et al., 2017; Glasgow-Charles et al., 2017; Johnstone, 2010; Lavia, 2008; Pedro, 2017; Pedro & Conrad, 2006; Williams, 2007).

Table 1: List of Special Schools in Trinidad and Tobago (1942-1988)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad</td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Cascade School for the Deaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Santa Cruz School for the Blind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>Princess Elizabeth School for the Physically Handicapped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Wharton-Patrick School (formerly School for the Mentally Handicapped)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Lady Hochoy Schools/Homes for the Mentally Retarded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>National Centre for Persons with Disabilities (formerly San Fernando Rehabilitation Centre)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Audrey Jeffers School for the Deaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Service Volunteered for All (SERVOL) Special School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobago</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Happy Haven School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Immortelle Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Pointe-à-Pierre Government Special School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References: (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017, p. 36; Happy Haven School Tobago, 2017; Harry, 2020, p. 19; National Centre for Persons with Disabilities Trinidad and Tobago, 2021; SERVOL Trinidad and Tobago, 2021)

Pre-independence five special schools existed for children with disabilities, all located in Trinidad, and post-independence (1962) this increased with the emergence of four additional special schools, all primarily located in Trinidad. However, absence of a government framework or strategy meant a reliance on parents to navigate complex systems of health, education and social assistance and create their own network of resources based on the unique diagnosis and needs of their child with a disability (Harry, 2020). Researchers position the lack of government direction as problematic in highlighting the value of persons with disabilities as being unequal

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8 Schools are reported based on their historical and present names.
to their peers, as well as issues that may arise in delivery of service provisions through philanthropic organisations due to changes in government priorities and policies (Harry, 2020).

Changes in government priorities saw the aforementioned special schools as well as others existing today, subsequently placed under the administrative oversight of the Ministry of Education and the creation, in 1981, of the Special Education Unit (Felix et al., 2017). This government action is attributed to the Winschel Report (1979), which is credited “as a significant catalyst to national policy development for inclusive and special education in Trinidad and Tobago” (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017, p. 35). Subsequent reports (see Table 2) repeated calls for government action on special education and service provisioning for children with disabilities. While authors (e.g., Harry, 2020) refer to these reports, I draw on the 2017 publication of Elna Carrington Blaides and Dennis Conrad because of their detailed description of these historical reports.

Table 2: Reports on Special Education in Trinidad and Tobago (1979-2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Report</th>
<th>About</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Organisation of American States (OAS) technical multi-national project: Special education and rehabilitation (referred to as the Winschel Report)</td>
<td>Lead: Dr James Winschel from Syracuse University and Consultant with the OAS Partnership Team: OAS, Syracuse University, Partners of the Americas, Ministry of Education (and Culture)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Report on the survey of the incidence of handicapping conditions in children between the ages of 3 and 16 in Trinidad and Tobago (referred to as the Marge Report)</td>
<td>Lead: Dr Michael Marge from Syracuse University and Consultant with the OAS Partnership Team: Marjorie Parkinson, Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education (Special Education Unit), Advisory Committee on Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Report of the collation and evaluation committee for the</td>
<td>National Consultation on Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Report</td>
<td>About</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2008 | Achieving Inclusion: Transforming the Education System of Trinidad and Tobago (Final Report) - Inclusive Education Component of the Seamless Education Project | Lead: Miske Witt & Associates  
Team: Dr Susan Peters, Dr Shirley J. Miske, Dr Christopher Johnstone, Dr Diane Prouty Harris, Dr Kimberly Ann Wolbers, Alicia Trotman and Dr Greg Sales |

References: (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017; Conrad & Brown, 2011; Glasgow-Charles et al., 2017; Harry, 2020; Johnstone, 2010; Lavia, 2008; Peters et al., 2008)

2.2.1.1 The Winschel Report

This 1979 report resulted in government ushering in a national policy on special education. Researchers explain the report’s focus was a situational analysis of persons “identified as the ‘handicapped’” including those who self-identified as having “sensory, intellectual and orthopaedic impairments” with a call for educational provisioning through “policy planning, development and implementation to determine appropriate definitions of disabilities” (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017, p. 36). This report was seminal in influencing organisational change within the bureaucracy, namely the Ministry of Education, to create a specific unit with the aim of addressing special education within Trinidad and Tobago through an undertone of education for all and mainstreaming (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017; Pedro & Conrad, 2006).
However, the report advised government against undertaking a national survey to determine the population of children with disabilities as it was costly and unfeasible, but advocated for action through policy (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017). Researchers explain that the creation of the Special Education Unit was fraught with human resource issues, such as a lack of specialists for student assessments, qualified special education teachers, as well as bureaucratic conflicts on roles, responsibilities and outlook, which saw the amalgamation of the Special Education Unit with the Student Support Services (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017; Harry, 2020).

2.2.1.2 The Marge Report

Five years later a second report emerged, commissioned by the Ministry of Education to identify the number of children with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago with the aim of informing policy, service provisioning and “facilitate programmed development for the prevention of disabilities” (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017, p. 38). The survey revealed “16.1 percent of children and youth had a disability” and called upon government to focus on training “special educators with expertise in various disability types” as well as develop a “national programme of primary and secondary prevention of the occurrence of new cases of disability” (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017, p. 38; Williams, 2007, p. 5). Unlike its predecessor, this report differed in that it focussed on disability prevention and intervention (Conrad et al., 2010). However, it complements the Winschel Report in providing insights into the continued call for special education for persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago (Glasgow-Charles et al., 2017; Lavia, 2008).

2.2.1.3 The Pilgrim Report

Six years after the Marge Report, the Pilgrim Report informed government to focus on “early detection and intervention procedures that were community based” with a preference to “educational practices as opposed to clinical approaches” towards the creation “of a seamless and inclusive education system” (Lavia, 2008, p. 111). Similar to the Winschel and Marge Reports, there remained a continued call towards education for all with a focus on assessment
and a person-centred approach (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017; Lavia, 2008). While these reports provided the government of the day with opportunities towards adoption of an inclusive philosophy, evidence-informed findings and recommendations for policy development, inclusion did not become a reality within the education system, as “marginalised groups remain marginalised” with the “vulnerable and disadvantaged remaining excluded from economic and educational activities” (Lavia, 2008, p. 112).

### 2.2.1.4 The White Paper

Four years after the Pilgrim Report, the White Paper attributed to a Ministry of Education consultation, acknowledged the findings and recommendations of the Pilgrim Report (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017). However, the White Paper’s focus expanded to “the provision of access and the opportunity to students of all abilities for the development of individual talents” by advocating government “establish Regional Diagnostic Prescriptive Centres,” but maintained the consistent call as previous reports for “special education within teacher training” and mainstreaming with schools having “plans to meet the needs of students with special needs” (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017, pp. 39-40; Conrad & Brown, 2011, pp. 1019-1020).

However, this report differed to its predecessors in its approach to having special schools’ role providing supports within the education system (Conrad & Brown, 2011). The Ministry of Education created a Student Support Services Division to administer “a pilot Diagnostic Programme in 1999” as well as in 2004 included the Special Education Unit (Harry, 2020; Williams, 2007, p. 7). While the report provided recommendations with a focus on inclusion for students with special education needs, they were not implemented by the ministry (Harry, 2020).

### 2.2.1.5 Miske Witt & Associates Report

Fourteen years after the White Paper, the Ministry of Education procured the services of a consultancy organisation, Miske Witt & Associates, to administer a national survey measuring
teachers’ perceptions and behaviours towards inclusion as a means of “assessing the readiness of Trinidad and Tobago to implement inclusive education policy” (Harry, 2020, p. 45; Johnstone, 2010). Although special schools were included in the data collection, their small sample size was often excluded from data analysis as the focus was on mainstream teachers (Johnstone, 2010). Peters et al. (2008) and Johnstone (2010) reveal positive attitudes towards inclusion, but report although general education teachers in mainstream schools interacted with students the most, they lacked special education knowledge and qualifications. A lack of special education hampers creation of an inclusive learning environment as general educators do not know strategies and approaches such as curriculum accommodations and modifications, and are not knowledgeable in recognising students who may have non-visible special education needs (Johnstone, 2010; Peters et al., 2008). The nation-wide survey found a “relatively high number of both diagnosed and suspected disabilities” in mainstream schools with early monitoring and assessment in its infancy and special education policy and legislation “lack[ing] the authority needed for implementation and enforcement” (Peters et al., 2008, pp. 6-7). The report alluded to “Trinidad and Tobago not optimally ready for Inclusive Education” (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017, p. 45).

2.2.1.6 Timeline of Seminal Reports and Special Schools

Thirty-seven years after the emergence of the first special school in 1942, emerged the first report on special education (see Figure 3).

![Figure 3: A Timeline Summary of Special Schools and Seminal Reports on Special Education](image)

Note: institutions are reported based on their historical names.
Within the space of twenty-nine years (1979-2008), five reports contributed to providing a situational analysis of inclusive and special education in Trinidad and Tobago. These reports provided recommendations on a pathway forward to mainstreaming students with disabilities and including them within the formal education system. However, existence of special schools and reports have brought to light a friction when attempting to modernise a colonial education system to be inclusive of all learners with special education needs (Campbell, 1996; Lavia, 2008). I will examine government instruments (e.g., legislation, policies) enacted post-independence with a focus on recognition and advocacy for persons with disabilities.

2.2.2 Government Instruments

Under the leadership of Trinidad and Tobago’s first Prime Minister, Dr Eric Williams, the *Education Act, 1966* (see Table 3) was introduced with the purpose of centralising the dual education system, regulating religious control of the education system, decolonising the curriculum and developing a formal system of compulsory education (Campbell, 1996, 1997).

*Table 3: Significant Legislation and Policies Post-Independence (Focussing on Persons with Disabilities)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>About</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Education Act</td>
<td>Promotes education through establishing a system that includes academic institutions, developing internal structures that includes recruitment of human resources and implementing education policy that collectively benefit individuals, community and the nation-state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Equal Opportunity Act</td>
<td>Prohibits discrimination on certain grounds, establishes a public commission body to advance equality for all and authorises a tribunal (an intermediate court) to adjudicate complaints.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Inclusive Education Policy</td>
<td>Commitment to an inclusive, accessible and equitable education system for all learners with a focus on students on special education needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Instrument</td>
<td>About</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>National Policy on Persons with Disabilities</td>
<td>Signals commitment to equality of opportunity for persons with disabilities as a signatory (2007) to the UNCRPD, which was ratified in 2015.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References: (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2009, 2018; Education Act, 1966; Equal Opportunity Act, 2000)

After the Williams’ administration, successive political administrations implemented and amended legislation, national strategies and education policies with mention of persons with disabilities (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2016).

2.2.2.1 Education Act, 1966

As discussed in section 2.2.1 Emergence of Special Education and outlined in Table 1, institutions for persons with disabilities existed starting in the 1940s and were eventually absorbed into the Special Education Unit in 1981 (Harry, 2020). However, the enactment of the Education Act saw children with disabilities still receiving supports and services within special schools, while in 1981 only those with “mild learning difficulties” received limited supports within mainstream schools with the creation of the Special Education Unit within the Ministry of Education (Harry, 2020, p. 13). The Education Act organises the public education system (see Table 4) into kindergarten, compulsory (i.e., primary and secondary) and tertiary (i.e., post-secondary) levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ages</th>
<th>Stage/Tier</th>
<th>About/Overview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>Early Childhood Care and Education</td>
<td>Entry into the formal education system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-11+</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>• Full-time education focussing on nine subjects Agricultural Science, English Language Arts, Mathematics, Physical Education, Science, Social Studies, Spanish, Values,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages</td>
<td>Stage/Tier</td>
<td>About/Overview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Character and Citizenship Education and Visual and Performing Arts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Progression to a secondary school determined by the SEA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• At the end of the fifth year, students write the CSEC examination, choosing from three streams (basic, general and technical) with a selection of approximately 22 subjects ranging from Agricultural Science to Typewriting and Visual Arts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Upon successful completion of five years of secondary schooling, students passing CSEC may continue for an additional two years and sit the CAPE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18+</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>• Entry requirements based on CSEC and CAPE results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Institutions such as The University of the West Indies, University of Trinidad and Tobago offer full- and/or part-time programmes (e.g., degrees) and courses.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References: (Caribbean Examinations Council, 2021a, 2021b; Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education, 2021d, 2021c, 2021a)

Legislation speaks to the creation of special schools either as standalone institutions or associated with existing academic institutions, and authorises the removal of disruptive students to other academic institutions including special schools (Education Act, 1966). This legislative provisioning creates a parallel stream within the education system, and a recourse for those in positions of authority (e.g., principal, elected official) to maintain the status quo of
segregated learning environments for students with disabilities (Harry, 2020; Peters et al., 2008).

However, it can be argued that the legislation does have provisioning to ensure resources to academic institutions. The legislation permits financial resources, staffing and the professional development of special education teachers, and the creation of regulations that “define the categories of children requiring special education” (Education Act of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 1966, pp. 56-57). This can be viewed as a fair approach to ensuring students with disabilities receive the necessary supports within a conducive learning environment (Conrad & Brown, 2011; Education Act, 1966; F. James, 2014; Paul, 2011). Special schools were established to facilitate the unique needs of students with disabilities as they are resourced with special education teachers and specialised support staff (Education Act, 1966).

Although this perspective can be used in some instances, such as students who have comorbidities (e.g., deaf/hard-of-hearing and blind/visual impairment), it can also explain the upholding of segregated learning environments within the education system for students with disabilities. The creation of a parallel stream in the education system is codifying students based on aptitude and then sorting them into mainstream or special schools (Singal, 2010; Watkins & Meijer, 2010). This is codified in section 77 and supported by section 85, which speaks to students receiving “education suitable” based on factors including “ability and aptitude” as well as identifying those “requiring special education” (Education Act, 1966, pp. 52, 56-57). Sorting students based on aptitude can result in some not receiving the same and/or a fair access to educational learning opportunities and is premised on a bell-curve thinking of learner intelligence, which has implications for creating at-risk and/or marginalised student groups when neurodiversity is not positioned as an asset (Fendler & Muzaffar, 2008).

The legislation recognises the value of education to the individual and the contribution to Trinidad and Tobago, but is silent on whether the national curriculum is modified to accommodate children with disabilities in special schools (Education Act, 1966). Osborne (1991)
explains the curriculum as the taught content, while pedagogy is approaches to teaching the content. Curriculum accommodation and adoption in special schools can be positioned as an opportunity to achieve the same outcome of equitable access to education. This means using the same curriculum delivered in mainstream schools in special schools, and adapting it based on the student’s learning needs (UNESCO, 1994; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). Curriculum flexibility allows for the learner with special education needs to be included within the learning environment because the lesson plans are accessible and assessments are modified, which demonstrates a learner-focused approach (Mittler, 2000). However, this would require allocation of the necessary service and resource provisions, as students would require one-on-one support and modifications of lesson plans to accommodate for their diverse learning needs. It took thirty-four years to enact legislation advocating for non-discrimination in education for persons with disabilities.

2.2.2.2 Equal Opportunity Act, 2000

The Equal Opportunity Act, 2000 defines disability as a “total or partial loss of bodily function, total or partial loss of a part of the body, malfunction of a part of the body including a mental or psychological disease or disorder, or malformation or disfigurement of part of the body” (pp. 6-8). I maintain this legal definition attributes disability as being inherent to the individual – disability and impairment are synonymous. I understand impairment as that which is localised to the human body (e.g., an individual who is deaf/hard-of-hearing). An individual may use hearing aids to help amplify hearing and/or may require a sign language interpreter to facilitate conversation one-on-one or in a group setting. Should the individual, if requested, not be provided a sign language interpreter then that creates a communication barrier, thus disabling them from participation because the accommodation was not provided; the result is exclusion and discrimination.

The legislation further prohibits discrimination on the ground of disability in areas such as education, employment, goods and services, accommodation/housing (Equal Opportunity Act, 2000). Non-discrimination in the provision of goods and services include “access to and use
of any place which members of the public or a section of the public are permitted to enter” such as financial institutions, government buildings, business establishments, sporting and recreational facilities (Equal Opportunity Act, 2000, p. 15). The legislation uses the words “access to and use of” and in doing so mitigates the notion of ‘sameness’ in treatment (Equal Opportunity Act, 2000, p. 15). Unless goods and services are extended to include the areas of customer service, information and communication, healthcare and transportation, the legislation is otherwise silent in these specific areas. Being specific removes the element of ambiguity in applicability and interpretation of domains, in which discrimination is relational to persons with disabilities.

However, the preamble reads “An Act to prohibit certain kinds of discrimination, to promote equality of opportunity between persons of different status” (Equal Opportunity Act, 2000, p. 6). This language is problematic as does not say all discrimination is prohibited and is open to interpretation and application. While it does espouse equality, it lacks an inclusive and equitable outlook towards prohibiting all grounds of discrimination and raises the notion of conditional inclusion for persons with disabilities (Armstrong & Barton, 2008; Barton & Armstrong, 2008; Harry, 2020).

In focussing on education, the Equal Opportunity Act, 2000 prohibits school boards, education-related institutions, and co-education schools from refusing or applying conditions to admissions that “deny or limit the student’s access to any benefits, facilities or services” or “expel or subject the student to any other detriment” (p. 14). However, the caveat for refusal or non-admission is on the grounds of undue hardship, which uses a cost-benefit analysis, factoring in the person’s disability with adjudication by the Equal Opportunity Tribunal (Equal Opportunity Act, 2000). I interpret this approach as a means-based testing to locate a balance for accommodation using a fiscal lens. The ‘ask’ is weighed on the scales of cost and benefit with an outcome premised on reasonableness (Armstrong & Barton, 2008). However, reasonableness is complicated when the request is applied broadly to include able-bodied persons, and in doing so removes the ‘ask’ from being relegated to the person with a disability.
who has professed to have experienced discrimination, to the benefit of all (Grue, 2019). While I can see this as adjusting for the application of equality (i.e., same), it does not for equity (i.e., fair), as the action of discrimination is relegated to the individual claimant and not all of society or those who can access facilities, services or goods of an establishment (Shevlin, 2010).

While recognising the legality of a means-based testing for undue hardship, this approach is problematizing the experiences of persons with disabilities who continue to be marginalised in society (Peters et al., 2008). An either-or approach or “clauses of conditionality” to resolution does not benefit any society that endeavours to uphold the inherent rights of a human being, irrespective of race, creed, religion, impairment (Slee, 1996, p. 107). The terms ‘reasonable accommodation’ and ‘undue hardship’ are attributed to Article 2 of the UNCRPD (2006):

> “Reasonable accommodation” means necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. (p. 4)

This definition compels nation-states to have regard to accommodations for persons with disabilities to prevent “discrimination on the basis of disability” (United Nations, 2006, p. 4). This approach positions a “rights-based approach to education” as education and disability are human rights issues with the latter focused on fair access to the same opportunities (Rioux, 2007, p. 3). While the UNCRPD does not provide factors of consideration, as a measurement for determining ‘reasonable accommodation’ and ‘undue hardship,’ like Trinidad and Tobago, nation-states such as Canada (e.g., the Province of Ontario) and Jamaica have endeavoured to so within their legal framework.

The Province of Ontario is guided by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC), which administers the *Ontario Human Rights Code*, 1990. The OHRC’s Policy on Ableism and
Discrimination based on Disability (2016) assesses “undue hardship” by factoring the “cost, and whether there are outside sources of funding and health and safety requirements” with the burden of proof for non-accommodation resting with the organisation (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2016, p. 49). In combining these three factors, organisations are required to prove that the costs of adjustments (i.e., ‘reasonable accommodation’) would be exorbitant to render the organisation unprofitable or its cessation, the costs could not be balanced by grants or subsidies, and adjustments would pose dire risks to health and safety (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2016). In Jamaica, the working definition of ‘undue burden’ speaks to considering the (dis)advantage of the accommodation to the person with a disability, type of disability and weighing the costs for accommodation by taking into consideration the organisation’s resources such as funding (Jamaica Disabilities Act, 2014).

In comparing, all three jurisdictions have a tribunal to hear and adjudicate legal proceedings. Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago adopt the same definitions of ‘undue hardship’. Unlike Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica and the Province of Ontario’s legislations do not have clauses that make it lawful to discriminate due to ‘undue hardship’ in the domain of education. Terminologies such as ‘reasonable accommodation’ and ‘undue burden’ expose the myths of education being equal, fair and merit-based, giving rise to the concept of “separate yet equal” in that while education is perceived as a human right, it is less accessible to students with special education needs as the onus of conformity is placed on the individual and not the system (Rioux, 2007, p. 6). This illustrates the role of a student as transactional in a reliance of measuring aptitude instead of the recognising the potential of each individual (Krishnamurti, 1981). In contrast, transformative education is student-focused to where the educator learns from a student through understanding, how to develop their potential based on their unique learning needs (Krishnamurti, 1981; Osborne, 1991).

2.2.2.3 Inclusive Education Policy (2009)

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago’s Inclusive Education Policy (2009) acknowledges global commitments to education as a human right and recognises the need for
local action towards modifying the national education system to make it accessible, inclusive and equitable to all learners, with a notable focus on students with special education needs. Enactment of the Inclusive Education Policy can be seen as a nod to the Salamanca Statement and the call for Education for All within a human rights framework (Mittler, 2000; UNESCO, 1994). Florian (2019) explains the education of learners with special education needs “was understood as that which was provided in special schools and special classes” (p. 694). In linking the global call to a national policy, it can be stated that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is endeavouring towards creating an “inclusive education system,” which has been endorsed by researchers who advocate for “a clear and focused national policy for inclusive and special education” (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017, p. 47; Florian, 2019, p. 692).

The Inclusive Education Policy defines special education needs as “a diverse range of characteristics” of a learner who requires “support different from those which are needed by most students to achieve the expected educational goals,” while special education refers to students “who cannot profit maximally from regular education” and require supports and service provisions (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2009, pp. 3-4). This definition highlights the need for a “radical rethink of policy” to “shift from a ‘defect’ to a ‘social model’” which places the learner with special education needs at the core of program and policy design instead of “partial segregation” for learning, while simultaneously raising the complexity of restructuring education systems that were not designed to be accessible and equal to all (Mittler, 2000, pp. xi, 3).

However, it can be argued the Inclusive Education Policy endeavours to reform access to education. The twelve principles contributing to “inclusive practice in education” speak to “equal opportunity, valuing diversity, equitable access, recognition of human rights” along with shared responsibility through collaborative partnerships, systems and structural reform, professional development and learning, “equitable resourcing” to regular schools so they can be accessible, “positive discrimination” to where learners with special education needs are provided with necessary supports not afforded to their peers and “quality assurance” measures
to “monitor and evaluate” (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2009, pp. 6-8). These principles speak to attributes of social justice in advocating for the same access, fair practices and anti-discrimination (Popova, 2017; Timmons, 2008).

While the Inclusive Education Policy speaks to educating learners in schools based in their community, it recognises the existence of special schools to provide “initial educational intervention” to “equip students with the compensatory skills in preparation for transition to the regular school system” as well as “provide basic education for students who are moderately or severely challenged” and “whose educational needs cannot be met within the regular school environment” (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2009, p. 8). The SEA (see Table 4) allows for students with special education needs to receive “special concessions” or accommodations due to their “functional differences which exist because of the disability/special educational needs,” but is couched in the language of reasonable accommodation to where “concessions are subject to limitations of what can be provided” (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2009, p. 10). It must be noted that reasonable accommodation is endorsed in Article 24 which advocates for the right to education for persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006). Slee (1996) argues reasonable accommodation are “linguistic veneers” in that they “advance and conceal competing agendas” and serve to “maintain the powerlessness” of students with special education needs and their network of support (p. 107). This alludes to the tension in interpretations of inclusion, which is examined further in a national policy that emerged nine years later.

2.2.2.4 National Policy on Persons with Disabilities (2018)

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago’s National Policy on Persons with Disabilities (2018) is a comprehensive approach towards creating a society where persons with disabilities are included in the provision of education, healthcare, employment, recreation and sport. The National Policy on Persons with Disabilities aligns with the UNCRPD articles (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2018; Harry, 2020). Short- and long-term socio-economic
goals are time-bound with reporting starting in 2020, signifying political willpower to enact meaningful change towards equality and equity for persons with disabilities.

The National Policy on Persons with Disabilities defines disability as a “restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) or ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal” and includes persons who have “long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments” (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2018, pp. viii and ix). I argue this definition of disability uses a medical lens and speaks to the limitation of an individual’s ability and capacity using the word ‘normal’. An individual’s impairment can be temporary or lifelong, acquired at birth or later in life and require varying degrees of support based on their spectrum of needs.

Within the context of education, the National Policy on Persons with Disabilities defines inclusive education as “persons with and without disabilities learning together” with the provision of reasonable accommodation limited to employment (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2018, p. ix). On one hand, the National Policy on Persons with Disabilities adopts a mainstream approach to having students with disabilities in the same classroom as their peers, while on the other hand, reasonable accommodation is relegated to the employment domain. This approach is problematic as reasonable accommodation should not be limited to employment, as persons with disabilities would also require necessary supports to access schools and be included in the learning environment (Keaveny, 2017; Kinsella & Senior, 2008). Keaveny (2017) argues absence of accommodation alludes to ableism or viewing students with special education needs through a ‘normalcy lens’, which can result in their lower academic attainment as accommodations are not provided in their learning environment. Kinsella & Senior (2008) extends academic accommodations as allowing students with special education needs to access the same learning environment as their peers.

The National Policy on Persons with Disabilities recognises the need to undertake legislative review and amendment with a focus on equality, non-discrimination, compliance and
enforcement; disability education and awareness; accessibility in the built environment; equal educational opportunities through curriculum review and restructuring; healthcare supports including habilitation and rehabilitation community-based programmes; and addition of the “disability dimension” to national statistics and data collection (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2018, pp. 36-37).

However, the National Policy on Persons with Disabilities adopts a human rights approach to eliminate discrimination, and in doing so is progressive in its outlook in creating an equitable society. Measuring completion of goals with timelines is indicative of accountability and transparency to citizens and transnational obligations, as exemplified in Trinidad and Tobago being a signatory to and ratifying the UNCRPD (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2018). While the National Policy on Persons with Disabilities meets the requirements on tangible actions, identifies shared-ministry responsibility and is time-bound, it lacks a mechanism to address failure of fulfilment and/or recourse to address inaction or incompletion, which impacts the overall outcomes of a more inclusive and equitable nation-state for persons with disabilities (Harry, 2020; Peters et al., 2008).

To the best of my knowledge, there is no formal government instrument (e.g., education policy) pertaining to transition for youths with a mild intellectual disability. Having discussed government instruments as it relates to special education in Trinidad and Tobago, I move on to discuss the consideration of others, as well as the selection of the theoretical framework of Person-Centred Planning and its applicability to my research.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

I considered alternative theoretical frameworks, such as (dis)ability critical race studies (DisCrit), (post)colonialism, ecological systems that could have been used for this research to see if they can help me to understand the experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability, and the perspectives of parents/legal guardians and educators (Annamma et al., 2013; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Loomba, 2005).
DisCrit focuses on the junction of identity-based factors – race and disability – within the discipline of education to examine the relationship between racism and ableism and how these are manifested in special education (Annamma et al., 2013). In applying this framework to the aim of my research, it could be used to amplify the voices of persons with disabilities and explain the social construction of terminologies such as race and disability with linkages to persistent inequalities and inequities (e.g., stigmatisation, marginalisation) across societal domains (Waitoller & Annamma, 2017). Similarly, it could be used within racially diverse nation-states, such as Trinidad and Tobago, to explain the persistence in upholding the ideology of normalcy and whiteness in relation to its colonial history (Annamma et al., 2013; Waitoller & Annamma, 2017). In considering the history of Trinidad and Tobago, a (post)colonialism lens can be used to examine how the legacy of colonisation to (post)independence continues to disenfranchise marginalised groups as systems such as education, employment were constructed for the economic and administrative benefit of the coloniser (Loomba, 2015). On one hand, colonialism can reveal the underpinning ideologies enacted by the coloniser in the creation of structures and systems that disenfranchised Indigenous peoples, resulting in inequalities and inequities (e.g., segregation) (Fanon, 1963). For example, this can explain the creation of the education system in Trinidad and Tobago post-abolition of slavery, the influence of religious institutions post-independence in the education of a racialised population (Campbell, 1997). While systems can refer to an overarching entity (e.g., political, education), they can also be understood as being interconnected and interdependent as it relates to human development. In focussing on levels of systems, there is an opportunity to examine the ecological interplay between an individual and their engagement with different contexts and environments, such as family, friends, practitioners, professionals, socio-political, religious (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This reveals the relationship(s) amongst levels of systems (i.e., ranging from immediate family to societal) vis-à-vis an individual’s lifespan, for example, an individual interacting with and moving across different levels can be seen in the interconnectedness of familial relations as well as interaction with the education system (e.g., curriculum, educators, peers) to entering adulthood and interacting with political, economic, social, cultural environments (Small et al., 2013). Within the context of an individual’s interaction with the
education system, there is an opportunity to examine how political, economic, social and cultural environments influence what is taught in the classroom, how decision-making determines the provision of resources and transitions across life stages (Dee, 2006; Kinsella & Senior, 2008). Each theoretical framework has strengths in applying it to different aspects of understanding the historical to present day manifestations of racism, ableism, (post)colonialism and the ecological connectedness across levels of systems in relationship to human development.

However, DisCrit is limited in understanding the process of transition planning for youths with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago. For example, there was not a connection between using a DisCrit lens to know youths’ views on their teachers, likes and dislikes, pathways to learning, future planning. This theoretical lens was limited helping me to see if my childhood experiences were unique to our family, recalling me witnessing the differential treatment of Micah, who has a mild intellectual disability, and my parents disregarding the recommendation of institutionalization. Similarly, I decided not to use (post)colonialism as it was limited in application at an individual level to understand the experiences of a youth, the perspectives of a parent/legal guardian and educator. This theoretical framework was limited in its application as my research was not focussed on the legacy of colonialism and its continued influence in the social, political and economic systems in Trinidad and Tobago. While aspects of the ecological framework can be applied to understand the interplay between human development as person moves within and across levels of systems, I was focussed on the process of transition planning and how youths with a mild intellectual disability were being prepared for life after school. I did not want to focus on religious, political, economic systems, but rather on the process of transition planning to understand experiences and perspectives. For example, parents/legal guardians’ perspectives on their child’s learning experiences, educators’ identifying pathways to learning and curriculum at special schools. In selecting a theoretical framework, I opted for Person-Centred Planning because it best aligned with the aim of my thesis, which is to understand how special
schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths (15-18 years) with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school.

2.3.1 Person-Centred Planning

Person-Centred Planning’s historical roots are North American, having been used initially in the United States of America and Canada to mitigate barriers faced by persons with disabilities within their communities (Corrigan, 2014). It has been used across the “health, social services, education” sectors with a focus on the needs of an individual and thus mitigating the power dynamic of relying primarily on professionals as the expert on the needs of an individual (White & Rae, 2016, p. 38). Within the education sector, Person-Centred Planning is used to inform the transition of persons with an intellectual disability, by focussing on them and involving their networks of support (e.g., parents/legal guardians, educators) to create a plan of action based on their goals and aspirations (Mansell & Beadle-Brown, 2004). In doing so, it centres a person with a mild intellectual disability as the expert on his/her life, identifying what matters to him/her, as well as his/her short- and long-term aspirations (Bason, 2020). Emerging from this planning process is an action plan that outlines a pathway forward based on what a person with a mild intellectual disability wants, identifies resources (e.g., support person, public or private financial assistance program) to help him/her achieve his/her aspirations. From an outcomes-based perspective, using Person-Centred Planning creates a shared outlook for all participants, places a person with a mild intellectual disability at the core of the discussion, uses a collaborative approach to action planning, identifies community-based resources for implementation and ensures it is a dynamic plan through periodic reviews (J. O’Brien, 2004).

There is consideration for using Person-Centred Planning as a research- instead of a practice-based framework. In addition to being used to facilitate the process of transition planning, Person-Centred Planning has been used as a research framework to understand how youths experience the process of transition. For example, in the health sector, it has been used as the framework for data collection, validation and reporting within Indigenous (i.e., Māori)
communities by adapting Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH) as a visual aid tool in healthcare and wellbeing research to mitigate chronic conditions (Potaka-Osborne & Gifford, 2018). Within the education sector, Person-Centred Planning has been used to design research to understand participants’ experiences and the perspectives of their networks of support as they transitioned into mainstream education (Corrigan, 2014). Similarly, in linking the education and social spheres, it has been used as a framework in education research during COVID-19, in using Making Action Plans (MAPs) as a tool for data collection, analysis and reporting on the views of students with special education needs and disabilities who are at risk of social exclusion (Gray et al., 2022). In focusing on persons with intellectual disabilities, Person-Centred Planning has been used as the framework to gauge the efficacy of the implementation of plans (Robertson et al., 2007). These studies illustrate its flexibility in application across sectors in being used as a framework for data collection through tools such as PATH, MAPs. Using Person-Centred Planning as a research-based framework allows for researchers to use its visual aid tools for data collection, analysis and reporting across sectors to understand the experiences of specific population groups. In doing this, it positions researchers as active listeners and participants as experts in identifying what matters to them in amplifying their voices, while simultaneously mitigating the researcher-participant power dynamic.

While Person-Centred Planning can be compared to Individual Program Planning in that both involve professionals and are action-oriented approaches used to support persons with disabilities, they differ in that through Person-Centred Planning the voice of an individual with a mild intellectual disability is amplified, instead of professionals and clinical practitioners who are often positioned as experts (C. L. O’Brien et al., 1997). Other researchers point to Person-Centred Planning being limited in that it does not consider how external factors (e.g., government systems, individual values, time) influence and affect transition planning service provisioning for an individual with a mild intellectual disability (Small et al., 2013). Similarly, there can be diverging or competing ideals and/or areas of interests amongst transition planning participants, which can bring to the fore concerns with implementation of a plan such as division of responsibility and allocation of resources (Osgood, 2005). For example,
implementation can be dependent on whether there is a provision or an absence of a service delivery programme or standardised processes (Dick & Purvis, 2005).

In contrast, one can argue that Person-Centred Planning is not viewed as facilitating service provisioning during transition planning, but as an approach that facilitates the transition from one life stage to another for a person with a mild intellectual disability (Hudson, 2006). In doing so, it leverages an individual’s support networks to collaborate on the identified goals while considering his/her competencies (Mansell & Beadle-Brown, 2005). This positions Person-Centred Planning as outcomes-focussed in that its intent is on what matters to an individual (e.g., friendships, employment preferences) and creating a pathway to achieve his/her future goal(s) (Dee, 2006). Person-Centred Planning can be positioned as asset-focussed in its preference towards an individual’s competencies and aspirations (Clark et al., 2005). Within this context, Person-Centred Planning is non-bureaucratic because it is not focussed on clinical diagnosis and interventions, but on an individual’s abilities, his/her future plan(s), identification of supports and assigning responsibility to those within his/her networks (e.g., professional, social) to collaboratively work towards an individual achieving his/her potential, as he/she transitions to the next stage in his/her life (C. L. O’Brien et al., 1997).

Person-Centred Planning speaks to an inclusive approach and meaningful engagement that is individual and not system driven (Florian, 2014; C. L. O’Brien et al., 1997). Being individual focussed and driven, it contributes to a person’s self-determination and independence in his/her role as decision-maker (Sanderson & Duffy, 2008). As such, an individual is the expert on his/her life planning and supported by his/her networks (e.g., family members, professionals) to implement his/her plan (Coles & Short, 2008; Lunt et al., 2008). It is argued that Person-Centred Planning aligns with the social model of disability in advocating for persons with disabilities’ self-determination and to be included in different spheres of society, such as the labour market (Medora & Ledger, 2005). Aligning with the social model of disability recognises that the onus is on society to accommodate by removing barriers, such as access to places and spaces, embedding disability inclusion from the design of policies and programmes,
so that an individual with a disability is included within and can participate in their community (Kennedy et al., 2008; J. O’Brien, 2002).

Enactment of Person-Centred Planning allows for the use of collaborative tools (see Figure 4) such as “Making Action Plans (formerly McGill Action Planning System) (‘MAPs’), Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH)” (Forest et al., 1996, p. 35).

Figure 4: Steps for PATH and MAPs

A philosophy of MAPs is that teachers can teach any student by being creative, all students can learn in the same classroom, education for all is a right, educational attainment means students are literate and have the competencies for the next stage in their lives (Forest et al., 1996). For example, MAPs allows the facilitator to capture in real time key information about an individual, including who they are, their strengths, needs, talents, dreams and nightmares, with the purpose of using the responses to create a plan of action (Forest et al., 1996). Similarly, PATH uses a phased approach by identifying the individual’s dream (i.e., ‘north star’) and

References: (Forest et al., 1996; Pearpoint & Kahn, 2023; Youth Ambassadors Across Canada, 2006)
working backwards to create a timeline pathway of each action that needs to be undertaken with identification of an accompanying person who provides support (Youth Ambassadors Across Canada, 2006). MAPs and PATH share similar steps in that they leverage discussions to asset frame an individual with a disability, such as identifying talents, and being mindful of building-in support using networks towards identifying the necessary pathway to achieving a person’s dream (C. L. O’Brien et al., 1997; J. O’Brien, 2004). For example, discussions can identify wanting to maintain social relationships (e.g., friendships), steps to ensure activities are completed so that an individual achieves the agreed upon goal.

Implementing requires a facilitated approach to understanding the current state (i.e., existing reality) and identifying a future state (i.e., where they want to be) with input from their networks of support (Medora & Ledger, 2005). By involving an individual’s networks, such as family members, there is acknowledgement that they too can contribute to the creation of a plan based on familial relationships and often being a source of support (Coles & Short, 2008). As part of a facilitated approach, tools such as process mapping can allow for a phased discussion (e.g., preparation, developing a plan, identifying future plans, implementing) (Sanderson et al., 2008). During discussions, active listening is encouraged (e.g., using PATH steps) to allow for asking of follow-up questions to understand, paraphrasing what is said, suspending judgment, mitigating power differential between the individual and their networks, and in doing so create a psychologically safe forum where the voice of an individual with a disability takes precedence over practitioners and parents (Corrigan, 2014; Kilbane et al., 2008). This practical approach allows for identification of how an individual views their future, choices and who within their networks can support with different aspects of implementing the plan (Kilbane & McLean, 2008). The facilitated discussion can be captured using practical tools such as communication charts, mapping a description of routine needs, aspirations, dreams, nightmares, likes, dislikes (Kilbane et al., 2008; Skelhorn & Williams, 2008).

An output from Person-Centred Planning is the development of visual aids or diagrams that illustrate an individual’s future plans, interests, strengths, needs and identified supports
(e.g., network) to help achieve his/her goal(s). For example, supports means providing what is needed so that an individual is successful in fulfilling what they set out to do (Mansell & Beadle-Brown, 2004). The intent from this process is to help everyone understand the plan of action, while contributing to an individual’s independence and participatory citizenship as he/she transitions to adulthood (Lunt et al., 2008). This positions Person-Centred Planning as co-designing based on a mutual outlook and advocacy towards an individual’s independence (Sanderson & Duffy, 2008). In particular, Person-Centred Planning identifies a shared understanding of the current and future states, with consideration for mitigating challenges as part of an iterative process (J. O’Brien, 2004). There is recognition that the long-term focus is an individual navigating life post-compulsory schooling (i.e., adulthood).

2.3.2 Life After Compulsory Schooling

Transition from compulsory schooling to young adulthood can be a time of excitement and apprehension in terms of future planning. Life after compulsory schooling can bring into mind ideas of defining oneself through planned endeavours (e.g., employment, education), recognising a purpose of the education system is preparation for adulthood through the development of competencies to enable a seamless integration as a contributing member of society (Banks et al., 2022; UNESCO, 1994). Post-compulsory school pathways for youths with a mild intellectual disability can mean pursuing employment opportunities and/or further/higher education for specialised training or accreditation (Dee, 2006; Mitchell, 1999). These pathways can provide an individual with a sense of belonging or being part of a community, contribute to their wellbeing (e.g., health, finance) and self-determination in their life choices.

However, pathways post-compulsory schooling are not seamless for persons with disabilities as reports reveal they face societal barriers that affect their socio-economic, mental health and wellbeing as well as future planning (Ginevra et al., 2022; Tisdall, 1994; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). For example, research confirmed “negative transitions and post school outcomes” for Irish students with intellectual disabilities, revealing a lack of concerted effort during compulsory schooling, which amplifies the difficulties
of transition for this vulnerable cohort (Banks et al., 2022, p. 147). It is proposed that career counselling and planning be a facet of preparation for transition planning, with a focus on preparation for employment through skills and knowledge acquisition (Ginevra et al., 2022). Similarly, it is advocated that post-compulsory school pathways can mean targeted and/or supported employment opportunities for persons with disabilities (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). This is important as employment is viewed across societies as a positive achievement in adulthood (Dee, 2006). Research from the United States of America found transition to work pathways can provide employment training (e.g., skills development) leading to job opportunities (e.g., networking) and longer-term employment for youths (14-22 years) with disabilities by leveraging their networks of support, which alludes to using Person-Centred Planning as part of facilitated and successful transition planning (Johnson, 2022).

In my research, I draw on elements of Person-Centred Planning, such as asking youths their likes and dislikes, pathways to learning, future planning, while asking parents/legal guardians about their child’s learning experiences. Pathways to learning and future planning were similar focus areas for educators and parents/legal guardians respectively. I included elements of Person-Centred Planning for each participant group, with a focus on youths, recognising collectively they are part of the cohort engaged in discussions and have expertise in their respective areas. For example, parents/legal guardians in their role as caregivers, educators in their role as accredited professionals and youths as experts on what matters to them. There is consideration for how what is learned during compulsory schooling provides youths with a mild intellectual disability with competencies to enter the next stage in their lives (Mitchell, 1999).

Youths sharing the academic and skill-based programmes they were enrolled in, can illustrate the different options available to them at their respective special schools. Within the theoretical framework of Person-Centred Planning, the options of courses, programs or training speaks to pathways to learning. These pathways to learning can be interpreted as youths participating in and deciding on particular areas of interest, and gaining skills and knowledge
that can be used to help them get a job or further their education (Martin et al., 2013). Supportive learning environments can speak to spaces and/or places in which differentiated approaches are used to help an individual understand what is being taught (Corrigan, 2014). Differentiated approaches, as described from the perspectives of parents/legal guardians, can illustrate how teachers focus on using various ways to help youths’ based on their competencies and learning style (McPhillips et al., 2010).

Involving youths in the decision-making process can allude to special schools listening to their voices and making them active participants in identifying their interests and/or what is important to them (Clark et al., 2005; Kilbane et al., 2008). The offerings of academic subjects and skills-based programmes can point to the existence of organisational structures (e.g., design of subjects, programmes) and practice (e.g., implementation by educators) at special schools (Kilbane et al., 2008). Linked to offerings of academic and skills-based programmes, is how they are preparing youths for what they want to do when they leave school, which speaks to future planning. Future planning can reveal a youth’s dreams and nightmares, such as what they want for themselves (e.g., job) or what they do not want to happen to them.

Youths sharing their dreams and aspirations speaks to them “exploring ideas and possibilities” of what interests them, which is part of them “expressing their identity” of who they want to be as they transition to adulthood (Dee, 2006, pp. 46-47, 97). Dee (2006) links academic subjects and programmes as pathways that allow youths to try out and consider if it is of interest to them. Academic subjects and skills-based programmes can be examined in how they provide youths with the knowledge and skills in preparing them as they transition to adulthood. For example, this can be focussed on entry into the world of work upon leaving school or to further education for vocational training (Dee, 2006). Skills-based programmes can be viewed as an integral part of training for and a benefit to persons with disabilities as they transition to the next stage in their lives (Mitchell, 1999). Others see a direct link between school’s curriculum and the labour market in how the former prepares youths to enter the workforce (Osborne, 1991). While arguing this can be an asset, Mitchell (1999) acknowledges
that post-compulsory school transition for persons with disabilities is not straightforward, as there are multiple individuals and factors (e.g., school resources, labour market) influencing transition planning. In particular, for students with intellectual disabilities and their networks of support, the process of transition and planning can be a time of heightened anxiety and challenging due to for example, limited information, service provisioning, post-compulsory school opportunities (Aston et al., 2021).

Having discussed the theoretical framework, I now move on to research on inclusive and special education in Trinidad and Tobago with a focus on experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability, perspectives of educators and legal/guardians as it relates to preparation for life after school, as part of transition planning. In instances where there is limited research within Trinidad and Tobago, I extend to include other jurisdictions, preferably with a focus on applicability to my research aim.

2.4 Inclusive and Special Education in Trinidad and Tobago and Anglophone Caribbean

Although government instruments confirm special education is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, there remains a continued reliance on civil society to develop and provide supports to parents of and children with disabilities to ensure equal and fair access to education (Harry, 2020; Pedro & Conrad, 2006). This approach appears to be simultaneously progressive and regressive in that legislation and policies adopt a progressive outlook, but are not buttressed by robust systems and structures for implementation, monitoring and reporting (Harry, 2020). This dichotomy is further manifested in an education system that is inequitable in practice, while the nation-state is a signatory to the UNCRPD, supportive of Sustainable Development Goals and Education for All (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2009). An assessment report completed by the United Nations found that although universal primary education was achieved and equality legislation enacted, “persons with disabilities continue to face a severe lack of facilities” (United Nations, 2013, p. 43).
Global commitments to Education for All do not seamlessly transpose into local action as “special education continues to maintain its more traditional aspects” to where students with special education needs received “modified and accommodative services in more restrictive classrooms, such as resource rooms and self-contained special education classroom” (Conrad et al., 2017, p. 161). This approach highlights bureaucratic rigidity and policy posturing, which manifests into education segregation for underperforming students who are streamed into special schools that have limited resources and a rudimentary curriculum (Glasgow-Charles et al., 2017; Paul, 2011; Pedro & Conrad, 2006). It uncovers a fragmented approach in that although universal (compulsory) education is upheld, there is recognition that not all students with special education needs are educated within publicly funded primary and secondary schools because they are focussed on competitive academic excellence, which speaks to retaining “the vestiges of academic elitism” (Harry, 2020, p. 211).

De Lisle et al. (2017) maintains that a colonial mindset towards education system design, pedagogy and assessments is sustained in the manifestations of parallel compulsory schooling for learners with special education needs that persist today. For example, this is evident in national examinations that continue to select, and sort based on aptitude with continued existence and reliance on special schools to place students with disabilities. Special education remains problematic as Trinidad and Tobago’s education system continues to maintain a colonial “elitist system that is deeply examination-oriented and focused on rewards for small percentages of the brightest citizens” (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017, p. 35). Steinbach (2012) and Harry (2020) agree the education system remains grounded in colonial structures and traditions. Although teacher education has been reformed to include an undergraduate education programme, teachers still maintain a didactic approach to teaching with a concerted reliance towards “rote-learning, memorization and regurgitation of the right answers on high stakes, formal final examinations” (Steinbach, 2012, p. 76). This approach to education is emblematic of upholding colonial systems, that view students as passive learners and ignores them as active contributors and collaborators within the classroom to knowledge creation and exchange. It can be argued that there is formal recognition of special education
within the Ministry of Education and acknowledgment that the programmes offered by special schools are dissimilar to the national curriculum, with remedies to address disparities through interventions such as early diagnosis, grants, accessible built environment, provision of supports and services (Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2004). However, international reports call for purposeful actions towards addressing disability discrimination, modernising systems to be inclusive of persons with disabilities, ministries’ partnerships across key social services sectors, expansion of consultation to include the voices of students with disabilities in policy and programme design, increase in educational programmes, opportunities and funding for students with disabilities, and continued public education on disability inclusion (UNICEF, 2013).

Similarly, in other Anglophone Caribbean countries, such as Barbados and Grenada there is a continued “heavy reliance on external, high-stakes exams” coupled with the “pressure to have students ready for these exams may lead teachers to use the more didactic, teacher-centred approaches to instruction and hamper their efforts to diversify their classroom practices” (Jackman & Young, 2017, p. 153). While their research examines teachers’ beliefs about creativity and is limited in focus on special education, I concur that learning is an engaging process that needs to be differentiated to adapt to diverse learners. A didactic approach does not engage all learners as participants, but places learners as recipients of knowledge. Likewise, in Jamaica, didactic approaches impact the learning experiences of students with special education needs in their disengagement from the content over time due to it becoming progressively challenging, reinforces ableism through a ‘normalcy lens’, and a hidden curriculum that is timebound and codified with “messages of intellectual competence,” which “can result in some students feeling their teachers do not care about helping them to understand or do not have the time to give them extra attention” (Keaveny, 2017, pp. 235-236). A theme in these discussions point to systems that maintain education segregation, which have an impact on the learning experiences for students with special education needs. In extending to implementation of special education policy and practice across six Anglophone countries in the Eastern Caribbean region, confirm education for all has been embedded in policies but application has been limited due to resource constraints (e.g., funding, qualified personnel),
competing interpretations of education inclusion by bureaucrats, inadequate initial teacher education and professional development training and their reluctance to teach students with special education needs (Armstrong et al., 2005).\(^9\)

### 2.4.1 Learning Environments

Schools are formal learning environments for students with special education needs, which can promote and uphold inclusive practices in educators having a shared ethos, demonstrating their commitment through actions, fostering partnerships with parents and within their locality, and enacting disability anti-discrimination and/or disability inclusion policies (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). Within these learning environments, culture can influence the ways in which we see ourselves and how others see us, such as aptitude. Cultural influences can be broadly considered as shared traditions and norms or practices by a community, such as language, beliefs (Popova, 2017).

In applying this to the context of special education, culture can influence how educators perceive students with disabilities (e.g., ability to learn), and coupled with limited to non-allocation of resources, these factors can affect the practice of inclusion in the classroom (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Singal, 2010). For example, within the context of Trinidad and Tobago, culture influences how persons with disabilities are perceived, which can be attributed to “negative social attitudes towards disability,” resulting in “a generally unwelcoming educational environment” (Harry, 2020, pp. 105, 108). These factors give emphasis to an education system that was not designed from the onset for students with special education needs with a continued focus on a charity and/or medical model of disability, irrespective of enacted disability inclusion policies and/or disability anti-discrimination legislation (Harry, 2020). While historically there have been incremental changes towards access to compulsory education for students with special education needs, there is consideration for “the unsatisfactory quality of education” in comparison to publicly-funded mainstream/regular schools (Gayle-Geddes, 2015, [9])

\(^{9}\) The six countries mentioned in A. C. Armstrong et al. (2005) research are Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia and St. Vincent and the Grenadines.
Similarly, research across six Anglophone countries in the eastern Caribbean region aligns with the historical perceptions of persons with disabilities “as having deficits” and “incapable of educational or social participation alongside their peers” (Armstrong et al., 2005, p. 72).10 This identifies the need to examine how historical exclusion for students with special education needs perpetuates within the education system, and the need for change by embedding the voices of those marginalised towards change through inclusionary practices (Rose, 2010). It is proposed that cultural change towards inclusion, while difficult to undertake, can be done provided it is driven by individuals collaborating on and implementing a shared action plan, while holding each other accountable (de la Haye, 2015).

Students’ voices can reveal their perspectives about their teachers, learning environments, peers. Their voices can reveal their insights on a sense of belonging, such as whether they feel included or excluded in their learning environment (Rose & Shevlin, 2017). In focussing on Jamaica, students with learning disabilities and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder did not have positive emotions towards their teachers, expressed difficulty coping through lecturing approaches to teaching and not belonging in the school’s environment, although they identified leveraging their friendships to help them cope with academic activities, such as note-taking (Keaveny, 2017). For example, teaching practices can reveal ableist tendencies in using non-differentiated approaches to delivering content, which can mean students with learning disabilities are not provided with modified content and/or supports. It is suggested that differentiated approaches can include “open-ended learning assignments, experiential and contextual learning” towards demonstrating flexibility based on students’ abilities, preferences and pursuits, which are indicative of promoting inclusive practices (Kaikkonen, 2010). In examining inclusive practices at a primary school in England, students described interactions with their teachers as negative, in terms of power residing with a teacher to determine who has access to resources and seating plan, their apprehension to ask for help,

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10 The six countries mentioned in A. C. Armstrong et al. (2005) research are Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia and St. Vincent and the Grenadines.
while highlighting their feelings of exclusion from social activities and friendships (Adderley et al., 2015).

These studies confirm that schools as learning environments can espouse an ethos of disability inclusion with varying degrees of practice by educators, which has implications on the learning experiences of students with special education needs. For example, non-inclusive learning practices can mean that students with special education needs disengage and/or experience marginalisation, which can affect learning outcomes and preparation for post-compulsory school destinations.

2.5 Special Education Needs and Transition

Within the context of the education system, transition happens when a learner progresses from one level to another, such as primary to secondary to tertiary (Rodriguez, 2015). In particular, the transition to post-secondary education and/or employment opportunities are important, recognising the preparation to access these streams is hinged on the skills acquired and accreditation received during compulsory schooling (Dee, 2004, 2006). However, for youths with special education needs such as having a mild intellectual disability, this time can be fraught with uncertainty and anticipation due to changes in service provisioning, perceptions of gatekeepers (e.g., post-secondary administrators, hiring personnel) about competency as well as individual aspirations (Dee, 2006; Tisdall, 1997). Youths exiting compulsory schooling into young adulthood are faced with decision-making as to what happens next in their lives, and in particular, for youths with special education needs there is consideration for their “economic, social and physical situation,” which has implications for their participation within their communities (Tisdall, 1994, p. 5).

It is advocated that transition planning be incorporated into a student with special education needs individual plans and involve their networks of support, such as educators and family, to facilitate a seamless and successful progression from one stage to another because it helps maintain momentum in the student’s development (Allen et al., 1998). This is relevant as
there can be a lack of resources (e.g., staff) and information sharing on opportunities, which can affect planning towards next steps for post-compulsory schooling pathways (Tisdall, 1997). In particular, transition planning conversations can reveal students dreams, nightmares, what matters to them and how they see themselves vis-à-vis their parents (Dee, 2006). For example, social networks, asserting independence and employment pursuits based on their interests.

Research discusses the role of educators in using the curriculum to prepare students for post-compulsory school pathways. This underscores the role of educators making content accessible to learners with an intellectual disability, which is important as recognition of neurodiversity can allow for modifications in approaches to teaching, resulting in the creation of a positive learning environment (Malapela & Thupayagale-Tshweneagae, 2022). For example, educators’ perspectives at a school district in the United States of America revealed ideological support in using the curriculum to develop students’ capabilities and provide them with opportunities for decision-making and self-advocacy as part of preparation for adulthood, but in practice “inconsistencies were evident between the teachers’ classroom teaching strategies, their use of the individualized educational plan in transition planning, and their belief in children’s rights as citizens” (Martin et al., 2013, p. 15).

Within the context of Trinidad and Tobago, high-stakes, standardized examinations maintain its historical intention of sorting students based on aptitude during compulsory schooling (Felix et al., 2017). Subjects are taught to prepare students to write these examinations, which positions schools to maintain their exclusive rankings by selecting students who excel to continue their compulsory education (Steinbach, 2012). This approach to large-scale testing affects students with special education needs who are often streamed and/or encouraged to attend a non-mainstream/regular school, as educators advise parents/legal guardians to enrol their child with special education needs in a vocational school and/or “told quite frankly that ‘this is not the place for your child’” (Felix et al., 2017). This approach identifies attitudinal and institutional barriers towards students with disabilities, as they do not have equal and fair access to publicly funded compulsory schooling (Harry, 2020). These studies
identify how examinations during compulsory schooling can be used to stream students with special education needs into non-academic pathways and/or special schools based on perceptions of their aptitude, which can have consequences for their life after school. For example, streaming can mean students with special education needs have limited options to access further/higher education and/or employment, as these pathways can be hinged on having necessary grades, certification, accreditation from formal examinations.

In focussing on the role of educators and experiences of families at special schools during the process of transition planning in England revealed parents wanting “purposeful and meaningful” employment opportunities for their child recognising the non-permanent, under-and unemployment faced by persons with disabilities, identified wanting their child to develop competencies that enabled them to be independent and having access to similar life-long learning opportunities as their peers, which was similarly expressed by youth participants (Mitchell, 1999, p. 760). This underscores the importance of planning and partnerships in the process of transition. Transitions from post-compulsory schooling for youths with a mild intellectual disability reported researchers in the Republic of Ireland advocating for home-school-community partnerships (e.g., parent, educator, employer), a longer transition planning timeframe (e.g., early teenage years) as well as the need for schools to embedded necessary service supports throughout the process (Aston et al., 2021; McCoy et al., 2020).

However, the process of transition from compulsory schooling for youths identified the intricate and non-seamless nature of transition to employment, with a call for enhancing existing transition models to include a longer timeframe for preparation coupled with necessary education and awareness (Mitchell, 1999). This advocacy call is important recognising the efficacy of post-compulsory school transition pathways can affect future choices and opportunities for youths with mild intellectual disabilities. For example, there is recognition of the connection between employment and its contribution to the socio-economic wellbeing of an individual with an intellectual disability (Shevlin et al., 2020).
In focussing on preparation for post-compulsory school transition in England, the process of decision-making involving youths and their networks of support, can be determined mutually (e.g., all in agreement), informally (e.g., inaction, unaware), externally (e.g., outside factors), progressively (e.g., step-by-step), unilaterally (e.g., one person), and can bring to the fore disagreements in choice(s) as well as reveal power dynamics or imbalances, which can have implications for youths’ future planning (Dee, 2004). While this illustrates the nuances of decision-making, there is recognition that there needs to be support during this process for transition planning, as parents and youths may also identify their concerns about the future (Dee, 2004). Similarly, preparation for transition from compulsory schooling for students with intellectual disabilities in the Republic of Ireland found a fragmented approach to career planning and guidance, uncertainty of whose responsibility it was within the school for this service, with implications for students post-compulsory school pathways such as their preparation to undertake opportunities and limited choices (Banks et al., 2022). It is advocated that a framework can help in linking needs and wants with reality as part of transition planning, such as post-compulsory school employment opportunities which were identified by youths in Ontario (Tisdall, 1994). This framework can help mitigate youths’ choices with parental expectations towards preparation planning.

2.5.1 School Leadership and Educators’ Perceptions

Pedro (2017) envisions special education at the core of teacher training and affirms that a shared and sustained educational vision can lead to success in Trinidad and Tobago. This calls for education practitioners and administrators to be critical thinkers and changemakers in seeking to disrupt the status quo towards consistently advocating for equitable access to educational opportunities and learning environments for all learners, which includes those with disabilities (Popova, 2017). In focussing on school leadership, principals as administrators, will be leading through purposeful action in collaboration with teachers towards having an inclusive education ethos in their respective schools (Marshall, 2017). However, there is limited research on educators’ perspectives within special schools in Trinidad and Tobago, with most focussed
on inclusive education within mainstream/regular schools for students with special education needs.

Although a Special Education Unit was created in 1980 within the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education, there was bureaucratic reluctance to commit fiscal resources to implement meaningful and necessary changes for special education as part of teacher education and professional development (Pedro & Conrad, 2006). In 2007, special education training and/or accreditation was embedded as part of teacher training within tertiary institutions in Trinidad and Tobago, but prior to this time, remained absent from initial teacher training and their professional development due to resource constraints (e.g., expert trainers), which resulted in their non-preparation for teaching students with special education needs in mainstream school and confirming a continued absence of support for this cohort of students (Pedro, 2017). Educators’ perception of self and their role are influenced by historical, political and cultural factors recognising an inherited colonial education system remains post-independence (i.e., 1962), albeit incremental modernisation through ratification of international conventions and implementation of government instruments towards disability inclusion (George et al., 2003). For example, teacher candidates expressed responsibility for development of future generations, recognised the need being skilled to work within diverse environments, while citing lack of recognition for their profession (George et al., 2003). However, research confirm within eight Caribbean countries “very little/no attention at all in teacher training programmes” with a preference for didactic teaching practices, with consideration by the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education for “low achievers” (Jennings, 2001, p. 119).11

In focussing on the role of educators in promoting inclusive learning environments, Trinidad and Tobago’s inherited colonial education system continues to rely on formal examinations to assess and sort and segregate learners based on their ability resulting in non-

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11 The eight countries mentioned in Jennings (2001) were the Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, Guyana, Jamaica, St Kitts, St Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago.
accommodation of learning needs, while promoting the right to compulsory education for all (De Lisle et al., 2017). For example, sorting and segregating can be seen in using formal examinations such as the SEA that determine a student’s secondary school destination. This dichotomy exposes competing priorities in the nation-state being a signatory to international commitments to inclusive education or education for all, while maintaining an education system that upholds exclusionary practices. It is argued that inclusive education be embedded as part of all initial teacher education and professional development programmes towards modifying practices in the classroom to accommodate all learners with special education needs in mainstream/regular classrooms and other learning environments (Conrad et al., 2017).

Disability inclusion in principle versus practice by educators remains a concern due to individual (e.g., perceptions of preparedness, additional time for accommodations), institutional (e.g., schools’ rankings, academic success in formal examinations) and systemic (e.g., ministry resource allocations) barriers (Glasgow-Charles et al., 2017). In particular, teachers were concerned about perception of professional competency due to a lack of special education training, lack of bureaucratic resources and support, and how students with special education needs “might limit the level of academic success” that “was used to measure teacher competence,” which spoke to “a desire for academic excellence” (Glasgow-Charles et al., 2017, pp. 199-200). Although the findings cannot be generalised to the practices and beliefs of all teachers, they reveal behavioural/attitudinal and institutional barriers to inclusion, reinforced by a competitive education environment. Similarly, Conrad & Brown (2011) find that although teachers are favourable towards inclusion, there is a “resistance towards assuming responsibilities” for students with special education needs due to attitudinal and institutional barriers (p. 1017). Attitudinal barriers focused on teachers lack of special education training and the perception that their inexperience would mean them being not able to support students with special education needs, while institutional barriers identified the limited resources and supports provided by the Ministry of Education (Conrad & Brown, 2011). Research also reports that educators’ perceptions towards inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools in Trinidad as negative and attributed this to a convergence of most schools not having
disability inclusion policies and absence of compliance mechanisms for effective implementation the *Equal Opportunity Act* (Parey, 2020). While legislation and policies advocate for education inclusion, research reveals teachers’ perspectives and attitudes towards inclusion as problematic in mainstream/regular classrooms in Trinidad and Tobago. For example, mainstream compulsory school teachers were uncertain about inclusion for students with special education needs in practice due to lack of resources to support implementation in the classroom, with their hesitation hinged on mitigating factors such as funding, specialised staff, teacher education (Parey, 2019).

In focussing on special schools, one study emerges that focussed on two schools for students with special educational needs (i.e., deaf, emotional/behavioural and learning difficulties) in Trinidad (Conrad et al., 2010). The study affirmed educators’ commitment to inclusion and their content with the level of support provided to students, while identifying challenges such as robust educator initial and continuing professional development, limited resources (e.g., staff) and community partnerships (e.g., parents, clinicians), lack of inter-system relationships (e.g., health, education, social services) to support parents (Conrad et al., 2010). This study differs to some perspectives of educators (e.g., Glasgow-Charles, 2017; Conrad & Brown, 2011) towards inclusion within mainstream schools, while highlighting similarity in challenges such as initial teacher education and continuing professional development.

Extending to the Anglophone Caribbean, research finds similar perspectives towards inclusion in Guyana and Barbados. In focussing on special schools in Guyana, research reveals a majority of students suspected of having a disability being streamed there on the advisement of educators from mainstream schools, as they are limited in their special education training (Cheong et al., 2018). Although Guyana has enacted disability legislation (Persons with Disabilities Act, 2010), there remains similar barriers to inclusive education for students with disabilities, such as non-mandatory special education training for educators, limited resources (e.g., special schools, specialised staff), disability discrimination, which results in their “higher rates of poverty, lack of access to schools, and teachers who are not trained in how to best
meet their needs” (Cheong et al., 2018, p. 249). In contrast, research finds behavioural and institutional barriers to inclusion can also be manifested in learning environments that purport to be inclusive, such as the case of two schools in Barbados that have classes for students with disabilities (Blackman, 2017). While findings are limited to two schools, they reveal social exclusion was experienced by both special education teachers and students with disabilities in their non-interaction with the general education cohort of teachers and students (Blackman, 2017). Blackman (2017) argues this approach is “tokenistic” as having special education as part of the schools “contributed to their social standing,” while proximity did not influence behaviour (p. 286). This reveals a deeper issue of inclusion remaining an ideological concept and not a practice, even in mainstream schools that did not have environmental barriers. While inclusion opens the school doors to all learners, behaviours and practices exclude students with special education needs. This alludes to inclusion as a journey, not a destination. I contend that school leadership is not limited to the principal and is incumbent on all educators, within an academic institution to collectively practice inclusion for the realisation of actual change.

This brings to the fore the need for embedding training on special education as part of initial teacher education and continuing professional development. Drawing on the findings from the Miske Witt and Associates Report, educators with non-special education backgrounds were limited in their understanding and application of inclusive practices in mainstream schools in Trinidad and Tobago (Johnstone, 2010). While the findings are not inclusive of special schools, they identify gaps in teacher education and training, which has implications for students with special education needs attending mainstream schools, such as accommodations and supports, academic attainment. For example, there was strong agreement that all students can learn, but mixed optimism that students with disabilities “can become productive adult citizens,” prompting an advocacy call for increased special education, which can contribute to educators’ awareness of disabilities and approaches to accommodate learner neurodiversity in mainstream schools (Johnstone, 2010, p. 38). Embedding special education as part of modernising initial teacher training and continuing professional development coupled with allocation of resources (e.g., funding) are espoused to address negative perceptions of the
abilities of students with special education needs, as well as ensure the provisions of support and accommodations (Conrad & Brown, 2011). In focusing on resources, there is consideration for challenges faced by educators such as disparity in wages (public versus private schools), official adaptation of the national curriculum, lack of teaching materials and supports, which are under the purview of the Ministry of Education (Harry, 2020).

Outside the Anglophone Caribbean region, researchers agreed educators have a prominent role in fostering inclusive learning environments, which can promote a sense of belonging for all (Malapela & Thupayagale-Tshweneagae, 2022). For example, teachers at a school in England reported having a community-like learning environment with students through their use of differentiated approaches and modifying the national curriculum to accommodate learners’ needs, while citing a sense of belonging and value in their work (Hope, 2012).

2.5.2 Experiences of Youths with a Mild Intellectual Disability

International reports confirm persons with disabilities continue to face unequal access to education due to negative perceptions (e.g., prejudice), institutional (e.g., inaccessible environment) and systemic barriers (e.g., inaccessible curriculum, segregated classes/schools), which impede their academic attainment and access to gainful employment opportunities (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). These concerns are valid considering the goals of students with special education needs are influenced by perceptions of their aptitude and competence to cope with the compulsory curriculum, provisions of supports and services and their participation in educational planning conversations (Shevlin, 2010). Learning environments (e.g., schools) can cultivate a sense of belonging or exclusion for learners (Rose & Shevlin, 2017). In cultivating inclusion, schools are positioned as dynamic organisations in which staff can remove and/or prevent barriers through a shared ethos and meaningful practices to show operationalisation of disability inclusive policies into action (Kinsella & Senior, 2008).
Within the context of Trinidad and Tobago researchers reported on inclusion for students with disabilities in mainstream schools. A lack of specialised staff (e.g., special education teacher), limited access to information and communications technology (e.g., Braille), inaccessible built spaces (e.g., ramps) were common across compulsory schools in Trinidad (Parey, 2020). Although this study did not include the voices of youths with a disability attending these schools, it provides insight into the provision of services, supports and accommodations within mainstream schools in Trinidad.

In Jamaica, while students with learning disabilities and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder transitioning within compulsory schooling (i.e., primary to secondary) reported unfavourable views towards educators due to non-use of differentiated approaches to adapt lesson plans and providing classroom supports (e.g., notetakers) based on their needs, they identified a sense of belonging at school in creating and fostering social bonds to help them in the classroom (Keaveny, 2017). This identifies the nuanced ways in which students with special education needs sought supports for their learning needs by leveraging their friendship circles to offset a lack of classroom supports.

In particular, a sense of belonging can help to understand how learners view their learning spaces, teachers and friends as part of their learning experience (Hope, 2012). Within this context, the experiences of students at a mainstream school in England found them collaborating with teachers as part of shared learning and identifying that they felt as if they were part of a community, which contributed to their positive self-perception, normalised their vulnerability in asking for help during classes and increased their participation in learning (Hope, 2012). This is one example of how educators and learners can foster a mutually beneficial learning environment.

A sense of inclusion or exclusion can be examined as part of transition planning in whose voices are amplified and/or preferred during these discussions. For example, youths preparing to leave compulsory schooling disclosed uncertainty in their post-compulsory school
plans as their outlook and choices were not necessarily aligned with that of their parents and educators (Dee, 2006). This brings to the fore a tension in whose voice (e.g., youth, parent, practitioner) is being recognised and acknowledged in decision-making and self-determination.

2.5.3 Perceptions of Parents/Legal Guardians

Parents/legal guardians have a significant role in their child’s lives, such as the choices for their education (F. James, 2014). It is not uncommon for parents/legal guardians of a child with a disability to be his/her primary advocate to ensuring equal access to education, as they want better opportunities for him/her in life (Harry, 2020). For example, in advocating for transition to mainstream schools from special schools, research confirmed inclusion can happen through a collective amplification of parental voices for necessary changes towards addressing barriers, such as education and awareness to change behaviours and mindsets, forming collaborative networks (e.g., educators, other parents/legal guardians) for information dissemination, decentralising of and embedding accountability in service delivery (Alur, 2010). This reveals the influential role of parents/legal guardians in advocating for their child with special education needs in fostering local-level partnerships, and multiple lines of communication (e.g., other parents, educators) and facilitating knowledge transfer (e.g., education and awareness), which can contribute to the development of mutually beneficial partnerships with vested interests and assurance in their child’s education (Hornby, 2010).

Parents/legal guardians’ partnership with educators can benefit their child with special education needs recognising their respective areas of expertise, such as knowledge of their child, application of a curriculum or approaches to teaching and learning for the learner (Ashdown, 2010; Malapela & Thupayagale-Tshweneagae, 2022). Parent/legal guardian and teacher partnerships can illustrate the synergy between home and school lives for students (Piaget, 1973). For example, within the context of transition planning, this partnership can encourage dialogues to develop an individualised learner plan on what is needed to prepare for a seamless progression to the next stage, open networks for service provisioning and opportunities (Ashdown, 2010). Government reports support the nurturing of parent-educator
partnerships recognising the shared responsibility in the development of individual learners to be productive citizens in society (Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2004).

Within the context of West Indian parents/legal guardians involvement in the education of their child with special education needs, research positioned this as moving away from a more traditional outlook in terms of their roles vis-à-vis educators who are seen as experts (Hornby, 2010). This identifies parents as moving from a passive to having active involvement in the lives of their child with special education needs. In focusing on parental perceptions of their child with special education needs in Tobago, research revealed they did not expect their child to excel academically yet remained positive about their future employment opportunities and independent living (Paul, 2011).

2.5.4 Outcomes for Students with Special Education Needs

Articles of the UNCRPD identify the rights of persons with disabilities to equal and equitable access to compulsory and tertiary education for self-development and fair practices throughout the employment lifecycle across public and private sectors (United Nations, 2006). However, an outcome of universal education in developing nation-states was envisioned as progression from compulsory schooling to tertiary through memorisation for standardised examinations (Bacchus, 1981). It is advocated that nation-states like Trinidad and Tobago focus on using education as a vehicle to drive its development, by modernising from memorisation towards having schools as “learning communities” that promote innovative learning strategies through differential learning approaches, such as continued educator professional development, collaborative teacher-student practices, encouraging students to be innovative (Bacchus, 2008, p. 144). These practices can contribute in addressing disparities in educational attainment, benefit individuals’ self-determination and quality of life through application of knowledge and skills throughout adulthood, while contributing to the socio-economic development of a nation-state (Bacchus, 2008).
Within Trinidad and Tobago there is limited research coupled with lack of national data focussing on outcomes for students with special education needs (Paul, 2011). In particular, youths with special education needs in Tobago were more likely to receive compulsory education within special schools in foundational Mathematics and Reading, and be employed part-time with limited opportunities to progress to post-secondary education in comparison to their non-disabled peers (Paul, 2011). Similarly, international reports confirm temporary and/or part-time employment are common for persons with disabilities, acknowledging a lack of hiring by private sector organisations (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). This prompts the question of who is accessing universal education and the quality of education received by students with special education needs. Research across the Anglophone, eastern Caribbean countries confirmed that vocational pathways and skilled trades are common curriculum focus areas for students with special education needs who are deemed as unable to cope with the academic curriculum, which highlights friction in the purpose of education outcomes towards accreditation and developing individuals to be self-sufficient and participatory citizens in society (Armstrong et al., 2005).^{12}

At the time of my writing, the government of Trinidad and Tobago did not report on educational and vocational outcomes for students with disabilities as outlined in the National Policy on Persons with Disabilities (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2018). Data collection and reporting, while requiring robust systems, can provide insights on the current situation and a corresponding benchmark for periodic measurement. In 2013, the United Nations reported that Trinidad and Tobago achieved basic universal primary education as a commitment to the Millennium Development Goals, but lamented that the country needed to address its “institutional weakness” to report on outcomes for persons with disabilities in light of having an equality legislation (United Nations, 2013, p. 49). Therefore, addressing this gap can inform evidence-based decision-making by bureaucrats and policymakers towards measuring periodically educational outcomes for students with special education needs.

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^{12} The eastern Caribbean countries mentioned in A. C. Armstrong et al. (2005) research are Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, and St Vincent and the Grenadines.
In linking the empirical work and government instruments, special education remains separate to the formal education system and located within segregated learning environments or special schools. While the nation-state is a signatory to international commitments, has enacted legislation (e.g., *Equal Opportunity Act*) and formal policies (e.g., National Policy for Persons with Disabilities) towards equal opportunities for all citizens, there remains a reliance on special schools to educate learners with special education needs. There is consideration for how special schools are preparing youths with special education needs for life after school.

2.5.5 Future Jobs

A purpose of the compulsory education system is to prepare all learners to be independent, responsible and participatory citizens, as they transition from compulsory schooling to adulthood (Dee, 2006; Dewey, 1938; Florian, 2007). There is recognition that preparation during compulsory schooling (i.e., knowledge and skills acquired) prepares youths as they transition to adulthood where they would make decisions about social relationships, employment, further/higher education and other life choices as it relates to their self-determination (Tisdall, 1994). However, a lack of programmes and preparation for employment, coupled with a lack of employment accommodation and attitudinal barriers can further result in higher rates of under- and unemployment and poverty for students with special education needs as they transition to the world of work (Gayle-Geddes, 2015; Singal, 2010). Researchers confirmed persons with intellectual disabilities are notably absent from the labour market and have limited employment opportunities, which have consequences for their lives, such as socio-economic, health, wellbeing (Aston et al., 2021; van Ingen et al., 2022).

In Trinidad and Tobago, research confirmed there are no formal mechanisms to identify post-compulsory school destinations and outcomes for youths with disabilities, and in particular, students with disabilities in Tobago transitioning to post-compulsory school destinations do not have the necessary accreditation for further/higher education and instead have foundational competency in reading, writing, Mathematics with employment opportunities focussed on “vocational or technical programs or gaining some form of trade or
unskilled employment” (Paul, 2011, p. 207). This outlook towards foundational academic knowledge and vocational opportunities was shared by parents who wanted gainful employment that would allow “some amount of independence and/or income for their adult children” (Harry, 2020, p. 128).

Across the Eastern, Anglophone Caribbean countries (i.e., Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, and St Vincent and the Grenadines), there remains a focus on streaming towards non-academic pathways and skilled trades as employment avenues post-compulsory schooling (Armstrong et al., 2005). These findings reveal gaps in equal access to educational opportunities with limited post-compulsory school pathways resulting in a “negative impact” on “the readiness of persons with disabilities to transition to the labour force” (Gayle-Geddes, 2015, p. 135).

A common thread in these studies point to a focus on the foundational aspects of literacy acquisition with a streaming towards skilled trades as a pathway post-compulsory schooling. For example, employment in the trades is a common choice for youths with a disability upon leaving school in Tobago (Paul, 2011). There remains a need to understand how educators and leadership enact the practice of inclusion for students with special education needs.

2.6 Research Gaps and Contribution

I wanted to understand how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs for life after compulsory schooling. At this junction in their lives, there is consideration for what is involved in this preparation, such as how educators are using the national curriculum to prepare youths in knowledge and skills acquisition. My research aim was to develop a deeper understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths (15-18 years) with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school. I wanted to know:
1. What are the experiences of youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability at special schools who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling?

2. What are the perspectives of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling?

3. What are the perspectives of parents and/or legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from compulsory schooling?

There is an opportunity to hear about pathways to learning (e.g., co-op, apprenticeships) at special schools, and how this is used to develop youths’ competencies in preparing them for the next stage in their lives (i.e., adulthood) where they would make life choices such as, pursuing further/higher education, employment opportunities.

2.6.1 Gaps in Existing Research

Existing studies focussing on the emergence of special schools (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017), give an account of the historical to present day pathway of a special school (Harry, 2020), reported on the experiences of youths in Tobago (Paul, 2011), perspectives of teachers in mainstream schools in Trinidad and across anglophone Caribbean countries (Blackman, 2017; Gayle-Geddes, 2015). I reference these authors and draw upon their work for a historical context, an understanding of the education system and experiences of parents and teachers’ perceptions. However, there remains an absence of a focus on youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability and how special schools are preparing them to transition from compulsory schooling to post-compulsory school destinations.

Studies have also focussed on mainstream/regular schools to examine teacher attitudes on disability inclusion, compared educational attainment and employment outcomes for persons with and without disabilities in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, examined accommodations in regular/mainstream schools for children with disabilities (Blackman et al., 2012; Conrad & Brown, 2011; Gayle-Geddes, 2015; Parey, 2019, 2020). Studies on educator perspectives in Trinidad and Tobago are primarily focussed on special education mostly within
mainstream/regular schools. Two studies focus on three special schools located in Trinidad (Conrad et al., 2010; Harry, 2020). However, these studies do not focus both islands (i.e., Trinidad and Tobago), do not include vocational and government schools.

Collectively previous studies provide a foundation to understand the landscape of special education in Trinidad and Tobago. However, a limitation is that they do not intersperse and/or focus on the combined experiences of youths, and perspectives of educators and parents/legal guardians within the context of transition planning for youths within special schools in Trinidad and Tobago. In particular, the studies are absent of the voices of youths (15-18 years old) with a mild intellectual disability. Including the voices of youths with a mild intellectual disability contributes to amplifying their experiences, recognises them as subject-matter experts on their lives and allows for an understanding of how they navigate compulsory schooling in preparation for post-compulsory school destinations. There remains a gap in understanding preparation as part of transition planning to life after compulsory schooling for students with a mild intellectual disability attending special schools in Trinidad and Tobago.

2.6.2 Contributions to Research

In focussing on my research, co-designing with Micah allowed me to gain insights from his experiences to understand what compulsory schooling in Trinidad was like for him and how he navigated it. Our sibling relationship gave me an opportunity to see his worldview and allowed me to understand the decisions my parents made in not adhering to the recommendation of professionals. For example, during our discussion about interview questions for youths, two groups (i.e., youth, educator) were identified and we decided to include parents/legal guardians because of their decision-making and advocacy for their child. Collaboration meant we co-created questions for each participant group and areas of focus. This non-traditional approach demonstrates leveraging the insights of a subject-matter expert to co-design research (Jones & Gillies, 2010). This approach provides a unique methodological contribution by relying on his experiences and knowledge and incorporating them as part of an inclusive research design (Nind, 2014; Seale et al., 2015).
My research is unique in applying elements of a Person-Centred Planning theoretical framework with specific focus areas to understand the experiences of youths, perspectives of educators and parents/legal guardians who are part of the transition planning process (i.e., preparation to post-compulsory school destinations) within special schools in Trinidad and Tobago. This brings to the fore the inclusion of multiple participant groups that share a central focus on transition planning for youths with a mild intellectual disability. From the onset, including the voices of youths with a mild intellectual disability, gives them agency recognising their input is often absent from disability research. Additionally, there is inclusion of the perspectives of their parents/legal guardians and educators who are part of this cohort’s networks of support. I focussed on these three groups as they are involved in and can share their perspectives in how each is experiencing the youth’s transition process based on their respective roles. Across these three groups, a youth can be placed at the centre as he/she interacts with his/her parent(s)/legal guardian(s) and educator(s). This approach provided for an in-depth understanding of preparation for life after school, as part of transition planning, from the experiences and perspectives of three groups of participants across the three different types of special schools (private, government, vocational) in Trinidad and Tobago.

Data collected and findings reported would provide information in understanding the preparation to transition to life after school for students with a mild intellectual disability who are attending special schools in Trinidad and Tobago. Having multiple participant groups who share a common area of interest in preparation for transition planning for youths with a mild intellectual disability would allow me to gather data with a focus on comparing experiences and perspectives. I would have an opportunity to further discuss these findings with Micah and capture his perspectives, which would provide a unique opportunity to reflect on his experiences and that of participants in my research. For example, compare his and youths’ compulsory education experiences, provisions of supports, preparation for post-compulsory school destinations. My research addresses an existing gap in knowledge about how youths with a mild intellectual disability attending special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are being prepared for life after school.
2.7 Summary

This chapter discussed the development of Trinidad and Tobago’s education system with a recognition that special education was absent from its design. I described government instruments – legislation, regulation, policies – using a disability lens. While national policies are a nod to international commitments, there remains a fragmented approach to the education of students with special education needs, as evidenced in the upholding of segregated learning environments that are codified in legislation and policies as well as reported in research.

I presented research within the Anglophone Caribbean as it relates to the education of students with special education needs and disabilities within mainstream and special schools. Researchers have discussed the creation of special schools in Trinidad and Tobago as arising from civil society addressing a gap in the education system to educate students with special education needs (Carrington Blaides & Conrad, 2017; Harry, 2020; Lavia, 2008; Pedro & Conrad, 2006). Discussions have also focussed on barriers to educating students with special education needs in mainstream/regular schools (Conrad & Brown, 2011; Gayle-Geddes, 2015; Parey, 2020; Steinbach, 2012). Researchers have also focussed on the existing colonial structures and systems impeding access to regular schools for students with special education needs (De Lisle, 2012; De Lisle et al., 2017; Harry, 2020; Lavia, 2008; Steinbach, 2012). Enacted legislation and national policies continue to recognise the need for special schools to exist in Trinidad and Tobago to educate persons with disabilities (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2009, 2013, 2018; Education Act, 1966). Research studies also provided insights into the education of students with special education needs within special schools in Trinidad and Tobago. For example, Harry (2020) focussed on The Immortelle Centre, a special school in Trinidad, as a case-study to depict the “inherent conflict between the country’s vision of equality and implicit doubt in the value of persons with disabilities” (Foreword). Paul (2011) investigated educational and vocational outcomes at two special schools in Tobago and reported on teachers’ academic credentials and parents’ educational attainment.
My research is unique in its co-design by involving a subject-matter expert, leveraging elements of Person-Centred Planning in combination with a secondary (i.e., Other) area of focus, and three research questions to help me to understand how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago were preparing youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability for life after school. Each research question was linked to a respective participant group (i.e., youth, parent/legal guardian, educator), and I had corresponding questions and/or statements within each group that linked to and supported the overarching focus of my research.

2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I set the context of Trinidad and Tobago’s education system with a focus on special education, discussed inclusive and special education as it relates to perceptions of educations, experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability, perceptions of parents/legal guardians, as well as outcomes for students with special education needs. In focussing on special education needs and transition, I explained my theoretical framework of Person-Centred Planning. I identified how my research contributes to knowledge. Having summarised this chapter, I transition to my third chapter – Methodology.
3 Methodology

3.1 Overview of Chapter

In the previous chapter, I gave an overview of Trinidad and Tobago’s education system with a focus on special education, discussed inclusive and special education as it relates to perceptions of educators, experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability, perceptions of parents/legal guardians, as well as outcomes for students with special education needs. I explained my theoretical framework of Person-Centred Planning and identified how my research contributes to knowledge.

In this chapter, my focus is to outline the approach I undertook in designing, planning, implementing and reporting on my research. In section 3.2, I outline the research paradigm and following this, in section 3.3 I discuss my research design. Building on this, in section 3.4, I explain how I applied an ethical approach throughout my research. Then, I explain in section 3.5, my approach to outreach and recruitment, followed by section 3.6 where I account for my approach to data collection. Next in section 3.7, I speak to how I embedded quality in my research design and identified how my qualitative research is trustworthy. Finally, I summarise in section 3.8 on how I achieved the aims of my research and conclude in section 3.9 with a transition to my next chapter – Data Analysis and Results.

Research, as a process of inquiry, seeks to answer specific questions through data collection to explain what is happening (Guppy & Gray, 2008; Kara, 2015). Unpacking the research process reveals components such as epistemology or “theory of knowledge” that is linked to a theoretical perspective or “philosophical stance” that guides the researcher’s methodology or “plan of action” and the methods or “techniques used to gather and analyse data” (Crotty, 1998c, p. 3). To achieve this aim, in this chapter, I applied these components in a research paradigm by stating my ontological stance, epistemological outlook, methodological plan and methods to answer my research questions (Brinkmann, 2020; Crotty, 1998b; Scotland, 2012).
3.2 Research Paradigm

Scotland (2012) defines a paradigm as comprising of “components: ontology, epistemology, methods, and, methodology” that are interrelated (p. 9). As a researcher, I am seeking to understand and know about reality and how this is manifested or ontology (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Deriving meaning from lived experiences speaks to the process in which I am constructing and gaining knowledge of reality, or epistemology (Gallagher, 2009a; Levers, 2013). I recognise the ways in which knowledge is used and values ascribed, or axiology, in my research is derived from my ontological stance and epistemological outlook (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Spencer et al., 2020). The adoption of a single reality or multiple realities existing influences one’s viewpoint in that the former stance can be linked to an objective stance where reality exists, while the latter subjective stance interprets reality and lived experiences as influencing each other but, varying for individuals based on how they make sense of an event (Levers, 2013). Spencer et al. (2020) agree that one’s ontological stance influences one’s epistemological outlook. Similarly, Crotty (1998) acknowledges there is no singular epistemology as this is linked to the researcher’s worldview. As such, researchers are encouraged to explore their ontological stance as it can influence their research design (Gallagher, 2009).

My philosophical stance guides my research framework as well as my theoretical lens (Levers, 2013; Spencer et al., 2020). This is demonstrated in my stance of reality varying for individuals based on how they interpret and make sense of events in the world, and my reliance on their experiences and perspectives, which speaks to social constructionism (Burr, 2019). The Introduction chapter provided an in-depth perspective into the implication of my worldview on my research that points to the ontological stance of multiple realities, and an epistemological view that constructing meaning or making sense of events in the world varies individually (Creswell, 2013).
3.3 Research Design

I understand that my reality varies to that of others, including Micah, based on the different ways we see and experience the world. In designing, I used a collaborative approach by informing Micah of the focus of my research, answering his questions and consulting with him through a one-on-one discussion (Chalachanová et al., 2020; Cigman, 2014; Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2018). We discussed our experiences during compulsory schooling, which revealed that our interactions with teachers were different. For example, Micah shared that at primary school, he was placed to sit at the back of the class or ignored and not provided the necessary supports (e.g., notetaker) within the learning environment. In contrast, during primary school I chose my seat, received one-on-one supports from my teachers when I had questions, and considered how teachers were using the national curriculum to prepare me, and not him, to write the SEA. During our discussion about interview questions for youths, two groups (i.e., youth, educator) were identified and we decided to include parents/legal guardians because, like my parents, they were responsible for decision-making and advocated for their child. Collaboration meant we co-created questions for each participant group and areas of focus. For example, asking youths about their views about their teachers, what they wanted to do after school.

Although Micah was not a co-researcher, his contributions in co-creating my research by sharing his experiences and knowledge, added value to my understanding of a person with a disability navigating compulsory schooling in Trinidad (Nind, 2016; Seale et al., 2015). While Micah’s perspectives helped me to understand his experiences, I decided not to use a similar approach in co-creation of my research and data analysis, as I did not have familial relationships with prospective participants, did not want to co-create knowledge based on their experiences and it was not feasible for me to travel internationally during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic.
3.3.1 Person-Centred Approach to Research Questions

I used a combination of Person-Centred Planning and my research questions to develop focus areas (see Figure 5) with corresponding relevant related follow-up questions for each participant group (i.e., youth, parent/legal guardian, educator) that was involved in the preparation for life after school, as part of the transition planning process.

![Figure 5: Participant Groups with Focus Areas](image)

While exiting compulsory schooling may be a seamless experience for some, it can be problematic for others, such as students with disabilities as they embark on the next chapter of their lives. Planning can help students with a mild intellectual disability and their families who may be facing uncertainty, carve out a pathway with the next step(s) post-compulsory school transition including options for the future (Sanderson et al., 2008). Using a Person-Centred
Approach in planning focuses on the capabilities and aims of an individual with a disability, along with input from their networks of support (i.e., parents/legal guardians, educators), with consideration for resources (e.g., public funding) with the aim of developing an action plan focused on an individual achieving his/her short- and long-term goals (Mansell & Beadle-Brown, 2004, 2005). Applying a Person-Centred Approach calls for active listening to understand the needs, dreams and what matters to an individual; mitigating the power dynamic of professionals by recognising the expertise of an individual as a decision-maker in his/her choices; and collaboration by all towards a shared outlook of helping an individual become independent (Kilbane et al., 2008).

While this approach focuses on developing the potential of the individual based on their choices using an action plan, it can be fraught with implementation challenges such as availability of resources within an organization and/or public service provisioning (Osgood, 2005). However, a Person-Centred Approach can be used as an advocacy tool to amplify the voice of a student with a disability to understand what matters to him/her and how his/her networks of support can collaborate to help him/her achieve his/her goals and dreams (Kilbane et al., 2008; Medora & Ledger, 2005). This approach can provide the opportunity for individuals to collaborate towards a shared goal of helping a student with a mild intellectual disability achieve his/her goals and independence.

In applying elements of a Person-Centred Approach to my research design, I wanted to develop a deeper understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs for life after school. I wanted youths with a mild intellectual disability to share their views about their teachers, likes and dislikes about school, what subjects they were studying at school and their plans for what they want to do upon leaving school. I asked questions focused on these areas, as active listening within a Person-Centred Approach reveals “a person’s likes, dislikes, hopes, aspirations and fears” (Skelhorn & Williams, 2008, p. 139). I wanted parents/legal guardians to speak about why they chose a particular special school, their dreams and nightmares upon their child leaving school and share
their views on future planning for their child. I wanted educators can share their perspectives on subjects taught, how they assessed students, approaches used to share different learning pathways with students, challenges they faced, and perspectives on their career and training. I involved parents/legal guardians and educators, as they are part of the networks of support who collaborate and contribute to focusing on the voice of an individual with a disability by ensuring his/her choices are integrated into the transition planning (Lunt et al., 2008; Sanderson & Duffy, 2008). The experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability coupled with the perspectives of their parents/legal guardians and educators provided insights into how aspects of Person-Centred Planning were incorporated into transition planning at special schools in Trinidad and Tobago.

I had one research question per group (i.e., youths, parents/legal guardians, educators), and used a similar approach across all three groups. I had a focus area, followed by a response for what I want to know and then question(s) or statement(s). I did this to guide me during all interviews and to re-focus the conversation, as needed, if it veered off topic. I used Person-Centred Planning because it allowed me to understand how transition planning (e.g., (in)formal) was happening within special schools for students or youths and include the perspectives of their parents/legal guardians and educators. In my research, Person-Centred Planning focus areas included for:

- Youths – likes and dislikes, pathways to learning, future planning.
- Parents/legal guardians – child’s learning experiences, future planning.
- Educators – pathways to learning.

The corresponding relevant related follow-up questions for Person-Centred Planning focussed on what youths liked and did not like about their schools, courses or programs available to them at the school, and their dreams and nightmares upon leaving school. There were similarities in these focus areas across participant groups to allow for comparison. For example, for Future Planning, I asked youths and parents about plans such as their dream and nightmare for life after school. Similarly, I asked educators and youths to share the different learning
options (e.g., academic, general, skills-based) available at special schools. This allowed me to understand the extent to which youths’ voices were part of Person-Centred Planning as part of the preparation for life after school, such as their interests, future plans.

In addition to using Person-Centred Planning focus areas, I also had a second or general (i.e., Other) area of focus. Having an Other area of focus meant that I could have opening conversation questions with the intent of building rapport. Recognising I did not have any familial relationships with any participants and having met them only through virtual introductions, I did not want to be perceived as a distant researcher. An Other area of focus also allowed me to embed contextual questions as areas of interest that were used to understand participants’ views, such as asking why educators chose to teach at special schools, why parents/legal guardians selected a particular special school. In my research, Other area of focus included for:

- Youths – views on teachers.
- Parents/legal guardians – perspectives on schools.
- Educators – curriculum, perspectives on career, teacher training.

An Other area of focus allowed me to have open-ended questions and/or statements that allowed participants to direct the conversation, such as disclosing as much or little information they wanted based on their responses. For example, asking youths about their views on their teachers, asking educators about their perspectives on their career. Other area of focus questions and/or statements meant that I started interviews with, or progressed from, or interspersed questions and/or statements that allowed for a flow in the conversation. Having an Other area of focus was beneficial in answering my research questions for each participant group. For example, understanding the experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability who are attending special schools and preparing to transition from compulsory schooling.

Each focus area had corresponding questions and/or statements (refer to Tables 5, 6 and 7) because I wanted to know about the experiences of youths, and perspectives of
parents/legal guardians and educators at special schools in Trinidad and Tobago. I wanted to know youths’ opinion of their teachers, why parents chose a particular special school for their child, subjects being taught in school, approaches to assessing learning, why educators chose a career in teaching and their academic and/or continuing professional development. Using both Person-Centred Planning focus area and Other area of focus provided an understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs for life after school.

For youths with a mild intellectual disability, my research question was, what are the experiences of youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability at special schools who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling. To answer this research question, I had focus areas to guide my conversation and remind me what I wanted to know, and then used the approach of asking youth participants to complete ‘fill-in the blank’ statements (see Table 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Areas</th>
<th>What I Want to Know?</th>
<th>Complete the Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Views on teachers</td>
<td>Their opinion of their teachers</td>
<td>My teachers make me feel ____.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What I like most about my teacher is ____.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes and dislikes</td>
<td>What they like and do not like about school</td>
<td>At school, I am most proud of ____.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>My favourite thing about school is ____.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathways to learning</td>
<td>The options of courses/programs/training available to choose from</td>
<td>At school, I am learning about ____.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>My favourite subject/course at school is ____.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future planning</td>
<td>Their plans/ideas for what they want to do when they leave school</td>
<td>When I get older, I want to be a ____.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>My dream for what I want to do when I leave school is ____.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>My nightmare upon leaving school is ____.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Including focus areas and their corresponding statements on likes and dislikes, pathways to learning and future planning aligned with Person-Centred Planning, in that I asked about what they liked or did not like about their learning environments, their choices of courses/programmes to choose from based on their interests and their ideas for what they wanted to do when they leave school. In instances where reading statements did not naturally flow as part of a conversation, I reframed it as a question. For example, when asking about the options of courses/programs/training they can choose from, I asked, tell me about what you are learning at school or what subjects are you taking at school? This demonstrated my adaptability as a researcher in adjusting my approach to finding different ways to gather data to answer what I wanted to know for each focus area.

For parents/legal guardians of youths with a mild intellectual disability, my research question was, what are the perspectives of parents and/or legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from compulsory schooling. To answer this research question, I also had focus areas, and used a preamble followed by a combination of questions and fill-in the blank statements (see Table 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Areas</th>
<th>What I want to know</th>
<th>Question(s) / Complete the statement(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child’s learning experiences</td>
<td>Their perspectives on what their child is learning at school</td>
<td>Preamble: Schools can provide students with supports and services including if they need one-on-one assistance (e.g., notetaker, additional time to complete tasks, etc.) to help them in their learning journey. What learning supports or accommodations are provided for your child while at school? What skills and knowledge do you want your child to learn while at school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Areas</td>
<td>What I want to know?</td>
<td>Question(s) / Complete the statement(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspectives on the special</td>
<td>To know why they chose this school for their child</td>
<td>Preamble: The choice of which school your child attends can be based its location, teacher-to-student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school</td>
<td></td>
<td>ratio, learning programs, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Why did you choose this school for your child?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Preamble: Schools are to help prepare students for their next stage in life through what they learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and what they do while at school, such as finding out their interests or helping them prepare for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>interviews. This can help the student prepare for the next stage such as getting a job or pursuing a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>course/program that they are interested.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How will this school prepare your child for the next stage in their life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future planning for the</td>
<td>Their plans for the next stage in their child’s life</td>
<td>Preamble: Thinking about life after finishing school can bring ideas of what happens next for your</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child</td>
<td></td>
<td>child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What do you hope your child does next after they finish school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Follow-up: How are you planning for this next stage in their life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>My dream for my child to do when they leave school is _____.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>My nightmare for my child upon leaving school is _____.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I used preambles to transition from one focus area to the next, while framing the context of the discussion. Including focus areas and their corresponding questions or statements on child’s
learning experiences and future planning aligned with Person-Centred Planning, in that I asked about what their child was learning at school and accommodations in the learning environment, as well as their plans for the next stage in their child’s life upon leaving school.

For educators at special schools, my research question was, what are the perspectives of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling. Like parents/legal guardians, I had focus areas and used a preamble but had only questions (see Table 7).

Table 7: Focus Areas and Statements to Answer the Research Question for Educators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Areas</th>
<th>What I want to know?</th>
<th>Question(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>The subjects that are being taught at the school.</td>
<td>Preamble: It is a common practice that schools use the national curriculum in the delivery of subjects to students. Some choose to use an international or develop their own curriculum with various subjects or programs available to students. What subjects are available to youths with a mild intellectual disability?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How is the teacher assessing a student’s progress?</td>
<td>Preamble: As a teacher it is a common practice to use different ways to find out if a student understands and/or can apply what is being taught. How are youths’ learning assessed (e.g., end of term exams)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>About the approaches schools are using so</td>
<td>Preamble: There various ways that can be used to help students get the knowledge and skills they need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Areas</td>
<td>What I want to know?</td>
<td>Question(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>that youths have transferable skills and knowledge.</td>
<td>need as they consider if they want to go into the workforce and/or pursue a particular program/course based on their interests. How does this special school prepare youths with a mild intellectual disability for the next stage in their life such as further education, employment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathways to learning</td>
<td>The options students can choose from to find out what they like.</td>
<td>Preamble: As students move towards the next stage in their life, they can be provided with options that allows them to find out what they like and choose a pathway. What are the different pathways (e.g., career, general, technical) a youth with a mild intellectual disability can choose from?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The approaches and/or strategies used to introduce students to opportunities outside the classroom (e.g., co-op, internships,</td>
<td>Preamble: While at school students may or may not know what they want to do next, but during their time here they may have opportunities to find out what they want to do next through co-op, internships, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Preamble: As students move towards the next stage in their life, they can be provided with options that allows them to find out what they like and choose a pathway. What are the different pathways (e.g., career, general, technical) a youth with a mild intellectual disability can choose from? Person-centred planning – questions for teachers: ask about transition planning for students (e.g., does the school have transition planning for students, how the plan is worked out and managed, do they have child’s plan, who contributes, how is the plan monitored).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Areas</th>
<th>What I want to know?</th>
<th>Question(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>employer on-site visits, etc.</td>
<td>How does the school promote and support the pathways and other form of learning (e.g., co-op, volunteer, on-the-job, internship)?</td>
<td>Preamble: Schools are centres of learning with you having the responsibility in the delivery of the curriculum as well as doing routine activities to prepare youths to transition to the next stage in their lives. What are the challenges faced by the school in the future planning for transition of students? Follow up question: how does the school address these challenges?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The barriers/hindrances and challenges faced by educators in their routine as they work towards preparing students for the next stage in their lives.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspectives on their career</td>
<td>Why they chose a career in teaching with a focus on youths with special education needs.</td>
<td>Preamble: Choosing a particular job can stem from an interest/passion, wanting to make a change or to be employed. What role do you see yourself fulfilling in terms of educating students with special education needs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching training</td>
<td>Academic and/or continuing professional development.</td>
<td>Preamble: Choosing a particular job often requires technical and specialized knowledge and skills. What teacher training have you completed and/or currently working on?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Including focus areas and their corresponding questions or statements on pathways to learning aligned with Person-Centred Planning, in that I asked about the options, such as different pathways, students can choose from to find out what they liked to understand the different
ways in which schools are developing students through exploration of different learning options.

3.3.2 Research Questions

The focus of my research was to develop a deeper understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school. In unpacking this, my focus was on youths between 15-18 years with a mild intellectual disability attending special schools, educators at special schools, and parents/legal guardians of youths with a mild intellectual disability attending a special school.

I focussed on these three groups as they are involved in and can share their perspectives in how each is experiencing the youth’s transition process, although they are in different settings (e.g., classroom, house/residence) and have a distinct role (e.g., educator, parent). Across these three groups, a youth can be placed at the centre as he/she interacts with his/her parent(s)/legal guardian(s) and educator(s). For example, while attending a special school, youths would be gaining knowledge in academic subjects (e.g., Mathematics, English), acquiring specialised skills (e.g., skilled trades), building social skills (e.g., friendships) and being prepared for the next stage in their lives after compulsory schooling, such as entering the world of work.

To develop a deeper understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school, there was one question per group for a total of three research questions.

1. What are the experiences of youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability at special schools who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling?
2. What are the perspectives of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling?
3. What are the perspectives of parents and/or legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from compulsory schooling?
In deciding on which methodology and method to use, I was guided by my focus, which was to develop a deeper understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school. I chose interviews because I wanted to delve into the experiences and perspectives of voluntary participants to understand how youths were being prepared for the next stage in their lives after compulsory schooling. I did not want to undertake experimental and survey research, recognising the population size for youths with a mild intellectual disability attending special schools in Trinidad and Tobago is unknown, as not all special schools (e.g., privately owned) are under the purview of the Ministry of Education or a government agency, and there is no database that I am aware of that captures the specificity (e.g., age, type of disability) of this student population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2021c). This meant that using an instrument such as a quantitative survey would not provide the breadth of data to generalise statistically what is happening in transition planning for youths with a mild intellectual disability in special schools, as their population size is unknown (Guppy & Gray, 2008). In my research design, I did not apply a deductive approach to develop questions and use variables to hypothesize, as I did not want to test which variable influenced another or others, or provide a statistical analysis of what is happening in transition planning for youths in special schools (Luker, 2008). I did not want to undertake a comparative analysis between transition planning for youths with a mild intellectual disability attending mainstream and special schools in Trinidad and Tobago, with the aim to quantify and report on variances in those who had transition plans, schools with pathways to learning, special education teachers or analyse the number of times specific words and terms were used by participants (Kara, 2015).

My philosophical stance guides my research framework and theoretical lens (Levers, 2013; Spencer et al., 2020). My experiences informed my worldview and by extension I understood the varied experiences of others informed their worldview, which spoke to multiple worldviews. In applying this stance to my research, I used qualitative methodology because I wanted to know more about participants experiences and perspectives to understand how
transition planning in special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school (Brinkmann, 2020; Conrad & Brown, 2011; Kara, 2015). I focussed on using open-ended questions during my in-depth, recorded interviews with participants to understand the experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability, and the perspectives of their parents/legal guardians and teachers within the context of transition planning (Brinkmann, 2020; Creswell, 2015; Hewson, 2020). Interviews provide a subjective view into the experiences and perspectives of individuals, which can introduce a biased view of the world, yet they do provide a collective insight into the experiences and perspectives of diverse participants (Luker, 2008). Using open-ended questions allowed me to ask follow-up probing questions that provided historical context and future thinking, as well as created space for participants to ask me questions for clarification as part of our dialogue (Agnew & Pyke, 2007). This enabled me to build a rapport with participants and not be seen as a distant researcher who only wanted to ask questions. To build rapport, I encouraged participants to ask me questions and was open to speaking about my interest in focussing my research on Trinidad, which included my experiences in relation to my brother. In sharing this information, I wanted participants to also be comfortable to disclose as much or as little as they wanted during our conversation. For example, this approach was beneficial as interviewing persons with intellectual disabilities requires “flexibility on the part of the interviewer” to pivot to explore particular responses, inquire to clarify, or redirect the conversation towards the question or topic (Sigstad, 2017, p. 25). These interviews allowed me to gather diverse perspectives, understand the process planning at special schools, an individual’s thinking in decision-making, thoughts on their experiences and how they made sense of their reality (Agnew & Pyke, 2007; Brinkmann, 2020).

3.3.3 Research Plans
Qualitative methodology allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs (mild intellectual disability for life after school. I used one-on-one interviews with voluntary participants “as a means of capturing and exploring their perceptions, beliefs and attitudes” to
understand their experiences (Brown, 2018, p. 80; Crotty, 1998a, 1998c). I did not choose to focus on group interviews because I wanted an individual to speak about his/her personal experiences, as well as mitigate groupthink or dominant voices (Brinkmann, 2020; Leko et al., 2021). Individual interviews allowed voluntary participants to speak openly including providing examples about sensitive and personal situations to explain their experiences (Brinkmann, 2020). Qualitative methodology allowed me to ask open-ended questions as part of semi-structured interviews with participants, including follow-up or probing questions, for data collection with the aim of analysing the data to explain findings and describe participants’ worldviews to answer my three research questions (Agnew & Pyke, 2007; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

My intent was to get a deep understanding of participants’ perspectives within the context of transition planning to compare within and across groups (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leko et al., 2021). I wanted to gain insights into how teachers are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school in Trinidad and Tobago, and understand the perspectives of parents/legal guardians on how special schools are preparing their child for the next stage in their lives (Creswell, 2013). Data collection on the perspectives of educators, parents/legal guardians reveal the different experiences within a “pluralistic world,” of individuals within the particular context of transition planning (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 3; Crotty, 1998a). This enabled me to gather what the views of participants in each group were, allowed me to explore why participants held these views, while focussing on how transition planning for youths with mild intellectual disabilities was happening in special schools in Trinidad and Tobago.

My reality is informed by my personal experience in Trinidad. Micah, who having been diagnosed with a mild intellectual disability was recommended to be institutionalised and reflecting on this time, I see professionals using this to pre-determine his potential with the recommendation for placement at an institution (Ravenscroft & Allison, 2018). My experience is unique and “embrace the idea of multiple realities” based individual identity (e.g., race,
disability, gender) and interaction with society (Creswell, 2013, p. 20). This means that to understand the experiences of others, I would need to speak with participants in Trinidad and Tobago. Deriving meaning from their experiences and perspectives highlights its subjective nature and differences, as individuals’ understanding are framed by societal and historical factors (Agnew & Pyke, 2007; Crotty, 1998a). This alludes to traditions, norms and practices creating a societal reality that is navigated by individuals who make sense of their lived experiences based on their intersecting (e.g., race, disability, gender) identity (Crotty, 1998a; Levers, 2013; Luker, 2008).

Ravenscroft and Allison (2018) explain the link between knowledge and belief, in that knowing can lead to belief but believing is not synonymous with knowing. In applying this statement to my research, my overarching aim is linked to a personal and national policy context (Ravenscroft & Allison, 2018). The Literature Review chapter discusses the historical context to present day reality for persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago. My research builds on the prior work of researchers (see Harry, 2020; Paul, 2011) through an understanding of teachers and parental perspectives from three special schools. However, there remains a gap in understanding transition planning (i.e., preparation) to life after compulsory schooling for students with a mild intellectual disability attending special schools in Trinidad and Tobago. As such, to understand how individuals experience and make sense of their world during this transition, I would need to engage in dialogue with them to understand their perspectives (Creswell, 2013). This calls for me, as a researcher, to consider and use a methodology and its corresponding methods to collect data from voluntary participants, to develop a deeper understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school, and to answer my research questions. Having discussed my theoretical framework with a focus on its applicability to my research design, I explain my approach to ethics.
3.4 Ethics

Ethics is an integral aspect of research, from design to reporting (Kara, 2015; Traianou, 2020). I was mindful of this in the way I designed the research, recognising that the COVID-19 global pandemic prompted exploration of new pathways for stakeholder identification, volunteer participant recruitment, data collection and validation (Lobe et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2020, 2022). At the time of my planned in-field research in October 2021, the travel advisory in Canada prohibited non-essential travel and there were travel restrictions to enter Trinidad and Tobago. Therefore, I had to consider alternate methods for data collection, such as using technology to recruit, interview and share confidential information with participants.

3.4.1 Research Design

In applying an ethical approach to my research design, I disclosed to Micah about planning to undertake research to understand how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school. I informed him of his right to decline or confirm participation, while letting him know the information he shared with me would be mentioned in my research. For example, his experiences at school and using his name. His verbal consent to collaborate and co-create meant that I recognised that our sibling relationship provided me with an opportunity to ask about his experiences at school.

While relying on his expertise, I was aware that our discussion had the potential to retraumatize in recalling some experiences at school, and mitigated this by telling him that he can disclose whatever information he prefers, as well as decline or stop the discussion at any time (Chalachanová et al., 2020; Cigman, 2014; Coyne & Carter, 2018a; Harvey, 2018). Our conversations allowed me to ask follow-up questions to clarify or delve deeper to understand what he said, while allowing him to ask me questions about and advise me on my research. For example, asking me about why I wanted to focus on Trinidad and Tobago, advising me to ask youths what they liked about school. This demonstrated a collaborative approach by involving
and consulting with a subject-matter expert at the beginning of the research design to learn about his experiences (Nind, 2016). In applying this to my brother, I considered how to ensure I treated him fairly, with dignity and respect based on his identity (e.g., age, disability), while recognising his right to decline participation (British Educational Research Association, 2018).

3.4.2 Application Planning

In preparation for my ethics submission, I completed The University of Edinburgh’s mandatory Data Protection Training to understand best practices I can apply to my data collection, storage and retrieval. Prior to stakeholder engagement, I used the British Educational Research Association’s (BERA) guidelines for educational research to write my ethics application and submitted it to Moray House School of Education and Sport Ethics Committee for approval (British Educational Research Association, 2018). From the onset and with the support of my supervisors, my research was designed using a COVID-19 lens based on travel restrictions. This approach was endorsed at the time of my ethics application to The University of Edinburgh, Moray House School of Education and Sports (Research Ethics, Integrity & Governance), which recommended all students endeavour alternate approaches to in-field research due to COVID-19.

3.4.2.1 Ethics Application – Participant Recruitment

My ethics submission application identified how I would recruit participants, potential risks to participants and myself as a researcher, such as psychological stress or discomfort in speaking about post-compulsory school transitions, disclosure of child abuse or neglect (Traianou, 2020). My ethics application confirmed I completed mandatory Data Protection Training and use of the BERA (2018) as my external ethical guidance. I identified The University of Edinburgh, Moray House School of Education and Sport as my primary review body, with a possible secondary review body in Trinidad and Tobago (e.g., local school authority, school board, head administrator). This secondary review body was important recognising the role of a

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13 Preparation for my ethics application started in July 2021, with the application submitted on Monday 23rd August and approval received on Thursday 30th September 2021.
principal or head administrator, acting as a gatekeeper of a special school. By doing this, I wanted to adhere to any local requirements and recognise the role of gatekeepers who have the authority to grant me approval prior to me reaching out to prospective participants. I disclosed my research aim and questions for each participant group, the instrument (i.e., semi-structured interviews) used for data collection, identification of prospective special schools, criteria for participation, sampling, measures to protect vulnerable participants, recruitment, consent and/or assent, confidentiality and handling of data.

In my ethics application, I confirmed identification of prospective special schools was done through Internet searches using phrases such as ‘special schools Trinidad and Tobago’ or publicly available lists on government websites (e.g., Ministry of Education, Disability Affairs Unit). Stakeholder discovery of these government websites and Google search terms identified 26 special needs schools and five disability associations (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2021c, 2021b). I explained that this information was used to create a stakeholder list, where I cross-referenced using publicly available information (e.g., social media) the contact details for each special school. My intent was to use this list as my first point of outreach via email to prospective special schools. While emails may not have been an ideal choice to recruit prospective participants because email addresses may be non-functional, or emails can be perceived as spam or unsolicited messages by recipients, this was my preferred choice based on the uncertainty of in-person recruitment due to COVID-19.

3.4.2.2 Ethics Application – Participant Interviews

I acknowledged in my ethics application of the sensitivity to interviewing youths with a mild intellectual disability about transition planning. Sensitivity can include, for example, indicators of discomfort, disclosure of abuse, use of medical diagnosis language. I identified mitigating the risk of post-compulsory school transitions, by being prepared to share the contact information of the Ministry of Education – Student Support Services Division and their

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14 Internet search terms included ‘special schools in Trinidad and Tobago,’ ‘disability organisations Trinidad and Tobago’ and searching the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Social Development and Family Services website (https://dau.socialtt.org/schools/). Website accessed April 2021.
regional district offices, as their focus is on providing specialised support services for children with moderate and severe special educational needs (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2021a). In focussing on other signs of stress or discomfort (e.g., visual, vocal) by a participant, I indicated that I would stop the interview either temporarily (e.g., a break) and let the participant decide if they wanted to continue, reschedule, or decline to proceed with the interview. To mitigate my awareness of a youth’s abuse or neglect, I confirmed that I would report such disclosure, request the youth to also contact The Children’s Authority Hotline in Trinidad and Tobago, and provide them with the telephone number for support services. With respect to the use of medical diagnosis, I indicated that youth participants will be aware of their disability either from a formal diagnosis, attending a special school and/or their parents/guardians. I confirmed that I did not intend to use the term mild intellectual disability in my research to show individual deficit.

Including the views of youths with a mild intellectual disability can address perceptions of them not being experts in their lives, and dispel notions of them not knowing or being able to identify what matters to them, such as their aspirations (A. James, 2007; Stalker & Connors, 2003; Tonon et al., 2019). I wanted to include the voices of youths with a mild intellectual disability because their insights are invaluable in understanding their experiences, such as what matters to them, their learning experiences, and recognising that it gives agency to a group who are often overlooked in education disability inclusion research (Rose & Shevlin, 2004). In particular, using their words verbatim in research allows for authenticity towards understanding their experiences within a particular context, and mitigates the element of an adult (e.g., parent) interpreting and conveying on their behalf their messages (A. James, 2007; Lewis, 2002). However, there is consideration for mitigating the youth participant-researcher power dynamic and building rapport, which I indicated would be done through the use of visual aids, such as asking them to share pictures or drawings of what they like or dislike about school, via their parents/legal guardians (Teachman, 2019). In having youth participants choose the pictures or drawings, allowed them to decide what they wanted to share with me while giving
me insights into their likes, dislikes, future plans that would be helpful in our conversation (Stalker & Connors, 2003).

Including the voices of parents/legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from compulsory schooling can give perspectives into how they are planning for and/or navigating this process of transition (Beresford, 2004; Tarleton & Ward, 2005). I indicated being attentive to parents/legal guardians display of discomfort through their body language, tone, as well as being sensitive to not labelling their child. I indicated that I would have introductory conversations with parents where I encouraged them to ask me questions about my research to understand my rationale, while letting them know that they can share as much or little they wanted with me. During these conversations, I confirmed that I would not pry for official diagnosis, as I wanted to focus on preparation for life after school for youths with a mild intellectual disability. Recognising their parental/legal guardianship of their child, their perspectives would give details on their child’s learning experiences, learning environment, challenges they face and support they need (Porter et al., 2013). Similarly, including the voices of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling would give insights into programmes and/or subjects taught, their teacher training and/or continuing professional development (Agnew & Pyke, 2007). I confirmed that special schools would not be named and to protect confidentiality of all participants, content would be anonymised and I would use pseudonyms (Kara, 2015).

Instead of setting up personal accounts on different online platforms (e.g., Zoom, WebEx), I identified Microsoft Office suite of application (i.e., Outlook, Teams) as my preferred software choice for outreach because it was available to me as a researcher at The University of Edinburgh. I am aware that online platforms can be risky in terms of information breaches and mitigated this by using software linked to my profile as a researcher because of the protection from The University of Edinburgh’s firewall. With regards to online recruiting and interviewing youths who were not the legal age of majority, I mitigated this by indicating that I relied on
parents/legal guardian’s consent to speak with the youth and requested the contact information of their parent/legal guardian to share information (e.g., consent/assent forms, transcript, audio-video recording). This highlighted the role of parents/legal guardians as gatekeepers prior to me speaking with their child (Punch, 2002). I asked for a parent/legal guardian to be present as an adult observer during the interview. Knowing that confidentiality would be a concern, I resolved this by asking for both youth and parent/legal guardian to be in a private space/room in the house and requested they do not disclose what was discussed with anyone. Having a parent/legal guardian in the room also raised the issue of their influence in coaching their child with responses and perhaps limited disclosure by the youth to questions, which would have a subsequent impact on the data collected (Gardner & Randall, 2012). To mitigate this, I indicated that I would request of parents/legal guardians during introductory conversations, to only be observers and remind them, as needed, during interviews that I wanted to hear the experiences of youths. I also made them aware that only youths can request data to be deleted from their respective transcript.

3.4.2.3 Ethics Application – Participant Information Packages

In considering what prospective participants, including youths with a mild intellectual disability would be consenting to, guidance from BERA (2018) further informed my ethics application in the creation of plain-language Information Sheets, Consent and Assent Forms for each participant group.

The Information Sheets told participants about myself as it related to my research, benefits of participation, risks and mitigation, data collection and retention and destruction. I disclosed to participants that my research interest was linked to my experiences in Trinidad having a brother with a mild intellectual disability. The benefits included an opportunity for participants to discuss their experiences and perspectives of transition planning. I indicated that audio-video recordings and transcripts were to be stored on my personal drive on The University of Edinburgh’s server. I adopted a transparent and open approach to research by sharing both transcript and audio-video recording link with the respective participant(s) using
their personal email address(es). I informed all participants that data would be destroyed five years after finishing my studies because I did not want to retain these records and audio-video recording for an indeterminate timeframe. This approach aligns with advice on having a reasonable retention timeframe for data (Government of the United Kingdom, 2018).

I needed to get the necessary consent or assent of participants because I wanted to gather information from groups of individuals who I otherwise do not have access to, recognising geographical distance and non-familial relationships (Hammersley & Traianou, 2015). The Assent Form told youths with a mild intellectual disability that I was writing a report for The University of Edinburgh, made them aware of the option to participate or decline as well as take breaks or stop the interview, they would co-own the transcript and audio-video recording, and what they shared with me would be anonymised before it is read by others, including writing about them. The Consent Form for educators and parents/legal guardians used similar language. This demonstrated to all prospective participants that the decision to participate was theirs, as I was transparent in disclosing who I was as a researcher, informing them of their rights and what they were consenting or assenting to for my research (Hammersley & Traianou, 2015). These steps aligned with an ethical approach to identification of prospective participant recruitment (Manohar et al., 2019).

3.5 Outreach and Recruitment

Once ethics approval was granted by The University of Edinburgh on Thursday 30th September, 2021, I proceeded to reach-out to prospective special schools via a “cold calling” email, based on the stakeholder list I created from Internet searches (Hewson, 2020, p. 14). My initial email outreach in October 2021 to prospective special schools included key excerpts from my Invitation to Participate with the intent, upon response, to schedule an introductory telephone call or online chat via Microsoft Teams. A follow-up email inquiry was sent a week later to those who had not replied to my email, resulting in some participants declining as they did not meet the eligibility requirements (e.g., special school did not have youths with a mild
intellectual disability between the ages of 15-18 years). Declining demonstrated the voluntary nature of prospective participants opting out of my research.

During my initial conversation with prospective educators who responded to my email inquiries, I informed the principal or head administrator, as they are gatekeepers, of each special school about my research, receiving ethics approval from the University of Edinburgh, and I inquired about whether local approval (e.g., school board/authority) was required prior to engaging with prospective participants (Agnew & Pyke, 2007; British Educational Research Association, 2018; Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lewis & Porter, 2004). I was guided by the principal or head administrator’s response as to whether ethics approval from The University of Edinburgh – Moray House School of Education and Sport was sufficient and offered to email them a copy of the letter for recordkeeping. I also discussed my research including my ask for participants, answered their questions, and was guided by the principal or head administrator’s timelines of when to follow-up for a decision.

During initial conversations with educators at special schools, I did mention my focus was on youths with a mild intellectual disability (15-18 years) who were transitioning from compulsory schooling. My invitation to participate documents also mentioned that my focus was on youths with a mild intellectual disability. I did not ask for medical documentation, although in conversation with parents, some shared a medical diagnosis for their child. I did not pry, recognising parents may not have a medical diagnosis and being sensitive around possibly labelling their child, as well as my focus was to develop a deeper understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school. Youth participants were described and identified by teachers as having a mild intellectual disability. Principals or the head administrator of each special school acted as the liaison in recruiting prospective educators, parents/legal guardians and youths by sharing their contact information with me. During these introductory conversations, several educators asked me to share the findings with them, which I agreed to do in the form of a report or presentation at the end of my studies. This verbal agreement
demonstrated reciprocity in support of knowledge transfer and contributing to topical research that can be used to inform evidence-based decision-making by policymakers, bureaucrats, special schools.

Once a prospective participant was identified, I reached out using their contact information to schedule an introductory conversation. During conversations with educators, parents/legal guardians and youths, I introduced myself, provided context about my study as well as disclosed the topics for discussion (e.g., curriculum, likes and dislikes about school, future planning for their child). I did not share specific questions since I used semi-structured interviews. During preliminary conversations, most prospective participants agreed to participate in my research. Some prospective participants declined due to closure of their school during the pandemic, or not having youths within the age group of my research, or availability based on their work schedule. However, some participants who declined acted as a liaison by introducing me via email or text message to another prospective participant. During all introductory conversations with participants, I confirmed their contact information and shared my mobile number should they prefer to chat via telephone or text message instead of Microsoft Teams. When I received no responses to my initial and follow-up emails, I did not pursue further contact as I did not want to be excessive and burdensome with my ask, but be mindful of a prospective participant’s privacy (Guppy & Gray, 2008).

One educator admitted the bureaucratic nature of approvals may be lengthy and present barriers, and opted to participate without local approval, as my research guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. This situation exemplified the dynamic nature of qualitative research that prompted me to consider a reasonable, ethical solution (Traianou, 2020). Following a discussion with my supervisors, I was guided by the decision of the adult participant, which was supported by my supervisors. This action demonstrated a shared level of “trust and discretion” between the participant and myself and the creative approach to solutioning an “ethical dilemma” (Brinkmann, 2020, p. 20; Guppy & Gray, 2008, p. 19; Kara, 2015). The steps I took in this situation demonstrated ethical transparency and accountability in
As a follow-up to conversations where prospective participants agreed to voluntarily participate, I emailed them an Invitation to Participate, which informed them of their rights to participate or decline, privacy and anonymity (British Educational Research Association, 2018; Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Georgeson et al., 2014; Lewis & Porter, 2004). Voluntary participants were emailed a Participant Information Sheet and required to complete an Assent Form (i.e., youths with mild intellectual disability less than 18 years) or Consent Form prior to participation, which demonstrated transparency in information sharing so that prospective participants can make an informed decision (Agnew & Pyke, 2007; British Educational Research Association, 2018; Cohen et al., 2018). Parents of youths with a mild intellectual disability were required to grant consent using the Participant Information Sheet, as 18 the legal age of majority in Trinidad and Tobago (British Educational Research Association, 2018; Cohen et al., 2018; Age of Majority Act, 2016; Lewis & Porter, 2004). Prior to the interview date, I contacted voluntary participants via text message to confirm the interview date, time and requested the consent and/or assent form(s) be emailed to me. If participants did not have access to a printer and/or scanner, they typed their name on the form or used an electronic signature, while some took a picture of the printed, signed form and emailed it to me. All participants who volunteered for my research submitted a completed consent and/or assent form, in keeping with transparency and accountability in the ethics process (Agnew & Pyke, 2007; Hammersley & Traianou, 2015).

### 3.5.1 Participant Selection Considerations

I planned to interview five participants per group for a total of 15 participants. I selected five across all groups as I wanted to get multiple perspectives within each group, but being cognisant of:
• The number of special schools in Trinidad and Tobago and the sample size that are focussed on transition planning for youths between the ages of 15-18 years.

• The number of students with a mild intellectual disability between the ages of 15-18 years attending a special school in Trinidad and Tobago.

• The number of parents/legal guardians who have a youth between the ages of 15-18 years attending a special school in Trinidad and Tobago.

3.5.2 Sampling

Due to the small number of special schools in Trinidad and Tobago, their names and location were not mentioned in my reporting as it had the potential to identify them and some participants (e.g., educators). This approach was in keeping with anonymity and confidentiality as outlined in my Invitation to Participate documents (British Educational Research Association, 2018).

In conversation with prospective participants post-ethics approval using my stakeholder list, I was informed of an association for privately-owned schools that is not under the purview of the Ministry of Education, although some of these schools were listed on the Disability Affairs Unit’s webpage. Leveraging this information, I relied on publicly (e.g., social media, school’s website) available information to determine the special schools’ focus area (e.g., developmental disabilities) and group (e.g., youths, 15-23 years). This approach allowed me to enhance my prospective stakeholder list of special schools with their corresponding information (age group, disability type, primary contact, public/private/vocational school). My intent was to use this information as part of my initial outreach and conversations with the principal or head administrator. While my list of special schools may not be exhaustive, the sample was comprehensive as it was representative of the types of special schools (i.e., vocational, private, government) in Trinidad and Tobago (Luker, 2008).

I used special schools as the gateway to access prospective parents and teachers, paying attention to the school year to invite prospective participants (Brown, 2018; Lewis & Porter,
For example, during my discussion with special schools, I confirmed there were youths with a mild intellectual disability attending and shared information about my research, including the number of participants per group I wanted to interview, with the principal or head administrator. The principal/head administrator identified prospective participants (e.g., parents/legal guardians, youths with a mild intellectual disability). Following these telephone conversations, I emailed documentation (e.g., information sheets, consent and assent forms) about my research as well as my ethics approval letter, if requested for recordkeeping, to the respective individuals for transparency and to support my request. The principal or head administrator of the special school acted as the gatekeeper and liaison in recruiting prospective participants. My accountability as a researcher to these gatekeepers was ensuring confidentiality was maintained and being respectful of their work commitments, ensuring timely follow-up with participants who reached out to me, and being available to answer follow-up inquiries via email and/or text messages (Kara, 2015).

Principals/head administrators from six special schools (see Table 8) agreed to participate, including recruiting parents/legal guardians and youths (15-16 years) with a mild intellectual disability. These six are representative of the types of special schools found in Trinidad and Tobago.

Table 8: Names of Participating Special Schools in Trinidad and Tobago

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Special School Type</th>
<th>Name16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>New Horizons Private Special School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Accelerate Academy Private School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Foundation Scholars Private Special School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Lifetime Learning Private Special School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Brightstar Government Special School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15 School terms are September to December, January to March and April to July.
16 Pseudonyms are used for anonymity and confidentiality.
During the data collection period there was a bereavement in my family, and this prompted me to pause in-field research for several days. However, I had scheduled an interview with a prospective parent, and there was a miscommunication as my email requesting to reschedule was not received and/or read on time. I apologised for this miscommunication and informed the parent that I would reach-out by a particular date to reschedule. When I had resumed data collection, I contacted the parent twice via text messaging to reschedule, but an interview date was not proposed by the parent. This particular situation resulted in not being able to follow through with a prospective participant and illustrated the dynamic nature of undertaking research (British Educational Research Association, 2018).

3.5.2.1 Inclusion Criteria

The aim of these 15 interviews was to explore insights into the experiences and “multiple realities” of participants (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 21). Sampling was purposive with a focus on persons who can speak in-depth about their experiences and perspectives on the school's curriculum, programmes, transition planning as well as those who have youths attending special schools. Eligibility for participants was based on being:

- A youth aged 15-18 years with a mild intellectual disability who is attending a special school.
- An educator (e.g., principal, teacher) employed with a special school and is preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school.
- A parent and/or legal guardian of a youth with a mild intellectual disability who attends a special school.

A cross-section of participants allowed for “representation in the sample” within the context of understanding how were special schools in Trinidad and Tobago educating and preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability for the transition to young adulthood (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 219). This representation aligned with the research questions for each group and focussed on those within the group who can provide insights into answering the questions (Hewson, 2020). For example, understanding the experiences of youths with a mild intellectual
disability who were preparing to transition from compulsory schooling, meant I focused on those who were at a special school and specifically were preparing to exit compulsory schooling. Focusing on educators who were actively involved in the transition process was preferred to those who are not, as I wanted to know what subjects were being taught, the pathways to learning, their teacher training and insights on their career. This gave me an opportunity to explore responses with follow-up questions, understand what transition planning looks like for a particular special school and be aware of challenges faced, if any, in preparing youths for the next stage in their lives. Similarly, the choice to focus on parents/legal guardians was intentional as they are legal overseers and would be providing advice to youth participants (i.e., their child) in planning towards the next stage in their lives. Parents/legal guardians provided insights on their plans such as employment opportunities (e.g., skilled trades), challenges they faced and supports in-place for their child. Only youths with a mild intellectual disability (15-18 years) with parental consent who also assented to participate, their data was used in analysis and reporting.

3.5.3 Interviewing

Due to COVID-19, the Government of Canada’s travel advisory prohibited non-essential travel and there were travel restrictions to enter Trinidad and Tobago, such as closure of borders resulting in restriction of international travel (Government of Canada, 2022). While in-person fieldwork would have been preferred, based on travel restrictions, closure of special schools and uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 variants, my research was conducted using online platforms (i.e., Microsoft Teams, Outlook), as these are “commonly used software” often being used by schools in Trinidad and Tobago for a virtual classroom (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 538). All interviews were conducted in English as this is the national language of communication (written, verbal) in Trinidad and Tobago.

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17 The Government of Canada advised against non-essential travel outside of Canada. See news release “Government of Canada advises Canadians to avoid non-essential travel abroad” by Global Affairs Canada dated March 13, 2020, which was accessed on Thursday 13th April, 2023.
COVID-19 impacted countries differently (e.g., state of emergency lockdown, virtual/online school), so I relied on special schools to confirm in-person or virtual learning as they shared information about my research with prospective participants via email. Online interviewing can “open up new avenues of enquiry” for me “which transcend time and place” (Brown, 2018, p. 82). Using technology to facilitate synchronous (texting, video chat) and asynchronous (e.g., email) communication can be used to conduct research (Hewson, 2020). Online interviewing during a pandemic can be problematic in that it can add to the online fatigue experienced by educators and youths who are now in virtual school, exclude those (e.g., students, parents) who do not have technological assets (e.g., computer) or access to a reliable Internet connection, as well as introduce online privacy and confidentiality risks (Kara, 2015; Lobe et al., 2020; Topping et al., 2021). However, online interviewing continues to be used as an option for recruitment, data collection and reporting. For example, it can enable persons to communicate in real-time across different time zones and geographical distances, while facilitating ease of data collection through online surveys or interviews and collating responses for analysis for reporting (Kara, 2015).

Online interviewing using Microsoft Teams software provided opportunities for all participants and me, in that it accommodated accessibility requirements such as speech-to-text and transcription. It facilitated audio-video recording and transcription in real-time that can be used for data analysis (Hammersley, 2010). However, online interviewing can also present barriers to both researcher and prospective participants. These barriers can include privacy concerns in access to a secure device (e.g., password protected), choice of software (e.g., readily available or cost prohibitive), scalability of software across different devices (e.g., computer, handheld device), ease of use (e.g., user friendly), adaptability for network security and connectivity (e.g., anti-virus software, bandwidth capacity), accessibility accommodation (e.g., accuracy in transcribing) (Lobe et al., 2020; Topping et al., 2021). There is concern for virtual access into the homes or interview spaces used by participants and researcher (Lobe et al., 2020). For a researcher it can result in more time spent transcribing due to inaccuracies in
the software-generated typed responses by artificial intelligence because of accents or speech impediments or pace of speech.

The uncertainty surrounding school re-opening in Trinidad and Tobago, periodic changes in travel requirements and emerging variants of COVID-19, I decided online interviews would be preferred to ensure healthy safekeeping of voluntary participants and me as the researcher (World Health Organization, 2022). I had access to record (audio and video) interviews on Microsoft Teams with my university student profile. Several participants already had Microsoft Teams software installed on their computers, while other participants used its web-based version on their devices (e.g., iPad, smartphones). To conduct interviews, I used the option on Microsoft Teams software to blur my background and this was done by some participants to mitigate background distractions and privacy. To mitigate virtual interview fatigue, I offered participants the option to stagger their interview over two days based on their availability and schedule, as well as scheduling interviews on evenings and weekends based on participants’ requests. I used participant’s personal email address to share and receive consent and/or assent to participate forms, share transcripts for data validation and Microsoft Teams audio-video recordings for their recordkeeping. Microsoft Teams software allowed for a verbal consent and assent at the beginning of interview(s), as well as audio and video recording of virtual interviews, which was used for transcribing and data analysis. I asked participants for their consent/assent prior to recording to recognise the ongoing nature of consent and respect their rights as volunteers in my research (British Educational Research Association, 2018). When participants had technical issues using Microsoft Teams, I contacted them by telephone and we collaborated to resolve these issues, which demonstrated my recognition of the varying degrees of participants’ technical proficiency and the cooperative approach used towards a solution to ensure they can participate (Lobe et al., 2020; Topping et al., 2021). As part of transcript preparation, I downloaded the transcript provided by Microsoft Teams software after each interview and used that as my initial draft to make corrections based on what was said by me or a participant in the audio-video recording.
3.5.4 Risks Mitigation

My study covered research in which the likelihood of physical or emotional risk to the participants is minimal, which was acknowledged in the Participant Information Sheet (British Educational Research Association, 2018). The Participant Information Guide and Consent Form conveyed to participants that I would anonymise data and use pseudonyms (British Educational Research Association, 2018; Cohen et al., 2018; Lewis & Porter, 2004; Traianou, 2020). All participants submitted their respective consent and assent forms, verbally agreed to be audio and video recorded and no one asked to stop the interview. During interviews with youths, I confirmed that a parent/legal guardian was present in the room as an observer, as he/she was sitting next to or at times I heard him/her explaining a question to his/her child, which ensured that parental oversight was embedded in the interview process (Hewson, 2020). At the end of the interview, I stopped the recording and reminded participants of my next steps, which included sharing via email the Microsoft Teams audio-video recording and a clean, typed transcript for their review. For youths with a mild intellectual disability, transcripts and recordings were also emailed to their parents/legal guardian to review and confirm what was discussed during our conversation with their child. I requested participants share any tracked edits to the typed transcript within one week. Participants did not make any edits to the typed transcript, and no one asked to remove their transcript from my research.

As part of my research plan, I applied research (project management) techniques to assign timelines for tasks, complete stakeholder identification, interviewing and reporting. These included creating a prospective participant list as outlined in my Sampling section. I also used timelines to reach-out to prospective educators at special schools, such as one week between initial and follow-up emails, and using calendar reminders and text messages to re-confirm interview dates with participants. I used organisational skills to schedule interviews and used communication skills to create the questions and topics, information sheet and consent forms as well as facilitate interviews. Data and interview transcripts were saved on my personal drive on The University of Edinburgh’s secure server.
3.6 Data collection

My three research questions provided the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school. Each research question was linked to a respective participant group, and I had corresponding questions and/or statements within each group that linked to and supported the overarching focus of my research.

Semi-structured interviews allowed me to guide the conversation to ensure I was consistently asking the same questions to participants based on their respective group by following the topics in my open-ended questions, explore their responses by asking them to clarify and delve into their responses, such as asking for and/or allowing them to provide a historical and/or present-day context to help me understand their worldview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hewson, 2020). I did not use structured and unstructured interviews as the former is like a verbal questionnaire with limited opportunity to deviate from asking the specific questions, while the latter puts the researcher in the role of an active listener for each interview without a consistent approach to facilitate comparison amongst responses to topic questions (Brinkmann, 2020).

COVID-19 resulted in global travel restrictions by the Government of Canada and all schools in Trinidad and Tobago closed to in-person learning and classes being held online, which removed the opportunity for in-person field research including observations. Being an observer would have allowed me to be present in the physical classroom to make field notes of what I am seeing and my interpretation. In-class observation was not feasible in an online learning environment and questionnaire responses may not list all possible participant responses to understand their experiences (Jahoda et al., 2010). For example, responses may reveal social desirability bias to where participants select responses that are favourable or alternatively select one response (i.e., yes or no) throughout or responses that may contradict (Agnew & Pyke, 2007; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To mitigate biases, semi-structured interviews allowed me to ask follow-up questions to clarify responses. During my initial
conversations, principals or head administrators confirmed that closure of special schools during the pandemic resulted in challenges such as students not having devices to access online learning or not having expertise in using these devices. As such, I relied on these gatekeepers to identify prospective participants.

3.6.1 Interview Procedures

I consistently used the same approach in interviews: re-introduced myself, explained the purpose of my study, paused for any questions, re-confirmed they consented to being recorded, progressed from general to sensitive questions (e.g., introductions, experiences at school, future planning), asked them to provide any additional information they wanted to share that was beneficial to my project, and closed by thanking them for their time and reviewed the next steps post-interview (Agnew & Pyke, 2007; Luker, 2008).

3.6.1.1 Procedures for Interviewing Youths

Interviewing youths with a mild intellectual disability requires flexibility in the structure of the interview, getting buy-in from parents and mitigating the power dynamic between a youth and me as a researcher (Teachman, 2019). I scheduled initial conversations and interviews based on the availability of parents/legal guardians and youths. For example, I offered the option of having the interview over two days. During our initial conversation I encouraged them to ask me questions about myself and research. This approach illustrated my recognition of the need to mitigate the researcher-participant power dynamic and initiate a connection with a youth before proceeding to data collection (Gallagher, 2009b).

In preparation for interviews with youths with a mild intellectual disability, I requested them to share, via their parents/legal guardians, five pictures about:

1. How he/she feels about his/her teacher(s).
2. What he/she likes or what about school makes him/her happy.
3. What he/she does not like or what about school makes him/her sad.
4. What is his/her most favourite activity or subject at school.

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5. What he/she wants to do when they leave/finish school.

I used this approach as an opportunity to create a comfortable virtual environment, build rapport between the youth and myself as a researcher, allow for the youth to guide the conversation by speaking about a picture and to mitigate the lack of in-person interaction (Adderley et al., 2015; Hewson, 2020; Messiou, 2006; Sigstad, 2017). In instances where the youth did not have pictures from school to share, they shared drawings to communicate their feelings. My intent was to facilitate dialogue while using the pictures or drawings to create a sense of familiarity so the youth can feel at ease (Punch, 2002; Teachman, 2019). I prefaced each corresponding questions and/or statements with a preamble and then paused for the youth to respond, often mentioning that there were no right or wrong answers. When given one-word responses, I re-framed and asked a follow-up question, such as can you tell me more (e.g., why you feel this way or said this?). These approaches demonstrated flexibility in using blended formats of pictures, drawings, statements as prompts to start and/or continue a conversation with youths (Lawson, 2010). At the end of each interview, I offered them the opportunity to share any other insights as well as ask me questions. Following the end of an interview with a youth and his/her parent/legal guardian, I emailed his/her parent/legal guardian to confirm I deleted all electronic records of the images. Pictures or drawings were not used in data analysis as they could have identified participants and/or special schools.

3.6.1.2 Anonymising Transcripts

Prior to data analysis, all transcripts were reviewed and identifying information (e.g., name of school, address, location, name of person) were removed in keeping with anonymity and confidentiality as outlined in my Invitation to Participate document. I used a first name pseudonym for all youths and parents/legal guardians and a pseudonym last name for educators, including teachers who were not interviewed but were mentioned by youths during our conversation. In focusing on participant identifying information (e.g., name, address, school name), I used only the youth’s age and type of disability and an educators’ school type (e.g., vocational, private, government). I used pseudonyms for all special schools to mitigate the
probability of identification. I further anonymized any identifiable information (e.g., cities) and replaced them with the phrase ‘identifiable information removed.’ I did this instead of using a pseudonym or generic naming convention for a location because I wanted to retain the essence of the conversation without divulging information (e.g., Eastern Region Vocational Special School). My decision was based on the few numbers of special schools in Trinidad and Tobago and the possibility of inadvertently disclosing through identification, a participating special school or participant (e.g., educator) to a reader. This approach is in keeping with research practices as guided by researchers such as Traianou (2020).

3.6.2 Interviews with Youths with a Mild Intellectual Disability

Interviews (see Table 9) were conducted in their respective homes with a parent/legal guardian present in a room of their choice that was private to limit background noise and interruption. Six youths were interviewed, and their parent/legal guardian also agreed to participate, except for Simone’s who declined due to her work schedule.

Table 9: Summary of Youth Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Special School</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Future Plans</th>
<th>Parent/Legal Guardian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>Foundation Scholars Private Special School</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Business owner: landscaping, carwash, electronics</td>
<td>Patricia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracey</td>
<td>Brightstar Government Special School</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Cook, Baker</td>
<td>Derrick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Receptionist, Clerk, Office worker</td>
<td>Tara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Special School</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Future Plans</td>
<td>Parent/Legal Guardian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Beautician / Cosmetology</td>
<td>Sandra (declined to participate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Accelerate Academy Private Special School</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Automobile-body repair</td>
<td>Vincent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anil</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Chef</td>
<td>Sherry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the beginning of the interview, I introduced myself, asked them to introduce themselves to me and to share what they wanted me to know about them. This line of inquiry was used to understand how they saw themselves, as well as mitigated the power dynamic by having them choose what to disclose to me as a researcher. At the beginning of these conversations, they were understandably hesitant or provided short responses, but I used the pictures or drawings to build rapport and/or redirect the conversation. For example, this could be asking them to describe the picture, why they chose it and how it made them feel. For some youth participants who did not share pictures or drawings, I decided to use a different approach such as asking them to use a word or words to tell me about what they liked or disliked, with follow-up questions asking them to tell me more about their choice of word(s). I also asked youth participants to imagine if they were speaking with someone (e.g., a famous person) they wanted to meet as an alternate approach to discussion to give them a sense of familiarity. This allowed me to mitigate the researcher-participant power dynamic in having them choose who they wanted to meet and how much information they wanted to disclose in conversation with this individual.
Sometimes after I asked a question, a parent/legal guardian could be heard speaking in the background, and I used this opportunity to gently remind them to refrain from answering or coaching their child with a particular response. However, I did not interrupt when parents were explaining questions or telling their child to speak to me, as I realized their relationship allowed for a feeling of comfort and familiarity in comparison to me who they were meeting for the second time. The average age for all youth interviewees was 16. While all attended a special school, during our interview it was disclosed that Tracey would be exiting school, as 18 is the maximum age allowed to attend Brightstar Government Special School.

3.6.3 Interviewing Educators at Special Schools

Interviews (see Table 10) were also conducted in a space of their choosing such as a private room in their house, their office at school, and in one instance in transit to and from a nearby park for their evening walk.

Table 10: Summary of Interviews with Educators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Special School</th>
<th>Position(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miss DaCosta</td>
<td>Lifetime Learning Private Special School</td>
<td>Principal &amp; Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Richards</td>
<td>Foundation Scholars Private Special School</td>
<td>Principal &amp; Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Noel</td>
<td>New Horizons Private Special School</td>
<td>Principal &amp; Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Abara</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Joseph</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss George</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
<td>Teacher &amp; Social Worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Nkosi</td>
<td>Brightstar Government Special School</td>
<td>Principal &amp; Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Clarke</td>
<td>Accelerate Academy Private Special School</td>
<td>Principal &amp; Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Dwyer</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All educators who participated were female. Although I had an interview scheduled with a male teacher, he did not attend the online interview. I followed-up to reschedule and was told the Christmas period was a busy time of the year and he forgot about the interview. Although he
did reschedule, he did not attend the second scheduled online interview. I opted not pursue a third request, as I did not want to appear intrusive, but respected this decision as it is the voluntary nature of research (British Educational Research Association, 2018). This example demonstrated the right of an individual, while consenting, was not obligated to participate in my research and my role in respecting his decision (Traianou & Hammersley, 2020).

To build rapport during these online interviews, I asked them to tell me about their school, as if I was a parent who wanted to enrol my child and to explain the admission process. This line of inquiry allowed me to gather additional information about the school’s student population, areas of focus and requirements for enrolment. I asked about the curriculum, future planning/transitions for youths and their perspectives on selecting a career in special education. Educators who are preparing youths to transition to the next stage in their lives (e.g., the world of work) provided insights about the subjects taught, how learning is being assessed, the different pathways to learning for youths (e.g., co-op placements). They also shared in-depth content about their career pathway into special education; the school, such as its history to present day; as well as challenges they faced where a dual role was being performed simultaneously, such as an administrator (i.e., principal) and teacher. Educators also spoke of challenges that were exacerbated during COVID-19, such as regression in student learning due to lack of in-person teaching and one-on-one interaction, as well as students’ limited access to technology to participate in virtual learning. I often used prompts such as tell me more about why you said this, or can you describe to me how you are facilitating online learning to help me delve into their stories and understand their perspectives.

3.6.4 Interviews with Parents/Legal Guardians of Youths with a Mild Intellectual Disability

Interviews (see Table 11) were conducted in their respective homes. Five parents/legal guardians agreed to participate in my research.

Table 11: Summary of Interviews with Parents/Legal Guardians
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Name of their Child</th>
<th>Special School their Child Attends</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>Foundation Scholars Private Special School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derrick</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Tracey</td>
<td>Brightstar Government Special School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vincent</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Accelerate Academy Private Special School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherry</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Anil</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To build rapport, I asked them what information they would want me to know if they were introducing me to their child for the first time, as well as what they would like others to know and understand about a child with special needs. The first question opened the line of inquiry for me to learn more about their child, while allowing me to compare their response to how they perceive persons with disabilities. I asked open-ended questions to learn more about their child’s learning experiences attending a special school and how they are being prepared for adulthood/transition to the next stage in their life (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The proximity to the youth provides a parent/legal guardian with a different perspective, in particular, the role of the school in equipping his/her child with the skills and knowledge and how these can prepare a child for the next stage (e.g., the world of work) in his/her life.

3.6.5 Online Interviewing and Transcripts

During interviews, my video camera was turned on and I asked participants to also turn on their video camera, but in some instances there were technical issues (e.g., loss of connectivity) due to bandwidth capacity and the device used by participants (Hewson, 2020). When there was a loss of connectivity, upon reconnecting to Microsoft Teams, I asked participants to repeat what was previously said to ensure their responses were recorded. Where there was a technical disconnect due to bandwidth capacity, I remained on the video call as participants would reconnect within a few minutes.
Although I planned to complete 15 interviews, I completed 20 (see Table 12) over three months starting in October and ending in December 2021.

Table 12: Summary of Interviews (October-December 2021)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Total Interview Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educators</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10 hours 8 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents/legal guardians</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2 hours 53 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youths with a mild intellectual disability</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4 hours 7 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
<td><strong>17 hours 8 minutes</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total duration for all interviews (see Appendix 8.1) was 17 hours 8 minutes (average was 51 minutes). Eighteen interviews were completed within the school term (i.e., September-December), except for two interviews that were completed after school closed for the term. Although I offered to conduct the interview in January 2022, the parent/legal guardian opted for both interviews (including youth) to be completed later in the month of December.

Participants who were interviewed for each group were representative of the private, government and vocational special schools in Trinidad and Tobago (see Table 13).

Table 13: Summary of Special Schools and Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Special School</th>
<th>Educator(s)</th>
<th>Youths &amp; Parents/Legal Guardians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Horizons Private Special School</td>
<td>Miss Noel</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accelerate Academy Private Special School</td>
<td>Miss Clarke</td>
<td>Matthew &amp; Vincent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School¹⁸</td>
<td>Miss Abara Miss Joseph</td>
<td>Thomas &amp; Tara Simone &amp; Sandra¹⁹</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹⁸ Although the principal declined to participate, the special school agreed to participate and coordinated the recruitment of teachers, youths and parents/legal guardians for my research.
¹⁹ Although Sandra declined to participate, I opted to include her name to show she consented for Simone to participate and was present during our conversation.
Although I approached six special schools, only four were able to recruit youths and parents/legal guardians to be participants due to the closure of special schools. Although school closures presented difficulties to educators in recruiting prospective participants, Miss Noel and Miss DaCosta agreed to participate in my research. After each interview, I journaled to capture my perspectives and observations of the virtual interaction and downloaded the recording and transcript from Microsoft Teams (Luker, 2008). In my journaling, I wrote about how I interpreted the interaction, what I thought about what I heard with mention of specific statements or examples that stood-out for me. For example, experiences of bullying, barriers faced in accessing compulsory education. I decided not to interview anymore prospective participants because the data collected from 20 participants provided in-depth experiences of youths and perspectives of educators and parents/legal guardians to answer my research questions.

### 3.6.6 Organising and Cleaning the Data

I used the framework method for analysis of my qualitative data, following a step-by-step process from transcription, familiarisation with interview, coding, creating and testing a preliminary analytical framework and using the framework to interpret the data (Gale et al., 2013). The framework method continues to be used by early career researchers to specialists ranging from sectors (e.g., health) to academic fields (e.g., social sciences) in analysing qualitative data (Gale et al., 2013). Individuals as well as groups of researchers can apply the stages of analysis to transcripts to develop labels that are then linked to create categories that
can be used as part of a chart or table to further analyse data for interpretation and reporting (Gale et al., 2013). The benefits of this approach enables data to be condensed yet maintain precision in having an interviewee’s words verbatim, while facilitating comparison within and across groups to elucidate instances of agreement, differentiation or anomalies in perspectives and experiences of participants (Gale et al., 2013). Through a step-by-step process from transcription to interpretation, this method for data analysis of my qualitative data enabled me to complete three levels of analysis – individual, within and across groups (Gale et al., 2013).

After each interview, I downloaded the audio-video recording and transcript from Microsoft Teams and saved them to a dedicated folder on my OneDrive. The days following each interview was spent ‘cleaning’ the transcript using a three-step process: first, removing the time stamps that were generated by Microsoft Teams software; second, listening to the recording and retyping content to match what was said; and third, reviewing the recording a second time to validate what I typed against what was said and removing filler words (e.g., uh-huh) (Luker, 2008).

In the first step, I reviewed a transcript with the intent to ‘clean’ it by removing the time stamps to help me easily read and correct any software transcription errors. ‘Cleaning’ the transcript did not mean modifying colloquial parlance as I wanted to maintain the accuracy of what was said by participants. In the second step, I listened to an audio recording and retyped and corrected content, as needed, to match what was said during an interview including adding punctuation for readability. I paid attention to what a participant said and not their physical (e.g., gestures, facial expressions) behaviours. I did this because my aim was to understand participants’ perspectives and experiences based on what was said and not analyse their body language, recognising some participants did not have their videos on and there were technical issues (e.g., loss of Internet connectivity). In the third step, I listened again to a recording to validate what I typed because I wanted to ensure I accurately captured what was said in an interview, including documenting breaks in the conversation due to technical glitches or parents/legal guardians speaking in the background. I opted for this three-step process to
ensure accuracy and readability of content. For example, I was consistent in ‘cleaning’ transcripts, which meant all had page numbers, bolded names for interviewer and participant and paragraphs for readability. These steps undertaken in the process for transcription aligns with stage one of the framework method (Gale et al., 2013).

Educators, parents/legal guardians and youths were emailed their respective audio-video recording and ‘clean’ transcript for their record-keeping and data validation. For data validation, I gave them one week from the date of the email to review and to share any tracked edits to the transcript. I also let them know that if I did not receive any feedback, this meant that they were happy with the transcript, and I would proceed to anonymise for confidentiality. Following this step of participant-checking and data-sharing, I did not receive any edited transcripts from participants. No participant requested edits to or withdrew their transcript during data validation or asked for their transcript to be removed or excluded from my research. These ‘clean’ transcripts were the source or raw data that I relied on for analysis and information sharing, which is in keeping with my commitments to participants as documented in my Information Sheet, Consent and Assent Forms (Hammersley, 2010).

Once data validation of a ‘clean’ transcript by a respective participant was completed, the transcript was anonymised to remove any identifiable information (e.g., participant name, special school). I selected names (see Figure 6) that identified the type of special school (i.e., private, vocational, government) and participant names that were common based on the demographic groups in Trinidad and Tobago.

*Figure 6: Participating Special Schools, Educators, Youths and Parents/Legal Guardians*
Anonymised transcripts were given pseudonyms, printed, and kept in their respective group – educators, parents/legal guardians, youths – because I wanted to focus on one group at a time as a first step in trying to answer each research question. I printed the research questions to remind me of my focus areas and corresponding relevant related follow-up questions I asked to answer the overarching research question for each group.

3.6.7 Reviewing and Coding the Data

The anonymised transcripts were printed and used for data analysis. Since interviews finished in December 2021, I watched each audio-video recording and re-read its corresponding transcript to familiarise myself with an interview. The dynamic nature of semi-structured interviews meant that I used, as needed, conversational prompts that resulted in a participant’s response(s) to a question being captured in several different areas across a transcript. Conversational prompts help to draw out content that are not limited to one-word yes or no responses, or to help clarify the message being conveyed by the respondent (Sigstad, 2017).

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20 See Data Analysis chapter for findings based on the individual, intragroup and intergroup levels of analysis.
This is demonstrated in an interview excerpt (see Figure 7) with Ezra, who spoke about two teachers at his school – Miss Powell and Miss Brown.  

Figure 7: Transcript Excerpt from Interview with Ezra

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keren</th>
<th>And can you tell me how you feel about having Miss Powell as your teacher?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>Happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keren</td>
<td>Yeah, why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>Yeah, she does treat me good and she does treat me like a child. Yeah, like her own son.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Transcript page 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keren</th>
<th>Uh, and what classes do you have with Miss Brown?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>No, nah. She’s she’s my second friend. She is the next side.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keren</td>
<td>When you say she’s the next side, what do you mean by that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>Like friend, best friend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keren</td>
<td>Oh, Miss Brown is your best friend?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>Uh huh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keren</td>
<td>Oh wow, nice. Why do you say she’s your best friend?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Miss Powell and Miss Brown are pseudonyms given to educators, at Foundation Scholars Private Special School, who Ezra identified during our interview.
Ezra’s interview demonstrated how I used active listening by acknowledging what I heard, paraphrasing and clarifying by asking a follow-up question. By doing this, I showed curiosity as a listener and sustained momentum in the conversation to draw out Ezra’s opinion on how he viewed his teacher. I used active listening during the 20 interviews to have participants explain why they made that comment or provide context (e.g., historical, present day) as a way of helping me understand their worldview. This steps undertaken in the process for familiarisation with the interview aligns with stage two of the framework method (Gale et al., 2013).

Within each respective group, I read each transcript focussing on highlighting corresponding relevant related follow-up questions (i.e., the question I asked) and a participant’s response using a different coloured highlighter (see Figure 8) for each focus area. Re-engaging with the raw data and using different coloured highlighters helped me in paying attention to where responses to corresponding relevant related follow-up questions may be captured across a transcript.

Figure 8: Example of Highlighting Transcript Excerpts (Interviews with Miss Abara and Simone)
The highlighted transcript excerpts show how, at an individual level, I used different coloured highlighters to code data. Doing this proved to be beneficial as I read each transcript and summarised participants’ responses in tables (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Excerpts from an Interview with Thomas (Youth)**
I kept participants’ responses verbatim with corresponding transcript page numbers for ease of reference. I used a consistent approach for each participant group summary tables by having the research question, focus areas, relevant related follow-up questions, participant’s name, name of school and their response(s) with the corresponding transcript page number(s). For parents/legal guardians, I included the pseudonym of their child to show familial relations. For educators, I included the pseudonym name of the school. These table summaries were descriptive data that showed, at an individual level, what I learned from my interviews with participants. I consider these table summaries as my individual level of analysis in that participants’ responses to the corresponding relevant related follow-up questions were the selected text matched to respective focus areas. In highlighting questions asked and responses given by participants to create a table summary for each group, as part of my individual level of data analysis, aligns with stage three or assigning labels or codes as part of the framework method (Gale et al., 2013).

Then, I used the individual level of analysis to compare responses within their respective participant groups based on each group’s research question. An output from this was a table summary, which I considered my intragroup level of data analysis. Next, I used the intragroup level of data analysis to compare across the three participant groups. I did this because I wanted to report on what the data were telling me about the process of transition from compulsory schooling for youths with a mild intellectual disability, and what the data were telling or not telling me about the opportunities for life after school for youths with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago. An output from comparing across all three groups was a table summary, which I considered my intergroup level of data analysis. This three-step process of data analysis was used to answer my research questions. The steps undertaken in the process from individual to intergroup and finally intragroup levels of analysis aligns with stages four to seven of the framework method, as I “developed and applied a working analytical framework” that was used to “interpret the data” (Gale et al., 2013, pp. 4-5). Doing this helped me to achieve the aim of my research, which was to develop a deeper understanding of how
special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school.

3.7 Quality in Research Design and Method

In this section, I explain how I embedded quality throughout my research design and discuss its limitations.

3.7.1 Validity in Qualitative Research

An important facet in establishing rigour in qualitative research is validity (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Leko et al., (2021) calls for qualitative researchers, such as myself, to demonstrate how my “findings are considered trustworthy and credible” while simultaneously speaking to my stance on “reflexivity and positionality” and use of triangulation in data sources (pp. 282-283). Other researchers adopt a similar approach in identifying credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability as measures of rigour in qualitative research (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Creswell & Creswell (2018) and Creswell & Miller (2000) propose a multi-pronged approach to ascertaining validity in qualitative research that includes triangulation, participant review of findings, reflexivity, vivid descriptions, reporting on anomalies in analysis, immersive in-field research time, external reviewer debrief, audit of the project. Similarly, Lincoln & Guba (1985) identify transferability, credibility, dependability and confirmability as key components that speak to the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Drawing on the similar elements from these researchers who align with Lincoln & Guba (1985), I also identified how my qualitative research is trustworthy, with consideration for limitations in the context of using a COVID-19 lens in design and implementation.

3.7.1.1 Transferability

Transferability is defined as a “thick description” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). As a researcher, I identified my interest in undertaking this research and using my sibling relationship to understand Micah’s experiences. In doing this, I provided a historical and situational context of why I wanted to undertake my research in Trinidad and Tobago. In
designing my research, I described the planning to implementation process. I provided context on my approaches to sampling, recruitment and data collection. Linked to this was the sharing of focus areas, rationales, preambles, questions and/or statements for each participant group. I was transparent in disclosing how I recruited voluntary participants, resolved ethical dilemmas in recruitment, and mitigated any issues arising from online recruitment and interviewing. I provided interactional context about how I conducted introductory conversations and the settings in which I did online interviews. I shared initial data analysis to demonstrate representation of the types of special schools found in Trinidad and Tobago, as well as the backgrounds of educators, parents/legal guardians and youths with a mild intellectual disability.

However, a limitation of my research as it pertains to transferability is that I was not in the same physical space as a voluntary participant. This would have allowed me to describe the layout (e.g., a classroom). It would have enabled me to be more cognisant of non-verbal cues (e.g., body posture, facial expressions) and see the interaction between parent/legal guardian and child in-real time. However, the global travel restriction by the Government of Canada coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in all schools in Trinidad and Tobago closed to in-person learning and classes being held online. There is consideration for technology limitations such as Internet connectivity, and a participant’s preference to not turn on his/her video camera. Although information about non-verbal cues was not captured, it did not limit the scholarly nature of my research. In times of a global pandemic and/or uncertainty, scholarly research such as mine, can still be undertaken using innovative tools (e.g., technology). Another researcher can use the information in this chapter to undertake similar online and/or in-person research.

3.7.1.2 Credibility

Credibility involves “prolonged engagement, persistent observation,” use of multiple “sources, methods and investigators” as well as “peer debriefing, negative case analysis and member check” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 328). I interviewed 20 voluntary participants, representing three groups, who provided in-depth perspectives of parents/legal guardians and
educators, as well as the experiences of youths who were transitioning from compulsory schooling. This allowed me to compare by participant and groups to identify similarities and anomalies. I shared transcripts and audio-video recordings with respective participants and gave them one week from the date of my email to share their edits with me. In my email I also invited each to have a follow-up conversation with me, including hearing about their reflections on the interview. All participants did not request a follow-up conversation. Following data analysis, I agreed to share a report or present to participants findings as part of my approach to thank them, as well as contribute to knowledge transfer and evidence-based decision-making as it pertains to transition planning for youths with a mild intellectual disability. My intent in doing this is to be accountable to participants who shared their time, experiences and perspectives with me over the three months. In my reporting, I included non-identifiable information (e.g., age, special education accreditation, number of years teaching) about participants using pseudonyms. I also shared information in my Data Analysis and Results chapter, including relying on the voices of participants to share their experiences and perspectives.

A limitation of my research was the time spent in-field recognising the COVID-19 global pandemic prohibited me from travelling to Trinidad and Tobago to recruit prospective and interview voluntary participants. The closure of special schools and limitations on international travel during a global pandemic prevented me from being in the field for a long period of time (e.g., one year) for data collection. While I would have preferred to use classroom observation as another source of data collection during in-field data collection, this was not a feasible option as special schools resorted to an online learning environment with fewer students, as some did not have the technology (e.g., computer, handheld device) or required support to participate. While a year (i.e., October 2021 to September 2022) for data collection would have been a lengthy period, data collection started in October and finished in December 2021. However, during these three months I recruited, interviewed, and shared raw data (i.e., transcripts, audio-video recordings) with all participants as well as provide periodic updates to my supervisors. Although online data collection was not a preferred choice from the onset, it
was a practical option based on COVID-19, travel restrictions and special school closures in Trinidad and Tobago.

3.7.1.3 Dependability

Dependability speaks to an audit trail with a focus on “the product – the data, findings, interpretations and recommendations” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 318). This calls for transparency in my role as a researcher in relation to participants, as well as consideration for mitigating biases that can influence how I conducted interviews and interpreted data (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Leko et al., 2021).

At the beginning of this chapter, I explained the purpose for my research, my approach to selecting participants, instrument used and timeframe for data collection, as well as how I used the data to summarise preliminary findings across participant groups. This approach aligns with best practices in being transparent so that “another researcher can follow the decision trail” to undertake a similar research (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 153). In addition to sharing the data with voluntary participants, I also included excerpts from an anonymised transcript (see Appendix 8.2) for transparency. In reporting on findings, I included in this chapter, tables with summaries for each participant group.

I disclosed that I did not have a neutral position as a researcher based on my experiences in Trinidad and my conversations with Micah. My researcher reflexivity meant that I considered how my experiences were influenced by my thoughts and actions for each interview (Nathan et al., 2019). To mitigate this influence, I was transparent in disclosing my sibling relationship and discussions, any relationships with gatekeepers and participants, and how I resolved ethical dilemmas. I journaled at the end of each interview to capture what I thought of what a participant said, what comment(s) was/were noteworthy to me and why, as well as how I interpreted what was said by reflecting on Micah and my experiences growing up in Trinidad. This approach allowed me to be aware of my stance as a researcher and be mindful in how it can influence my data analysis and reporting. For example, instead of using my
I used one instrument (semi-structured interviews) for data collection even though there were restrictions on international travel, closure of special schools and legislated lockdowns with added constraints for physical and social distancing. I used multiple participant groups that share a central focus on preparation for life after school, as part of transition planning, for youths with a mild intellectual disability. A strength of this option is it allowed for in-depth understanding of transition planning from the experiences and perspectives of 20 participants across the three different types of special schools found in Trinidad and Tobago. While the data collected is not generalizable to the population of students with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago, it is representative of the groups. My intent was to use the data to develop a deeper understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school. Through this process, I endeavoured to be resourceful in gathering data from diverse participants who brought forward varied perspectives and experiences. This process allowed me to address the limitation of using multiple instruments for in-field research.

3.7.1.4 Confirmanability

Confirmanability speaks to a detailed outline of each step I took in my research from planning to reporting with identification of each step or an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An audit trail shows evidence of the pathway from concept design to reporting for research (Cope, 2014; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

3.7.1.4.1 Researcher Reflexivity

As a researcher, I shared that my experiences in comparison to Micah’s influenced my worldview and was open in disclosing this to participants in my information sheets. In the Introduction chapter and this chapter, I positioned myself in my research by identifying my stance, my rationale for undertaking this research, my perspective in knowing Micah’s pathway
as determined by professionals. I collaborated with Micah by asking him about his experiences and used this as an opportunity to explore possible questions to ask youths with a mild intellectual disability. Although my brother is not a co-researcher, he has informally contributed to my research through sharing of his time and experiences to help me understand his worldview. The nature of my research, identified from the onset the recognition of multiple realities of participants, which are informed by their respective experiences and perspectives based on variables (e.g., gender, disability) that contribute to their identity (Leko et al., 2021).

As part of my researcher reflexivity, I used mitigation strategies such as journaling after each interview to capture how I interpreted each interaction. Journaling facilitated reflection on the time I spent with each participant, how I interpreted what I heard with linkages to the wider discourse of special education in Trinidad and Tobago or within the context of Micah’s experiences. With regards to determining who would participate, I outlined my search terms to identify prospective participants and process of engagement post-ethics approval. Through this process, I sought to be transparent in why I wanted to undertake this research and how I proceeded to recruit and gather data from voluntary participants.

3.8 Summary

I used an ethical approach from the design to reporting in my research. This was demonstrated in my adaptability to designing my research using a COVID-19 lens and implementing it during a global pandemic, with a focus on respecting the right to participate in contributing to data collection; maintaining an inclusive and fair approach in sharing information with gatekeepers; requiring explicit consent and assent from all participants; and being transparent and accountable to participants in protecting their privacy and upholding confidentiality. Although I encountered ethical dilemmas, I resorted to a reasonable approach to resolving the situation through dialogue with prospective participants and relied on my supervisors in their capacity as my academic advisors. This approach is in keeping with ethical practices as guided by BERA (2018) and supported by Traianou (2020).
At the design stage, I collaborated with Micah to discuss questions to ask youths. For the implementation stage, I collaborated with local gatekeepers by sharing information (e.g., information sheets, consent/assent forms) about my research, which in-turn allowed them to recruit prospective participants. During introductory conversations, I was transparent in sharing information about myself and answering questions with prospective participants. I was flexible in my approach to scheduling interviews with participants and used technology to facilitate geographical distances and time differences. I had three different participant groups who shared the same outlook of transition planning for youths with a mild intellectual disability who attended special schools. This allowed me to gather in-depth data across a diverse group of participants in Trinidad and Tobago to analyse for differences, similarities, anomalies in experiences and perspectives. Although I planned to conduct 15 semi-structured interviews, I completed 20 within three months. While one instrument was used due to the impacts of a global pandemic, I journaled to capture my perspectives as a researcher after each interview, and in doing this, I adopted an impartial stance in describing what I heard by not using value-laden statements. I mitigated ethical dilemmas by discussing possible approaches with both supervisors before actioning a decision. I was accountable to participants in sharing transcripts and audio-video recordings for member-checking and their recordkeeping, which speaks to the co-ownership of data. I was trustworthy in using pseudonyms and anonymising transcripts to protect the privacy of participants and special schools, while maintaining confidentiality throughout my research. During meetings, I debriefed my supervisors on research activities, including what I had done and planned to do for data collection and reporting, which provided an important layer of research oversight. I shared preliminary reporting on the data collected for each group in describing the types of special schools, ages of youths, future job(s), years of teaching and special education accreditation.

A limitation of my research in establishing confirmability is an official audit of my research records (e.g., transcripts, journaling notes). Although there was no submission of these records to a third-party, my supervisors acted in this capacity as peer-debriefers. For example, during our meetings I discussed summaries of completed and upcoming interviews. I did not share raw
data (e.g., audio-video recordings) with my supervisors in keeping with ethical guidelines and agreement made with participants as outlined in the Information Sheet and Consent/Assent Forms. However, excerpts from an anonymized transcript were shared (see Appendix 8.2) as part of transparency for recordkeeping and in accordance with ethical guidelines.

3.9 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to outline the design and methods I undertook in designing and implementing my study with the aim of filling a gap in understanding the transition for life after school for students with a mild intellectual disability attending special schools in Trinidad and Tobago. I wanted to develop a deeper understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school. I shared my ontological stance, epistemological outlook, methodological plan, and method to answer my three research questions and their respective sub-questions. I was thorough in explaining my decisions and my justifications, with consideration for designing and implementing research during a global pandemic. The decisions that I made at each step on my research journey spoke to being trustworthy, credible and authentic, which contributed to ensuring a robust approach to my overall research. I now transition to my next chapter – Data Analysis and Results.
4 Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Overview of Chapter

In my Methodology chapter, I explained my ontological stance and epistemological outlook, discussed my research design, outlined how I applied an ethical approach in my research, accounted for my approach to sampling and data collection for each participant group, and concluded with how I embedded quality in my research design and identified how my qualitative research is trustworthy.

In this chapter, I present how I analysed the data collected during interviews. In section 4.2, I discuss my approach to data analysis and following this, I report on findings within groups. In section 4.3, I account for the perspectives of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling. In section 4.4, I report on the experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling. In section 4.5, I describe the perspectives of parents/legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from compulsory schooling. Then, I move to section 4.6 to report on the findings across the three groups. Next, in section 4.7 I summarise this chapter and conclude in section 4.8 with a transition to my next chapter – Implications for Policy and Practice.

4.2 Approach to Data Analysis

I was the only researcher with access to all the raw data. Once member-checking was done, the anonymised transcripts were printed and used for data analysis. I used the framework method for analysis of my qualitative data because it was adaptable in application by allowing me to complete three levels of data analysis and summarise at each stage using tables, which helped me to answer each research question and fulfil the aim of my research (Gale et al., 2013).

The framework method is flexible in its use across disciplines (e.g., health, social sciences) and provides researchers, such as myself, with an opportunity to analyse qualitative data (semi-
structured interviews) from different groups on a particular topic (Gale et al., 2013). In applying this to my research, the framework method meant that I was able to follow a step-by-step process from transcription to familiarisation with interviews and creating table summaries that were beneficial as I progressed through levels of data analysis. I did not use qualitative software (e.g., NVivo) to complete any levels of data analysis because I chose to print and highlight and use tables to summarise the data. This approach helped me in reviewing, referencing, summarising and reporting as I progressed through levels of analysis. Through this process, I completed three levels of analysis (see Figure 10) – individual, within group (i.e., intragroup) and across groups (i.e., intergroup).

![Figure 10: Levels of Analysis](image)

4.2.1 Individual

In applying the framework method for the first level of data analysis, I focussed on individual responses to questions and at this stage in analysis, transcripts were kept within their respective participant group (Gale et al., 2013). I read and highlighted in different colours the questions I asked followed by participant responses (see Figure 11).

![Figure 11: Individual Level of Analysis – Transcript Excerpts for Tara (parent), Miss DaCosta (teacher), Ezra (student)](image)
After I read and highlighted transcripts for a particular group, I created a table to summarise each participant’s responses (see Figure 12) to questions for Person-Centred Planning and Other focus areas. I did this because I wanted to report on each participant’s experience and perspective to the questions that were associated to respective focus areas. This approach aligns with the framework method in linking raw data to categories (Gale et al., 2013).

**Figure 12: Individual Level of Analysis – Table Headings for Participant Groups**

| Research Question: What are the perspectives of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling? |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Educators – Name of Special School** | **Curriculum** | **Pathways to Learning** | **Perspectives on Career** | **Teacher Training** |
| **Keren** 17, right, sorry, he’s 17 now. So let’s think of Thomas like at the age of 20, right. He’s he’s wanting to go into the world of work. He’s he’s wanting either to play music or or work in an office, right. What would you say if you could have a, I’ll give you that one wish Thomas never used yesterday. So that’s one thing that you know in your mind and in your heart you can rest easy knowing that Thomas is happy. What would be that dream that you would have for Thomas? | **How are students’ learning assessed?** | **Does the school have transition planning for students, how the plan is worked out and managed, do they have child’s plan, who contributes, how is the plan monitored?** | | **What teacher training have you completed and/or currently working on?** |
| **Tara** Yeah just want Thomas to be successful in his job and in his life. So that you know, he would have this and be responsible. | **How does this special school prepare youths with a mild intellectual disability for the next stage in their life such as further education, employment?** | **What are the different pathways a youth with a mild intellectual disability can choose from?** | | |
| **Keren** Now when you say successful it his job, is anything in particular that you’re looking for, like you just want him to be happy on the job that he doesn’t get face bullying? Or is it like, oh I want him to make a lot of money. Here. | | **Does the school promote and support the pathways and other forms of learning?** | | |
| **Tara** That’s as well. But I want him to like what he does as well too, you know. So be better at his job, like want to be better at all that as well too. Yeah. | | **How does the school face the transition stage or youths with mild intellectual disability?** | | |
The individual level of analysis summary tables for educators, youths and parents/legal guardians had a similar format:

- Research question for each group,
- Participant group and relationship (e.g., name of special school, name of youth),
- Headings that described the overarching idea based on the groups’ experiences or perspectives,\(^\text{22}\)
- Statements and/or questions that were associated with each heading.

For each participant group, I included relationship to associate, for ease of reference, the connection to a special school and/or youth. For example, youths and educators were linked to a special school, parents were linked to their child and special school. For each participant group, the highlighted individual responses were entered verbatim with associated transcript page numbers into its respective summary table. The three table summaries (i.e., youths, parents/legal guardians, educators) reported on a total of 20 individuals’ responses. These table summaries were my first level of my data analysis because they provided a descriptive summary at an individual level response to questions associated with each focus area. At the individual level of data analysis, there was a total of 27 questions and statements across 9 focus areas.

\(^{22}\) For educators the headings were curriculum, pathways to learning, perspectives on career, teacher training. For parents/legal guardians the headings were child’s learning experiences, perspectives on the special school, future planning. For youths the headings were views on teachers, likes and dislikes, pathways to learning, future planning.
areas for the three participant groups. Upon completing the individual level of analysis, I moved to my next level of analysis – intragroup.

4.2.2 Intragroup

In applying the framework method, I used the individual level of analysis (i.e., table summaries) to compare responses within (i.e., intragroup) the three participant groups to answer each research question (Gale et al., 2013). Applying the framework method meant identifying similarities in experiences under a specific heading, while also providing examples where a participant may have a dissimilar experience or perspective (Gale et al., 2013). I read and compared participants’ responses to focus areas as it related to each group’s research question. For example, in the experiences of youths what similar or different pathways to learning being undertaken by special schools, comparing youths’ experiences across special schools. My intent was to explain what the data are telling me about the:

1. Experiences of youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability at special schools who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling.
2. Perspectives of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling.
3. Perspectives of parents and/or legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from compulsory schooling.

I developed summary tables with specific headings (see Figure 13) to explain findings, which were used as a point of reference in writing the respective sections for participant groups.

Figure 13: Intragroup Level of Analysis – Samples of Table Summaries

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23 Pathways to learning and future planning were focus areas that repeated across the three participant groups (i.e., youths, parents/legal guardians and educators).
The intragroup summary tables for educators, youths and parents/legal guardians had a similar format:

- Research question for each group,
- Headings that described the overarching idea based on the groups’ experiences or perspectives,
- Linkages to initial coding that were classified based on focus areas,
- Sub-headings that identified associated ideas that linked to the heading,
- Description that linked to focus areas with an explanation of why I asked a question, and
- Examples of supporting transcript excerpts from participants within that group.

These table summaries helped me in cross-referencing my notes for comparison and provided a summary of the relevant data for each group with an accompanying description of the specific headings at an intragroup level. This approach aligns with the framework method in having data in a table format (i.e., columns and rows) to show categories (e.g., headings) and their associated links (e.g., sub-headings) (Gale et al., 2013). At the intragroup level of data analysis,
there was a total of seven headings and 19 sub-headings (see Figure 14) combined for the three participant groups.

Figure 14: Intragroup Level of Analysis – Headings and Sub-Headings for Participant Groups

The headings for participant groups are the responses to the respective research question for a participant group. For example, for the participant group youths, the headings identify the answer to the research question, while sub-headings are the associated linkages to a heading. In applying this to youths, the experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling reveal supportive learning environments and being prepared for potential future jobs in the skilled trades. Supportive learning environments were manifested in their positive emotions towards teachers, teachers helping them understand, their participation in extra-curricular activities and resource constraints. Similarly, for educators, the perspectives of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling reveal a sense of pride, passion and purpose, and curriculum focussed on skills-trade and remedial academics. A sense of pride, passion and purpose was manifested in educators viewing teaching as a ‘calling,’
resource constraints, resistance and reluctance, and special schools existing for a purpose. Curriculum focussed on skills-trade and remedial academics was manifested in developing all-rounded students and preparing them to be self-sufficient. The perspectives of parents/legal guardians reveal a positive outlook of special schools, special schools having a role in transition planning and wanting their child to be happy. A positive outlook of special schools was manifested in their child belonging at school and having a supportive learning environment. Special schools having a role in transition planning was manifested in a focus on remedial academic and skills-based programmes and providing advisory support. Wanting their child to be happy was manifested in developing life skills to be independent citizens and concerns about their wellbeing. I will expand on each group for this level of analysis in the section Intragroup Findings. After completing the intragroup level of analysis, I moved to my next level of analysis – intergroup.

4.2.3  Intergroup

In applying the framework method for analysis, I compared across groups (i.e., intergroup) to understand how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school (Gale et al., 2013). In focussing on preparation for life after school, I used the intragroup table summaries to compare across groups to explain:

1. What the data are telling me about the process of transition.
2. What the data are telling or not telling me about the opportunities for youths with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago.

Recognising I had similar focus areas, such as future planning and pathways to learning, provided an opportunity to compare responses for youths, their parents/legal guardians and educators. For example, I compared what youths said about their experiences in comparison to their parent’s perspectives. I did not use qualitative software (e.g., NVivo) to complete an intergroup level analysis because I chose to read the intragroup table summaries and created another table or a “framework matrix” to summarise and provide a description of the specific
headings (Gale et al., 2013, p. 5). I developed summary tables with specific headings (see Figure 15) to explain findings, which were used as a point of reference in writing the respective sections for participant groups. I did this because I wanted to include data from across the three groups to explain the process of transition and opportunities for youths.

Figure 15: Intergroup Level of Analysis – Samples of Table Summaries

For the intergroup table I used a similar format:

- Overarching questions (i.e., transition planning, opportunities for youths),
- Headings that described the overarching idea based on the groups’ experiences or perspectives,
- Linkages to initial coding that were classified based on focus areas,
- Sub-headings that identified associated ideas that linked to the heading,
- Description that linked to focus areas with an explanation of why I asked a question, and
- Examples of supporting transcript excerpts from participants across all groups.
Data in this table were used as a point of reference in writing this section. At the intergroup level of data analysis, there was a total of two headings and four sub-headings (see Figure 16).

For each question, the headings reflected the findings across three participant groups. For example, the process of transition for youths with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago, as reported by educators, parents/legal guardians and youths, revealed person-centred practices. Sub-headings were linked to headings. For example, curriculum modifications and provisions of supports were manifestations of how person-centred practices happened at special schools. Similarly, in focussing on preparation for life after school, opportunities for youths with a mild intellectual disability revealed resource constraints and vague transition pathways, which were linked to the heading uncertainty in post-compulsory school destinations.

My approach to data analysis helped me with the aim of my research, which was to develop a deeper understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school. Having
explained the three levels of data analysis, I now move on to discuss intragroup findings. First, accounting for the perspectives of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling. Second, reporting on the experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling. Third, describing the perspectives of parents/legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from compulsory schooling. I decided on this approach to reporting recognising that educators were the first participant group I engaged with for my research. Educators, as gatekeepers, introduced me to other educators at special schools as well as parents/legal guardians and youths.

4.3 Intragroup Findings – Perspectives of Educators

I account for the perspectives of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling. I used my initial coding or individual level of analysis for educators as the starting point to refine and explain their experiences at an intragroup level.

Nine educators, all female, participated in interviews from October to December 2021 (see Table 14).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Special School</th>
<th>Position(s)</th>
<th># Years Teaching(^{24})</th>
<th>Special Education Accreditation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miss DaCosta</td>
<td>Lifetime Learning Private Special School</td>
<td>Principal &amp; Teacher</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Masters (Autism Specialist 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Richards</td>
<td>Foundation Scholars Private Special School</td>
<td>Principal &amp; Teacher</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{24}\) The number of years teaching as of 31\(^{st}\) December 2021 are self-reported by educators.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Special School</th>
<th>Position(s)</th>
<th># Years Teaching(^{24})</th>
<th>Special Education Accreditation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miss Noel</td>
<td>New Horizons Private Special School</td>
<td>Principal &amp; Teacher</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Undergraduate degree, Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Abara</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Undergraduate course – Gifted and Special Needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Joseph</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Undergraduate course; professional development courses (autism, Down syndrome, intellectual disability); proficient in Braille</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss George</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
<td>Teacher &amp; Social Worker</td>
<td>5 years 11 months</td>
<td>Undergraduate course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Nkosi</td>
<td>Brightstar Government Special School</td>
<td>Principal &amp; Teacher</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, Special Education &amp; Teachers’ College – elective course in Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Clarke</td>
<td>Accelerate Academy Private Special School</td>
<td>Principal &amp; Teacher</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Teachers’ College – elective course in Special Education and an Advanced Certificate, Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Dwyer</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Undergraduate degree with specialization in Special Education; Postgraduate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Educators self-reported their number of years teaching, with Miss Richards and Miss Nkosi reporting 30 years and Miss George approaching six years. On average, educators had 16 years 10 months teaching experience. Except for Miss Richards, eight educators confirmed having special education accreditation (e.g., degree). Educators spoke about the special school’s curriculum, pathways to learning, and shared their perspectives on their career and teacher training.

At an intragroup level, the perspectives of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling reveal a:

- Sense of pride, passion and purpose, and
- Curriculum focussed on skills-trade and remedial academics.

4.3.1 Sense of Pride, Passion and Purpose

I asked educators why they chose a career in teaching with a focus on youths with special education needs. I wanted to know about their interest(s) and purpose for choosing to be a teacher and their outlook or aim.

4.3.1.1 Teaching as a ‘Calling’

All educators spoke about teaching as a ‘calling.’ They saw themselves fulfilling an important role at special schools and within the education system.

... it’s a joy to know that you’re able to be a pillar, for parents for children, for anybody who comes into this space who wants information for them to feel welcome and to feel that warmth and that joy that I’m not better than you. You’re not better than me [...] I could learn something from you. You could teach me something [...] it brings me a little
joy. It brings me a lot of joy. It’s about the longevity and continuation. [...] getting each person or individual to understand fully that you matter. That you matter and can contribute. (Teacher Miss Richards, transcript pp. 20-21)

... making an input into the lives of an individual you’ll find that it is it is worth it. It is worth it. (Teacher Miss Noel, transcript p. 22)

... I want to ... help my son to help other students as well [...] I have the opportunity to put what I have learned into practice and I have enjoyed it. It has been stressful because I mean it’s not easy easy task. But it is where I know I I need to be. [...] I know that the children have the ability. I know they have the skill. All they need is someone or teachers who can see where they are, and what they require, what support they need, and supervise and teach the way they can learn to provide that space and thing for them. I know I can’t reach everybody, but at least I will reach some. (Teacher Miss Dwyer, transcript p. 22)

These perspectives revealed educators saw themselves as fulfilling an important role in the lives of youths with a mild intellectual disability. Educators, such as Miss Dwyer, spoke about preparing youths for life after school, while acknowledging the limitation of their outreach to this student population. However, all spoke about positively contributing to the development of youths as all-rounded students and independent citizens. For example, instilling a sense of confidence, determination in carrying through what they set their minds to, creating a safe and supportive learning environment. Educators’ perspectives gave insight into how they made sense of choosing this career and their role within the learning environment.

I asked educators to share their perspectives on their career, as part of my Other area of focus, for conversational purposes. Educators have an important role in the lives of learners, often being described as “change agents who would help to transform the education system” (Pedro, 2017, p. 31). This positions them as leaders and advocates for youths, for example, in how they positioned themselves as learning from youths, encouraging open conversations about life choices. This demonstrates educators as being open to and receptive to learn from youths, instead of adopting the traditional approach of positioning the teacher as the expert and imparting knowledge to the student (Freire, 2000). For example, Miss Richards and Miss Dwyer’s perspectives illustrated how they were keen to learn from their students, including
how to best support them for the next stage in their lives. Freire (2000) describes this approach as “problem-posing education” where the focus is on individual capacity to “perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves” (p. 83). In my research, educators used their positional authority and spheres of influence to engage in dialogue with youths to prepare for the next stage in their lives. This action can be described as interweaving academic and life skills with the intent of preparing youths to be independent adults (Martin et al., 2013).

4.3.1.2 Resource Constraints

In sharing their perspectives on their career, educators spoke about barriers or hindrances and challenges they faced, as they work towards preparing students for the next stage in their lives. Challenges were described in terms of resources constraints – funding, bureaucratic ‘red tape’ and facilities.

... I would say funding. Funding is like at the top. Especially for the skills. Getting equipment or tools that might be another challenge we may have, if it is, we decide we want to do the practical stuff ... on a bigger scale. Other resources like like people. To come and do stuff ‘cause most people would want money to come in and to get some sort of monetary something for coming in [...] So getting the resources, resources, meeting people, meaning equipment. Getting information out there that we exist, that this is what we’re doing, this is what we offer. [...] we weren’t going to go out to school or do anything or do any online because we did not receive funding or we didn’t pay our staff about two months we had no money to pay them. (Teacher Miss Richards, transcript pp. 15, 16)

The fact is you will wait for years to get a response for whatever you’re asking. So that of itself is ... an issue. It tires you when you’re trying to get things going ahead. And then there is a red tape because at one point in time, we were allowed to submit our own procurement, our list of what we needed. And they took that away from us. They decide well who gets what [...] it’s all special schools. So obviously it takes a much longer time before you can be considered. [...] at one point in time, they were supposed to do an expansion on the school [...] a place earmarked to build a new school. [...] nothing is being done [...] we submit the information yes every year they will allocate a certain amount of money you will see nothing come coming forward. Right. When you inquire, they will say, well, OK something else came up important at a regular school and we had to do that. So we did expansion on another regular school. So we are still stuck there. So the whole mindsets that that persons with disabilities would have experienced in the
long years ... the same thing still progressing it still going on all up to now in a more sophisticated way may I say. So we are still pushed on the backburner. [...] I need staff. I can't even get staff. I need teaching staff. [...] that can of individualized attention to help the children to gain independence is you don’t have that kind of staff. So we are struggling. Special education teachers we’re lacking. The fact is that very few people are going into that area of study. And the persons who would have done it, they are now retiring. If you don’t have younger persons taking up that mantle, then eventually I don’t know what will happen in the next, maybe 5-10 years. (Teacher Miss Nkosi, transcript pp. 17, 18, 20)

The lack of funding presented a barrier to educators in recruiting teachers, paying salaries and wages and operational costs for special schools. Funding had a ripple-effect in how it affected sourcing of equipment, personnel and renovating infrastructure. For example, Miss Nkosi highlighted the complexity of how bureaucratic ‘red tape’ manifested in the prolonged timeframe for decision-making, the centralization of procurement and the reallocation of infrastructure monies to mainstream schools. A shared concern for educators was the lack of further and/or higher special education training programmes. For educators, this manifested into a limited, specialised workforce to offset the current and future needs for special schools. For example, Miss Joseph disclosed a staffing challenge faced by The Learning Institute Vocational School was not having a Job Placement Officer, who was responsible for in-field placements of youths, and employer education and awareness for hiring of persons with disabilities. This human resource constraint could mean a non-seamless transition to the world of work through community-based partnerships for youths with a mild intellectual disability.

Special schools are centers of learning with a responsibility towards the delivery of a curriculum, as well as doing routine activities to prepare youths to transition to the next stage in their lives. The perspectives of educators reveal resource limitations at these special schools in actively participating in transition planning and youths’ preparation to enter the next stage in their lives. It reveals educators’ reality at special schools in Trinidad and Tobago in youths’ transition planning. For example, “school-level barriers” and “system-level barriers” speak to resource constraints (e.g., specialised personnel) within schools and government (e.g., infrastructure funding) (Glasgow-Charles et al., 2017). Researchers confirm school
infrastructure, equipment, staff wages and salaries are barriers experienced by educators in Trinidad and Tobago, which can impede students’ inclusion in the classroom (Conrad & Brown, 2011; Pedro, 2017). Within the context of Tobago, findings reveal the need for “sound infrastructure to promote more optimal academic achievement and employment outcomes” with a call for “adequate funding to support that infrastructure as well as the social commitment to implementing more inclusion opportunities and learning experiences” for “youths with disabilities in society” (Paul, 2011, p. 209). The manifestations of resource constraints allude to a bureaucratic rigidity and brings to the fore the realization that the financial capacity for education modernization towards inclusion are limited in “small states like Trinidad and Tobago” (Lavia, 2008, p. 114). International reports confirm that barriers such as resource constraints (e.g., qualified staff, infrastructure, funding) continue to impede access to quality education for persons with disabilities, which has future consequences for their future socio-economic well-being and access to opportunities (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). Resource constraints point to institutional barriers that serve to impede access to specialised staff, equipment, facilities, which in turn can limit the access to opportunities for youths with a mild intellectual disability (United Nations, 2006). For example, this can include different learning options for their development as young adults.

4.3.1.3  Resistance and Reluctance

In addition to resource constraints, educators identified another barrier as resistance and reluctance by parents, employers and persons in society (e.g., community). This was exemplified in actions such as bullying, stigmatization and discrimination.

... I keep bringing it back to culture ... we come from a culture where people are very sheltered [...] having a child with special needs, families can be more protective. [...] they may not want to push their kids into having a sort of career. [...] families would rather wrap their kids up in cotton wool [...] we’re not going to push them to get a job because we don’t know if they’re gonna come up against bullies. So it’s okay to keep them at home and we will provide for them. I think that’s there’s not a lot of people who want to push for their kids to be able to find a job and work. (Teacher Miss DaCosta, transcript pp. 11, 12)
For me I can say the biggest barrier that I continuously face is definitely parents who are not yet ready. [...] some parents, not ready to let go of their ... children and allow them to become as independent as they can be. [...] they have a child with a disability and sometimes they feel like they need to overly protect them. I understand ... from a parent point of view that you wanna protect them, but in the same breath, you’re not allowing them to become you know, to gain that independence. So we have had like parental resistance with regards to letting go [...] At some point you have to allow them to become independent and do things on their own. (Teacher Miss Abara, transcript p. 11)

... another barrier would definitely be of course you know society only hold up in terms of public perception and their readiness to accept persons with disabilities in into the work market, the job market and not everybody is ready or is accepted accept persons with disabilities you know, so you would have that resistance as well, even while we’re trying to introduce them or get our partner with new companies and new businesses in the community that we can, after they leave ... they can be placed in different institutions. We we still have that resistance you know, a lot of people may not be so open to just hire a person with disability. (Teacher Miss Abara, transcript p. 12)

... we have students graduating and qualified and certified, we not seen as much as being employed ... there’s still that full barrier of employment, of persons attitude, accessibility [...] the majority of it is people’s attitude ... that’s really preventing ... that smooth transition out there. Stereotype. Persons don’t want to work with persons with disabilities. They think that they lazy, even though you’re qualified and you have your certification, etc. that you still cannot do the job or even if they employ you they wanna give you task that’s below your experience and your certification qualifications that’s on it. So sometimes they hire you out of pity. Sometimes very unfair conditions as well. Sometimes you are employed and the statutory payments that should be made, they don’t pay for it for you because they don’t think that they should pay for you, but it’s ... a lot of attitudes really bad perceptions out there. (Teacher Miss Joseph, transcript pp. 10, 11)

[...] a lot of parents who have children with disabilities tend to shelter their their children [...] You already know how harsh the world is, so you do everything to protect your child so they’re ... not exposed to ... they may not have experienced bullying or harsh words that people would say crazy crazy behaviours of people ... (Teacher Miss Joseph, transcript pp. 12, 13)

Two ... parents, parents’ perception of their child is what we keep dealing with. Three, the community because one of the issues we have, that we face ... is we have a neighbour that is oh my goodness, he he’s the worst. The things he would say about the children, yeah, it’s terrible. [...] one of the issues we have with persons in the community where they don’t believe that we should be there and that sort of thing. (Teacher Miss Dwyer, transcript p. 13)
A similarity across educators’ perspectives in this study is how resistance and reluctance were manifested within families and society. For example, Miss DaCosta, Miss Abara, Miss Joseph and Miss Dwyer described the nuanced ways in which the actions of parents/legal guardians can impede the continuity of what was being taught by educators.

Now some parents, uh, not ready to let go of their of their children and allow them to become as independent as they can be. So you know, of course you know they would, they have a child with a disability and sometimes they feel like they need to overly protect them. Sometimes they are afraid of traveling on their own and the parents themselves, sometimes they living literally the other end of the country, and they’re traveling down every day with their child. And I mean, I understand that we know from a parent point of view that you wanna protect them, but in the same breath, you’re not allowing them to become you know, to gain that independence. So we have had like parental, uh, resistance with regards to letting go, you know it. (Teacher Miss Abara, transcript p. 11)

... we do have kids and they’re like, yeah, my mom did my homework for me. You know they come and they tell you, and I tell the parents do not do their homework like when we did the online sessions, you’d hear the parents in the background whispering the answer, and I’m like no, no, no, you know, please don't because it's it's not like your kid is getting points for getting things correct. (Teacher Miss DaCosta, transcript p. 9)

Miss Abara shared The Learning Institute Vocational School used a buddy system to pair students who lived in the vicinity of each other, to travel to and from school as a way of developing their independence and understanding of how to navigate public transportation. For Miss DaCosta the actions of parents/legal guardians illustrated how they were impeding their child’s independence by not letting him/her complete his/her own work, which can hinder his/her understanding of and progression learning new content. Similarly, access to employment opportunities was limited due to negative perceptions and undervaluing of persons with disabilities. Educators’ (e.g., Miss DaCosta and Miss Joseph) perspectives alluded to a link between societal perception and that of parents/legal guardians, in their protection of youths with a mild intellectual disability. For example, awareness of the reality of workplace behaviours influencing their reluctance to see their child enter the world of work.
Resistance and reluctance by parents/legal guardians, employers and persons in the community were challenges identified by educators in the future planning for the transition of youths with a mild intellectual disability. The perspective of parents towards protecting their child with a mild intellectual disability is reflected in Miss Abara’s excerpt (italicized emphasis is mine).

Now some parents ... not ready to let go of their of their children and allow them to become as independent as they can be. [...] they have a child with a disability and sometimes they feel like they need to overly protect them. (Transcript p. 11)

The perception of parents/legal guardians to protect their child from the behavioural barriers is a valid concern (Harry, 2020). Harry (2020) validates this concern in reflecting on the experiences of parents who preferred to have their child attend a special school (i.e., The Immortelle Centre) because it “provided a haven from the stigma and rejection” faced in mainstream schools (pp. 74-75). Dee (2006) shares a similar perspective in positioning parental resistance and reluctance as a mindset friction between their child’s individual independence and future uncertainty. For example, Miss DaCosta’s perspective described the inclination of parents/legal guardians towards protecting their child based on culture. Paul (2011) confirms a negative cultural perspective remains to where “disability [is] perceived as a family issue that is hidden from the rest of society” (p. 207). This can demonstrate how negative cultural perceptions of disability persist and the necessity for societal change (Chimedza, 2008). While some nation states have enacted legislation (e.g., anti-discrimination), the stigma and discrimination experienced by persons with disabilities remains an international call to action (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019).

4.3.1.4 Schools Exist for a Purpose

Despite barriers such as resource constraints and reluctance and resistance, educators echoed that special schools exist for a purpose. Their purpose was linked to developing youths’ independence, providing advisory support and leveraging (in)formal pathways as part of transition planning.
our life skills program is designed in such a way that it really focuses on equipping our students with that day to day functioning skills that most of them do not have. So they come in without exposure to a lot of basic fundamental skills ... our program is really designed to equip them with that knowledge and skills and to become just independent persons overall ... (Teacher Miss Abara, transcript p. 14)

We tell the children you will choose so we always keep them as part of the whole process. [...] first we ask them [...] What would you like to do? We talk to them, we give them the options.” If they don’t understand, we may read stuff for them or show them something. “... I would say we would really look at each child as an individual to ensure that each child gets what it is that they need to help them develop (Teacher Miss Richards, transcript p. 3, 7)

... there are some companies that work with us and still working with us. So if we do have trained persons they accept them. And then there are those who go out there and find their own work, and then there are parents who find work for their children and that’s how the transition takes place. If a particular company is interested in hiring a child and they know nothing about disability, we step in and sensitize them, we’ll do a few educational sessions with them, preparing the employees and the employer for integrating or having a person with a disability in the workplace. (Teacher Miss Joseph, transcript p. 8)

Several educators shared how special schools were promoting and supporting pathways and other forms of learning for youths with a mild intellectual disability. For example, Miss Abara identified how The Learning Institute Vocational School incorporated life skills as part of its program, while Miss Richards demonstrated how Foundations Scholars Private Special School used an individualised approach in dialogues with youths to then personalise learning. Another form of learning was illustrated by Miss Joseph in how The Learning Institute Vocational School liaised with employers for disability inclusion awareness and education. However, these approaches were not consistent across all special schools. At Lifetime Learning Private Special School, Miss DaCosta disclosed, “unless a specific school has contact with somebody, many times kids will age out of the system and remain here” (transcript p. 3). This exemplified an uncertainty in transition planning and unintended consequences for youths with a mild intellectual disability.
Educators shared some of the different ways in which special schools were promoting and supporting the pathways and other forms of learning for youths with a mild intellectual disability. These different ways could be beneficial to youths as they may or may not know what they want to do next, but during their time at school they could have opportunities to explore opportunities through co-op, internships, volunteer. This can be seen as an approach by special schools to provide youths with life skills through educational programmes, and promoting disability inclusion in employment through advocacy and awareness (UNESCO, 1994). These opportunities can act as pathways to the world of work or further/higher education, in preparing youths as they transition to adulthood considering post-compulsory school transition is not seamless (Mitchell, 1999). The perspectives of educators in my research, supports this stance in revealing the vagueness and non-seamless progression in transition pathways for youths across special schools. This can result in consequences for youths who do not have the necessary supports to transition to the next stage in their lives, including to the world of work (Gayle-Geddes, 2015). Researchers advocate having a formal requirement around transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities can alleviate challenges faced by students and their networks of support during this process (Ellman et al., 2020).

Preparation can speak to the different ways in which special schools are developing youths through exploration of different learning options, or pathways to learning. Using the theoretical framework of Person-Centred Planning can be applied to understand educators’ perspectives on pathways to learning. Understanding the challenges faced by special schools in the future planning for the transition of youths can reveal educators’ concerns. Concerns can point to their effect on youths’ preparation for the next stage in their lives. Resource constraints have the potential to affect the quality of services and access to opportunities for youths with a mild intellectual disability as part of their transition planning (Kennedy et al., 2008). It raises the interdependency and interconnectedness amongst educational organisations (e.g., special schools), institutions (e.g., government) and community organisations (e.g., employers), as well as the need to place Person-Centred Planning at the core of conversations on planning instead of an afterthought in transition planning (Sanderson
et al., 2008). In focussing on youths with a mild intellectual disability, the quality of services and access to opportunities can be part of a Person-Centred Planning approach, as equal and equitable access enables persons with disabilities to be participatory citizens in society (Kilbane et al., 2008). Related to access to opportunities post-compulsory schooling, is exploring what is being taught to youths with a mild intellectual disability at special schools.

4.3.2 Curriculum Focussed on Skills-Trade and Remedial Academics

Educators have a significant role in the experiences of students during their compulsory schooling years. Outside of the home environment, students spend considerable time in a learning environment (e.g., special school), interacting with peers as well as teachers, administrative and support staff. Within the learning environment, the curriculum can refer to acquiring knowledge about a subject, as well as process, procedures and practices or the “hidden curriculum” that are described as “norms of the classroom, quality of interaction between teacher and student” and format of instruction, which are controlled by the teacher (Osborne, 1991, pp. 11-12).

4.3.2.1 Developing All-Rounded Students

I wanted to know what subjects were offered at special schools to youths with a mild intellectual disability. Using the individual level of analysis data, I created a diagram (see Figure 17) to show educators’ self-reporting on the subjects and programmes that were available at their respective special schools. I used different colours to map to identify each special school’s subjects and programmes.

Figure 17: Mapping Subjects and Programs as Reported by Educators
I grouped subjects together based on similarities of subject area, for example, Food Preparation included cooking and baking. I linked subjects and programmes to either identify them as academic subjects or skills-based programmes. Mapping helped me to identify similarities based on subjects and programmes. Then, I further refined this mapping diagram, grouping subjects and skills-based programme areas in a table (see Figure 18) and providing examples as needed to show linkages. For example, music and art were placed under Visual and Performing Arts. I added the names of special schools with their corresponding educator(s), academic subjects and skills-based programmes. I filled-in by typing ‘yes’ to identify where an educator identified subjects and/or programmes. Black shaded responses mean an educator did not self-identify these academic subjects and/or programmes during our conversation. Yellow shaded responses mean an educator mentioned adapting the Ministry of Education’s syllabus and did not name specific subjects. I doubled-checked this table against my initial coding of individual responses to what subjects were mentioned by educators during our conversation (i.e., Curriculum – Other area of focus). I created this table because I wanted to compare and not to statistically report on subjects and programmes reported across special schools.
All special schools maintained a traditional outlook in their offering of academic subjects, albeit at a remedial level. Remedial Mathematics and remedial English Language Arts were common across government, private and vocational special schools. Miss DaCosta used various curriculum and shared her focus was on “independent lifestyles that wasn’t academically based” (transcript p. 7). Miss Noel confirmed adapting the national curriculum based on learners’ needs.

... we stick with the Ministry of Education syllabus in terms of from an academical standpoint. From a vocational standpoint, it varies [...] because we are not in a position to offer, if I should use the term a national certificate .... So even though you may not need an official certification ... you are able to become self-sufficient in a particular field, they want to get into, it is available. (Teacher Miss Noel, transcript pp. 6, 7)

Miss Noel did not identify specific subjects available to students at New Horizon Private Special School, but confirmed reading and comprehension were part of student learning activities. The Learning Institute Vocational School, Foundation Scholars Private Special School and Lifetime Learning Private Special School offered a combination of academic and skills-based programmes. All educators spoke about developing an all-rounded student, in terms of using the curriculum to focus on skilled trades and remedial academics. Developing an all-rounded student meant the knowledge and skills gained by youths can help prepare them for the next stage in their lives. For example, this can be entering the world of work.
I wanted to know what subjects and programmes were available at the special school to get information about the curriculum as part of my Other area of focus. Educators spoke about the curriculum at special schools focussed on skills-trade and remedial academic subjects. Maintaining a traditional outlook to the curriculum can be seen as special schools aligning with “the nation’s commitment to a traditional, academic focussed curriculum” (Harry, 2020, p. 105). The focus on remedial Mathematics and remedial English as well as skills-based programmes align with traditional outlook of education for students with disabilities who “are not seen to be academically able” and steered with “a heavy bias toward the development of vocational skills” (Armstrong et al., 2005, p. 75). However, special schools adapting the national curriculum and/or using a hybrid approach (i.e., combination of national and international curriculum) demonstrate how educators were modifying content based on learner needs (Deng, 2010). Adapting the curriculum, modifying classroom instruction and creating learning opportunities illustrate practical ways in which inclusion happens within a learning environment (Giangreco et al., 2010). For example, apprenticeships can be seen as combining theoretical and practical aspects of a skilled trade, while exposure to a real-work environment can provide youths with an opportunity to apply what is learned and contribute to their development. The curriculum can be used to support youths’ transition planning through exploring options (e.g., co-op, apprenticeship) and supporting them to develop competencies based on their identified career choices (Dee, 2006). Linked to the availability of subjects and programmes at special schools, was how they were preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability for the next stage in their lives.

4.3.2.2 Preparing Them to be Self-Sufficient

I asked about pathways to learning to know how special schools promoted and supported these pathways and other forms of learning for youths with a mild intellectual disability. I wanted to know about options students can choose from to find out what they liked as well as approaches used to introduce students to opportunities. This helped to understand the different ways in which schools are developing students through exploration of different learning options, opportunities and preparing them for life after school. Educators revealed
formal (e.g., vocational apprenticeship programmes), informal (e.g., career days) and hybrid (e.g., volunteer training) pathways and forms of learning.

... I know they have the apprenticeship program where the students will be doing actual work, right. So if you have a we have a client ... and they're building, we do Woodworking for people [...] The students those apprentice will be involved in that activity and then going out to the, delivering the item to the client, and installing it or whatever. So we have some students doing that for them to give them that experience they need. [...] 'cause we have a few of those people working [...] Some working at other companies and some who work along with the instructors. (Teacher Miss Dwyer, transcript p. 12)

Well, we do have an Entrepreneurial class. So they will teach them what it will entail for you to open a small business, you know the process of having to register it, what you require and and go through the process with them. Talk to them about their time, if they're going for interviews. If you want to go look for a job, what will be required. You know, how you dress, how you present yourself and all of that. (Teacher Miss Dwyer, transcript p. 6)

The Entrepreneurial Studies programme and apprenticeship opportunities at the Learning Institute Vocational School were formal pathways used to promote other forms of learning and prepare youths for the next stage in their life. These pathways can be seen as helping youths either become entrepreneurs (e.g., small business owner), know how to prepare for and participate in a job interview. Other educators spoke about liaising and advising parents as part of preparing youths for the next stage in their lives.

There are a couple other schools within our organization that do practical skills. So we tell parents OK, you start looking at these schools or we start speaking to the principals and administrators of those schools and we try to get them there. If not we look at YTEPP or SERVOL who would take in students from around that same age group. (Teacher Miss Richards, transcript p. 3)²⁵

... we ask the parents to start focusing on what they really want the child to do. Some of the parents who have the kinds of skills that can teach their own child, they will take the child out to work with them. There other stakeholders who will come and offer to assist the children in training them to do particular things like you know just a what you call

²⁵ YTEPP (Youth Training and Employment Partnership Programme) and SERVOL are vocational training organizations in Trinidad and Tobago.
that, kinda entrepreneurial kind of thing that you can learn how to do things for themselves, right. [...] the division of education at times would send persons who are trained as well to train the children to do the extracurricular kind of thing and some vocational skills. So in those instances that’s how we try to help the children. (Teacher Miss Nkosi, transcript p. 9)

Miss Richards and Miss Nkosi shared a common perspective in providing advisory support to parents and/or leveraging external resources to provide students with access to learning opportunities. This illustrated a hybrid approach to promoting and supporting pathways to learning. Their knowledge of organisations that can provide training to youths and engaging parents in conversations about post-compulsory school destinations, show collaboration and consideration in helping parents and youths. Advisory support and leveraging their networks can help bridge the transition from a special to a vocational school. Linked to developing an all-rounded student was preparing them to be self-sufficient for their future endeavours.

Educators spoke about using a combination of academic and vocational programmes, as well as involving youths in their future planning.

... you are letting them know what is required, one. Two, you are dealing with them from to ensure them, in terms of working with their confidence in themselves. And three, you’re looking at, you’re giving them what is required and letting them know what is required. [...] one of the things from early, you ask them what is it they want to become. And you find that we would have, if I should use it the correct term ‘Career Days, Dress for Success’ and whatever skill you want to achieve, you dress for that. And based on their ‘Dress for Success,’ it helps you as the teacher to know exactly, field, the areas that you have to work on them with regards to it more. So then you are looking at it more on a one on one. (Teacher Miss Noel, transcript pp. 8, 9)

We also focus on Entrepreneurial Studies ... to know how we can obtain earning capacity based on their skill. How can we be become entrepreneurs even if we are not successful in the job market by obtaining employment outside, we can still be business owners. We can open our own business and we know ... aspects of the business part of it. [...] basic business skills they learn with regards to how they can take this skill and turn it into a little business. (Teacher Miss Abara, transcript p. 7)
‘Career Days, Dress for Success’ and Entrepreneurial Studies can be seen as informal pathways in promoting and supporting learning for youths. Information sharing, developing confidence, one-on-one support point to ways in which special schools were preparing youths for the next stage in their lives. Planning for the future was envisioned as youths being independent. Independence was demonstrated in the youths’ choosing to self-identify their area of interest during career day and being informed about self-employment opportunities. Miss Noel focused on building their confidence, sharing information, and relying on a youth’s choice to have teachers create an awareness of what is needed to achieve their career goals. Similarly, Miss Abara used Entrepreneurial Studies as a pathway to let youths know about the basic operations of being a business owner. These approaches demonstrated how educators used academic and vocational programmes to prepare youths for the next stage in their lives.

I wanted to know how special schools promotes and supports pathways and other forms of learning, which supported in answering my research question. Within the context of Person-Centred Planning, this speaks to pathways to learning. Dee (2006) argues Person-Centred Planning has an important role in transition planning, for example, the knowledge and skills youths gain at special schools can help them as they enter young adulthood where they will make life choices in employment, friendships, well-being. Educators undertaking roles as professional advisors and opening their networks, as well as using formal, informal and hybrid approaches to promote and support pathways to learning can be seen as giving options to help in the decision-making for the next stage in youths’ lives. This demonstrates active listening, and “using practical and positive strategies to enable and support people” so they can be independent (Kilbane & McLean, 2008, p. 19).

In applying the theoretical framework of Person-Centred Planning, the focus area of pathways to learning can identify the options students can choose from to find out what they like, as well as approaches and/or strategies used to introduce youths to opportunities outside the classroom. While attending special schools, youths can be presented with options to explore as part of determining what they want to do next in their lives. Pathways to learning
were exemplified in apprenticeships, vocational programmes, career days, extra-curricular activities provided by ministry staff. Collaboration amongst parents/legal guardians, youths, educators and their networks identify the individuals who are necessary in transition planning (Sanderson & Duffy, 2008). Corrigan (2014) advocates collaboration and cooperation are important in transition planning, as they can facilitate a shared outlook, maximise information sharing and minimise uncertainties as to post-compulsory school transition for youths with a mild intellectual disability.

In this section, using an intragroup level of analysis, I reported on the perspectives of educators who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling point to a:

- Sense of pride, passion and purpose, and
- Curriculum focussed on skills-trade and remedial academics.

Using transcript excerpts, I supported my research findings and evidenced this by linking to literature. I also described how the perspectives of educators aligned with Person-Centred Planning and Other focus areas. I applied the theoretical framework of Person-Centred Planning to a sense of pride, passion and purpose, and a curriculum focussed on skills-trade and remedial academics. In the next section, I continue presenting the findings with a focus on youths.

4.4 Intragroup Findings – Experiences of Youths

At the time of interviews (i.e., October to December 2021), all youths were attending classes online due to the global pandemic that prompted closure all schools in Trinidad and Tobago. The six youths were between 15 to 18 years of age (see Table 15), with Anil being the youngest and Tracey the eldest.

Table 15: Youth Participants
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youths</th>
<th>Special School</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>Foundation Scholars Private Special School</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracey</td>
<td>Brightstar Government Special School</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Accelerate Academy Private Special School</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anil</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Anil’s experience was unique in that he started at The Learning Institute Vocational School during the global pandemic and interacted with his teachers and peers online. A few weeks after our interview, Tracey would have been celebrating her 18\textsuperscript{th} birthday, signalling her transition from Brightstar Government Special School. The experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling revealed them as having:

- Supportive learning environments, and
- Being prepared for potential future jobs in the skilled trades.

4.4.1 Supportive Learning Environments

4.4.1.1 Positive Emotions Towards Teachers

Supportive learning environments were identified by all youths in describing their positive emotions towards their teachers, using words such as nice or happy to explain how their teachers made them feel during in-person or online classes. This positive emotion also extended into seeing a teacher as a friend. Matthew shared, “I think my teacher is kind. She is lovely to me, and she does help me through in reading and Maths and art” (transcript p. 3). Anil spoke about all his teachers as being “very nice” adding one teacher “is a serious woman when it comes to homework. She say she want us to do our work” (transcript p. 5). Simone who also attends the same school as Anil, but in a different programme, had similar feelings, sharing “I like all my teachers” (transcript p. 4). While Ezra had positive emotions about his teachers, he disclosed she “treat me like a child ... like her own son” and saw her as a “friend, like best friend
... ‘cause she does treat me nice’ (transcript pp. 5, 8). These excerpts describe how the student-teacher relationship is being viewed from the perspective of a student. The views of youths alluded to a positive learning experience with the teachers they interacted with at their respective special schools. Anil describing a teacher as being serious was viewed from the perspective of wanting students to complete school-related tasks.

4.4.1.2 Helping Them Understand

A supportive learning environment was further demonstrated in youths’ descriptions of what teachers did to help them understand and encourage them in the process of learning.

They does help me understand properly about what work we doing. They does sit some sometimes does sit by me, like face to face conversation and explain, explaining me about the question and I go answer it in a like in my own words basically. (Student Thomas, transcript p. 3)

I like the way they teach us the lessons. How they explain, how they explain it to us and how they does put on videos to help you understand the work and thing. (Student Simone, transcript p. 5)

Like if I have a problem like I does come and talk to them ... I does say Miss could you help me in reading and spelling. And they does help me through, they does help me. (Student Matthew, transcript p. 5)

Students’ voices provided an insight into how the application of teaching affected them learning within their classrooms. It can reveal perceptions on the behaviours and practices used in the process of learning through teacher-student interactions (Messiou & Hope, 2015). Students’ perceptions can reveal whether they view their interactions with their teacher positively, negatively, such as emotional, psychological (Keaveny, 2017). These excerpts describe the actions taken by educators that facilitate the process of knowledge transfer for a lesson. In my research, the experiences of youths speak to supportive learning environments constructed by educators with the aim of interacting meaningfully with learners (Adderley et al., 2015). The student-teacher relationship has a direct effect on how a student participates with the content being taught in the classroom (Adderley et al., 2015). A supportive learning
environment is seen in a youth admitting he/she needs help, a teacher taking the time and using differentiated approaches (e.g., one-on-one conversations, audio-visual) to give more details and verify a youth understands through question and answer. This can be an example of transformative knowledge transfer, in how the teacher adapts how information is shared based on the needs of the learner (Kaikkonen, 2010). Extending beyond the classroom to the broader school environment is another way of examining the experiences of youths. This can provide insights into how they show a sense of belonging at their school (Popova, 2017).

4.4.1.3 Participation in Extra-Curricular Activities

Supportive learning environments extended beyond the classroom to include participation in extra-curricular activities at special schools. Learning was not limited to knowledge transfer within the classroom, but evidenced in social interactions, sports and music programmes available at special schools. This created a sense of belonging for youths, as they spoke positively about their participation and involvement in these activities. At Foundation Scholars Private Special School, Ezra started riding horses and looked forward to this activity “because it’s fun” adding “it does make me feel calm and relax” (transcript pp. 14-15). While he spoke about physical and emotional benefits to riding horses, it has also resulted in him receiving “a medal and a trophy” at the Special Olympics (transcript p. 15). Ezra’s social interactions was demonstrated in play activities with friends at school and socialising during lunchtime with his teacher. Similarly, Tracey also spoke about friendships at school through play activities.

... you know it’s about having well having fun and then just jump a little and then we run a little and then you come back home. [...] we does like playing and catching and then hiding anywhere we want ... (transcript p. 8)

For Thomas and Matthew, participating in extra-curricular activities at school was based on their interests.
In the context of my research, special schools were using extra-curricular programmes as an avenue to provide diverse learning opportunities to youths. I view these extra-curricular activities as special schools developing an all-rounded student and creating a sense of community. This can be an approach by special schools to create and promote a sense of community amongst the faculty and student cohorts (Kennedy et al., 2008). For example, Tracey’s excerpt speaks to her social bonds with friends, which aligns with researchers findings of how this can contribute to her participation in and development of social skills (Keaveny, 2017). Developing an all-rounded student points to the development of interpersonal, communication and social skills. Youths’ voices alluded to a sense of belonging at school, as demonstrated in them being a part of groups, participating in social and sporting events based on a common interest. Social interaction within these extra-curricular activities helps students develop social skills, such as communicating through conversations, cooperation through team-based activities, relationship-building through friendships. Developing these skills helps students as they progress through life stages, including transitioning to young adulthood where they will be looking for vocational opportunities and forming new social networks. This can be considered as positively contributing to the quality of their education and life experiences (UNESCO, 2000).

4.4.1.4 Resource Constraints

However, within the setting of supportive learning environments there can be constraints, such as resources. In my research, constraints on resources were identified as staffing and facilities. These were identified by students in terms of what they do not like, including concerns raised about and/or changes they would make to their school. Staff
constraints were raised by Thomas as the teaching cohort were also called upon to dedicate time outside the classroom for fundraising activities.

It is because when they busy with the events and the fundraisers, it does be less studying for me and the students basically. [...] some teachers could be at the fundraisers while other teachers just go be teaching. (Transcript pp. 9, 10)

For Thomas, fundraising activities for the special school meant that teachers were busy as their time was mostly dedicated to fundraisers and its associated events. Thomas saw their absence in the classroom as affecting him and his peers, in perhaps, getting the help they needed in studying. Although Simone attends the same school – The Learning Institute Vocational School – unlike Thomas, she spoke about facility constraints.

I would say a bigger beauty classroom. Because when we are in school physically we have to sign a vacant, we does have to use the art room ... because we does have real plenty children in our class and it doesn’t be enough room for us to write down a set of tables. Not enough stations. It could only two people could do a manicure, the rest would have to do like basic setting and them kinda thing. Cause it’s only two stations they have alone. So definitely more space. (Transcript p. 9)

Simone’s perspective described limited physical spaces to where rooms were being shared for multiple classes (i.e., Visual and Performing Arts, Beauty Culture) and not having sufficient workstations for students in the Beauty Culture class. This illustrated limited space in the built environment for dedicated rooms for classes and equipment for students to gain hands-on experience (i.e., learn by doing). Like Simone, Ezra spoke about wanting to make changes and modernise the special school he attended – Foundation Scholars Private Special School.

I would change the whole school. Like turn it to a better school. By change the principal office, all the classroom, the yard, the porch, yea and the gate. Especially the gate. That gate rotten. (Transcript p. 21)

Ezra described the appearance of the school in terms of its physical state and condition. Thomas, Simone and Ezra’s experiences can explain how youths make sense of teachers’ absences from the classroom, due to administrative requirements and what they think of their
special schools’ physical environment. These descriptions show the concerns within the learning environment that can be seen to influence youths’ experiences. For example, staffing resource constraints can point to how results in the absence of teachers in the classroom due to fundraising activities, which then influence the timeframe in which a student receives support. However, Thomas’ experience suggests that teachers’ absences in the classroom are because of administrative tasks based on the timeframe for fundraising. Simone and Ezra share similar experiences in terms of needing additional and/or improved physical spaces at their respective special schools. It implied that they view the brick-and-mortar buildings as an extension of their learning environments. It is important to note that in describing the staffing and facilities constraints, youths did not imply that their teachers were not supportive of their learning or did not want them to succeed in their studies.

The perspectives of Thomas, Simone and Ezra can imply a connection between resource constraints and its possible indirect effect on by students who attend special schools. Thomas’ perspective pointed to financial constraints that prompted the special school to use fundraising as an avenue of revenue, which meant that teachers were not present in the classroom when students may need their assistance. Simone and Ezra’s perspectives highlighted the limitations of and/or need to update the school’s physical spaces. These perspectives can bring to mind the ways in which barriers to learning are manifested for youths at special schools (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). School constraints can also affect students’ experiences and perceptions of their school. Thomas, Simone and Ezra’s perspectives can demonstrate how they made sense of the fundraising activities and built environment of their schools. These perspectives give an insight into their worldview and how the learning environment is not limited to only the teacher-student interaction and includes components, such as administrative activities and the built environment (Adderley et al., 2015). In my research, it is important to note that these resource constraints did not impact the overall experiences of youth participants in how they viewed their positive emotions towards their teachers, the differentiated approaches used by teachers to help them understand and their active participation in extra-curricular activities.
Youths sharing their views about their teachers was used to establish rapport and open a conversation pathway to understanding their likes and dislikes about the special schools. The youths revealing their likes and dislikes can give an insight into who they are as individuals, how each view their world by revealing what matters to him/her (Dee, 2006). The theoretical framework of Person-Centred Planning can be applied to understand the experiences of youths in how they spoke about their likes and dislikes. Youths spoke about positive emotions towards their teachers and participation in extra-curricular activities, while alluding to a dislike of resource constraints. Their perspectives can point to friction being manifested in how challenges faced by special schools are perceived by and affect them (Osgood, 2005). For example, this friction can be seen in how special schools acquired revenue to support its operations, and how the absence of teachers in the classroom was perceived by youths. Person-Centred Planning brings to the fore the individual (i.e., youths) level of support and organisational (i.e., special schools) processes and practices (Kilbane et al., 2008). For example, how youths are supported and the framework in which teachers at special schools deliver learning programmes, within a complex learning environment based on established norms of practice. Linked to this, is understanding how these learning programs are preparing youths as they transition from compulsory schooling to the next stage in their lives.

4.4.2 Being Prepared for Potential Future Jobs in the Skilled Trades

4.4.2.1 Differentiated Pathways to Learning

The options of academic subjects and skills-based programmes that youths can choose from can provide insights into the different pathways to learning available at special schools. Differentiated pathways to learning can provide youths with an array of options in developing their skills and knowledge, which can be used as they embark on the next stage in their lives. The differentiated pathways to learning can be interpreted as transferability of classroom learning to post-compulsory school transition, such as employment (Osborne, 1991).

I wanted to know the options of courses, programs or training that youths with a mild intellectual disability were enrolled at in their respective special schools. Using the individual
level of analysis data, I created a diagram (see Figure 19) to show how each youth self-reported on the subjects and programmes they were enrolled in at special schools. I used different colours to map from each youth to their self-identified subjects and programmes.

I grouped subjects together based on similarities of subject area, for example, Food Preparation included cooking and baking. I included skill-based programmes that youths reported, for example, if they identified it was their major or part of their routine school activities. I linked subjects and programmes to either identify them as academic subjects or skills-based programmes. Mapping helped me to identify similarities based on subjects and programmes.

Then, I further refined this mapping diagram, grouping subjects and skills-based programme areas in a table (see Figure 20) and providing examples as needed to show linkages. For example, music and art were placed under Visual and Performing Arts. I added the names of the six youth participants with their corresponding special schools, academic subjects and skills-based programmes. I filled-in by typing ‘yes’ to identify where a youth confirmed they were enrolled in a subject and programme. Black shaded responses means that a youth did not
mention these academic subjects or programmes during our conversation. I doubled-checked this table against my initial coding of individual responses to what they were learning about at school (i.e., Pathways to Learning – Person-Centred Planning focus area). I created this table because I wanted to compare and not to statistically report on the pathways to learning for youths across special schools.

**Figure 20: Summary of Subjects and Courses Reported by Youths**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youths (Special Schools)</th>
<th>Academic Subjects</th>
<th>Skills-Based Programmes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Remedial) Mathematics</td>
<td>(Remedial) English Language Arts (e.g., comprehension, reading)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew (Accelerate Academy Private School)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas (The Learning Institute Vocational School)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samson (The Learning Institute Vocational School)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ant (The Learning Institute Vocational School)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra (Foundation Scholars Private Special School)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracey (Brightstar Government Special School)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All special schools maintained a traditional outlook in their offering of academic subjects, although at a remedial level. Remedial Mathematics and remedial English Language Arts were common to all youth participants across government, private and vocational special schools. These subjects were taught at a foundational level, as exemplified (see Figure 21) in my conversations with Ezra and Matthew.

**Figure 21: Transcript Excerpts from Interviews with Ezra and Matthew**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keren</th>
<th>OK, so how much reading do you do at school?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yeah, so so what do you learning now in Mathematics?</td>
<td>(Transcript page 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>Multiplication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keren</td>
<td>Uh-huh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Transcript page 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>About two, two Miss, two to three, two to three.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keren</td>
<td>Two to three times or two to three hours?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Transcript page 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>Subtraction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keren</td>
<td>uh-huh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Wow, that’s a long time reading. OK, that’s good. So what what do you do in that? Tell me how you learn how to read at school, what do you do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keren</td>
<td>And, what’s the next one boy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Like she does give me a book. And she does, I does practice it for myself and then I does read it for she.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keren</td>
<td>Division?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>OK, and if what happens if you don’t know a word, what happens?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keren</td>
<td>I does help she, I does ask she for help, she could help me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>She does help me Miss.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keren</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Maintaining a focus on Mathematics and English Language Arts can be seen as a way of ensuring youths understand and can apply foundational functions (e.g., addition, subtraction) while being able to read, write and spell. This can suggest special schools using these subjects to provide youths with a foundational understanding, so they can use these skills and
knowledge in routine activities in their lives. For example, foundational Mathematical functions and being literate can help youths as they transition to the world of work. At The Learning Institute Vocational School, Thomas, Simone and Anil shared a common academic subject – Information Technology (IT). Anil shared IT was his favourite subject at school “because it’s about dealing with computers” adding he used what he learned “to do research. I does research cooking shows and thing” (transcript p. 14). This can suggest a benefit to Anil in him being computer literate. For example, in how he used the knowledge acquired from the IT class to find cooking shows that interest him. Apart from remedial Mathematics and remedial English, other academic subjects were not consistently offered across all special schools based on youths’ self-reporting.

Except for Tracey who attended a government school, it can be said that youths attending private and vocational schools were enrolled in at least one skilled-based programme. This was evident in private and vocational schools that offered a combination of academic (e.g., Mathematics) and skills-based (e.g., Woodwork) programmes to the five youth participants. This is demonstrated in Matthew learning Woodwork, while Thomas, Simone and Anil were majoring in Office Administration, Beauty Culture and Food Preparation respectively.

Math, English, Life Skills, IT and Beauty Culture, Physical Education (Student Simone, transcript pp. 2, 11)

Reading, Math, Art, Sports (football), Baking, Music/Steelpan, Spelling, Woodwork (Student Matthew, transcript pp. 3, 18, 20, 25)

Food Preparation, IT, Remedial English, Remedial Math, Life Skills, Sexuality Education Entrepreneurial Studies (Student Anil, transcript p. 3)

Majoring in skills-based programmes is intended to prepare youths to gain knowledge and practical experience in specific areas, which they can then use to seek employment opportunities or be self-employed. The practical experience being learned in a skills-based programme is demonstrated in my conversation (see Figure 22) with Simone whose major is Beauty Culture.
Simone
Because because I would like to learn to do nails and hair.

Keren

(Transcript page 6)

OK. So what are you learning in Beauty culture right now?

Simone
We just finished the topic facial for this term.

Keren
OK, can you tell me a bit, well I have a face, so can you tell me a bit about what you learned? If you’re telling me about what you’re going to do with a facial and so forth, how can you explain that to me?

Simone
You do skin analysis and you check, you make sure and check the person’s skin. You check their skin type, see if they have any skin condition like acne. Acne scarring and if they have some, and if they have skin condition, you have to refer them to a doctor because beauty, cosmetic, esthetician, they cannot prescribe medicine, you have to get doctor for that. We could just could just tell you like thing that you can use for your face to prevent and help you out in that way.

Keren
Excellent, excellent. So do you take what you learn at school and apply that home?

Simone
Yes.

(Transcript page 7)

In this conversation excerpt, Simone’s explanation highlighted a combination of theoretical and practical components of a lesson in the Beauty Culture programme. Theoretical in knowing the steps involved for a skin analysis and determining skin type. Practical in doing the actions needed for a skin analysis and giving advice to an individual. Like Simone, Anil also applied what he learned in the Food Preparation. Although he was attending school online, he applied what he learned in class to cook at home by describing how to make macaroni salad.
You have to boil the macaroni and put the peas and carrots in it, mayonnaise and ... sweet corn and thing. (Transcript p. 6)

Anil’s explanation illustrated his application of the theoretical aspect in understanding the ingredients needed for this recipe and recalling the order in which to complete the steps. The practical aspect was learning to prepare and cook a meal.

Differentiated pathways to learning can provide youths with a mild intellectual disability with a variety of options in academic and skills-based programmes. It can also imply legislative alignment in having special schools offer courses based on a learner’s aptitude (Education Act, 1966). Academic courses provided at a remedial level can be considered as allowing youths access to the curricula (Chimedza, 2008). For example, applying what is learned in remedial Mathematics and remedial English to their respective skills-based programmes. The combination of academic and skills-based programmes can suggest that special schools are providing youths with knowledge and skills that they can use as they leave compulsory schooling and enter young adulthood (Paul, 2011). For example, being able to read and write and do foundational Mathematical calculations, seek employment, or start their own business. The different skills-based programmes suggests special schools are giving youths an opportunity to choose what they want to learn based on their interest (Watkins & Meijer, 2010). It can be seen as youths being prepared for the next stage in their life.

Youths sharing the academic and skill-based programmes they were enrolled in, can illustrate the different options available to them at their respective special schools. Within the theoretical framework of Person-Centred Planning, the options of courses, programs or training speaks to pathways to learning. These pathways to learning can be interpreted as youths participating in and deciding on particular areas of interest, and gaining skills and knowledge that can be used to help them get a job or further their education (Martin et al., 2013). Involving youths in the decision-making process can allude to special schools listening to their voices and making them active participants in selecting what interests and/or is important to them (Clark et al., 2005; Kilbane et al., 2008). The offerings of academic subjects and skills-
based programmes can point to the existence of organisational structures (e.g., design of subjects, programmes) and practice (e.g., implementation by educators) at special schools (Kilbane et al., 2008). Linked to offerings of academic and skills-based programmes, is how they are preparing youths for what they want to do when they leave school.

4.4.2.2 Small Business Entrepreneurs

There is consideration for how the skills and knowledge acquired (i.e., what is being taught and learned) at special schools translates into future planning for youths who are transitioning from compulsory schooling. Within the context of my research, I asked youths about their plans and/or ideas for what they wanted to do when they left school. For example, what they wanted to do when they got older, their dream and nightmare upon leaving school. Youths’ dreams and aspirations gave me an insight on their ambitions and area(s) of interest(s) to them (Dee, 2006). While special schools maintained a traditional academic focus, youths’ plans and/or ideas for what they wanted to do when they left school focussed on future jobs as tradespersons. Tradespersons “acquire the knowledge, skills and competencies specific to a particular occupation” through “vocational education [that] may have work-based components” (Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 208).

Ezra, Simone and Anil spoke about being small business entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship means taking individual “initiative to transform a business concept into a new venture” (Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 196).

Have my own business. [...] like doing electronics. Well, well I love cleaning cleaning cars. (Student Ezra, transcript p. 38)

I want to start my own business, like doing people nails. Like nails, like do people nails, and it so might happen that I do other things as well like hair, facials, waxing, and I would pretty much own. (Student Simone, transcript p. 12)

I want to become a chef. [...] I want to open a Barbeque business. (Student Anil, transcript pp. 1, 24)
Ezra’s dream identified two areas of interest – electronics and cleaning cars – that were not directly linked to his enrolled skills-based programme of Food Preparation. The academic component of remedial Mathematics and English can suggest a benefit to him as he explores either area of interest as part of his further education. Simone and Anil’s dreams of having their own businesses were directly related to their respective skills-based programmes at The Learning Institute Vocational School. Simone and Anil spoke about being enrolled in the skills-based Food Preparation and Beauty Culture programmes respectively. However, only Anil identified being enrolled in Entrepreneurial Studies, which can suggest he is learning about the requirements and responsibilities as a business owner as part of his coursework. Matthew identified his dream was “to be a straightener” which he further explained as “painting cars” (transcript p. 21). Matthew’s interests did not directly link to his skills-based programmes of Woodwork and Food Preparation.

Youths sharing their dreams and aspirations speaks to them “exploring ideas and possibilities” of what interests them, which is part of them “expressing their identity” of who they want to be as they transition to adulthood (Dee, 2006, pp. 46-47, 97). Dee (2006) links academic subjects and programmes as pathways that allow youths to try out and consider if it is of interest to them. Academic subjects and skills-based programmes can be examined in how they provide youths with the knowledge and skills in preparing them as they transition to adulthood. For example, this can be focussed on entry into the world of work upon leaving school or to further education for vocational training (Dee, 2006). The findings in my research point to employment in the trades is a common choice for youths with a disability upon leaving school (Paul, 2011). Researchers advocate that skills-based programmes can be viewed as an integral part of training for and a benefit to persons with disabilities as they transition to the next stage in their lives (Mitchell, 1999). Others see a direct link between school’s curriculum and the labour market in how the former prepares youths to enter the workforce (Osborne, 1991). While arguing this can be an asset, Mitchell (1999) acknowledges that post-compulsory school transition for persons with disabilities is not straightforward, as there are multiple individuals and factors (e.g., school resources, labour market) influencing transition planning.
While youths’ dreams and aspirations provided information on their future planning, they also spoke about their nightmares or things they did not want to happen to them upon leaving school.

4.4.2.3 Nightmares

Ezra and Anil expressed their nightmares in terms of not being physically harmed (e.g., hurt, robbed, murdered). Tracey said, “it doesn’t have nothing” (transcript p. 20). Thomas, Simone and Matthew also shared things they did not want to happen to them after leaving school.

Never getting a job. (Student Thomas, transcript p. 23).

Getting pregnant. (Student Simone, transcript p. 13)

Like it’ll be missing my friends when I leave school. Be seeing them again when I leave school and the teachers. Like don’t get be caught up in the wrong type of bad things. Be be good and don’t be caught up in the wrong type of thing. Like smoking, drinking, and get lock up and all them thing. (Student Matthew, transcript pp. 22, 23)

Youths’ nightmares revealed diverse viewpoints in terms of their fears. For Ezra and Anil, they were fearful of being harmed by someone. Thomas’ fear was not being employed, while Simone did not want to get pregnant before marriage and wanted to focus on starting a beautician or cosmetology business. Matthew’s fear was manifested in a loss of friendships with his peers and teachers as well as involvement in activities, which he saw was wrong. Tracey’s comments can suggest that there is not a specific nightmare or fear she had upon leaving school.

Nightmares can reveal what matters to youths, such as what they need to be mindful of as they transition to adulthood, what foremost in their minds, what influences their thinking (Dee, 2006). This information can help decision-makers to identify areas that can be overlooked such as friendships and social networks and practical aspects of adulthood (e.g., job) (Dee, 2006). The fears of youths expressed in my research can allude to a heightened sense of
awareness of what the future looks like for them, especially in terms of employment and economic well-being (Tisdall, 1994). Unemployment and lack of employment opportunities can allude to awareness of a barrier to work for Thomas. Access to employment remains a challenge for persons with disabilities, which can affect their finances, livelihood and well-being (Shevlin et al., 2020; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). In addition to employment concerns, loss of friendships was cited as another concern. Friendships can be seen as developing social bonds and communication skills (Keaveny, 2017; Sigstad, 2017). There is recognition that students with disabilities experience a greater loss in friendships with time, which aligns with Matthew’s concern upon leaving school (Heslop et al., 2002). To mitigate this concern, Sanderson et al. (2008) call for this to be part of the transition planning conversation as friendships hold significance in people’s lives. This can point to the importance of friendships in creating a sense of belonging and community, for example, youths with a mild intellectual disability (Kennedy et al., 2008).

In applying the theoretical framework of Person-Centred Planning, the focus area of future planning considers the dreams and aspirations of individuals (Mansell & Beadle-Brown, 2005). Asking about and listening to the dreams and nightmares of youths, demonstrate how I used these focus areas of Person-Centred Planning to engage in conversation with them to understand their worldview. In my research, youths spoke about their future in terms of what they wanted and what they did not want to happen to them (Kilbane et al., 2008). This can exemplify how communication can be used to position youths with a mild intellectual disability as experts in their lives and decision-makers in highlighting what matters to them (Skelhorn & Williams, 2008). This is exemplified in youths identifying career choices and considerations as they prepare to exit compulsory schooling. Future planning is a critical stage as youths transition to young adulthood because it brings to the fore uncertainty of what the future holds coupled with individual autonomy in decision-making (Sanderson et al., 2008). Researchers advocate that knowing what matters to the individual can help in transition planning and preparation for the future (J. O’Brien & Callahan, 2010; Sanderson et al., 2008).
In this section, using an intragroup level of analysis, I reported on the experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability at special schools who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling. The experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling revealed them as having:

- Supportive learning environments, and
- Being prepared for potential future jobs in the skilled trades.

In the next section, I continue presenting the findings with a focus on the perspectives of parents/legal guardians.

4.5 Intragroup Findings – Perspectives of Parents/Legal Guardians

I describe the perspectives of parents/legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from compulsory schooling. I used my initial individual level of analysis for parent/legal guardian participants as the starting point to refine and explain their experiences at an intragroup level. Five parents/legal guardians (see Table 16) participated in interviews from October to December 2021.

Table 16: Summary of Parents/Legal Guardians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Name of their Child</th>
<th>Special School their Child Attends</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>Foundation Scholars Private Special School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derrick</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Tracey</td>
<td>Brightstar Government Special School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vincent</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Accelerate Academy Private Special School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherry</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Anil</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
They spoke about their child’s learning experiences, perspectives on the special school and future planning for their child. The perspectives of parents/legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from compulsory schooling revealed:

- A positive outlook of special schools,
- Special schools having a role in transition planning, and
- Wanting their child to be happy.

4.5.1 A Positive Outlook of Special Schools

I asked them about their perspectives of special schools as part of my Other area of focus. I did this because I wanted to develop a rapport with them to know why they chose a specific special school for their child. Also, I wanted parents/legal guardians to share their perspectives of their child’s learning experiences, to know whether the learning environment accommodates their child’s needs and is supportive in helping them get the knowledge and skills across different areas. Understanding their child’s learning experiences was as part of my Person-Centred Planning focus area.

4.5.1.1 Belonging at the School

Parents/legal guardians spoke about a sense of belonging for their child in explaining their positive outlook of special schools. They often spoke about their child’s sense of belonging in terms of them not being bullied or excluded at their special school.

… she [Tracey] didn’t like to go into school […] being bullied. I went searching in different schools. And so I went to the school and make do there and about two years after, my phone just ring. Miss Nkosi come and call. When Miss Nkosi call I went, that is how come we end up getting she, ‘cause she name was there. (Parent Derrick, transcript pp. 4, 6)

No tolerance of bullying […] They’re more receptive to them, right and they’re more willing to help each other or other than in the mainstream is where there is a challenge, is like a fight for first place but any the where he is, I can’t talk for all special schools, but where he [Ezra] is … they help, they tend to help each other, support each other and they come down to the level of the child to understand you know where they bring them from point A to point B. (Parent Patricia, transcript p. 4)
Derrick identified Tracey’s reluctance to attend her former mainstream school because of bullying, which resulted in him actively searching for another school to enrol his daughter and often being waitlisted for placement. Although the wait was two years, Derrick shared staff at Brightstar Government Special School “did their best. The school did their best. I have no regrets and no complaints” (transcript p. 9). Patricia highlighted Ezra’s experiences attending mainstream and special schools. At his previous mainstream school, he experienced bullying in comparison to his time at Foundation Scholars Private Special School where she saw the actions of the educators at the special school as including and accepting of Ezra. Patricia revealed several other factors helped her to decide which special school to enrol Ezra.

One it was it was only school at the time in the area that would have attend to his special needs ... not too far from where I live. And two ... the advantages he would have been getting from this school because they, a lot of teachers they are specialized in deal with special children with special needs. [...] the way that they dealt with the children, and they hold the interact with them are the reasons why I choose that one. And I saw from which part he was before to which part he is now, he has improved tremendously. So that’s why I choose [...] And I also it was highly recommended. (Parent Patricia, transcript p. 8)

Proximity to residence, specialised staff and third-party recommendation were factors that influenced Patricia’s choice of a special school. Both Derrick and Patricia spoke about having to find a school for their respective child based on learning needs and confirmed a sense of belonging in their child’s experiences. A sense of belonging was manifested in the acceptance of Tracey and Ezra, supported learning environment to help them progress in their learning and them wanting to go to school.

Bullying of a student with a disability can suggest an attitudinal barrier. For example, bullying can be attributed to the negative behaviours towards students with disabilities, which can result in them not wanting to attend and/or leave a mainstream school (Rose & Shevlin, 2004). Parents/legal guardians may recognise the impact bullying can have on their child (Dee, 2006). This was demonstrated in Derrick searching, waiting two years, and receiving a call confirming Tracey’s enrolment in a special school. This shows a parent/legal guardian taking a
course of action and decision-making towards finding a conducive learning environment for his child because he wanted his child to be in a psychologically safe learning environment (Harry, 2020). This confirms the rights of parents/legal guardians in making education-related decisions for their child (United Nations, 1948). The practices of educators at special schools illustrated a learning environment of tolerance and non-bullying. A sense of belonging at school speaks to being a part of a community in which students were accepted and welcomed for who they were as individuals (Allen et al., 1998). Derrick and Patricia’s revelation of the bullying experienced by Tracey and Ezra, and their reluctance to attend mainstream school alluded to them being not part of the school’s community. It also highlights the barriers (e.g., attitudinal/behavioural) learners with disabilities encounter in mainstream schools (Glasgow-Charles et al., 2017; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). This alludes to how exclusion affected Tracey and Ezra and influenced the decision of Derrick and Patricia. This can suggest ableist practices in viewing all students through an able-bodied lens and treating them the same without regard for learner diversity, resulting in the exclusion of those who require learning accommodations and supports (Keaveny, 2017). In contrast, Derrick and Patricia’s experiences at Brightstar Government Special School and Foundation Scholars Private Special School spoke to these schools creating a sense of belonging for Tracey and Ezra. This can suggest these schools as providing a safe learning environment and teachers providing the necessary learning accommodations, contributing to a student being part of its community and valued for their individuality (Roffey, 2010). Linked to this sense of belonging, is the provision of supported adjustments.

4.5.1.2 Supportive Learning Environment

Parents/legal guardians described how special schools adapted their learning environment based on the needs of youths with a mild intellectual disability. Sherry shared that for Anil, “it’s a slow a slower learning environment … at that special school” (transcript p. 4). A slower learning environment for Anil at The Learning Institute Vocational School can exemplify how the educator adapted lesson plans and/or teaching at a pace to benefit him. By doing this, it can demonstrate a form of support and/or adjustments to help Anil. Adapted learning was
manifested in terms of pace, one-on-one support, and teacher flexibility in being accessible to parents and students.

... because everyone is on a different level, you find that you will get that individual attention because we’re not competing with each other. [...] a lot of repetition with him, over and over. (Parent Patricia, transcript pp. 5, 6)

... take time with Tracey, a lot of time sending work for her to do ... giving her time to do it. She could call ... any hour, any hour, in the night any hour and ... would always respond, correct her work, to give her the encouragement, you know and give her time. (Parent Derrick, transcript p. 2)

So the teachers are very helpful, very cooperative and everything. I mean that school is like a big family. Because the teachers and them, you know, I never had like any bad experience. You could talk to them like a normal ... like any advice or if Thomas if having problems at school, you could talk to them one-on-one. Me being a parent, I could call the teacher and talk to her. And even if have a problem or anything like that and they would give me advice or they would give Thomas counselling or things like that you know. All of them are very friendly. And even the principal. (Parent Tara, transcript pp. 3-4)

Well I know that the teacher trying to help him with he reading [...] ‘Cause sometimes she does give him homework [...] and sometimes, he might make an error mistake. They might give him something to write and he go come and write, and when he come back to somebody who I know they will try to assist him and they might tell him he have to do it over because what you do it ain’t correct enough. And he go go and do it. (Parent Vincent, transcript p. 4)

... Anil going online class [...] but from what I notice at home, the teachers deal with them individually there. She had the whole class, but she will call child each child by their name and ask them whether they understand or not. So they kind of paying more attention to the children than the primary school and making sure each understand what they supposed to do, and if they don’t understand something, the teacher will stay back at intermission with that student and make sure he or she understand what’s going on. [...] whenever they get homework, the teacher does always tell them if they have a problem call her and let her know because it’s about ... 8 different teachers because they do in different subjects. So, but the work from what I see is very, OK and he understands most of the work. (Parent Sherry, transcript pp. 4, 5)

The five parents described similar approaches across the six special schools (private, vocational, government). Similar approaches included one-on-one interaction with the youth and teacher,
using repetition to reinforce what was taught, being available to meet with youths and parents/legal guardians to provide advice, even if it meant providing guidance on schoolwork assignments after school hours.

Parents/legal guardians’ observations spoke to a positive relationship with educators in which parents/legal guardians, students and educators have a mutually-beneficial relationship based on co-operation, trust and respect (McPhillips et al., 2010; Popova, 2017). The role of educators in being accessible to parents/legal guardians and youths suggests distributed power and shared participation in creating a supportive learning environment (Shevlin, 2010; UNESCO, 1994).

Asking parents/legal guardians their perspectives on a special school provided insights to understand why and/or what factor(s) influenced their decision-making. It also revealed their perspectives of a special school, for example, interaction with staff, child’s learning experiences. This is important, as parents/legal guardians play a role in Person-Centred Planning as decision-makers and contributors to the planning process for their child’s education, recognising they may have a significant role and vested interest throughout the life of their child with a disability (Coles & Short, 2008). In applying the theoretical framework of Person-Centred Planning, the focus area of child’s learning experiences considers whether the school’s learning environment supports and accommodates the needs of the student (Dick & Purvis, 2005). This points to the actions of educators in providing learning supports and/or accommodations based on the student’s needs (Mansell & Beadle-Brown, 2005). Providing these learning supports and/or accommodations calls for educators to practise active listening to understand “what is important to, and what is important for” the student in creating a supportive learning environment, which illustrates distributed power in that students with disabilities are recognised as having expertise in their lived experience, which means that decision-making power does not only reside with professionals (Kilbane et al., 2008, p. 32). The observations of parents/legal guardians described educators’ recognition of the diversity of youths’ learning needs and using various ways to be accessible to parents and youths. The diversity of learning
needs was not seen by educators as a limitation of youths’ capacity to learn, but an opportunity to help by adapting lesson plans (C. L. O’Brien et al., 1997). In my research, the collaboration amongst students, parents/legal guardians and educators demonstrate leveraging relationships with a common outlook to providing supports and accommodations for youths with a mild intellectual disability (Kennedy et al., 2008).

4.5.2 Special Schools Having a Role in Transition Planning

4.5.2.1 Focus on Remedial Academic and Skills-Based Programmes

I asked about the skills and knowledge parents/legal guardians wanted their child to learn while they attended special schools. My intent was to understand, from their perspectives, what their child was being taught at special schools and how they believe special schools are preparing their child for the next stage in life. They spoke about a focus on remedial academic subjects and skills-based programmes in the quotes below.

More, probably more reading and probably Maths [...] I would just say more, more academics. More on the academics which he does not like, he does hate to do schoolwork, but because his teacher, the teacher he has now, he had her, had her two years ago, she gets him. She gets him to do work and he is progressing quite well in the numbering skills in terms of like numbers, figures. And more like reading, more reading, more skills, more reading. That’s what I want to do with him more. I just wanted to make sure he’s able to count. Able to count and identify money. So it’s more like counting and recognizing, yea, he recognize money right and more applying it, more applying the tools. (Parent Patricia, transcript pp. 5-6)

Basics in life ... the tables, to read, to write, to spell, your name, the holidays, names of different holidays [...] the basics in life to move on in life. [...] they more, doing book works like addition, tables, learning Mathematics to check, to deal with money. Teaching her different words, learning tables, learning Mathematics to check, to deal with money. You know the basics in life that’s what Tracey and them doing right now. The basics all the basic they learning right now. (Parent Derrick, transcript pp. 4, 7)

... he tell me he want to learn a trade. I say well you have to make sure to read. You have to make sure read and spell, eh, two thing I does tell him. I don’t want him to go through that same procedure like how I go through. He must be able to upgrade he self to a more higher level, so people can’t take advantage of him, he can’t read, he can’t write, you know. I don’t think I would really want that. (Parent Vincent, transcript p. 6)
... I would like him to be able to do whatever he have to do on he own. [...] even if he become a good chef, you know, like he could get a job where he could help himself to do something [...] So he have no siblings to say well, he have this person to help him ... so you have to be able to help himself because today in today’s world you can’t trust nobody. (Parent Sherry, transcript pp. 6-7)

... the teachers ... with the Office Admin work as well with the notes and all that, they give them like information how to go about working in the office [...] How to file, they give them examples and all that as well, like how the work would be and things like that and what they would have to do [...] They go into details about it and they try to help them to be independent for themselves ... (Parent Tara, transcript pp. 8-9)

The five parents/legal guardians shared a similar outlook in wanting their child to be literate upon leaving their respective special schools. Patricia and Derrick spoke with a focus on remedial academic subjects for Ezra and Tracey, while Vincent, Tara and Sherry highlighted skills-based programmes that Matthew, Thomas and Anil were enrolled in at their respective special schools. Parents/legal guardians’ perspectives on these areas pointed to wanting their child to be self-sufficient in life. This is exemplified in Sherry’s perspective of wanting Anil to independent as he does not have siblings. For Vincent, it was important for Matthew to be literate, self-aware and skilled in a trade. Like other parents/legal guardians, Derrick shared he wanted Tracey to know the “basics in life ... the tables, to read, to write, to spell your name [...] the basics in life to move on in life” (transcript p. 4). Derrick’s perspective is seen from the standpoint of wanting Tracey to be able to apply what she has learned at school as she transitions into her adult life.

Parents/legal guardians wanting youths with a mild intellectual disability to be independent upon leaving school speaks to the role of special schools, as transformational spaces of learning, in preparing them for post-compulsory school transition by adapting the curriculum and providing necessary supports to accommodate learners with disabilities (Shevlin, 2010). Doing this demonstrates differentiated approaches to teaching with a focus on learner literacy, and providing youths with skills and knowledge to be participatory and independent citizens (McPhillips et al., 2010). Parents/legal guardians’ perspectives allude to a
recognition of the importance of literacy and skills-based programmes in determining post-compulsory school pathways for their child. Their perspectives describe their focus while revealing their “anxiety, uncertainty and stress” upon their child exiting compulsory schooling (Dee, 2006, p. 3). Vincent was focussed on Matthew being literate and not being taken advantage of, while wanting him to have better outcomes in life than him. Sherry highlighted the uncertainty of family support, lack of trust in individuals to help Anil and a preference for him to be independent. Derrick and Patricia wanted Tracey and Ezra to have a basic understanding of financial literacy. These examples give an insight into the collective perspectives, such as concerns, of parents/legal guardians. Researchers confirm these perspectives are warranted in the context of transition planning to post-compulsory schooling pathways. For example, Dee (2006) explains parents/legal guardians are faced with heightened uncertainty in terms of what the future holds and worry what happens if they are no longer there to help their child. Harry (2020) acknowledges these perspectives, as parents/legal guardians want a fulfilling and happy life for their child. Linked to this, is the role of special schools in providing advisory support as part of transition planning.

4.5.2.2 Advisory Support

As part of preparing their child for the next stage in their life, parents/legal guardians described the role of educators at special schools in the context of providing advisory support. In this role, educators provided guidance to parents and/or facilitated knowledge transfer on opportunities to explore for post-compulsory school transitions, such as employment, further education. In explaining how educators were helping them, parents/legal guardians also identified resource constraints affecting how much a school can do to help them in planning for post-compulsory school opportunities.

... according to how well he does in his exam, they offer a job placements for them in their field. Well, I think probably they have ... links with other companies as well to employ children [...] I think yeah, because they said that they have ... provide job placements as well for the children. (Parent Tara, transcript p. 9)
... they are advising me on schools [...] they will assist you in getting, locating different schools where they are, but it is still up to, because as I mentioned is a small school with little or no funding from the government so they ... only doing as best as they could right now. (Parent Patricia, transcript p. 7)

Tara described a facilitated transfer for Thomas at The Learning Institute Vocational School. This meant the special school had community partnerships with prospective employers who can provide Thomas with post-compulsory school employment opportunities. In comparison, Patricia’s perspective confirmed educators were advising her on avenues to explore for Ezra’s transition and revealed a resource constraint – funding. On one hand, educators at Foundation Scholars Private Special School facilitated knowledge transfer in terms of possible schools for Ezra's post-compulsory school transition. On the other hand, funding constraints limited how much the special school can do as there was not a dedicated staff to bridge a transfer to the receiving institution or organisation. This meant Patricia had to undertake the task of researching schools and their programmes based on Ezra’s interest, complete the necessary intake forms at the receiving school, and share information about Ezra’s supports and accommodations.

Parents/legal guardians saw special schools as having a role of advisory support in transition planning. This was illustrated in information sharing, facilitating post-compulsory school opportunities, such as the world of work. Advisory support can show the importance of the school-home relationship in how parents/legal guardians viewed the role of educators at special schools and leveraging this partnership to plan next steps (McCoy et al., 2020). In doing this, it positions both special schools and parents/legal guardians as active and participatory actors focussed on exploring opportunities for post-compulsory school transition (Allen et al., 1998). This approach positions both parties as wanting youths with mild intellectual disability to have a planned pathway of what is next as they enter young adulthood as decision-makers because decisions reflect individual choice and independence (Martin et al., 2013). Adopting the role of advisory support can be seen as special schools being innovative in facilitating transition planning, recognising limitations in their resource allocation. However, resource allocation limitations – funding, built environment, staffing – for parents/legal guardians, had
the potential to affect their child’s learning experiences. Limitations in resource allocation for special schools point to “disparities in education systems and outcomes,” which have a direct effect on students with disabilities (Florian & Rouse, 2010, p. 186). For example, insufficient staffing can result in teachers not being able to spend sufficient time to support or accommodate a student and/or teachers undertaking multiple roles.

Parents/legal guardians are part of the group of individuals (i.e., team) involved in Person-Centred Planning (Corrigan, 2014). Within the context of Person-Centred Planning, I wanted to know about their child’s learning experiences. A child’s learning experiences can provide insights into how special schools are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability as they enter young adulthood, including educational and/or vocational pursuits (Conrad et al., 2010). The skills and knowledge acquired can provide insights into how these are preparing them to pursue further and/or higher education or enter the world of work. The perspectives of parents/legal guardians can reveal what matters to them and what they value in their child’s learning experiences at special schools. This places familial relations as a necessary, contributing factor in Person-Centred Planning considering their proximity to and having knowledge of their child with a mild intellectual disability (Sanderson et al., 2008). Coles and Short (2008) agree and position parents/legal guardians as instrumental because their insights can speak to their child’s strengths, growth opportunities and are often part of their child’s decision-making. Within in my research, the perspectives of parents/legal guardians on the role of special schools in transition planning provided insights on what skills and knowledge they want their child to learn and how they think a special school is preparing their child. Connected to schools preparing their child as part of transition planning, is what parents/legal guardians wanted for their child in the future.
4.5.3 Wanting Their Child to be Happy

4.5.3.1 Develop Life Skills to be Independent Citizens

When parents/legal guardians said they wanted their child to develop life skills to be independent citizens, they spoke about supporting their child in their endeavours, wanting them to be self-sufficient, successful in life and have gainful employment opportunities.

Be independent, to be an independent citizen. [...] he doesn’t really have to rely on anyone to give him anything or depend on the public sector. He’ll be independent. He’ll have his own business and depend on himself on himself, his resources. (Parent Patricia, transcript pp. 13-14)

Well as I told you I have no dream. To be what she, I would love her to sing yeah like her mom ’cause she have a wonderful voice. But is what she wants to be honest. (Parent Derrick, transcript p. 9)

I would just want Thomas to be successful in his job and in his life. So that you know, he would have this and be responsible. But I want him to like what he does as well too, you know. So and be better at his job. Like want to be better and all that as well too. (Parent Tara, transcript p. 13)

... I want him to learn, learn a trade ... that’s the only solution to it and then if if he could still go to school and finish his education. So he have two choices. (Parent Vincent, transcript p. 9)

To be successful in whatever he choose to do. (Parent Sherry, transcript p. 12)

Patricia envisioned Ezra as being self-sufficient, an entrepreneur and not replying on government funding (i.e., social assistance). Tara and Sherry shared similar perspectives in wanting Thomas and Anil to be successful in life. Vincent spoke about Matthew’s success in terms of life choices – finish his education or be skilled in a trade. In comparison, Derrick’s dream for Tracey was to become a singer, but acknowledged this would be her decision.

Thinking about life after compulsory schooling can bring ideas of what happens next for a youth with a mild intellectual disability. The perspectives of parents/legal guardians speak to self-determination and independence for their child, which are necessary components for them
as they enter adulthood (Martin et al., 2013). This positions youths with a mild intellectual disability as decision-makers and having ownership of their lives (Mitchell, 1999; Tisdall, 1994).

For example, Vincent and Derrick wanted Matthew and Tracey respectively to decide on the next step upon leaving their respective special schools. This points to parents/legal guardians wanting their child to use their knowledge and skills from compulsory schooling to build a successful future (Harry, 2020; Mitchell, 1999). However, the perspectives of parents/legal guardians also disclosed their concerns about their child’s wellbeing.

### 4.5.3.2 Concerns About their Child’s Wellbeing

Parents/legal guardians expressed concerns about their child’s wellbeing in terms of challenges and/or barriers they may face upon exiting compulsory schooling. Concerns were described in terms of their vulnerability, while barriers were presented in terms of unfair treatment in the work environment.

People taking advantage of his good nature, his willingness. (Parent Patricia, transcript p. 14)

... I never want Tracey to leave school and she don’t know nothing. She just there, ent know to cook, ent know to read and write that is most important, that would be a nightmare. Ent know to read and write, Tracey could read and she could write. That would a been a nightmare, can’t read, can’t write, she can’t check money which is important in life you know. (Parent Derrick, transcript p. 9)

... in the workplace or anything for people for someone not to bully him or take advantage of him. Like in work wise or like you know, sometimes some people ... you know just don’t like somebody and you just like to be spiteful or something like that too. [...] so you know like nothing bad wouldn’t happen ... in his workplace or anything. (Parent Tara, transcript p. 14)

... the world is full of all kind of things that you will expect anything once you alive. And I does have to talk to him and have a little chat with him, and say sometime once you alive you have to look for anything, you know. So I does make sure show me you keep your head together. Keep your head on your shoulder and watch what you are doing. Right. ‘Cause you know something because you feel you go jump off here now and you feel you have something right now, you have to fight for what you want. You don’t want your child to get into the bad things [...] I don’t want him to get involved in doing bad
things [...] you have to make sure put that in your head as time go on, you have to make sure you put that in your head. (Parent Vincent, transcript p. 11)

Well, for him not to be able to take care of himself. (Parent Sherry, transcript p. 13)

Patricia and Vincent shared similar concerns in terms of Ezra and Matthew entering adulthood and uncertainty about being negatively influenced by persons or exploited, which identified concerns of their vulnerability. Vulnerability was also expressed in Derrick and Sherry’s perspectives of Tracey and Anil not being reliant on another person, but capable to do routine activities in life such as reading, basic finances, self-care. Connected to concerns of vulnerability, was employment barriers. Tara wanted Thomas’ employment opportunities to be successful to where he was not the recipient of workplace bullying and/or harassment.

Parents/legal guardians can hold views of wanting their child to succeed while being concerned about their wellbeing (Heslop et al., 2002; Mitchell, 1999). This can be likened to a positive yet cautious outlook by parents/legal guardians. For example, Patricia spoke of wanting Ezra to be successful and an entrepreneur, while alluding to his vulnerability. Parents/legal guardians’ concerns about their child’s well-being are valid as they “are widely viewed as more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse than adults” (Gallagher, 2009, p. 14). This is supported by Harry (2020) who attributes these as manifestations of behavioural barriers by persons in society. Parents/legal guardians’ concerns about their child’s well-being are important recognising they will be future contributors to society (e.g., labour market) in Trinidad and Tobago (United Nations, 2013). The perspectives of parents/legal guardians emphasised how they envisioned their child’s future and simultaneously revealed their concerns (Dee, 2006).

I asked parents/legal guardians about future planning their child. My intent was to know their plans for the next stage in their child’s lives. I wanted to know this because it can reveal their thinking about what their child should do next, how they are planning for this while highlighting opportunities, barriers and/or challenges. Within the context of Person-Centred Planning, parents/legal guardians are part of the team of individuals who have a vested interest
in and can speak to the capabilities of a youth with a mild intellectual disability (C. L. O’Brien et al., 1997). Their perspectives are important in creating a holistic plan based on a shared understanding that focuses on a youth with a mild intellectual disability (J. O’Brien, 2004). A component of this planning is consideration for future planning that can be discussed in terms of dreams and nightmares. The perspectives of parents/legal guardians revealed their dreams were for their child to develop life skills to be independent individuals. These perspectives align with Person-Centred Planning in focussing on the dreams of the individual “in a way that keeps them healthy, safe and well” (Kilbane et al., 2008, p. 29). For example, Derrick did not impose his preference for Tracey’s future, but spoke about her making that decision and having his support. Likewise, Tara spoke about supporting Thomas and wanting him to like what he chooses to do in the future. Parents/legal guardians acknowledged challenges and/or barriers their child would face upon leaving their respective special schools. These challenges and/or barriers were presented as nightmares or things they did not want to happen to their child. These perspectives are important in future planning in terms of putting in place supports to mitigate the identified challenges. This positions Person-Centred Planning as a dynamic process that uses a collaborative approach to help a youth with a mild intellectual disability be part of and a contributing member in society with the necessary supports, which helps them be independent (Medora & Ledger, 2005). This stance is supported by researchers who view independence for persons with disabilities as the aim of Person-Centred Planning (Kilbane & McLean, 2008).

In this section, using an intragroup level of analysis, I reported on the perspectives of parents/legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling. Their perspectives revealed:

- A positive outlook of special schools,
- Special schools having a role in transition planning, and
- Wanting their child to be happy.

In the next section, I continue presenting the findings across all three participant groups.
4.6 Intergroup Findings

I used my intragroup level table summaries for youths, parents/legal guardians, educators to compare across groups to explain:

1. What the data are telling me about the process of transition.
2. What the data are telling or not telling me about the opportunities for youths with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago.

These questions are connected to my three research questions in how the curriculum is preparing youths for life after school and understanding what it means for youths (i.e., how this preparation either helps or hinders them as they enter adulthood). The same twenty individuals comprising of youths, parents/legal guardians and educators participated in interviews from October to December 2021.

4.6.1 Process of Transition

The process of transition for youths with a mild intellectual disability revealed person-centred practices within the learning environment. Person-centred practices were described by educators, parents/legal guardians and youths as curriculum modifications and provision of supports.

4.6.1.1 Person-Centred Practices: Curriculum Modifications

Curriculum modifications meant educators adapted aspects of a national and/or international curriculum in the design and delivery of lesson plans. For example, academic subjects such as visual and performing arts included music, while skills-based programmes such as food preparation included baking, cooking. Curriculum modifications in the process of transition planning can be part of earlier stages of planning and implementing a plan. Educators, parents/legal guardians and youths described how the curriculum was adapted to suit a learner.
... we follow the national curriculum. However, we ... adapt to suit the children. We also have, so the reading would be very basic. Writing the very basic formation of letters. Alphabet sound recognizing of signs and so on. [...] extra-curricular activities like drumming, drama, swimming. Pan, steelpan. Art and craft, they would do some sewing [...] before COVID we started golf. They also have sessions with with tennis. [...] they have their regular PE ... (Teacher Miss Clarke, transcript p. 4)

... the teachers ... with the Office Admin work as well with the notes and all that, they give them like information how to go about working in the office [...] How to file, they give them examples and all that as well, like how the work would be and things like that and what they would have to do [...] They go into details about it and they try to help them to be independent for themselves ... (Parent Tara, pp. 8-9)

They does help me understand properly about what work we doing. They does sit some sometimes does sit by me, like face to face conversation and explain, explaining me about the question and I go answer it in a like in like my own words basically. (Student Thomas, p. 3)

I like the way they teach us the lessons. How they explain, how they explain it to us and how they does put on videos to help you understand the work and thing. (Student Simone, p. 5)

Miss Clarke confirmed the national curriculum is modified for students at Accelerate Academy Private Special School. Modification meant using an introductory approach to academic subjects with the addition of extra-curricular learning activities. From a parent/legal guardian perspective, Tara outlined how this modification manifested for her son, Thomas, who attended The Learning Institute Vocational School and described how modifications helped him. Modification had theoretical and practical components in the explanation of what happens in an office, while practical involved the aspect of doing what happens in an office. For Simone, a student at The Learning Institute Vocational School, modification meant using differentiated approaches to help her understand a lesson plan. It meant a teacher explaining one-on-one or using videos to where a learner has flexibility to control pace and extend duration through repetition.

Curriculum modifications can illustrate how educators are making the national curriculum accessible for youths with a mild intellectual disability in learning environments
Curriculum modification can be described as “reasonable accommodation” by educators at special schools in how youths with a mild intellectual disability have access to the national curriculum (United Nations, 2006, p. 4). Making adjustments based on a learner’s needs can be an approach towards inclusive practices in a learning environment that are person-centred (Conrad & Brown, 2011). Deng (2010) positions inclusive practices as flexibility on the part of a teacher to convey a lesson plan using different instruments. For example, this was described by Simone in a video being used to help her learn at her own pace. This demonstrates a simple yet effective way in how modifications can benefit a learner. Incorporating extra-curricular activities as part of the curriculum, Conrad and Brown (2011) report these modifications contribute to having a positive effect on a learner’s well-being in how he/she perceives his/herself. This was exemplified in special schools incorporating physical education and visual and performing arts and youths’ participation. Extra-curricular activities and curriculum modification depict a flexible and accessible approach in content being adapted to youths diverse interests and learning needs (UNESCO, 1994). Related to learning accommodations was the provision of supports.

4.6.1.2 Person-Centred Practices: Provisions of Support

Provisions of supports was seen in the role of educators as advisors in information sharing and acting as a liaison to facilitate post-compulsory school opportunities. In the process of transition planning, provisions of supports can be seen as implementing a plan. This can be manifested in educators assuming roles as coaches and transition planning advisors.

Because the teachers and them, you know, I never had like any bad experience. You could talk to them like a normal like you know, like if you need like any advice or if Thomas is having problems at school, you could talk to them one on one. Me being a parent, I could call the teacher and talk to her. And even if I have a problem or anything like that and they would give me advice or they would give Thomas counselling or things like that you know. All of them are very friendly. And even the principal. (Parent Tara, transcript pp. 3-4)

If I have a problem, I call Miss Nkosi anytime. I don’t have a problem to send a message, she gets back to me, you know no problem. You call the next one you might not get them, but Miss Nkosi … excellent, excellent. They did a lot for Tracey. The way Tracey is today to
where she was before, I thank GOD, I does thank GOD, we does thank GOD for them every day. (Parent Derrick, transcript p. 4)

... whenever they get homework, the teacher does always tell them if they have a problem call her and let her know because it’s about ... 8 different teachers because they do in different subjects. So, but the work from what I see is very, OK and he understands most of the work. (Parent Sherry, transcript p. 5)

We really do try and to see how much information we can get and having these conversations always helps us, ‘cause sometimes we may not have an idea of what is happening or what other options there are and when we had the conversations with parents [...] just having that constant conversation finding out if they’re comfortable here. Is there anything else ... you need assistance with? (Teacher Miss Richards, transcript p. 14)

Parents/legal guardians’ perspectives revealed practices in how teachers acted as coaches and/or guidance counsellors, even beyond regular school hours. These practices were demonstrated in educators listening to parents/legal guardians concerns, being available to respond to youths’ questions about assignments and keeping an open line of communication to share transition planning information that can help youths. These shared perspectives illustrated that practices extended beyond the learning environment to home support. For example, Miss Richards spoke about engaging in ongoing conversations with parents to see how else she can help even after a youth transitioned from Foundation Scholars Private Special School. Provisions of supports can identify ways in which educators were (in)directly extending their roles beyond the classroom.

The provisions of support by educators can be described as forging a partnership with parents/legal guardians. UNESCO (1994) identifies this partnership as necessary because it promotes collaboration and has a mutually beneficial outlook for youths with a mild intellectual disability. By doing this, it demonstrates their recognition and action towards mitigating “marginalisation, exclusion and underachievement” through “strategies for encouraging the presence, participation and achievement” for youths with a mild intellectual disability (Ainscow & Miles, 2009, p. 6). Educators as coaches and guidance counsellors identify the multiple roles they undertake to support youths and parents/legal guardians (Ashdown, 2010). This speaks to fostering safe learning environments in which information is shared by individuals, open lines of
communication are encouraged and active listening is practised (Hornby, 2010). Inclusive
person-centred practices can illustrate a “healthy home-school partnership” which is “crucial to
the well-being of the pupil” (Ashdown, 2010, p. 99).

Person-centred practices at special schools were described by educators, parents/legal
guardians and youths with a mild intellectual disability. Person-centred practices reflected
learners’ disability in making the curriculum accessible, using differentiated instructional
approaches, leveraging networks of support to collaborate towards equitable learning
opportunities, which demonstrate a focus on competency-building for youths with a mild
intellectual disability and is consistent with a Person-Centred Approach to planning (C. L.
O’Brien et al., 1997). In my research, the actions of educators confirmed person-centred
practices were happening within special schools in Trinidad and Tobago. Their actions can
exemplify how their behaviours and mindsets influenced their practice in learning
environments (Florian & Rouse, 2010; Giangreco et al., 2010). For example, the actions of
educators, such as Miss Richards, in providing guidance to parents/legal guardians can
demonstrate her role in wanting to help facilitate a transition from compulsory schooling to
post-compulsory school pathways for youths. By doing this, it speaks to her inclusive
behaviours recognising that parents/legal guardians and youths may not have all the
information needed to explore post-compulsory school options, and through information
sharing, this contributes to placing a person at the core of the planning process to where
he/she plays an active role in determining what matters to him/her (Clark et al., 2005).
Information sharing, such as the actions of Miss Richards, can facilitate exploration based on
what is important to a youth based on his/her likes, dislikes, dreams and nightmares.
Connected to a youth deciding what is important to him/her, is determining post-compulsory
school destinations.
4.6.2 Opportunities for Youths with a Mild Intellectual Disability

The opportunities for youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago revealed uncertainty in post-compulsory school destinations. This uncertainty was manifested in resource constraints and vague transition pathways.

4.6.2.1 Uncertainty in Post-Compulsory School Destinations: Resource Constraints

Internal resource constraints were manifested in special schools limited staffing and finances, while external resource constraints included bureaucratic ‘red tape’ and further/higher education and employment barriers. Educators, parents/legal guardians and youths spoke about limited teaching staff and alternate means special schools used to generate revenue.

... one challenge we face is staff, staffing, trained staffing [...] working with persons with disabilities require more staff than you will in a typical school [...] we don’t always have the required amount of staffing, so one person will have to do a lot. (Teacher Miss Dwyer, transcript p. 13)

... is a small school with little or no funding from the government so they they they only doing as best as they could right now. They don’t get much support and you always have to be asking for stuff, begging for stuff. And you really don’t get that support as you are a small school [...] Because we are small school, we really don’t get a lot and as parents we have to donate, we have to come together sometimes to pay the special Ed teachers. ‘Cause people like Miss Richards ... they are qualified teachers and sometimes the salary they getting, they really don’t have to, they don’t really have to stay there and actually endure all of that. And they stay because of the love for it and the love of the children, right. So they could have closed down the school and if they did we were not anywhere to put our kids. So you know I don’t think they are doing enough in terms of special Ed in Trinidad and Tobago, especially for the handful. (Parent Patricia, pp. 7, 15)

The Learning Institute Vocational School is a private school, is not a government funded school. That’s why they have to do fundraisers and all that for the school then to raise funds to support the school and all that. (Parent Tara, transcript p. 16)

It is because when they busy with the events and the fundraisers, it does be less studying for me and the students basically. [...] some teachers could be at the fundraisers while other teachers just go be teaching. (Student Thomas, transcript pp. 9, 10)
“I want to be a straightener [...] Like cars, like painting, painting cars. I ain’t learn that yet Miss.” (Student Matthew, transcript p. 21)

Internal resource constraints were manifested across private, vocational and government special schools. While I discussed resource constraints at the intragroup level of analysis, this repeated across the three participant groups, and I decided to include this finding at the intergroup level of analysis to show how it manifested in different ways across participant groups. Miss Dwyer’s perspectives revealed how staffing impacted her workload at The Learning Institute Vocational School to where she had to undertake additional roles and functions, often resulting in being away from the classroom. Educators’ absences at The Learning Institute Vocational School were noticed by Tara and Thomas. Tara’s perspective focussed on how internal funding constraints meant educators were responsible for fundraising activities to ensure the vocational school had the necessary revenue to offset expenditures (e.g., operational costs). Similarly, Thomas’ experience revealed how educators’ absence from the classroom, because of these additional activities, affected him and his peers. Thomas’ recommendation of a division of tasks and responsibilities, while plausible, may not be easily applicable to all special schools. Under-resourcing can be seen also in Patricia’s perspective of Foundation Scholars Private Special School to where parents/legal guardians donated to staff salaries because they recognised the need for the school’s existence. Under-resourcing also manifested in Accelerate Academy Private Special School not having a skills-based programme, based on Matthew’s interest, for him to be a straightener (i.e., automobile body repair). However, this school’s existence like others were described in terms of having a purpose within its respective community. For example, this was described by parents/legal guardians in these special schools providing their child with access to compulsory education opportunities.

26 Recalling resource constraints were described by educators in terms of funding, infrastructure; by youths in terms of staffing, facilities; and by parents/legal guardians in terms of staffing to facilitate transition planning process.
Internal challenges as described by participants were linked to external resource constraints. For example, a lack of government funding meant insecurity in the stability of the location of New Horizons Special School.

... the main challenge faced by this school is finance. [...] we are registered as a non-profit .... Being registered with the Ministry of Education ... if you change location you have to re-register with the ministry. [...] I had realized ... that sometimes places that we had moved to, to where I tried to upgrade the place for re-registration, you’ll find that as soon as you upgrade the place, the the landlords ask you to vacate the premises for one reason, one reason or the next. So I reach to the point that I said I am not upgrading the place again to see for re-registration, but I will wait until we can get our own building then that for re-registration, our own property where we could everything fix up, so you know that nobody can ask you to leave. So that was one of our challenge that you will put out, but on other people’s property. [...] because of our problems, you find that we cannot do as much as we want to do what we, but we would really like to do more. (Teacher Miss Noel, transcript pp. 16, 17, 18)

The lack of stable sources of revenue meant that the special school often relocated premises. Miss Noel disclosed being evicted about four times which meant relocation of the school’s premises had impacts, such as increased rent and operational costs, decreased non-fee-paying student in-take, staffing and teachers’ salaries. The requirement to re-register meant the special school had to meet all the legislated requirements for it to be opened to receive students. While ministry mandated requirements are valid, there is consideration for the school being registered as a non-profit, not having a fixed property location and facing revenue challenges. The school had to meet legislated requirements for sourcing its own property to educate learners with special education needs, without the support of government funding. Interim locations meant the school’s outlook towards educating students was hinged to external factors, such as tenancy contract, ministry approval, operational costs. Miss Noel’s perspective illustrated the interconnectedness between internal and external financial constraints and its probable effect on opportunities for youths.

Uncertainty in post-compulsory school destinations for youths were described in terms of further/higher education and employment barriers.
Honest truth, when he leave school, I don’t know if he want to finish school or he want to learn a trade because it it have a trade school [...] I I think they have a lot of programmes you know but I don’t know all the programs. They have a trade school and the trade school close down. Beside that, beside the trade you know, let he get something to do. And something to do and he could still focus and focus on his education if he really want to. Right. I might say some, I might say it here, but is up to he to do to finish what he have to finish from from school and continue do what he have to do. (Parent Vincent, transcript p. 9)

My child is out, but for other children who come in to have a place where they could go and learn, learn more skills. ‘Cause if they had, they would have had more skills. They have light and life where they build the school a bigger school. And still they don’t have the equipment to teach the gentleman and the, the young man more skills, you know. I would have, I would have liked that. (Parent Derrick, transcript p. 12)

Showing me how to make different chairs, cupboards, and like bed frames ... (Student Matthew, p. 25)

The perspectives of Vincent and Derrick reveal undetermined post-compulsory school destinations for Matthew and Tracey respectively. The closure of a trade school and limited options for further/higher education meant that youths could experience a non-seamless transition once they exited Accelerate Academy Private Special School and Brightstar Government Special School. For example, Tracey identified wanting to be a cook or baker, while Matthew wanted to be in the field of automobile-body repair and was learning Woodworking as a skills-based programme. The practical aspect of these identified areas could mean that special schools can look towards community-based partnerships as an entry into the world of work for youths.

However, this was often contingent on internal staffing resources at special schools and having employer partnerships.

... works on limited resources [...] we don’t have a job placement officer because that person was promoted ... I hope we get someone that would be able to really work the field and understand disability and will really be able to persuade and reach out to employers out there so that more persons with disabilities can be hired. (Teacher Miss Joseph, transcript p. 16)
In terms of getting them out to the world of work, it is somewhat totally the parents’ responsibility to get them into the field or into areas, which should not really be the ideal thing. I know the school is supposed to be involved in it, but presently it is not. Because for us to do this it requires having persons employed as job coaches who can guide the children, take them to these different places and ensure that they follow the instructions, help them to understand what they need to do at the job and to monitor them from time to time until really become independent. We do not have that kind of resource ... hence the reason why we not fully involved. (Teacher Miss Nkosi, transcript pp. 9-10)

... the collaboration that we have with the community ... over the years it has not been as close knit as we use to [...] I don’t know for what reason, but they have not taken, I could probably say on average they have not taken any of our students for probably the last four years. Prior to when I started working ... a lot of students were placed in those community jobs, but within the last four years they have not ... we haven’t had students being placed [...] So that would be kind of a hindrance, in terms of coming into response as the how, how are they accepting or transitioning into the job market? (Teacher Miss Abara, transcript pp. 16-17)

Educators’ perspectives point to hindrances encountered by special schools in developing and sustaining partnerships with employers. A shared perspective was not having a dedicated staff member focussed on fostering sustainable community-based partnerships and preparing youths to transition into the workforce. This meant the responsibility was transferred to parents/legal guardians to find and forge these partnerships for their child. While schools can advise, they shared a similar outlook in not having the capacity to lead this initiative to where there was a seamless transition to the world of work (e.g., co-op, on-the-job training) or further education (e.g., skills-trade institution).

The resource constraints expressed by participants across private, vocational and government special schools can have a (in)direct effect on post-compulsory school opportunities for youths. This can allude to a tension in educators’ role in fulfilling their professional requirements within learning environments, in the face of a reality that presents hindrances in facilitating a seamless transition from compulsory to post-compulsory school pathways for youths (Dee, 2006). For example, research confirms the need for specialised staff to facilitate the transition to post-compulsory school pathways, further/higher education,
employment as part of a seamless process (Beresford, 2004). Resource constraints influence how inclusion education is manifested in mainstream learning environments and remain a concern for developing nation states (Chimedza, 2008). In my research, resource constraints were manifested in special schools in Trinidad and Tobago, which influenced the experiences and perspectives of youths with a mild intellectual disability, parents/legal guardians and educators. Researchers argue that resource constraints in developing nation states, such as Trinidad and Tobago, are related to “limited economic resources” that affect how funding is distributed across the education system (Bacchus, 2008, p. 130). Conversely, there is an international call that resource limitations cannot be a reason for not providing equitable education for all, which includes youths with a mild intellectual disability (UNESCO, 2000). The experiences and perspectives of participants illustrate the dichotomy in how resource constraints are manifested, and how special schools adapt to educate youths with a mild intellectual disability (UNESCO, 1994). Educating youths can reveal what they are being taught and how it is preparing them for what they want to do after leaving school.

4.6.2.2 Uncertainty in Post-Compulsory School Destinations: Vague Transition Pathways

Linking the subjects and programmes taught at special schools to what youths identified as their future plans revealed vague transition pathways to post-compulsory school destinations. In focussing on what was taught, educators and parents/legal guardians identified academic subjects, skills-based programmes and extra-curricular activities available to youths at their respective special schools.

... Agriculture, Beauty Culture, Bookbinding, Welding, Woodwork, Office Administration, Garment Construction and Food Preparation. [...] remedial Math and English. There is also a Life Skills Program, Computer Literacy and the Comprehensive Sexuality Education [...] We have Entrepreneurial Studies as well. (Teacher Miss George, transcript pp. 6, 7, 10)

... they more, doing book works like addition, tables, learning Mathematics to check, to deal with money. Teaching her different words, learning tables, learning Mathematics to check, to deal with money. You know the basics in life that’s what Tracey and them doing right now. The basics all the basic they learning right now. (Parent Derrick, p. 7)
Academic subjects, skills-based programmes and extra-curricular activities can provide youths with knowledge and skills. For example, Miss George outlined the options of subjects and vocational programmes available at The Learning Institute Vocational School, while Derrick shared what Tracey was learning at Brightstar Government Special School.

I created a table (see Figure 23) to summarise youths reporting of their subjects, programme majors and dreams.

**Figure 23: Summary of Youths Self-Reporting of Subjects and Future Plans**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youths</th>
<th>Special School</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Programme Major</th>
<th>Future Plans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tracey</td>
<td>Brightstar Government Special School</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Remedial Mathematics, Remedial English, Social Studies, Science, Physical Education</td>
<td>Not identified</td>
<td>Cook, Baker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Remedial Mathematics, Remedial English Language Arts, Social Studies, Science, Information Technology, Visual and Performing Arts, Office Administration</td>
<td>Office Administration</td>
<td>Receptionist, Clerk, Office worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Remedial Mathematics, Remedial English Language Arts, Information Technology, Physical Education, <strong>Beauty Culture</strong>, Life Skills</td>
<td><strong>Beauty Culture</strong></td>
<td>Beautician / Cosmetology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Accelerate Academy Private Special School</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Remedial Mathematics, Remedial English Language Arts, Physical Education, Visual and Performing Arts, Woodwork, Food Preparation</td>
<td>Not identified</td>
<td>Automobile-body repair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anil</td>
<td>The Learning Institute Vocational School</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Remedial Mathematics, Remedial English Language Arts, Information Technology, Health and Family Life Education, Entrepreneurial Studies, Life Skills, <strong>Food Preparation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Food Preparation</strong></td>
<td>Chef</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table summary gives a visual representation of how youths reported on what they were studying and what they wanted to do (i.e., future planning) when they left their respective special schools. I used this summary as a guide to connect academic and skills-trades programmes to post-compulsory school destinations for youths. Highlighting in grey helped me to see if there was a (in)direct relationship in what was being learned and their identified post-compulsory school destination (e.g., employment opportunities). Thomas, Simone and Anil’s academic subjects and skills-trades programmes were providing them with knowledge and skills that aligned with their future career plans. While Ezra, Tracey and Matthew’s academic subjects
were not directly related to their future career plans, they could be beneficial in providing them with a level of competency as they pursued their future career plans. For example, remedial Mathematics and English can be used in being a baker or entrepreneur. However, all students had vague transition pathways for post-compulsory school destinations, as there was not a direct connection between post-compulsory school to either further education (e.g., skills-trade institution) or vocational (e.g., co-op work placements) opportunities. Vague transition pathways was also seen in special schools not consistently offering programmes based on the identified future plans of youths with a mild intellectual disability, as well as no identified or confirmed post-compulsory school destination for youths.

Vague transition pathways can reveal how youths with mild intellectual disabilities face uncertainty in post-compulsory school destinations. For example, during our interview, Derrick mentioned Tracey would be leaving compulsory schooling and admitted that he and his wife did not identify a next step for her, but confirmed they would support her choice. Planning for post-compulsory school destinations is an important facet of discussions amongst youths with a mild intellectual disability, parents/legal guardians and educators (Dee, 2004). There is consideration for service provisions throughout the process of transition planning to alleviate uncertainty and anxiety around post-compulsory school destinations (Aston et al., 2021; Ellman et al., 2020). The decision-making involved in transition planning amongst individuals reveals the friction between an individual’s future plans and other factors (e.g., defined pathways, policies, legislation) (Dee, 2004). Decision-making can be influenced individually (e.g., parents/legal guardians), behaviourally (e.g., prejudice, discrimination) and institutionally (e.g., absence of equity employment framework). These factors reveal the intricate process involved in transition planning for youths with a mild intellectual disability in preparing them for adulthood, and calls for a rethinking towards modernising transition planning to facilitate post-compulsory school preparation and a longer timeframe to bridge into the world of work. (Mitchell, 1999).
In applying the theoretical framework of Person-Centred Planning, pathways to learning and future planning are connected in how the former provides youths with avenues to learning (e.g., technical) to explore, while the latter reveals their plans or ideas for what they want to do when they leave school. Transition planning connects systems, such as education to employment (Richardson & Powell, 2011). While it is acknowledged that resource constraints can impede the efficacy of Person-Centred Planning, there is consideration for using alternate approaches to provide youths with opportunities (J. O’Brien, 2004). For example, educators and parents/legal guardians highlighted the different ways in which resource constraints manifested for youths. It is important to note that these constraints resulted in using innovative ways to pay teachers’ salaries, create revenue to maintain operation of the special school. Including vocational programmes as part of the curriculum can provide youths with skills and knowledge as they forge a pathway for themselves. Forging a pathway can mean using their skills and knowledge gained from compulsory schooling, in the face of uncertainty as they work towards a future that they want for themselves (J. O’Brien, 2004). Researchers advance that in Person-Centred Planning, failure to successfully execute a transition plan seamlessly can serve to develop an individual’s resiliency (J. O’Brien, 2004). For example, resiliency can be seen as an asset for youths with a mild intellectual disability in giving them an opportunity to learn from and grow as they transition across different life stages.

4.7 Summary

I analysed the data collected in my research by explaining my approach and theoretical framework. I outlined my steps to answer my three research questions at an individual and intragroup level of data analysis. At the individual level of data analysis, I summarised 20 participants’ responses to corresponding relevant related follow-up questions and identified their respective focus areas. I then used the individual level of data analysis for intragroup analysis.

At an intragroup level of data analysis, I compared responses within the three participant groups, as it related to each group’s research question. First, accounting for the perspectives of
educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling. Second, reporting on the experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling. Third, describing the perspectives of parents/legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from compulsory schooling. The experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability at special schools who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling point to supportive learning environments and being prepared for potential future jobs in the skilled trades. The perspectives of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling point to them having a sense of pride, passion and purpose and special schools having a curriculum focussed on skills-trade and remedial academics. The perspectives of parents and/or legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from compulsory schooling point to them having a positive outlook of special schools with them having a role in transition planning and wanting their child to be happy. I then used the intragroup level of analysis for intergroup analysis.

At an intergroup level of data analysis, I compared across the three groups. The process of transition based on their experiences and perspectives point to person-centred practices, which were manifested in curriculum modifications and provisions of support. While the opportunities for youths with a mild intellectual disability point to uncertainty in post-compulsory school destinations, which were manifested in resource constraints and vague transition pathways.

Using transcript excerpts, I reported on the experiences of youths, accounted for the perspectives of their teachers and parents/legal guardians, as well as supported my research findings and evidenced this by linking to literature. I also described how the experiences and perspectives of each participant group aligned with Person-Centred Planning, and Other focus areas and applied the theoretical framework of Person-Centred Planning to findings.
4.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I analysed the data collected in my research with a focus on an individual, intragroup, and intergroup levels of analysis to understand how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school. I discussed the process of transition for youths with a mild intellectual disability and identified what opportunities exist post-compulsory school transition for youths with a mild intellectual disability. Having completed my reporting on data findings, I transition to the next chapter on Implications for Policy and Practice.
5 Implications for Policy and Practice

5.1 Overview of Chapter

In this chapter, I explain the significance of my research findings within the context of how they may be important for policy and practice as it pertains to preparing youths with special education needs in Trinidad and Tobago for life after school. In section 5.2, I reflect on my research aim, questions and theoretical framework. In section 5.3, I summarise key findings, interpret and reflect on linkages to discussions in my Literature Review chapter, as well as include suggested recommendations for decision-makers. I summarise in section 5.4, and in section 5.5, I draw this chapter to a close and transition to my last chapter.

5.2 Research Aim, Questions and Theoretical Framework

5.2.1 Research Aim and Questions

I wanted to understand the present-day experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability, the perspectives of their parents/legal guardians and educators at special schools in Trinidad and Tobago. I discussed my research plan with Micah and his experiences helped me understand what compulsory schooling was like for him. In co-designing my research, our conversations identified key participant groups – youths, educators and parents/legal guardians. The aim of my research was to develop a deeper understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) for life after school.

Using Person-Centred Planning theoretical framework to my research aligned with my co-designing with Micah. I centred Micah in the conversation as an expert in his life, I asked about his experiences which revealed his likes, dislikes, learning pathways and future plans. In applying this to my research, I asked youths about their likes and dislikes, pathways to learning and future planning; parents/legal guardians about their perspectives on their child’s learning experiences and future planning; educators about their perspectives on pathways to learning at special schools for youths with a mild intellectual disability. Groups had similar focus areas, for example, youths and parents/legal guardians were both asked about their dreams and
nightmares. Recognising I did not have familial relations with participants prompted me to use an Other area of focus to build rapport through conversational prompts. For example, I asked youths about their views on teachers, parents/legal guardians about their perspectives on the special school attended by their child, and educators about the school’s curriculum and their perspectives on their career and teacher training. Using both Person-Centred Planning and Other areas of focus helped me to understand how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago were preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school.

5.3 Findings and Interpretation

In this section, I reflect on what I learned from my data analysis and from discussing my findings with Micah. At the beginning of my thesis, I reflected on whether my family’s historical experience was unique or a shared present-day reality in Trinidad and Tobago. Knowing that Micah and my compulsory school experiences were different, in how we were being prepared for life after school, it was important that I discussed and shared his feedback on my findings. A one-on-one conversation, focussing on one group at a time, allowed me to give him an update on the findings, such as youths’ views on their teachers, their dreams and nightmares. This demonstrated my transparency and accountability to him in sharing of his time and experiences to co-design my research.

Receiving and reporting on his feedback spoke to his consideration of and reflection on findings in relation to his experiences. This often meant comparing his experiences to that of participants, such as identifying where things changed or what needed to change where he thought more should be done for youths with a mild intellectual disability. During our conversation, I shared anonymised quotations by participants to give him context, such as how a youth described a supportive learning environment, why did they say they liked their teacher. I allowed for pauses in our conversation as he processed what I had shared and to give him an opportunity to ask me questions for clarifications. Doing this helped because it provided us with an opportunity to delve into his comments, such as asking him to share his thoughts on a quotation or tell me a bit more why he made a particular statement.
Micah’s comments provided me with an avenue to consider my family’s experiences in comparison to participants. This meant that I compared our experiences with the perspectives of educators, parents/legal guardians and the experiences of youths. Doing this helped me to draw out considerations for practice and make recommendations for policy and practice with a view towards options for how policymakers, parents/legal guardians, youths and special schools in Trinidad and Tobago can collaborate to prepare youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school.

5.3.1 Intragroup Level of Data Analysis – Experiences of Youths

My first research question asked about the experiences of youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability at special schools who are preparing to transition from compulsory schooling. A total of six youths participated who were between the ages of 15 to 18 years and were attending government, private and vocational special schools in Trinidad and Tobago.

5.3.1.1 Supportive Learning Environments

Youths described the teacher-student interaction (i.e., what teachers did) and how it affected them. Youths’ opinions of their teachers were positive in describing them as being kind, nice and taking the time to help them understand the contents of a lesson plan. Supportive learning environments were reflected in their positive emotions towards their teachers, who used different ways to help them understand what was being taught and their participation in extra-curricular activities. Youths described their teachers as their friends, being comfortable asking for help, and teachers taking the time to help them understand what was being taught during in-person and online classes. For example, one-on-one conversations or using videos to explain taught content. Youths identified participating in extra-curricular activities based on their interests, such as sports, music. Their involvement in extra-curricular activities identified what they liked about the school and how special schools created a sense of community and belonging for them, which allowed them to foster friendships. Youths’ description of their participation within and outside the classroom illustrated their learning experiences and development of lifelong skills, such as communication, interpersonal. It
depicted how youths’ learning was supported within special schools through academic and extra-curricular activities.

However, youths’ experiences also identified what they did not like about their schools. They spoke about changes they would make based on resource constraints, such as staffing and facilities. Staffing constraints were described in terms of teachers required to fulfil multiple roles that often removed them from the classroom. Facilities constraint manifested in the sharing of physical spaces by multiple classes coupled with limited equipment (e.g., manicure workstations) for students during practice sessions, and the need to modernise school infrastructure. This demonstrated youths being cognizant of the resource constraints within their learning environments. Although youths expressed a dislike for these resource constraints, they did not identify them as negatively affecting how they viewed their teachers.

In discussing these findings with Micah, he reflected on his experience as not always having a supportive learning environment at school. Although teachers and assistants would help him, this was infrequent and inconsistent. This practice meant his experiences at school were negative; he did not like going to school because he was not learning and did not have opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities. For example, English Language Arts was very difficult for him as he did not receive support to help him with reading, spelling and dictation. In comparison, he admitted Mathematics was his favourite class because he found it easier. He compared his experiences in Trinidad to Ontario where he received classroom support, admitting he liked going to school in Ontario because his teachers were helpful. For example, taking the time to bring him along and confirm he understood the contents of a lesson. There are differences in Micah’s experiences at a mainstream school to youths attending a special school in Trinidad. For example, contrasting emotions towards teachers, lack of individualised support, opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities. Although Micah did not explicitly identify resource constraints, I suggest the lack of ongoing assistance (e.g., support aide) and provisions (e.g., modified curriculum) affected his participation, skills and knowledge acquisition during his compulsory schooling. Reflecting on his experiences, I
consider what this may have meant for his future vocational opportunities. For example, what opportunities would he have access to with the knowledge and skills he acquired during compulsory schooling. I consider how compulsory schooling may not have prepared him for post-compulsory school transition in terms of being able to interview for and complete tasks/activities assigned in a job. This brings to the fore the onus on and the role of my parents in navigating uncertain pathways without support and services for their child. It could mean that Micah’s future post-compulsory school transition could have been different had my family not migrated to Canada. I say this based on Micah’s and my family’s experiences when we lived in Trinidad.

Educators’ actions in modifying the curriculum, using differentiated teaching methods and schools offering extra-curricular activities that created a sense of belonging for youths, speak to an intentional commitment in creating inclusive learning environments (Marshall, 2017). Supportive learning environments align with international conventions and government instruments in having inclusive learning environments for all students. Trinidad and Tobago is a signatory to and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and has a National Policy for Persons with Disabilities focussed on “inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities” (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2018, p. 2). This national policy aligns with international commitments and speaks to “equal opportunity for education” as well as “promotion of inclusion in schools” through curriculum modifications and resource allocations in special schools (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2018, p. 19). The actions of educators in my research confirmed they are enacting the spirit of this policy (e.g., modifying the national curriculum) within their respective special schools, so that youths with a mild intellectual disability have access to the same curriculum as their peers.

However, there was consideration for how resource constraints can affect inclusion at special schools. Marshall (2017) connects inclusive practices with costs for resources, such as specialised staff who are required in schools to meet the diverse needs of learners. While the
Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago’s National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2018) identifies resource allocation for special schools, my research identified resource constraints within six special schools. This was exemplified in youths reporting an absence of staff due to competing priorities (e.g., fundraising), the need to modernize school infrastructure and have adequate facilities for classes. There is consideration for how resource constraints are resolved in the interim so that special schools have a complement of specialised staff and reliable funding like their mainstream counterparts. This calls upon policymakers and decision-makers in Trinidad and Tobago to undertake education planning with a focus on equitable distribution of resources with the aim of meeting the educational needs of all irrespective of school type (e.g., government, private, vocational) (UNESCO, 1994). Fair access to resources can provide educators with opportunities to modernize facilities while having a stable source of funding. This can allow special schools to divert efforts towards having specialised staff, reliable revenue that can be used towards having sufficient equipment and implementing pathways to learning that can provide options to youths with a mild intellectual disability.

Reflecting on youths’ narratives illustrated an appreciation for their teachers, having opportunities to explore extra-curricular activities and seeing their respective special schools as safe spaces and places. I interpreted youths’ experiences as overall positive even though their respective special schools faced resource constraints. The teacher-student interaction is important in how contents of a lesson plan is designed, delivered and evaluated in a learning environment. For example, are different modalities used for a neurodivergent learner. In practice, this can help in the process of knowledge and skills development, as all learners do not engage with content the same way and at the same pace. Modifications and accommodations can demonstrate how teachers can adapt content in recognition of and accommodation for a neurodivergent learner. This has implications for a learner in terms of their experience, for example, do they feel their teacher considers them in the design, delivery and evaluation of lesson plans.
The identification of resource constraints by students suggested that special schools have limited budget, but this did not serve to diminish their efforts to provide youths with a mild intellectual disability with access to academic and extra-curricular learning opportunities. Instead, they used alternative sources of revenue to remain operational. While I saw this approach as innovative, I considered how sustainable it could be in the future and why special schools were not recipients of reliable, annual government funding like mainstream schools. As the Ministry of Education has regulatory oversight in the administration of the Education Act (e.g., registration of schools, curriculum), special schools should receive adequate funding to ensure they are operational to ensure all students have a fair and same access to compulsory education. This approach would provide special schools with access to a reliable source of revenue that can be used to address resource constraints identified by students. It can also (in)directly benefit students in them having access to necessary support staff, equipment, updated facilities. I inferred the actions of students asking for help as self-advocacy, and the positive responses of their teachers as inclusive practices. Asking for help indicated a youth may not have understood the message being conveyed, while the teacher having a one-on-one conversation, or using a video as a mode of explaining, identified practical ways in which time was taken to bring the student along in the process of learning. It demonstrated fairness in adapting the same content for a learner based on learning needs.

5.3.1.2 Being Prepared for Potential Future Jobs in the Skilled Trades

I asked youths about courses, programs or training available to them and mapped subjects and programmes as self-reported by youths to their respective special school for comparison. This helped me to see if the skills and knowledge being gained provided them with options, such as help them to get a job or further their education. It also helped me to understand their future plans or ideas for what they wanted to do when they left compulsory schooling, and simultaneously provided insights into what they did not want to happen to them.

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The six special schools maintained a traditional outlook in offering academic subjects, albeit at a remedial level. Remedial Mathematics and remedial English Language Arts were common subjects to all youths. Other academic subjects (e.g., IT, Science) were not common across special schools. Only youths attending private and vocational schools were enrolled in at least one skilled-based programme (e.g., Woodwork, Food Preparation). A combination of academic and skills-based programmes illustrated youths were gaining knowledge and practical experience in specific areas, which they can use to get a job or pursue further education. Youths disclosing their enrolment in academic and skilled-based programmes illustrated the different options available to them at their respective special schools. It linked to how the competencies developed from these programmes were preparing them for life after school, such as entering the world of work. While special schools maintained a traditional academic focus, youths’ plans and/or ideas for what they wanted to do when they left school focussed on future jobs as tradespersons. This included being small business entrepreneurs, such as electronics, aesthetician/beautician, chef. Although remedial Mathematics and English Language Arts provided youths with a foundational understanding (e.g., basic calculations, reading) there was not a direct link for some youths to their future career aspirations. For example, Ezra’s interest in electronics and Matthew’s interest in painting cars were not directly linked to their programmes of Food Preparation and Woodworking respectively. In contrast, Simone’s interest as an aesthetician and Anil’s dream to be a chef directly aligned with their skills-based programmes of Beauty Culture and Food Preparation respectively. Although special schools provided vocational learning opportunities for youths, these were not linked and/or aligned with their personal interests. This highlights the need for a Person-Centred approach to transition planning, recognising youths identified to me their interests and future plans. While identifying their dreams and aspirations for career choices, youths spoke about their nightmares or things they did not want to happen to them upon leaving school. This included not being harmed (e.g., hurt, robbed) to being unemployed, getting pregnant before marriage and loss of friendships.
In discussing these findings with Micah, he reflected on his dream and whether his compulsory schooling prepared him for the next stage in his life. He confirmed educators at the mainstream school did not ask him what he wanted to do after school, sharing during our discussion that he wanted to be an electrician and not having the option to participate in training, as the mainstream school he attended focused on academic subjects. He compared this to his experience attending compulsory schooling in Ontario where he got experiential learning opportunities and through this process realised that while he liked skilled trades (e.g., Woodworking), it was not part of his future employment plans. However, he had a similar outlook when hearing about youths’ nightmares. He voiced concerns about loss of friendships citing he missed his friends. He disclosed thinking about how he would manage in life post-compulsory schooling in Trinidad, recognising his difficulty reading, spelling, writing. Reflecting on his experiences, he identified wanting a future job in an office environment, such as a receptionist or in a field where he can advocate for people’s rights. Reflecting on Micah’s childhood experiences during compulsory schooling in Trinidad, I consider how was he being prepared for the real world in terms of literacy competency, understanding his likes and dislikes, creating a pathway of learning, future planning. I view Micah’s experiences as his compulsory schooling fulfilled a legal requirement, but not preparing him to transition into the next stage of his life. For example, exiting compulsory schooling with the necessary credentials, certifications or accreditation. I believe that had my family not migrated to Canada, my parents would have had the responsibility of navigating uncertain post-compulsory schooling pathways and deciding how best to support their child entering adulthood.

Being prepared for potential future jobs in the skilled trades pointed to vocational pathways for youths (Paul, 2011). Paul (2011) finds vocational and skilled trades as a common endeavour for youths with disabilities in Tobago. Within the policy context, international frameworks confirm the need for prioritising youths’ preparation for adulthood by them having competencies (i.e., skills and knowledge) so they can plan what they want to do post-compulsory schooling (UNESCO, 1994). This is important as there are linkages from education to an individual’s wellbeing, in how education can be used as the vehicle that prepares
individuals to undertake employment, while employment provides income that connects to wellbeing and being self-sufficient (Gayle-Geddes, 2015). Vocational pathways can provide employment opportunities for youths with a mild intellectual disability as they transition to adulthood. Employment opportunities are important as they can mitigate the under- and unemployment for persons with disabilities, while contributing to their socio-economic inclusion and wellbeing (Shevlin et al., 2020). There is consideration to having further education institutions that can provide additional programmes so youths can enhance their skills as part of continued learning opportunities and obtain credentials, certifications or accreditation that are recognised by employers. This has implications in the continuation of skills and knowledge acquisition in the pursuit of educational and vocational opportunities for youths. In practice, this can mean there are vocational institutions and/or apprenticeship opportunities that bridge the post-compulsory to vocational pathway for youths. It can provide special schools with a standardised suite of programmes that provide foundational competencies for youths, and following exit from compulsory schooling, there is entry into pathways that enhance their competencies with readiness for vocational opportunities. These vocational opportunities can be entering the world of work through (in)formal placements, such as internships, co-op, or starting a small business.

I interpreted the academic and skills-based programmes as diverse learning pathways available to youths. However, besides foundational Mathematics and English Language Arts, the availability of academic and skills-based programmes varied across private, vocational and government schools. The variation in programmes across special schools can be beneficial in providing diverse learning opportunities, while disadvantageous in limiting its access to a few or not having programme options. For example, IT was consistently offered to youths attending a vocational school and not to youths attending private and government schools. In practice, this can mean that a limited cohort of youths have a competency leaving compulsory schooling, while others will have to acquire the skills and knowledge on their own or post-compulsory schooling. The traditional outlook of academic subjects can suggest that youths attending special schools have access to a modified version of the national curriculum. Although these
subjects were taught at a foundational level, the competencies developed can help youths as they enter adulthood, such as being able to perform basic Mathematical functions, read and write. I infer there is a link between the academic and skills-based programmes provided by special schools in preparing them to pursue future employment opportunities based on their interest. While some youths may not have the necessary skills to perhaps immediately start their small business, there is consideration for applying the foundational knowledge and pursuing apprenticeship through further education opportunities. For example, this could be on-the-job training at a community business.

However, there remains a need to have clear preparation pathways for exploring and undertaking opportunities upon leaving compulsory schooling. This is important recognising there was not a definitive pathway for all from compulsory to post-compulsory, for example, youths having the recognised credentials, certifications or accreditation that would serve as a requirement for entry into future vocational and/or educational endeavours. Hearing about youths’ dreams and nightmares, I considered how they were like any of us in terms of thinking of what the future holds entering adulthood – who I want to be, what do I want to do, what I do not want to happen. I interpreted this as revealing insights into their ambitions, goals and concerns, while cognisant of the uncertainty in future planning.

5.3.2 Intragroup Level of Data Analysis – Perspectives of Educators

My second research question asked about the experiences of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling.

I asked educators to share their perspectives on their career, as part of my other area of focus. I wanted to know why they chose a career in teaching with a focus on youths with special education needs, their interest(s) and purpose for choosing to be a teacher, and their outlook or aim. Educators spoke about preparing youths for life after school, while identifying the limitation of their outreach for students with special education needs. For example, preparation
for life after school can mean instilling a sense of confidence, having determination to complete what you set out to do. In this study, educators identified creating a safe and supportive learning environment for students. In discussing their careers, they revealed barriers or hindrances and challenges (i.e., resource constraints) they faced in preparing students for the next stage in their lives. Resource constraints were funding, bureaucratic ‘red tape’ and facilities. Funding presented a barrier in terms of teacher recruitment, paying salaries and wages and operational costs for special schools. Funding had implications for sourcing equipment, personnel and renovating the school’s infrastructure. Bureaucratic ‘red tape’ meant that educators waited indefinitely for decision-making, such as procurement approvals and reallocation of monies earmarked for special to mainstream schools. Educators shared a similar concern in the lack of further and/or higher special education training programmes, which had consequences for the workforce and education system. Lack of a specialised workforce meant there was not a reliable source of personnel (e.g., special education teachers, teacher aides) to meet present and future needs for special schools.

Linked to resource constraints, they identified another barrier they faced – resistance and reluctance of individuals. Educators described parents, employers and persons in the community demonstrating resistance and reluctance through actions such as bullying, stigmatization and discrimination. For example, perceptions of potential for persons with disabilities were seen in parents sheltering or not allowing their child to develop competencies to become independent, employers discriminating in hiring practices and working conditions. Despite resource constraints and encountering resistance and reluctance, educators confirmed special schools existed for a purpose. This purpose connected to developing youths’ competencies so they can be self-sufficient adults, providing advisory support and leveraging (in)formal pathways as part of transition planning. Competency development focussed on including the youth in conversations on their interests, providing supports and learning opportunities to develop fundamental life skills. Advisory support manifested in opening their networks to inform parents/legal guardians about employment opportunities as well as employer education and awareness on disability inclusion.
As part of building rapport and getting information about the curriculum, I asked educators about subjects and programmes that were offered at respective schools to youths with a mild intellectual disability. Special schools focussed on skills-trade and remedial academic subjects. Remedial Mathematics and remedial English Language Arts were common subjects across government, private and vocational special schools. Educators confirmed adapting the national curriculum based on learners’ needs or using non-academically focussed curriculum to develop life skills. Academic and skills-based programmes were available to youths attending The Learning Institute Vocational School, Foundation Scholars Private School and Lifetime Learning Private Special School. A common approach for educators was developing an all-rounded student using remedial academics and skilled trades to prepare youths for entering adulthood, such as employment opportunities. In exploring this approach further, I asked educators about pathways to learning to understand the different ways they were developing students through exploration of opportunities in preparing them for life after school. Educators identified the use of formal, informal and hybrid approaches such as apprenticeships, career days and volunteer training respectively. For example, The Learning Institute Vocational School used apprenticeships and their Entrepreneurial Studies programme to inform youths about being a small business owner. Career days encouraged students to self-identify a skill and educators leveraged this information to provide guidance on what is required to achieve their career goal. Through (in)formal and hybrid approaches, educators used practical activities that allowed youths to self-identify an area of interest, allowed staff to use this information to give advice and support them.

In discussing these findings with Micah, he reiterated having a different experience with his teachers. He explained often being overlooked along with other students in his class who had reading difficulties. He was reluctant to disclose and was uncomfortable to self-identify as having a disability at his mainstream school because of being treated differently. Having a diagnosis of a mild intellectual disability meant he experienced prejudice in persons pre-judging his capability and second-guessing his aspirations of what he would do upon leaving compulsory schooling. For example, family members vocalising he would not obtain his driver’s
permit/licence and him depending on family support throughout his life. He admitted that having his driver’s permit and being able to commute (e.g., work, grocery store) gave him a sense of independence and fulfilment. In discussing his engagement with the curriculum at school, he confirmed it focussed on academic subjects and the skills he developed in agriculture class (e.g., gardening) can still be used today. However, his schooling did not prepare him for writing the SEA and for life after school. This meant he would not have the necessary credentials, certifications or accreditation upon leaving compulsory schooling. I view Micah’s experiences as relevant yet concerning, hearing about the practices of a mainstream school that did not promote and support pathways and other forms of learning. Based on his experiences, I infer educators at Micah’s school used a singular approach in instruction and teaching with limited accommodation for learner diversity. This is problematic as learners, such as my brother, are often not prioritised and overlooked resulting in them feeling marginalised and excluded from the process of learning. While I can only reflect on my brother’s experiences, there is consideration for the long-term implications for other students with disabilities who had a similar experience and how they are faring in adulthood. For example, literacy, job opportunities, being self-sufficient. The experiences of youths in my research, in some instances, are like that of my brother. While some (e.g., Simone) were enrolled in apprenticeship programmes (e.g., Beauty Culture) at their respective special schools, I thought of Tracey who transitioned from compulsory schooling a few weeks after our interview and did not have an identified pathway post-compulsory school transition. I think Tracey and Micah’s experiences were similar in that it was incumbent on family to determine a defined pathway post-compulsory school. The uncertainty in post-compulsory school transitions meant that the onus remains with families to determine what happens next in terms of future planning for their child with a mild intellectual disability. However, I do not diminish the efforts of educators who are working within non-negotiated constraints, as their outlook spoke to developing life skills in youths. I view the actions of educators who participated in my research as different to that of Micah’s teachers, in him describing being overlooked and ignored even while advocating for himself, and not being prepared to be self-sufficient post-compulsory school (e.g., further education, job opportunities). Micah’s experiences are not dissimilar to today, as resistance and
reluctance remains a reality in how persons with disabilities are perceived and treated within society.

Educators’ self-perception illustrate how they connected their career and identity (George et al., 2003). For example, their purpose and passion were to create an inclusive learning environment and develop youths’ competencies, so that they can lead fulfilling lives and positively contribute to society. There is recognition of the important role educators have within the education system, such as preparing students to transition from one life stage to another (Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2004). The nine educators, in my research, spoke about their determination to do their best with available resources to ensure students are equipped with knowledge and skills as they transition to adulthood. This mindset and behaviour can be interpreted as inclusive schools being responsive to, and educators accepting ownership for the diverse learning needs of students (Mittler, 2000). This was demonstrated in the six special schools explaining how they created, in their own ways, inclusive learning environments for youths with a mild intellectual disability. For example, in-class supports through one-on-one interaction, collaborating with parents and community networks to implement learning opportunities. This has consequences in practice as the actions of teachers affect the teacher-student and teacher-parent/legal guardian relationships. The accommodations and modifications based on learner needs describe how learning is a collaborative and dynamic process (Osborne, 1991).

However, barriers such as resource constraints, resistance and reluctance call into question how youths with a mild intellectual disability are being prepared for post-compulsory school destinations. This is important as youths entering adulthood can face compounded barriers accessing further/higher education and vocational opportunities. For example, there is recognition that persons with disabilities face barriers (e.g., behavioural) in employment (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). Reports have documented the need for persons with disabilities to have fair access to the same opportunities by meaningfully enacting international conventions (e.g., UNCRPD) and prioritising commitments.
to modernize systems (e.g., education) to be inclusive (UNICEF, 2013). The focus on remedial academics and streaming towards vocational programmes were common across the six special schools. On one hand, it can be said that youths are leaving special schools literate, while on the other hand there is consideration for having a recognised standardised accreditation (e.g., high school diploma) to pursue future educational and vocational opportunities (Paul, 2011). For example, to mitigate the dilemma of having post-secondary accreditation, The Learning Institute Vocational School focussed on apprenticeships as part of its skills-based programmes to enable youths develop their competencies and acquire on-the-job experiences. In my research, apprenticeships and/or other accreditation-based pathways were not consistent across the six special schools. This inconsistency reveals the need for policymakers and decision-makers to invest equally in special schools towards providing persons with disabilities with equitable opportunities in education (Paul, 2011). This is needed based on educators who described lack of funding to pay their salaries and wages, prolonged delays in funding approvals to procure equipment and specialised services (e.g., teacher aides, staff).

While legislation speaks to non-discrimination in education and employment, it also contains a clause of “unjustifiable hardship” to mitigate for factors such as impact on the individual, financial burden to fulfil the request and availability of required provision of goods or services (Equal Opportunity Act, 2000, pp. 16-17). While government instruments such as legislation (e.g., Equal Opportunity Act) advocate for persons with disabilities, they can also embed ‘opt-out’ clauses that, in practice, can impede employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. Recognising the under- and unemployment rates of persons with disabilities are higher than their able-bodied peers, it is recommended that clauses of undue burden be removed from legislation (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). This could have significant implications for youths with a mild intellectual disability who are embarking on careers in the skilled trades. Government instruments can be used as vehicles to enact societal change towards persons with disabilities, for example, non-discrimination hiring practices, public and private sector hiring quotas, mandatory employment accommodation (United Nations, 2006; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019).
Ratification of international conventions and protocols, and enactment of local anti-discrimination legislation and disability inclusion policies are a necessary first step towards institutional change. There remain implications for practice in changing behaviours and removing conditional clauses that can serve to impede access to employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

I interpreted the perspectives of educators as wanting to be changemakers in the lives of future generations, while working within non-negotiated constraints. By non-negotiated constraints, I refer to the limited or non-existent authority in decision-making for funding and limited influence in changing human behaviours towards a paradigm shift of disability inclusion. Irrespective of these resource constraints, barriers and challenges, educators’ narratives interlinked their sense of pride, passion and purpose in wanting to have a positive influence in the lives of youths with a mild intellectual disability. They recognised the power they have within the classroom to affect what and how content is being taught and guiding parents/legal guardians in planning for their child’s future. I construed this as them having positional power and spheres of influence to make incremental, yet intentional changes in the lives of youths through competency development and knowledge transfer. I considered how non-negotiated constraints affected them trying to provide youths with accessible learning opportunities, developing their competencies to function in the real-world and be self-sufficient. I view their actions as practical and innovative in how they used modified curriculum, focussed on developing life skills and self-advocacy so that youths can make interim plans upon leaving school.

While funding was cited as a primary barrier across the special schools, I also consider resistance and reluctance as equally important to address. I see funding as providing special schools with the wherewithal to ensure they can recruit specialised staff, procure equipment, modernise infrastructure based on community needs for students with disabilities. However, funding cannot resolve all concerns in preparing youths to transition from compulsory schooling, such as pathways to employment, education accreditation/certification/credentials,
employment parity with their peers. There needs to be a broader strategy focussed on disability inclusion education and awareness that addresses closing the achievement gap and preparing youths to be successful for life after school. While adapting the national curriculum to make it accessible to youths and developing life skills, there is consideration for how what is being learned translates into post-graduation pathways (e.g., further education, employment). I do not suggest this resides alone with special schools, even if they are part of the education system that is linked to the labour market. I see the need for collaboration amongst special schools, parents/legal guardians, persons with disabilities, policymakers and employers (e.g., public, private, non-for-profit) in designing, implementing, monitoring and reporting on academic attainment and closure of the employment gap for persons with disabilities. For example, there can be community-based partnerships between special schools, private and public sector employers who position themselves as leaders in actively being exemplars driving change forward. The implementation of, and embedding accountability and compliance through periodic reporting, can be an initial pathway forward in taking actions and nudging behaviour change in society.

I support educators’ stance that special schools exist for a purpose because their focus is on educating persons with disabilities who were previously enrolled in a mainstream school or had limited access to compulsory education. This was demonstrated in educators modifying the national curriculum or using international curriculum, designing and implementing accessible learning pathways for youths in preparing them to transition from compulsory schooling. There was a practical approach in designing lesson plans, such as using local newspapers for reading and comprehension. They also used alternate approaches to develop life skills through information sharing on how to be an entrepreneur, offering vocational programmes and extra-curricular activities. The use of practical approaches to understanding youths’ career choices allowed teachers to use this information to advise on how they can achieve their career goals.

Recognising some students with special education needs and disabilities are educated within regular/mainstream schools, there is consideration for having a sector partnership
towards ensuring these students receive the necessary supports within their respective learning environments. The aim of education should not be limited to basic literacy, but preparation for the next and subsequent stages in life. Compulsory education serves as a foundation for embarking on endeavours as we transition through life. For example, applying knowledge and skills in co-op/internship opportunities, enrolling in a learning programme. There needs to be a concerted effort towards ensuring students with special education needs and disabilities also have a robust foundation during compulsory schooling, as their educational attainment has implications for post-compulsory school pathways, achievement of their potential, quality of life and lifelong success. The intended outcome is ensuring all learners are supported through an accessible curriculum within inclusive learning environments that prepares them for future opportunities.

Using an intragroup level of analysis, the perspectives of educators at special schools who are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability to transition from compulsory schooling pointed to them as having sense of pride, passion and purpose, and curriculum focussed on skills-trade and remedial academics. I interpreted and discussed the findings with Micah and reflected on his experiences. I move on to discuss the findings of my third research question with a focus on the perspectives of parents/legal guardians.

5.3.3 Intragroup Level of Data Analysis – Perspectives of Parents/Legal Guardians

My third research question asked about the perspectives of parents/legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from compulsory schooling.

5.3.3.1 A Positive Outlook of Special Schools

I asked parents/legal guardians about their perspectives of special schools to build rapport and know why they selected a particular one for their child. Linked to this inquiry, and as part of my Person-Centred Planning focus area, I asked about their child’s learning experiences. I wanted to know whether the learning environment accommodates their child’s needs and supportive in helping him/her get the knowledge and skills across different areas.
Parents/legal guardians explained their child’s sense of belonging as he/she not being bullied or excluded at his/her respective special school. They disclosed that their child was often bullied at his/her former mainstream schools and the choice of special school was based on factors, such as proximity to residence, specialised staff, third-party recommendations. A sense of belonging meant the learning environment at special schools supported their child through accommodations (e.g., one-on-one support, extra time) and opportunities (e.g., extra-curricular activities) to be part of the school’s community. This highlighted collaboration in sharing information about how educators can support youths and parents/legal guardians. Collaboration and information sharing extended to special schools having a role in transition planning.

5.3.3.2 Special Schools Have a Role in Transition Planning

I asked parents/legal guardians what skills and knowledge they wanted their child to learn while at school because I wanted to know what was being taught at schools and how this was preparing youths for the next stage in life. Parents/legal guardians had a similar outlook in wanting their child to be literate, expressed a focus on remedial academic subjects and skills-based programmes. They viewed educators in an advisory role, providing guidance on post-compulsory school transition opportunities, while identifying resource constraints at special schools affected how much the school could have helped in planning for these opportunities. Funding constraints were manifested in schools not having dedicated personnel to build community partnerships and facilitate a warm transfer to receiving organisations, limited infrastructure capacity and little to no government financial support. Their perspectives revealed how they saw the role of special schools in preparing their child for post-compulsory school transition, while acknowledging their resource constraints.

5.3.3.3 Wanting Their Child to be Happy

Linked to preparing for post-compulsory school transition, I asked parents/legal guardians about their future planning for their child. I wanted them to share insights about what their child should do next and how they were planning for this, while identifying
opportunities, barriers and/or challenges. They spoke about supporting their child in his/her endeavours, wanting to be self-sufficient, successful in life and having gainful employment opportunities. For example, being a business owner and not relying on social assistance, being accredited in a skilled trade. They were concerned about their child’s wellbeing, explaining these in terms of their vulnerability and being taken advantage of (e.g., bullying, harassment) in the workplace.

In discussing these findings with Micah, he spoke about having a different experience at school and wondered aloud why he did not get that treatment, remarking “why the change of heart.” He said his experience would have been much better at school if he had a similar experience like the youths in my research who attended special schools. He admitted he wanted to go to school and wanted something like these students had, such as asking him what he wanted to do as an adult. He agreed that special schools have an active role in preparing youths to transition from compulsory schooling and emphasized the importance of knowing the interests of students. Parents/legal guardians concerns and aspirations for their child were important as it shows they were happy for and wanted their child to be successful life. In reflecting on Micah’s remarks, I empathised with his sentiments, wishing these opportunities were offered to him during compulsory schooling. There is validity in his remark as wanting to go to school to learn, but being ignored and overlooked in the learning environment can result in a negative experience. This negative experience can mean disengagement with and a level of frustration in wanting to learn but being overlooked by educators. I do not believe a student should experience this as it can affect how they view school, educators and learning environments as they progress through life. I find Micah’s experiences in comparison to participants in this research different, for example, classroom accommodations and supports, remedial academic and vocational programme opportunities. The consequences to my brother may be different to those of his generation who were also in a similar situation. Only when my family migrated to Canada, I see him having similar learning opportunities to the six youths who participated in my research, such as learning skilled trades (e.g., Woodworking), remedial academic subjects. While Micah’s experiences may be different to the six youths based on their
experiences during compulsory schooling, I consider what this meant for their future plans. For example, the six youths identified their future plans and there is regard for how these manifested as they exited compulsory schooling in terms of who they wanted to be, what they wanted to do (i.e., job) and how they saw themselves.

Having a positive outlook and the role of educators as liaison in advising parents about community opportunities are indicative of an inclusive ethos within these special schools (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). An inclusive ethos speaks to educators’ belief that all students can learn being translated into practice in modifying lesson plans based on a learner’s needs (De Lisle et al., 2017). In my research, parents/legal guardians spoke about wanting their child to develop life skills to be independent citizens, while revealing their concerns about their child’s wellbeing. Their concerns speak to their anxiety and consideration for what the future holds for their child, for example, employment opportunities, life choices, independence (Dee, 2006; Mitchell, 1999). The duality of this perspective is valid as an individual’s wellbeing is connected to their health, education, employment, familial relations (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). The concern of parents/legal guardians for their child’s wellbeing aligns with other researchers’ findings. Harry (2020) identifies the concerns of parents to have their child with a disability be self-sufficient adults. This is reiterated in international reports that document, for persons with disabilities, there is consideration for barriers (e.g., behavioural, institutional, environmental) and how these can compound access to healthcare, education and employment opportunities (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). Researchers advocate providing support networks for parents/legal guardians to help them during this transition process (Dee, 2004). This can mitigate their apprehension and facilitate information-sharing amongst them, for example, educational and/or vocational opportunities. Support networks can be a facet of the process of transition as educators would eventually be absent, but parents/legal guardians would continue to be part of their child’s life.
I interpret the perspectives of parents/legal guardians as an appreciation for the existence of special schools. A sense of belonging at school meant special schools created an inclusive environment for their child. The acknowledgment of this by parents/legal guardians demonstrated that educators were accommodating learner diversity through practical approaches, such as one-on-one interaction. Accommodations and supports are important in creating an inclusive learning environment because all students may not engage with content the same way, at the same pace and in the same format. There is consideration for a neurodivergent learner (e.g., learning difficulties) and learning styles (e.g., visual, auditory). Parents/legal guardians’ observations of how educators were available to help, even after school hours, illustrated their recognition of a commitment to working with youths at their learning pace. I infer parents/legal guardians’ preference for focusing on remedial academic and skills-based programmes, as wanting their child to access educational opportunities to develop skills and gain knowledge to prepare them to enter adulthood. I understood this as a preference for life skills and skilled trades, which they saw as contributing to being able to be aware of fundamental aspects of daily living and having the knowledge to forge their pathways and be self-sufficient. Being self-sufficient weighed on their future plans in as much as they saw their child using the skills and knowledge from compulsory schooling to be an entrepreneur and happy in their endeavours. The educator-parent/legal guardian collaboration highlighted the benefits of both groups working together to coordinate next steps for youths. I interpreted this overall partnership as being mutually beneficial and respectful, as it pointed to them being actively involved and having a vested interest in the child’s life. The dreams of parents/legal guardians are like those of others who want their child to be successful and happy in life. Their concerns about their child are not dissimilar to others, as vulnerability is not only limited to youths with a mild intellectual disability. I view the concerns of parent/legal guardians as valid because it illustrates a deeper concern for what happens next for their child upon exiting compulsory schooling.

Using an intragroup level of analysis, I reported on the perspectives of parents/legal guardians whose child with a mild intellectual disability is preparing to transition from
compulsory schooling. Their perspectives point to a positive outlook of special schools, special schools having a role in transition planning, and wanting their child to be happy. I interpreted and discussed the findings with Micah and reflected on his experiences. While the intragroup findings addressed the three research questions, I wanted to examine their implications for policy and practice at an intergroup level. This helped with my research aim to understand how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school. It allowed me to get a broader perspective on the process of transition and opportunities for youths with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago.

5.3.4 Intergroup Level of Analysis – Process of Transition

Based on cross group comparisons of the experiences of youths and perspectives of educators and parents/legal guardians, the process of transition point to person-centred practices, while opportunities for youths with a mild intellectual disability point to uncertainty in post-compulsory school destinations.

5.3.4.1 Person-Centred Practices

In my research, person-centred practices were described by participants in terms of curriculum modifications and provisions of support. Curriculum supports meant educators followed the national curriculum, but modified it based on learner needs which was illustrated in offering remedial subjects with the addition of extra-curricular activities. Parents/legal guardians explained modifications in terms of blending theoretical and practical components of a subject, such as using the knowledge of how something is done and being able to learn by doing. For example, this was seen in Simone learning about a topic area and then having the opportunity in her Beauty Culture class to apply what she learned through practice. For youths, it meant educators using different ways to teach based on a learner’s preference, such as one-on-one conversation, watching a video. Linked to curriculum modifications were provisions of support, which were manifested in the roles of educators as advisors. In this capacity, they shared information and acted as liaisons facilitating post-compulsory school opportunities. They assumed roles as coaches as transition planning advisors for parents and being responsive to
youths’ homework inquiries outside of regular working hours. This demonstrated educators’ multiple roles and services they provided to help youths and guide parents in their decision-making. Their actions illustrated how educators were (in)directly collaborating with youths and their networks of support to bridge a pathway from compulsory to post-compulsory school destinations.

I view this partnership as focussing on helping youths. This demonstrates a collaborative approach accommodating the needs of youths, while information-sharing with parents/legal guardians to plan post-compulsory school destinations. The curriculum can be used to facilitate the process of transition planning, such as developing competencies, exploration of learning opportunities (Dee, 2006). My research identified educators developing youths’ competencies through practical hands-on activities, while provisions of support were illustrated in being available to share information with youths and parents/legal guardians. This approach confirms the collaboration and coordination of efforts towards planning for youths’ future.

I interpret the actions of educators as demonstrating inclusive practices and elements of a Person-Centred Approach. They focussed on youths and their likes, dislikes, dreams and nightmares and leveraging their networks to inform parents about prospective pathways to explore. This approach can suggest working effectively with parents/legal guardians and youths towards a common goal of facilitating the transition from one life stage to another. In discussing these findings with Micah, he agreed that preparing youths for the real-world was important, as what is learned at school helps them navigate adulthood. He encouraged having a focus on financial/budgeting as part of learning opportunities as this helps them manage their monies (e.g., earnings, purchases). He reflected on his experiences of not having modifications to accommodate his learning needs, teachers not taking the time to ensure he understood contents, lack of textbooks to help him follow through on what was taught and not having lessons on financial/budgeting. A lack of preparation can have consequences on how an individual fares in making decisions that affect their health, finances, wellbeing, which can have subsequent implications in terms of their success in being able to support themselves in
adulthood. For example, an individual who does not have skills and knowledge that prepares them for adulthood can be at a disadvantage in seeking gainful employment, supporting themselves and/or family. I agree with Micah’s recommendations that a purpose of compulsory schooling is to prepare an individual for adulthood by applying the skills and knowledge gained into making choices on friendships, finances, learning and job opportunities, and health and wellbeing. Preparation can help individuals use the information to make decisions that contribute to their sense of independence, responsibility, and accountability. It can help individuals participate in, contribute to, and give them a sense of belonging in their communities.

5.3.5 Intergroup Level of Analysis – Opportunities for Youths with a Mild Intellectual Disability

5.3.5.1 Uncertainty in Post-Compulsory School Destinations

In my research, youths, parents/legal guardians, and educators pointed to uncertainty in post-compulsory school destinations because of resource constraints and vague transition pathways. Internal resource constraints were identified as limited staffing and finances, while external resource constraints were described as bureaucratic ‘red tape’ and further/higher education and employment barriers. Participants shared a similar view in how limited staffing meant that special schools did not have sufficient specialised personnel, resulting in existing staff undertaking multiple roles. For example, a principal would have roles that included teaching, oversight of school administrative tasks. The effects of not having a reliable revenue stream meant that special schools resorted to periodic fundraising activities, staff did not receive salaries or wages, teachers were absent from classes as they had to undertake additional tasks in support of fundraising activities. For example, Patricia shared how parents paid teachers and Miss Richards confirmed staff not being paid a salary for months. Special schools were often described as having insufficient physical space to accommodate the growing student population or in need of renovations to facilities and infrastructure. For example, Derrick and Miss Nkosi identified a lack of physical space, Thomas and Simone described the need for renovations.
Internal resource constraints were linked to external resource constraints. This was evidenced in New Horizons Special School not having a stable source of revenue and relocating several times, while having to re-register each time with the Ministry of Education but not receiving funding from government for a permanent school location. There is consideration for how relocation and re-registering affected access to compulsory education and learning opportunities for students. External resource constraints focussed on further/higher education and employment barriers. Parents/legal guardians spoke about uncertainty for their child in post-compulsory school destinations. For example, Vincent and Derrick were unsure of what options were available to Matthew and Tracey respectively due to the closure of a local trade school. This meant that their respective special schools could not bridge a transfer to a local vocational school. Barriers to employment were described by educators in not having dedicated personnel (e.g., job placement officer) to foster community-based partnerships that bridged the transfer from compulsory schooling to the world of work. Educators confirmed having a supportive advisory role in sharing information with parents/legal guardians who then took a lead role in bridging from school to further educational or vocational opportunities.

Resource constraints described the realities within private, vocational and government special schools, while identifying the (in)direct effect on post-compulsory school opportunities for youths. Academic subjects, skills-based programmes and extra-curricular activities provided youths with knowledge and skills, while allowing them to pursue non-academic interests. I mapped subjects, programmes, and youths’ future plans to identify what they were learning in their respective special schools. I wanted to see if there was a (in)direct relationship in what was being learned to their identified post-compulsory school destination, such as employment opportunities. In linking what youths were learning to their self-identified future plans revealed vague transition pathways to post-compulsory school destinations. Thomas, Simone, and Anil’s academic and skills-trades programmes provided them with competencies that aligned with their future plans. While Ezra, Tracey and Matthew’s academic subjects were not directly related to their future career plans, the skills and knowledge they acquired can help them pursue further learning towards their future career plans. For example, remedial Mathematics...
and remedial English Language Arts can help in learning to be a baker, self-employment, or entrepreneur. However, a shared similarity for all youths’ future plans was not having a direct connection between post-compulsory school to further education (e.g., trade school) or vocational (e.g., work placement) opportunities. Vague transition pathways revealed the uncertainty in post-compulsory school destinations for youths with a mild intellectual disability. For example, this was evident in my conversation with Derrick. Tracey was leaving school a few weeks after our interview, and Derrick confirmed that he and his wife would support her in whatever she decided to do without identifying what Tracey would be doing after she left school.

In discussing these findings with Micah, he advocated for schools to exist that are well-resourced to ensure youths with disabilities have the same and fair access to educational and vocational opportunities as their peers. He identified the need for schools to have teachers who are specialised or have specialised staff (e.g., aide, teacher assistant) in the classroom to help students through one-on-one support. Reflecting on his time at school, he would have benefited from these supports as he wanted to learn and wanted to attend school. I support Micah’s suggestion for specialised personnel in the classroom because it helps teachers in delivering content and allows for students to receive individual attention as needed in the classroom. This can provide teachers with support, help students move at their own pace to understand content based on their needs and learning style, while demonstrating practical ways in which all are included and part of the process of learning. It does not ignore, overlook, or differentiate learners, but recognises learner diversity and seeks to include them fairly in the process of acquiring knowledge and skills.

Research confirms the employment opportunities for youths with a mild intellectual disability remain an issue, with calls for having a transition pathway from special schools to work and a prolonged planning process because of its multifaced and complex nature (Mitchell, 1999). Resource constraints remains a challenge in meeting education for all goals. International reports, such as The Dakar Framework for Action – Education for All: Meeting our
Collective Commitments, recognise the persistent resource challenges faced by countries in meeting education for all goals because of underfunding and redirverting funding to other priorities (UNESCO, 2000). The Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000) details how resource constraints have implications in terms of the quality of education received and its subsequent effects on an individual’s literacy, livelihood, and wellbeing. Uncertainty in post-compulsory school destinations have implications for youths and their networks. The paucity of and/or fragmented allocation of resources can manifest in limited equipment, specialised personnel, inadequate infrastructure, and prolonged wait-times for decision-making. These components can affect the quality of learning for youths, while upholding longer-term inequitable outcomes in terms of their employment opportunities, economic livelihood. Addressing these resource constraints can mean allocating annual funding to special schools, decentralising decision-making for procurement to where schools can use their allocated budget for resources.

The perspectives of educators in my research supports this stance in revealing the uncertainty and non-linear progression in transition pathways for youths across special schools. I interpret the findings of uncertainty in post-compulsory school destinations as concerning, which aligns with international calls to action and research. While each of us may face uncertainty upon exiting compulsory schooling, the vague pathways to further/higher education and/or vocational opportunities are more pronounced for youths with disabilities. This uncertainty can affect how they see themselves (e.g., identity, future) and how others perceive them (e.g., peers, family, society). There is consideration for how their additional learning needs are supported in post-secondary environments and accommodated in employment. Concerns for how uncertainty affect their future can have consequences for their health and wellbeing, economic livelihood, life choices (e.g., starting a family) and quality of life.

I consider on how likely the youths with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago are to achieve the type of aspirations they described in my research in terms of their future plans. Recalling Ezra wanting to be a business owner, Tracey a cook or baker, Thomas a
receptionist/clerk or officer worker, Simone a beautician/aesthetician, Matthew an automobile-body repair worker and Anil a chef. While I consider them using their knowledge and skills to forge a self-employed pathway for themselves, I realise that this may not be a linear process in the sense of leaving their respective special schools and seamlessly entering the world of work. For example, several youths in my research would need to be hired by a third-party (i.e., employer) to achieve their aspirations such as Thomas, Simone. While acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to prepare them for entering their respective employment areas, there is consideration for provision of accommodation by the employer recognising individual disability needs. This raises the notion of being employable (i.e., competency in an area), which does not necessarily equate to employment opportunities, and highlights the uncertainty in entering the world of work and continuous employment for youths with disabilities (Mitchell, 1999). I consider the absence of a defined and/or identified pathway from a special school to entering the world of work to be concerning, as there can be limits to their future plans in terms of applying the skills and knowledge gained towards income generating opportunities, which can be a means of helping contribute to their health and wellbeing, socio-economic livelihood, independence and decision-making as adults. This is important recognising a lack of gainful employment has compounded effects on how persons with disabilities can provide for themselves and their families (Tisdall, 1994). Linked to achievement of identified aspirations is how realistic they can be achieved within the current context of Trinidad and Tobago.

I reflect on the future plans of each youth and while they are practical choices, I consider how realistic each is given the societal, financial and policy context in Trinidad and Tobago. Societal barriers can be exemplified in negative attitudes, stigma, discriminatory practices towards persons with disabilities, which were shared by participants. Financial barriers can be manifested in the absence of and/or underfunding of programs, resources (e.g., educators, infrastructure) for special schools in comparison to mainstream schools. Policy barriers can be seen in not embedding accessibility and using a disability inclusive lens in the design and/or evaluation of formal government instruments (e.g., legislation, regulation) as well as the absence of mandatory special education policies (e.g., transition planning) within compulsory
schooling. The findings in my research confirm that societal barriers do exist that inhibit social inclusion for persons with disability in Trinidad and Tobago. Social barriers were manifested in educators describing resistance and reluctance in terms of attitudinal barriers, while parents/legal guardians voiced concerns about their children’s wellbeing in terms of their vulnerability. Financial barriers were described by all participants in terms of resource constraints, while policy barriers were evidenced in the absence of a transition planning policy, segregated learning environments, clauses of conditionality for disability inclusion, mechanisms for monitoring enactment of legislation. These factors can serve to limit the inclusion of persons with disabilities into aspects of society (e.g., social, economic), which can have a compound effect on them achieving their aspirations. For example, I consider Matthew who wanted to be an automobile-body repair worker and not having access to a programme(s) to develop the skills and acquire knowledge. A lack of a defined pathway (e.g., internship, co-op, vocational institution) for Matthew to have competency in this field can serve to prolong and/or constrain entry into the world of work. In contrast, Thomas had an opportunity to develop skills acquire knowledge about being an office worker through the Office Administration programme at The Learning Institute Vocation School. While Thomas has an opportunity to acquire this competency, there is consideration for the pathway into the world of work may not be a seamless based on societal barriers. These examples can demonstrate the non-linear pathway across systems (i.e., education to employment) and how they serve to limit opportunities for persons with disabilities, with implications of this seen in under- and higher unemployment rates for persons with disabilities in comparison to their peers, social exclusion, and “long-term income poverty” (Gayle-Geddes, 2015; Singal, 2010, p. 47). This can demonstrate the persistence of disadvantaging persons with disabilities, in that while their future plans may be realistic and practical, development of competencies can be hinged to limited educational resources, access to post-compulsory school pathways can be contingent on socio-economic barriers, which can result in negative actualisation of their aspirations.

The intergroup level of analysis provided an in-depth understanding of how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with special education needs (mild
intellectual disability) for life after school. It reveals a complex and multifaceted network involved in the process of preparing youths to transition from compulsory schooling. Complex, in the experiences of youths coupled with the perspectives of parents/legal guardians and educators that revealed how inclusion was manifested in the six vocational, private and government special schools in Trinidad and Tobago as described by 20 participants. Multifaceted, in how collaboration and coordination happened during and in preparation for youths exiting compulsory schooling. The experiences and perspectives of participants identify resource constraints, processes in place to prepare and support youths’ transition, but fragmented or inconsistent pathways in post-compulsory school destinations. I interpreted the findings, shared Micah’s responses, and reflected on his experiences.

5.4 Summary

At the intragroup level of analysis, the experiences of six youths point to them as having supportive learning environments and being prepared for potential future jobs in the skilled trades. The perspectives of nine educators identify a sense of pride, passion and purpose, and curriculum focussed on skills-trade and remedial academics. The perspectives of five parents/legal guardians reveal a positive outlook of special schools, special schools having a role in transition planning and wanting their child to be happy. At the intergroup level of analysis, based on the experiences of youths and perspectives of educators and parents/legal guardians, the process of transition point to inclusive practices, while opportunities for youths identify uncertainty in post-compulsory school destinations.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I summarised key findings at the intragroup and intergroup levels of analysis. In focussing on the findings, I linked them to literature, interpreted and discussed them with Micah while reflecting on his comments. I now pivot to my final chapter – Conclusion.
6 Conclusion

6.1 Overview of Chapter

In my final chapter, I discuss in section 6.2 the overall contributions my research has made to knowledge about the experience of transition from compulsory schooling for youths with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago. In section 6.3, I discuss limitations of the research. Based on my findings, in section 6.4, I make recommendations for policymakers and practitioners in Trinidad and Tobago. Then, in section 6.5, I identify future research in this area. Following this, in section 6.6 I summarise and close my thesis.

6.2 Contributions to Research

My research has contributed to knowledge in closing the gap on how special schools are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school in Trinidad and Tobago. Data collected and findings reported provided topical information in understanding the preparation to transition to life after school for students with a mild intellectual disability who are attending special schools in Trinidad and Tobago. I relied on my sibling relationship to co-design my research, which identified participant groups being youths with a mild intellectual disability, their parents/legal guardians, and educators at the special schools they attended in Trinidad and Tobago. This identification further allowed me to focus on the different types of special schools (i.e., private, vocational, government) in Trinidad and Tobago.

At an intragroup level of analysis, youths’ findings identified supportive learning environments and being prepared for potential future jobs in the skilled trades; findings revealed educators sense of pride, passion and purpose in how they viewed their jobs and special schools’ curriculum focussed on skills-trade and remedial academics; and findings spoke to parents/legal guardians having a positive outlook of special schools, special schools having a role in transition planning and wanting their child to be happy. At an intergroup level of analysis, the process of transition for youths with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago finds person-centred practices, while opportunities for youths indicate to uncertainty in
post-compulsory school destinations. The discussions with Micah about these findings contributed to the overall study design, final reflections, and recommendations.

As a witness to Micah’s experiences in Trinidad, I involved him from the onset as a subject-matter expert based on his experiences, and wanted to understand what compulsory schooling was like for him, while sharing my experiences. Micah’s experiences provided insights into how he navigated compulsory schooling in Trinidad. Our sibling relationship gave me an opportunity to see his worldview and allowed me to understand the decisions my parents made in not adhering to the recommendation of professionals. Micah’s contribution helped me in co-designing this research, as I was able discuss, ask follow-up questions, and capture his comments on corresponding questions to prospective participants. Disclosure in my information package to prospective participants about Micah, provided me indirectly with an opportunity to connect with and build rapport with voluntary participants in Trinidad and Tobago. Discussing the findings with Micah and capturing his perspectives provided a unique opportunity to reflect on his experiences and that of participants in my research. For example, instances of where his compulsory experiences were different to youths, similarities in lack of supports and/or preparation for post-compulsory school destinations. Micah’s insights are instrumental in highlighting his experiences, which were dissimilar to mine, but can reflect the experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago. I provided a unique methodological contribution to research by involving my brother to understand first-hand about his experiences, which allowed me to incorporate them to design, implement and report on my research as part of an inclusive research design (Nind, 2014; Seale et al., 2015).

As I draw my thesis to a close, I compared Micah and my family’s experiences to that of participants. In some ways I see change, continuity of the status quo and in other situations I see stagnation. By change, I mean there is movement signalling progress in disability inclusion. By continuity in the status quo, I mean there is no movement signalling progress or regression in disability inclusion. By stagnation, I mean lack of progress in disability inclusion.
Change was revealed in how youths described their learning environments at special schools as being supportive, as evidenced in viewing their teachers positively who took the time to help them understand what was being taught and their participation in extra-curricular activities. Change was evident in educators using the curriculum to develop all-rounded students and preparing them to be self-sufficient. I do not believe that Micah was being prepared for life after school during his compulsory schooling years, for example, describing the actions and responses of his teachers when he advocated for supports at school. Micah’s compulsory schooling fulfilled a legal requirement of compulsory education but was not preparing him to transition into the next stage of his life. Parents/legal guardians’ positive outlook of special schools and seeing them having a role in transition planning signalled a change, as Micah’s experiences confirm he did not feel a sense of belonging at school and was not in a supportive learning environment. Change is also demonstrated in person-centred practices in curriculum modifications and provisions of support, which spoke to the process of transition for youths with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago.

Continuity of the status quo was parents/legal guardians wanting their child to be happy, which meant developing life skills to be independent citizens and being concerned about their wellbeing. The perspectives of educators in identifying resistance and reluctance highlight a continuation in the pre-judging and perceptions of persons with disabilities. I do not think this is limited to persons residing in Trinidad and Tobago, but a wider systemic issue in how persons with disabilities continue to be viewed and thought of as they engage with systems (e.g., education, employment). Continuity of the status quo was manifested in uncertainty in post-compulsory school destinations for youths with a mild intellectual disability because of resource constraints and vague transition pathways. I associate this to Micah and my family’s experiences in considering how compulsory schooling was preparing him for life after school and what opportunities would be available to him. This meant the onus was on my parents to navigate uncertain territories as there was no service provisioning they could rely on for assistance. While my parents did not have a network of support for guidance, I see a change in
the role of special schools in transition planning, as described by parents/legal guardians, in focusing on remedial academic and skills-based programmes and advisory support.

There was stagnation in terms of resource constraints that persist even though decades have passed since Micah attended compulsory schooling in Trinidad. The identification of resource constraints by Micah and my parents are repeated in the experiences of youths and perspectives of educators and parents. My family’s experiences in advocating for Micah and being told the school did not have resources is another manifestation of similarity in stagnation. Stagnation is seen in decades later that transition pathways remain limited and/or vague for youths with a mild intellectual disability. This signals that more needs to be done in terms of meaningful change towards disability inclusion for this population that continues to be marginalised within the education and employment systems.

I recognise that my perspectives can be influenced, such as being a witness to and hearing about Micah’s experiences. I mitigated researcher bias by identifying my stance, rationale, and perspectives from the onset of my research. I discussed my approaches to recruiting voluntary participants and analysis of data. My research was designed and implemented using a COVID-19 lens, as I could not travel to Trinidad and Tobago to meet with prospective participants and/or interview voluntary participants. I relied on Internet searches and disclosed my search terms in creating a list of special schools in Trinidad and Tobago, which I used as my initial outreach list. I did not rely on family members to recruit participants. I outlined my approach to seeking ethics approval, explained the purpose of my research, was transparent in disclosing my sibling relationship to prospective participants in my information package, as well as answering questions to build rapport and establish trustworthiness. I was accountable to voluntary participants in respecting their time, following up as requested, maintaining their confidentiality and anonymity, which aligned with BERA (2018) requirements. I resolved ethical dilemmas through discussions with my supervisors and being guided by research best practices. I journaled after each interview to reflect on what was said by participants, and if there were similarities in their experiences and/or perspectives as it related to Micah and my family.
shared cleaned transcripts and audio-video recordings with participants. As part of member checking and data validation, I invited participants to edit their respective transcript and request a follow-up conversation about the interview with me. I confirmed with participants that I will share findings with them via a report. Disclosure of my sibling relationship, identifying any relationship with gatekeepers and participants, resolution of dilemmas, journaling after each interview helped me to be cognisant of my stance as a researcher and mindful of how this can influence my data analysis and reporting.

The findings of my research help to close the gap in understanding how youths (15-18 years) with special education needs (mild intellectual disability) are being prepared by special schools in Trinidad and Tobago for life after school. My research provides youths, parents/legal guardians, researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and decision-makers with topical information on how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school. While the qualitative data in my research was not generalizable to the population, the sample was comprehensive as it was representative of the types of special schools (i.e., private, vocational, government) found in Trinidad and Tobago. The findings at an individual, intragroup, and intergroup levels of analysis provide new information on the experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability, and the perspectives of parents/legal guardians and educators. My research provided multiple examples to support findings, with consideration for preparing within the transition planning process, while highlighting opportunities for change. Although my research was conducted primarily online, this was my choice during the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. However, my research facilitates knowledge transfer and contributes topical data and findings that can be used to inform evidence-based decision-making by parents, practitioners, advocacy organisations, policymakers, bureaucrats, special schools in the process of transition planning for youths with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago. My research is intended for various audiences including but not limited to policymakers, bureaucrats, practitioners and parents/legal guardians as well as the broader disability studies research community (Ravenscroft & Allison, 2018).
6.3 Limitations of Research

While my Methodology chapter discussed the limitations of my research as it pertained to quality in research design, I discuss broadly in this section the limitations of my research in terms of conducting research during COVID-19, the use of a single instrument and applicability of findings.

Undertaking research during a time of global crisis and uncertainty, such as COVID-19, meant that I had to adapt my initial research plans, which focussed on in-field recruitment of participants, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. As discussed in my Methodology chapter, the uncertainty of a global crisis prompted me to adapt to online identification of and outreach to prospective special schools. I could not complete classroom observations as all special schools were closed to in-person learning. I could not participate in online learning as not all students had access to technology (e.g., devices) or knew how to use them, and some educators confirmed giving printed copies of course content for parents/legal guardians to work on with their child. Being remote meant that observations were not an ideal option and I removed this in my revised research proposal and ethics application.

Although I used semi-structured interviews for all participants, I was bounded by technology parameters. For example, participants used mobile phones, laptops with limited Internet connectivity which meant I could not always have a view of a participant in ‘real time’. In these instances, I still proceeded with the interview as they consented or assented to participate. I recognised the limitation and/or lack of reliable Internet services and I wanted to be respectful of their commitment to participate in my research. I did consider if my participant group could have included more schools in not following up with prospective participants after two emails and/or phone calls. However, the data collected are representative of school types, included different participant groups and allowed for a depth of experiences and perspectives. I decided not to interview anymore prospective participants, as I had enough data to answer my research questions based on the interviews with 20 participants.
The use of one instrument was a choice, not a preference, due to the uncertainty and country restrictions at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. My preference for multiple participant groups focused on those who are part of the preparation in transition planning for youths with a mild intellectual disability. This allowed me to use semi-structured interviews to understand the depth of their experiences and perspectives across private, vocational and government special schools in Trinidad and Tobago. While my findings cannot be generalised to the population of youths with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago, it is representative. My research used a unique approach (i.e., sibling relationship), was adaptable in gathering data and representative of special schools. From design to implementation and reporting, I collaborated with my brother, local gatekeepers, and participants, while maintaining transparency and accountability. I described my rationale and approach to the three levels of data analysis. I delved into the levels of analysis, providing evidence to support my findings through anonymised narratives from participants’ transcripts. I provided descriptive data (e.g., tables, charts) for transparency in analysis and verbatim narratives that were representative of different school types. I evidenced my findings with literature and applied the theoretical framework of Person-Centred Planning to focus areas. The actions I undertook demonstrated my adaptability to leverage technology and forge a pathway forward in undertaking innovative research during a time of global crisis.

The applicability of my findings is not generalisable to the population of youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability who attend special schools in Trinidad and Tobago. From the onset, I did not intend to collect data through qualitative interviews for this entire student population. My focus was not to survey or interview and report broadly on all students and all special schools, but to delve into experiences of youths, perspectives of parents/legal guardians and educators. This meant working within the parameters of a global crisis and technology capabilities across geographical distances and time differences. However, this does not diminish the research from design to reporting and did not limit the scholarly nature of my research. My research followed BERA (2018) ethics guidelines, and in my Methodology chapter, I discussed how I embedded quality throughout my research design with consideration for
transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability, as well as was transparent in describing my researcher reflexivity.

I recognised and considered how my experiences can influence my research from design to reporting. To mitigate researcher bias, I adopted a transparent and accountable approach from design to reporting. I discussed my rationale for undertaking research in Trinidad and Tobago, disclosed my sibling relationship and how I co-designed my research with Micah based on his experiences. I explained my approach to sampling, participant recruitment and data collection, recognising I was not in the same geographical space as participants. I shared focus areas, rationales, and preambles for each participant group. I was accountable to participants in respecting their time commitments, sharing ‘clean’ transcripts and audio-video recordings for their recordkeeping. I journaled after each interview, maintained confidentiality and anonymity in using pseudonyms for participants and special schools. While I did not share my journal notes, I was transparent in my approach to the levels of data analysis. This meant that I used anonymised participant excerpts and transcripts, discussed with my supervisors my approach to data analysis, including the steps from individual to intragroup to intergroup levels of analysis as well as reported using tables, charts, diagrams, summaries for each participant group. This added a level of rigour in auditing the data analysis process. The data collected and findings provide evidence-based information on the experiences of youths, and perspectives of educators and parents/legal guardians on how special schools are preparing youths for life after school.

6.4 Recommendations

Based on my research findings as well as discussions in my Implications for Policy and Practice chapter, including those with Micah, I advocate for change and provide five recommendations that can be used by different groups in preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school. These recommendations can enact meaningful progress towards benefitting youths with a mild intellectual disability.
1. I recommend special schools and government ministries (e.g., Ministry of Education) collaborate towards development, implementation, monitoring, and reporting of a national strategy to closing the gap in educational attainment for students with educational needs and disabilities and preparation for post-compulsory school transitions. Embedded in this national strategy, is a theory of change that builds upon a Person-Centred approach to practice that identifies inputs (e.g., resources), activities (e.g., tasks, milestones), outputs (e.g., short-term indicators of success), outcomes (e.g., intermediate and long-term indicators) and outcomes (e.g., aim to be achieved). There remains an opportunity to leverage the existence of special schools towards the education of students. However, reliance should not be on special schools to do this alone, as they are under-resourced and limited in their capacities to forge a seamless pathway from school to post-compulsory school destinations for youths. There needs to be a commitment and accountability by all towards ensuring all students are learning and being prepared for future employment. This means using the national strategy to demonstrate how change will be implemented, measured, monitored and reported, which speaks to shared accountability, transparency and responsibility.

2. I recommend an active commitment from government with a focus on more equitable distribution of resources (e.g., funding, personnel) with the aim of embedding Person-Centred approaches in the delivery of service provisions and programmes. This is important as education is a fundamental right, as advocated in international conventions and endorsed by nation-states in local instruments (e.g., legislation, regulation, policies). Enactment of education for all calls upon policymakers and decision-makers in Trinidad and Tobago to undertake education planning with a focus on equitable distribution of resources with the aim of meeting the educational needs of all irrespective of school type. The benefits for the nation-state will be evident in seeing students reach their full potential. The intended outcome is preparing today’s students to be future adults who have the same access to opportunities and can fairly participate and contribute to society.
3. I recommend special schools and government ministries (e.g., Ministry of Education) ensure students enrolled in special schools leave compulsory schooling with nationally recognised credentials, certifications, or accreditation. While my thesis has not directly identified and/or addressed this issue in depth, having a recognised compulsory schooling credential (e.g., diploma) is important as the education system prepares students to enter the next stage in their lives, whether it is further/higher education, employment opportunities. This means that they enter the next stage having the prerequisite (e.g., high school diploma, vocational apprenticeship accreditation) that ushers them into the next pathway or pursuit in their lives. Exiting compulsory schooling with nationally recognised credentials, certifications or accreditation ensures an individual has a foundation upon which they can explore options, such as co-op employment to gain skills and knowledge. It allows for all students to have a fair chance and equality of opportunity, contributing to a skilled and knowledgeable workforce. The benefits for the nation-state will be evident in seeing students reach their full potential, while having a diverse and skilled workforce. For example, increasing access to education for students with educational needs and disabilities and preparing them to enter the world of work. The intended outcome is preparing today's students to be future adults who have the necessary competencies to contribute to the country's diverse labour market and economic outlook.

4. I recommend special schools consider using Person-Centred Planning as an active component of students’ Individualised Education Plan. While my thesis did not explicitly investigate which transition approaches were being used in special schools in Trinidad and Tobago and did not evaluate and/or compare the use of different approaches, there is recognition for where elements of Person-Centred Planning were (in)formally applied in asking students about their future plans, and there remains an opportunity to consider using Person-Centred Planning to help youths’ networks of support (e.g., educators, parents/legal guardians) prepare early (e.g., in-take/enrolment) with periodic check-ins for modification as well as have an idea of pathways to explore and who else
needs to be engaged in conversation as youths age-out. Actioning this recommendation would benefit all in having a shared outlook, mitigating and/or addressing barriers or challenges, while maximising group effort towards an effective and efficient transition to post-compulsory school destinations. The intended outcome is to support learner success while facilitating access to post-compulsory school destinations.

5. I recommend government ministries leverage the expertise of educators at special schools and partner with community organisations (e.g., private sector) to promote accessible transition pathways for youths with educational needs and disabilities, such as linking opportunities to individual aspiration(s). There is an opportunity for government, private and para-public sectors to be leaders by committing to employment for this group. For example, there can be bespoke employment pathways with hiring quotas and recognition for inclusive employers via government and special schools’ Internet website. This is not dissimilar to other employment equity initiatives undertaken in jurisdictions towards diversification of the workforce through targeted hiring, for example based on race. Accessible transition pathways can be part of a national strategy and can serve to close the gap in the under- and unemployment of persons with disabilities in the workforce. The intended outcome is a diverse, competent, and inclusive workforce.

While recognition is an important step towards change, legislative amendments can be mired in bureaucracy and may extend beyond the elected lifespan of a sitting government. However, I believe philosophical mindsets can evolve as evident in Trinidad and Tobago’s legislation (e.g., Equal Opportunity Act), disability-focussed policies (e.g., Inclusive Education Policy, National Policy on Persons with Disabilities) and international commitments towards equality, equity, and disability inclusion. Actioning said commitments is premised on willpower and in doing so, undertakes amendments of pertinent legislation and regulation with the aim of embedding disability inclusion across all facets of the education system. Albeit, political instruments are intended to nudge behaviour change towards inclusion, they are not the panacea. An outcome from this is quality education being available to all and is underpinned by
sustained political and financial commitments. This means equality of opportunity and equity of outcomes for persons with disabilities to their peers.

6.5 Future Research

While my research helps to close a gap in understanding how special schools are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school, there remains a need to continue focussing on understanding the process of transition for youths with special education needs who attend special schools in Trinidad and Tobago. This focus is needed as this area remains under-researched in understanding what happens to youths with special education needs when they leave compulsory schooling. My research found the process of transition for youths as having person-centred practices at special schools, but uncertainty in their post-compulsory school destinations.

Future research focussing on how special schools follow up on transition planning to understand whether and how youth are making use of their skills will be important for future programme planning. A three years-post-exit to entry into employment would allow for a longer timeframe to examine the planning process, such as who is involved in the planning process, the way(s) in which schools create, implement and revise transition plans, exploration of post-compulsory school partnerships, transition from compulsory to post-compulsory school destination. Using the information from my research provides insights into the types of special schools, key persons who are part of the planning process, theoretical framework that schools can use to facilitate planning conversations, and opportunities and considerations in the preparation for life after school. For example, using components of Person-Centred Planning within the transition planning process at special schools to map pathways for youths to understand a youth’s experiences, dreams, nightmares, likes, dislikes, pathways to learning and use this information to develop an action plan. This approach can be a practical way for youths’ voices to be amplified in the planning process, identify their networks of support to enact the action plan with a pathway of bridging from compulsory to post-compulsory school destinations. It also provides insights on special schools in understanding how they can modify
and/or develop new programmes, while supporting them in their focus of preparing youths to transition into the next stage in their lives – adulthood.

Continued research is needed if we are to understand what happens to students with special education needs after they leave compulsory schooling, how can special schools help in transition planning and the role of decision-makers (parents/legal guardians, youths), policymakers (e.g., government, public sector bureaucracy) in ensuring these persons are not further marginalised but prepared to pursue productive pathways to post-compulsory school destinations. This is important in developing individual potential, maximising learning opportunities at school to recognise and accommodate learner diversity, contribute to the labour market by closing the employment gap for persons with disabilities in comparison to their peers, and fulfilling the nation-state’s commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals as it pertains to persons with disabilities. The outcome from continued research is to ensure the compulsory education to employment pathway is one that is accessible, equitable and inclusive for all learners, including persons with disabilities so they can be successful in life.

The findings from my research and recommendations can be used towards identifying short- to longer-term changes in disability inclusion to understand what works and/or needs to change in learning environments, alternate pathways for future vocational opportunities, supporting mechanisms (e.g., resources) that can underpin the process of education at special schools to facilitate accessible, equitable and equivalent compulsory learning opportunities. These are some factors that contribute to ‘moving the needle’ towards progressive and inclusive education practices to ensure all students, irrespective of disability, receive the necessary supports and service provisions during compulsory schooling. By doing this, it can affect their learning experiences, access to resources (e.g., aide, equipment), preparation for leaving school and starting the next stage of their lives. This allows youths with a mild intellectual disability to have the same access to opportunities as their peers because they would have the necessary accreditations and level of competency to pursue endeavours as identified in their future planning.
6.6 Summary

As discussed in my Literature chapter, research has looked at the creation of special schools, reported on a special school, reported on the experiences of youths in Tobago, reported on perspectives of teachers in mainstream schools in Trinidad and across anglophone Caribbean countries. While I draw upon these to understand the education system, and experiences of parents and teachers’ perceptions, my research specifically focuses on youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability and how special schools are preparing them to transition from compulsory schooling to post-compulsory school destinations.

I applied Person-Centred Planning theoretical framework with specific focus areas to understand the experiences of youths, perspectives of educators and parents/legal guardians who are part of the transition planning process (i.e., preparation to post-compulsory school destinations) within special schools in Trinidad and Tobago. I used multiple participant groups that share a central focus on transition planning for youths with a mild intellectual disability. I contributed to giving agency to the voices of youths with a mild intellectual disability in Trinidad and Tobago who are either absent from or overlooked in disability research, as well as provided an advocacy platform for parents/legal guardians and educators who are part of youths’ networks of support.

6.7 Conclusion

As I draw this chapter and my thesis to a close, I am reminded of my impetus for undertaking this research. Witnessing the differential treatment of Micah, the discomfort and sadness knowing there was a possibility that he would be institutionalised, and not understanding why his impairment meant he had to be separated from our family left an indelible mark on my life. I consider undertaking this research as both a personal and professional journey.

A personal journey, in discussing aspects of my and Micah’s life and reflecting on our experiences at school, which at times carried its own emotional burden. For example, hearing
Micah disclose his experiences of exclusion and marginalisation, advocating for himself and frustration in wanting to learn but being prejudged by professionals. I may not completely understand the frustration Micah experienced in wanting to learn, and being overlooked and ignored by educators who were responsible for ensuring his competencies were developed in the process of learning. Hearing him say that his frustration often meant he left school for home, for example if his teacher was absent, I imagine was perhaps his way of coping with exclusion. His thoughts of how he would manage in life being aware of his difficulties reading, spelling, writing tells me that he was cognisant of how exclusionary practices affected his learning with consequences for his future. While I recognise the choice to self-identify is personal, I also recognise that culture may have played a part in him choosing not to and/or uncomfortable to share that he has a disability. I respect his decision as his experiences are personal to him based on his journey. There were emotions attached to the personal aspect of our family’s experiences becoming public through this research, in wanting to see if there are similarities or if these experiences were unique to our family. The personal became the professional in wanting to see, decades later, if anything had changed in Trinidad and Tobago.

From a professional perspective, I locate myself as a researcher. Planning this research and involving Micah in the co-design provided me with a deeper understanding of and appreciation of his lived experiences. Reflecting on what he shared with me, I see someone who has potential and is determined to succeed in life. Micah’s insights helped me as a researcher who wanted to understand the experiences of youths with a mild intellectual disability, and the perspectives of their parents/legal guardians and educators. In journaling after the conversations with youths, I found myself reflecting on what they shared and comparing to conversations with Micah. I found similarity in the narratives of Micah and youths. For example, practising active listening during conversations helped me to understand how they saw their future selves in terms of what they wanted to do, who they wanted to become, things and people that mattered to them, their concerns for their future lives. How they envisioned their future selves are like most individuals, including myself, in terms of figuring out our identities as we transition to adulthood. The perspectives of parents/legal
guardians resonated with me because their choices and efforts reminded me of my parents, who recognised their child’s potential and sought out favourable pathways. Like the decisions of my parents, I believe the actions of these parents/legal guardians are well intended in wanting the best for their child. I see a similar responsibility in them having to navigate uncertain post-compulsory schooling pathways and deciding how best to support their child entering adulthood.

I do not believe Micah’s compulsory education experiences in Trinidad should have happened and reflecting on the narratives of youths, parents/legal guardians, and educators, I am reminded that more needs to be done to ensure equality of opportunity and equity of outcomes for persons with disabilities. This is important as each parent/legal guardian advocated for the same access to educational opportunities for their child, educators called for fair distribution of resources, and youth participant expressed having a plan for themselves and wanting to be a contributing member of society. Their collective voices spoke to the need for meaningful change towards disability inclusion, and I support them and thank them for their continued advocacy.

I thank Micah, youths, parents/legal guardians, and educators for volunteering to participate and trusting me to share their narratives. My research would not have been possible without their invaluable contributions. I remain hopeful that my brother and the youths who participated in this research are successful in achieving their dreams they shared with me.
References


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Group.


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8 Appendices

8.1 Information Sheets

8.1.1 Invitation to Participate for Educators

Who am I?
My name is Keren Miguel. I was born in Trinidad and lived there until I was a teenager. At present, I live in Canada. I am writing to you today asking for your help with my project.

I am a doctoral (PhD) student at The University of Edinburgh – Moray House School of Education and Sport in the United Kingdom. I am working on a project called, “Inclusion in the Classroom: Transition Planning for Youths with Special Education Needs (Mild Intellectual Disability) in Trinidad and Tobago”. My personal interest in this topic is because of my brother who has a mild intellectual disability.

I am asking for your help to learn more about how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability for life after school.

What would I like to do?
I would like to talk with you to learn more about your perspectives, as a [teacher or principal/head of a special school] who is preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability (15-18 years) to transition from compulsory schooling.

I want to let you know that my project has received ethics clearance from The University of Edinburgh – Moray House School of Education and Sport.

What am I asking from you?
[Name of Special School] has agreed to participate in this project. I am asking if you would like to take part in my project, as you are a [teacher or principal/head] at [Name of a special school]. If you want to take part in my project, I will setup an online meeting for us to talk and you can ask me questions about my project.

At the start of our online meeting, I will ask you if it is okay to take notes and record our conversation so I can remember what you told me. Our online meeting will be about two (2) meetings, each approximately thirty (30) minutes in duration. I can also schedule our meetings based on your availability.
During our conversation, I am going to ask you about the school’s curriculum, the options or learning pathways for youths with a mild intellectual disability, and your perspectives on your career including teacher training/professional development and learning opportunities. There are no right or wrong answers, and what you tell me will help me to learn more about how the special school is preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability (15-18 years) to transition from compulsory schooling.

During our conversation, you may talk about some experiences that are difficult. If you want, you can choose to not answer the question or take a break or you can stop the conversation. You can also let me know what I can do to make the conversation a better experience for you.

What are the benefits of this project?

Your sharing of information will help me to understand how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability (15-18 years) to transition from compulsory schooling. I will learn about the school’s curriculum, the options or learning pathways for youths with a mild intellectual disability, and your perspectives on your career including teacher training/professional development and learning opportunities.

There is no compensation for your participation in this project. All costs associated with your participation in this project are your responsibility.

What will happen with what you tell me?

I will use the recording to write-out what was said and share with you a copy of the video and written copy to review to confirm what was discussed during our conversation. The recording and interview transcript will be saved on my personal drive on The University of Edinburgh’s server. If you prefer, I can schedule an online meeting for us to review and discuss together.

I will use the information to write a report to The University of Edinburgh – Moray House School of Education and Sport about how schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability (15-18 years) to transition from compulsory schooling. I may also write articles to publish and present my project at meetings (e.g., conferences).

I will not use your real name and will not tell anyone your identity, so no one will know what you said during our meeting. I will keep confidential and will remove any information about your identity in my report, articles and presentations. I will destroy the recording and interview transcript five years from the end of my studies.

How to contact me?

If you have any questions and want to participate in my project, you may email me directly at [insert email address].
You may also email my supervisors Professor Lani Florian at [insert email address] and Professor John Ravenscroft at [insert email address].

Thank you for your time.
8.1.2 Invitation to Participate for Parents/Legal Guardians

Who am I?

My name is Keren Miguel. I was born in Trinidad and lived there until I was a teenager. At present, I live in Canada. I am writing to you today asking for your help with my project.

I am a doctoral (PhD) student at The University of Edinburgh – Moray House School of Education and Sport in the United Kingdom. I am working on a project called, “Inclusion in the Classroom: Transition Planning for Youths with Special Education Needs (Mild Intellectual Disability) in Trinidad and Tobago”.

My personal interest in this topic is because of my brother who has a mild intellectual disability. I am asking for your help to learn more about how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability for life after school.

What would I like to do?

I would like to talk with you to learn more about your perspectives, as a parent and/or legal guardian, of a child with a mild intellectual disability who is attending a special school.

I want to let you know that my project has received ethics clearance from The University of Edinburgh – Moray House School of Education and Sport.

What am I asking from you?

[Name of Special School] that your child attends has agreed to participate in this project. I am asking if you would like to take part in my project, as you are a parent and/or legal guardian of a child who is 15 to 18 years with a mild intellectual disability. If you want to take part in my project, I will setup an online meeting for us to talk and you can ask me questions about my project.

At the start of our online meeting, I will ask you if it is okay to take notes and record our conversation so I can remember what you told me. Our online meeting will be about two (2) meetings, each approximately thirty (30) minutes in duration. I can also schedule our meetings based on your availability.

During our conversation, I am going to ask you what you think about your child’s learning experiences, perspectives on the special school and future planning for your child. There are no right or wrong answers, and what you tell me will help me to learn more about how special schools are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability for life after school.
During our conversation, you may talk about some experiences that are difficult. If you want, you can choose to not answer the question or take a break or you can stop the conversation. You can also let me know what I can do to make the conversation a better experience for you.

**What are the benefits of this project?**

Your participation and sharing of information will help me to understand how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability for life after school. I will learn about your child’s learning experiences, your perspectives on the special school and future planning for your child.

There is no compensation for your participation in this project. All costs associated with your participation in this project are your responsibility.

**What will happen with what you tell me?**

I will use the recording to write-out what was said and share with you a copy of the video and written copy to review to confirm what was discussed during our conversation. The recording and interview transcript will be saved on my personal drive on The University of Edinburgh’s server. If you prefer, I can schedule an online meeting for us to review and discuss together.

I will use the information to write a report to The University of Edinburgh – Moray House School of Education and Sport about how schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths with a mild intellectual disability (15-18 years) to transition from compulsory schooling. I may also write articles to publish and present my project at meetings (e.g., conferences).

I will not use your real name and will not tell anyone your identity, so no one will know what you said during our meeting. I will keep confidential and will remove any information about your identity in my report, articles and presentations. I will destroy the recording and interview transcript five years from the end of my studies.

**How to contact me?**

If you have any questions and want to participate in my project, you may email me directly at [insert email address].

You may also email my supervisors Professor Lani Florian at [insert email address] and Professor John Ravenscroft at [insert email address].

Thank you for your time.
8.1.3 Notice to Parents Requesting Their Child’s Participation

Dear [Name of Parent/Guardian],

My name is Keren Miguel. I was born in Trinidad and lived there until I was a teenager. At present, I live in Canada. I am writing to you today asking for your help with my project.

I am a doctoral (PhD) student at The University of Edinburgh – Moray House School of Education and Sport in the United Kingdom. I am working on a project called, “Inclusion in the Classroom: Transition Planning for Youths with Special Education Needs (Mild Intellectual Disability) in Trinidad and Tobago.” My personal interest in this topic is because of my brother who has a mild intellectual disability.

I am asking for your permission to speak with your child who attends [Name of Special School]. The special school has agreed to take part in the project. I want to learn more about how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths (15-18 years), like your child, for life after school.

I want to let you know that I will also ask your child for his/her agreement to take part in the project. I would like to talk with him/her to learn more about his/her experiences as a student by asking him/her what he/she thinks about their teachers, his/her likes and dislikes about school, what he/she is learning at school and what he/she wants to do when he/she leaves school.

I want to let you know that if you agree to me speaking with your child, I will invite you to be present in the room only as an observer. Discussions with your child will be audio and video recorded, and I will share a video and written copy with you and your child to review and confirm what was discussed during our conversation. I will not use your child’s real name and will not tell anyone their identity, so no one will know what your child said during our meeting. I will keep confidential and will remove any information about your child’s identity in my report, articles and presentations.

The sharing information will help me to understand how special schools school are preparing youths for life after school. I will use this information to write a report to The University of Edinburgh – Moray House School of Education and Sport about how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing students for life after school. I may also write articles to publish and present my project at meetings (e.g., conferences).

The video recording and interview transcript will be saved on my personal drive on The University of Edinburgh’s server and will be destroyed five years after I finish my studies. I want to let you know that my project has received ethics clearance from The University of Edinburgh – Moray House School of Education and Sport.
You may email me directly at [insert email address] if you have any questions about my project and I will setup an online meeting for us to talk.

You may also email my supervisors Professor Lani Florian at [insert email address] and Professor John Ravenscroft at [insert email address].

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Keren Miguel
PhD student
8.1.4 Invitation to Participate for Youths (15-18 years) with a Mild Intellectual Disability

Who am I?

[insert picture] Hello!

My name is Keren Miguel. I was born in Trinidad and lived there until I was a teenager. At present, I live in Canada.

I am a student at The University of Edinburgh – Moray House School of Education and Sport in the United Kingdom.

I am asking for your help.

What would I like to do?

I would like to talk with you to learn more about your school by asking what you think about your teachers, your likes and dislikes about school, what you are learning at school and what you want to do when you leave school.

What am I asking from you?

Your parents have said it is okay for me to talk with you, so I am asking if you would like to take part and talk to me.

This is not schoolwork, and it is your choice if you want to take part. If you decide not to take part, you will not get in trouble. It is completely your choice.

If you want to take part, I will setup time for us to talk and you can ask me questions about my project. I will ask your parent to be with you in the room, but only you will speak.

I will ask you if it is okay to take notes and record it so I can remember what you told me. We will talk at least two (2) times for about thirty (30) minutes each time. I will share the video with you and your parent.
I am going to ask you what you think about your teachers, your likes and dislikes about school, what you are learning at school and what you want to do when you leave school.

There are no right or wrong answers, and everything you tell me will help me to learn more about how your school is getting you ready for life after you leave school.

During our talk, you may feel happy or sad when you tell me about your school. If you want, you do not have to answer the question, or you can take a break or you can stop talking. You can also let me know what I can do to make our talk a better experience for you.

Why should you participate?

You telling me about your school will help me to know about what you like and do not like about school, what you are learning at school and what you want to do after you leave school.

What will happen with what you tell me?

I will use the recording to write-out what was said and share with you a copy of the video and written conversation so you can watch and hear what we talked about. The video recording and interview transcript will be saved on my personal drive on The University of Edinburgh’s server. If you want, I can schedule an online meeting for us to talk about it together.

I will write a report to The University of Edinburgh – Moray House School of Education and Sport about how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing students for life after school. I may also write articles to publish and present my project at meetings (e.g., conferences).
I will not use your real name and will not tell anyone your identity, so no one will know what you said during our meeting. I will keep confidential and will remove any information about your identity in my report, articles and presentations. I will destroy the recording and interview transcript five years from the end of my studies.

If you tell me about you or someone else being hurt during our conversation, I will need to speak to someone who can help.

How do you contact me?

If you have any questions and want to participate in my project, you may email me directly at [insert email address].

Thank you for your time.
8.2 Consent and Assent Forms

8.2.1 Consent Form for Educators

**Project:** Inclusion in the Classroom: Transition Planning for Youths (15-18 years) with Special Education Needs (Mild Intellectual Disability) in Trinidad and Tobago

**Keren has told me that:**

1. She is working on a project about how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability for life after school. □ Yes □ No

2. I can ask her as many questions as I want about the project before I decide if I want to participate. □ Yes □ No

3. There are no right or wrong answers. □ Yes □ No

4. My participation is voluntary. □ Yes □ No

5. I can choose to not answer a question or take a break or stop the conversation at any time. □ Yes □ No

6. I can ask to stop the recording. □ Yes □ No

7. She will share a written copy and video recording of our conversation for me to review and confirm what was discussed during our meeting. □ Yes □ No

8. She will write about my perspectives, and will keep confidential and remove any information about my identity in her report, articles and presentations. □ Yes □ No

9. She will write a report to The University of Edinburgh – Moray House School of Education and Sport. □ Yes □ No

10. She may also write articles to publish and present her project at meetings (e.g., conferences). □ Yes □ No

**I am happy with Keren:**

... taking written notes about what I say about my perspectives. □ Yes □ No

... recording our conversation so she can remember what we talked about and write it out. □ Yes □ No

... using quotations from our conversation in reports, articles and presentations. □ Yes □ No

**Do you want to take part in my project?** □ Yes □ No

Your name: __________________________
Your signature: _______________________
Date: _______________________

Please email the completed and signed Consent Form to me at [insert email address]. Thanks.
8.2.2 Consent Form for Parents/Legal Guardians

**Project:** Inclusion in the Classroom: Transition Planning for Youths (15-18 years) with Special Education Needs (Mild Intellectual Disability) in Trinidad and Tobago

**Keren has told me that:**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>She is working on a project about how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability for life after school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>I can ask her as many questions as I want about the project before I decide if I want to participate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>There are no right or wrong answers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>My participation is voluntary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>I can choose to not answer a question or take a break or stop the conversation at any time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>I can ask to stop the recording.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>She will share a written copy and a video recording of our conversation for me to review and confirm what was discussed during our meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>She will write about my perspectives, and will keep confidential and remove any information about my identity in her report, articles and presentations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>She will write a report to The University of Edinburgh – Moray House School of Education and Sport.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>She may also write articles to publish and present her project at meetings (e.g., conferences).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**I am happy with Keren:**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Do you want to take part in my project?** Yes No

Your name: __________________________ Your signature: _______________________

Date: __________________________

Please email the completed and signed Consent Form to me at [insert email address]. Thanks.
8.2.3 Consent Form for Parents/Legal Guardians to speak with Youth with a Mild Intellectual Disability

Project: Inclusion in the Classroom: Transition Planning for Youths (15-18 years) with Special Education Needs (Mild Intellectual Disability) in Trinidad and Tobago

Keren has told me that:

1. She is working on a project about how special schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing youths (15-18 years) with a mild intellectual disability for life after school. □ Yes □ No

2. I may ask her as many questions as I want about the project before I decide if I want her to speak with my child. □ Yes □ No

3. My child will be asked if he/she wants to participate in the project. □ Yes □ No

4. My child’s participation is voluntary. □ Yes □ No

5. An adult (e.g., parent) will be present in the room with my child to only observe the interview. □ Yes □ No

6. She will share a video and written copy of my child’s interview with me and my child to confirm what was discussed during our meeting. □ Yes □ No

7. She will write about my child’s experiences as a student. □ Yes □ No

8. She will keep confidential and remove any information about my child’s identity in her report, articles and presentations. □ Yes □ No

9. She will write a report to The University of Edinburgh – Moray House School of Education and Sport. □ Yes □ No

10. She may also write articles to publish and present her project at meetings (e.g., conferences). □ Yes □ No

Keren may speak with my child as part of her project. □ Yes □ No

Name of Parent/Guardian: ________________________________

Signature of Parent/Guardian: ________________________________

Name of Child (only complete if you want me to speak with your child): __________________

Date: __________________

Please email the completed and signed Consent Form to me at [insert email address]. Thanks.
### 8.2.4 Assent Form for Students

**Project:** Inclusion in the Classroom: Transition Planning for Youths (15-18 years) with Special Education Needs (Mild Intellectual Disability) in Trinidad and Tobago

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[insert picture]</th>
<th>Hello! My name is Keren Miguel.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I am asking for your help to learn more about how your school is preparing you for life after school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I will go through this form with you. You may ask me questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I will then ask if you want to tell me about your school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Keren has told me that:**

- She is writing a report for The University of Edinburgh about how schools in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing students for life after school.
- She may also write things that other people will read.
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- I do not have to talk to her if I do not want and that I will not get into trouble.
- I can choose to not answer a question or take a break or stop the conversation at any time.
- I can ask to stop the recording at any time or ask for information to be deleted.
- She will share a written copy and a video recording of our conversation with me to confirm what was discussed during our meeting.
- She will write about me and will not tell anybody my name and give any clues to anybody who I am.
- If I say that I am or someone else is being hurt, she will speak to someone who can help.
- I can ask her as many questions as I want about the project before I decide if I want to join in and take part.

**I am happy with Keren:**
... taking written notes about what I say about my experiences during school.
\[\text{Yes} \quad \text{No}\]

... recording our conversation so she can remember what we talked about and write it out.
\[\text{Yes} \quad \text{No}\]

... using what I say in what she writes.
\[\text{Yes} \quad \text{No}\]

Do you want to take part in my project?  
\[\text{Yes} \quad \text{No}\]

Your name: ________________________________

Your signature: ______________________________

Date: ____________________________

Please email the completed and signed Assent Form to me at [insert email address]. Thanks.
8.3 Ethics Approval Letter

Ref: KMIG23082021

Keren MIQUEL
Moray House School of Education and Sport

Date: 30th September 2021

Dear Keren,

Title: Inclusion in the Classroom: Transition Planning for Youths with Special Education Needs in Trinidad and Tobago

The School of Education and Sport Ethics Sub-Committee has now considered your request for ethical approval for the studies detailed in the above application.

This is to confirm that the Sub-Committee is happy to approve your application and that the research meets the School Ethics Approval criterion for this particular project. A standard condition of this ethical approval is that should any amendment, or deviation from the original protocol outlined in your application need to be made to carry out or continue your research, please notify the Ethics Sub-Committee at MHSES-Ethics@ed.ac.uk

The Committee also needs to be notified if there are any unexpected results or events once the research is underway that raise questions about the safety of the research.

Should you receive any formal complaints relating to the study you should notify the MHSE Ethics Committee immediately by email to MHSES-Ethics@ed.ac.uk

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

On behalf of:
Dr Fiona O’Hanlon
Director of Ethics
8.4 Summary of Interviews (October-December 2021)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Groups</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Average Interview Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educators</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1 hour 7 minutes 33 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents/legal guardians</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>34 minutes 34 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youths with a mild intellectual disability</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>41 minutes 10 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2 hours 23 minutes 17 seconds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educators</th>
<th>Parents/Legal Guardians</th>
<th>Youths (15-18 years) with a Mild Intellectual Disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miss DaCosta</td>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Ezra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview duration: 1 hour 11 minutes 24 seconds</td>
<td>Interview duration: 41 minutes 54 seconds</td>
<td>Interview duration: 1 hour 5 minutes 50 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Richards</td>
<td>Derrick</td>
<td>Tracey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview duration: 1 hour 16 minutes 16 seconds</td>
<td>Interview duration: 38 minutes</td>
<td>Interview duration: 44 minutes 57 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Noel</td>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>Thomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview duration: 1 hour 35 minutes 48 seconds</td>
<td>Interview duration: 36 minutes 45 seconds</td>
<td>Interview duration: 45 minutes 15 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Abara</td>
<td>Vincent</td>
<td>Simone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview duration: 50 minutes 6 seconds</td>
<td>Interview duration: 30 minutes 20 seconds</td>
<td>Interview duration: 29 minutes 17 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Joseph</td>
<td>Sherry</td>
<td>Matthew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview duration: 52 minutes 49 seconds</td>
<td>Interview duration: 25 minutes 52 seconds</td>
<td>Interview duration: 31 minutes 59 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss George</td>
<td></td>
<td>Anil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview duration: 52 minutes 12 seconds</td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview duration: 29 minutes 50 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Nkosi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview duration: 1 hour 55 minutes 34 seconds</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Clarke</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview duration: 1 hour 4 minutes 33 seconds</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Dwyer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview duration: 1 hour 9 minutes 51 seconds</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 interviews for a total interview duration of 10 hours 29 minutes</td>
<td>5 interviews for a total interview duration of 2 hours 53 minutes</td>
<td>6 interviews for a total interview duration of 4 hours 7 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8.5  Excerpts from Interview with Thomas (Youth) – Individual Level of Analysis

Keren

What are you studying at school?

Thomas

Mostly mostly we does be studying more about Office Admin or Office Administration.

Keren

How were your teachers? What would you say?

Thomas

Teachers and them was nice. That would be basically my answer.

Keren

OK, you said a word that describes your teacher is happy, right? You said that and you drew a smiley face on the paper you sent back to me.

Thomas

Yes.

Keren

Which why do they make you happy?

Thomas

Well, because the the does help me understand. They does help me understand properly about what work we doing. Yeah. They does sit, some sometimes they does sit by me, like face to face conversation and explain, explaining me about the question and I go answer it in a like in like my own words basically.

Keren

So, tell me about at school what are you most proud of?

Thomas

I'm most proud of participating in class more because normally I would I would be the quiet kid in class. The quietest in class. After like after like a few years, I would start participating more in classes. And that would be it, I guess.

Keren

OK, so if you are talking to your brother and your mom’s there and your mom is asking you Thomas, what is your most favorite thing to do at school? What would you say?

Thomas

I would I would, the most favorite thing to do in school is probably [Mom speaking to Thomas, play the steelpan.] play the steelpan.
Keren
Really, you play the steelpan.

Thomas
Yes, that was that was when I was in physical school. I used to play well I used to play the steelpan [inaudible] and when I get good at the steelpan, I end up joining the band, the school band.

Keren
OK. So let's talk a bit about if, for instance, you say you really like your teachers, they spend time with you and what not, right. But when I asked you, you wrote down here what I don't like when the teachers are mostly busy when it comes to fundraisers and events. And you drew a smiley face. Can you tell me more about that?

Thomas
Is is because when they busy with the events and the fundraisers, it does be less studying for me and the students basically.

Keren
So tell me a bit more about like how often are these like very frequent? These fundraisers they happen every day, every month, every week.

Thomas
Not frequently, but some months I could say.

Keren
OK. So it happens like several times a year.

Thomas
Yes, you could say that.

Keren
If I ask you what is your least favorite part of the entire school day, is there anything that kind of stands out stands out in your mind to you?

Thomas
No.

Keren
Let's just say you had one wish and you could change anything about your school. What would you change?

Thomas
I didn't really know what I would change. I would just leave it how it is.
Keren
OK, so you say you don't like the fundraisers? Would you wanna use the wish to change on that? 'cause you said you won't get a lot of time with them because they're doing all these fundraisers, right?

Thomas
Yeah.

Keren
Would you use your wish to change that maybe?

Thomas
Probably so.

Keren
Yeah. Why would you do that? Can you tell me a bit more?

Thomas
Because because they have, like some teachers go be in this with other with some teachers could be at the fundraisers while other teachers just go be teaching. One teacher go be teaching we class and the other teachers might be in the fundraisers. Something like that [inaudible].

Keren
So all the teachers help out with the fundraiser as opposed to what you said, some help and some teach.

Thomas
Yes.

Keren
OK. OK. So what do you do when they're doing fundraisers?

Thomas
I mean if it was physical, I would have still been school, but then the teachers and them would still be busy.

Keren
Right? Yeah, so I guess I could say that the reason why you don't like it is because you mentioned, you you said to me a bit earlier on that you like the one-on-one attention. Sometimes when the teacher walks around the classroom when you put your hand up and you say I, I need some help and they help you and when they are at the fundraisers, you're not getting that help.
Thomas
Yeah

Keren
And that kind of bothers you about.

Thomas
Yes, that kind of bothers me a little bit because because some of them does be busy, while like when me and the other children probably getting trouble with questions, so whatever work we do in the class basically.

Keren
So so let me ask you a bit about, you talk about your favorite subject at school is Information Technology and you put a smiley face. You're telling me about your favorite subject which is Information Technology?

Thomas
Basically, Information Technology, the teacher in the class does help you, does teach you how to type on a computer. And and basically after like after you might learn, when you know how to type, they does give you a certain worksheet to do and you does have to type it on the computer.

Keren
OK, OK. So you mentioned Information Technology or favorite subject? Why why is that?

Thomas
Because if even though it's easy, it's still it's still going to get a little harder once you once you become an exam writing student in the class. You're you're going to have a lot of typing to do, and you're going to have to do some kind of project. Basically on your computer work is something where you could, is something for your business, yeah. Do something nothing here to do some kind of thing, in order to do some kind of project for your business. So the work in Information Technology gets harder once you once you finish the first exam.

Keren
OK? So when you talk about in addition to Information Technology you mentioned earlier on your learning Mathematics. What else are you learning? What are some of the subjects were doing?

Thomas
Office Admin and well grammar, Language arts, [Tara speaking to Thomas, social studies, all the subjects.] Social studies and Science. And Maths, And music. And music.

Keren
Now, when it comes to what you want to do after you leave, you said you want to do office work when you finish school. Can you tell me more about that?

Thomas
Well. That is, when I finish school, but I not really sure what like what job basically like a receptionist or either a clerk or just an office worker who does work in an office.

Keren
OK. So are you thinking like in government in a business?

Thomas
In a business I could say.

Keren
OK. My dream for what I want to do when I leave school is.

Thomas
Work in a office.

Keren
OK.

Thomas
Or either or either, well go or be in a music studio.

Keren
OK. And you like it. OK, so you mentioned also you wanna be in a music studio so it's like the opposite end, right. So you're in an office and you're in a studio. Talk talk to me a bit about that.

Thomas
Either that go be my my second second choice of job if I don’t even get through with the office work, I just go music, the music studio thing instead. And be a DJ too. At the same time, I just like music.

Keren
So I'm going to read this statement to you and I'm gonna ask you again fill in the blank, OK. So my nightmare upon leaving school is.

Thomas
Never getting a job. I don't know like never get offered a job basically is what I would be saying. 'cause without a job you don't have money and without money you can't spend it. Yeah. Especially when you want, especially when you want the things you want in real life, but you just don’t have the money to spend it.