Special Classes in Irish Schools Phase 2: A Qualitative Study

Joanne Banks, Selina McCoy, Denise Frawley and Gillian Kingston, Economic and Social Research Institute; and Michael Shevlin and Fiona Smyth, Trinity College Dublin

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Foreword

I am pleased to publish the findings of the second phase of a study commissioned by the NCSE on special class provision in Ireland. The first phase, published in 2014, presented findings from a national survey of schools and provided data on the number and make up of special classes in Ireland.

This publication on the second phase, took a closer look at special classes in twelve case study schools around the country, six primary and six post-primary. The researchers engaged with students, special class teachers and principals in special classes for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Specific Speech and Language Disorder and Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD). They also considered informal classes set up by schools to support a number of students with a variety of need.

The researchers found that there wasn't a consistent approach by schools in the operation of special classes. They found that some teachers feel ill-equipped to teach in special settings – although once they had received training, teachers considered that their capacity to meet need was greatly improved.

The researchers also found that student experiences differed in these classes from school to school. Students valued the learning opportunities provided by smaller classes. However, worryingly, students in the informal classes, as well as in classes for MGLD, felt a stigma attached to attending the class and considered that they were perceived as being the 'lowest achieving group' and were not popular with their teachers.

All students should feel valued in school. Schools need to espouse a whole school approach to inclusion to mitigate students feeling excluded or different. In response to this finding, the NCSE published guidelines on setting up and organising special classes. These may be useful to schools and practitioners in creating supportive and inclusive learning environments for students who are unable to access the curriculum in a mainstream class.

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Acknowledgements

Contents

3. The Organisation of Teaching in Special Classes   47

4. Student Experiences in Special Classes   63

5. Summary of Findings and Conclusion

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Acronyms

ABA	Applied Behavioural Analysis
ASD	Autistic spectrum disorder
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate (Northern Ireland)
GAM	General Allocation Model
HSE	Health Service Executive
JCSP	Junior Certificate School Programme
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
MGLD	Mild general learning disability
NCLI	National Centre for Leadership and Innovation
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
SEN	Special educational needs
SESS	Special Education Support Service
SLU	Speech and Language Class/Unit
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SSLI	Specific Speech and Language Impairment
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

Executive Summary

Introduction

In Ireland, there has been intense debate as to the most appropriate educational setting for students with special educational needs and disabilities in recent years (Ware *et al*. 2009; Travers, 2009; NCSE, 2011). Much of it has stemmed from the introduction of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) which emphasised the need for more inclusive education where students with special educational needs can be educated alongside their peers in mainstream settings. Section 20 of this Act also specifies that the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) should ensure that a 'continuum of special needs provision is available as required in relation to each type of disability'. Special classes are part of that continuum and are intended to cater exclusively for students with special educational needs, with most classes admitting only students from a specific category of need (Ware *et al*. 2009). Policy documents have consistently promoted the need for special classes to be an integrated and flexible setting within the mainstream school context (NCSE, 2011). However, some argue that special classes as a form of provision have been neglected, being heavily overshadowed by the move towards mainstream class inclusion (Stevens and O'Moore, 2009, p.52), Ware *et al*. (2009) suggest that 'the special class model is often linked to the special school model and special classes have become more or less invisible as attention has focused mainly on the role of the school' (p.49).

Special classes have been part of the Irish system of education since the 1970s. It is only in recent years however that there is an increased focus on them due mainly to the increasing numbers of special classes opening each year, particularly for children with autism. Special classes are at the centre of the inclusive education debate with little consensus as to whether they benefit students with special educational needs (SEN) (Myklebust 2006; NCSE 2011). Some studies highlight their effectiveness in increasing the levels of inclusion for students with SEN (OFSTED 2006). Other research has identified the ways in which special classes play a role in segregating students (Crockett *et al*. 2007; Griffin *et al*. 2007; Tankersley *et al*. 2007). While research is increasingly focusing on how students fare in education (and different education settings), across a range of academic and social outcomes (Smyth *et al*. 2007; McCoy *et al*. 2014b), there has been much less attention on students in special class settings. Recent research and policy documents (Ware *et al*. 2009; NCSE 2011) have highlighted the evidence gap around this form of provision in Irish mainstream schools and called for an in-depth examination of the effectiveness of these classes for children with SEN. This led to the funding of the current mixed methods study of special class provision, the findings of which are presented in McCoy *et al*. (2014a) and this report. Commissioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2011, the objective of the overall project was to examine and evaluate the role and operation of special classes in mainstream Irish primary and post-primary schools.

Phase 1 study

The first report, based on a national survey of mainstream schools, was published in May 2014 and provides important baseline information about the operation and key features of special classes in primary and post-primary schools (McCoy *et al*. 2014a). The publication of this first report means that we now have detailed information on the characteristics of schools with special classes and the structure and operation of special classes in schools (McCoy *et al*. 2014a).

The Phase 1 report found that 0.5 per cent of the primary school population and 1.2 per cent of the post-primary population are being educated in special classes (5.1% and 13% of the population of primary and post-primary students with some form of SEN are educated in special classes). In total the study found there were 357 special classes provided at primary level and 302 at post-primary level, across 7 and 24 per cent of primary and post-primary schools respectively. This earlier study also found that over nine out of ten special classes at primary level were set up on the basis of sanction by the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) or Department of Education and Skills (DES). At post-primary level, however, just over half of special classes were not officially sanctioned, but established by schools through the pooling of resource hours. Just over one-third of classes were established following sanction by the SENO or DES (McCoy et al. 2014a, p.88). Where special classes are sanctioned, the classes are the responsibility of the NCSE who, with the SENO, are charged with setting them up and assigning them an appropriate designation based on the need or demand identified. There have been dramatic increases in the number of special classes sanctioned by the NCSE in recent years with the latest announcement of 149 new special classes due to open in mainstream schools over the 2015/16 academic year (www.ncse.ie 10 November 2015).

Phase 2 study

This report stems from the second phase of the broader special class study. It seeks to assess the extent to which these classes are meeting the needs of students placed in these classes, particularly in the context of the commitment to inclusive education outlined in the EPSEN Act (2004). It consists of a more focused longitudinal study of 12 case study schools with special classes which were used to track experiences among the cohort of students in these classes. Using principal and teacher questionnaires, in-depth qualitative interviews with special class teachers and focus groups with students in special classes, we examine the role and operation of special classes and address the lack of empirical evidence on student experiences in these settings. The report also re-analyses data from Phase 1, the national survey of schools, which was used in the first phase of this research study (McCoy *et al*. 2014a). The phase 2 study examines a range of key issues surrounding special classes, including how students in these classes fare, how teachers experience teaching in these settings and how these classes operate within broader school structures.

A total of six primary case study schools were visited at two time-points (March/April 2013 and May/June 2014), while six post-primary special classes were also visited at two time-points (May/June 2012 and May 2014). The schools were selected from the Phase 1 national survey of schools, to reflect a number of key dimensions, including school type, size, DEIS status and special

class designation. Given the large amount of qualitative data collected, student experiences in special classes were divided into four groups of special class provision based on the designation of the class and the relative severity of need of the students (as judged by the research team[1]). It is important to note that these groupings are to allow some comparison of student experience across settings, while fully acknowledging diversity in student need within classes and groups. The classes analysed included:

1. Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) classes – higher levels of need;

2. Speech and Language classes – medium levels of need;

3. Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD) classes – medium levels of need; and

4. Classes with no designation – lower levels of need.

This last group of special classes is part of a growing number of special classes established by schools through the pooling of resource teaching hours and without official sanction by the NCSE/DES. By concentrating on these different groups, we are focusing on the four largest types of special class provision in Ireland at present (see McCoy *et al*. 2014a).

Key findings phase 2 study

While the emphasis in the Phase 1 study was on understanding the structure and operation of special classes, the focus of this phase of the research was to examine student experiences in special classes. The report began with an examination of the role and experiences of teachers in special class settings, followed by an analysis of school level factors shaping special class provision.

The role of teachers in special classes

This report highlights a number of key issues relating to the organisation of teaching in special classes across primary and post-primary schools. The process of allocating teachers to special classes varies considerably, with some principals carefully selecting teachers according to their level of experience and qualifications. In other schools, however, special class teachers felt ill-equipped to meet the needs of students, finding the role particularly challenging and reporting that they did not have the required skills and qualifications to teach in such a setting.

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1   The research team formed such judgements based on their interviews with school principals, teachers and observations within the class settings, in particular considering the levels of support provided to students, their capacity to engage with the curriculum and expectations of their educational outcomes. The levels of need are defined relatively across the case study schools, and serve to allow comparison of different special class contexts. This classification does not necessarily correlate with the classifications used for formal designated classes. For example, students in mild GLD official classes might be considered to have mild or lower levels of need, while those in moderate GLD classes could be considered to have moderate or medium levels of need.

Where teachers received supports from the Special Education Support Service (SESS) and other professional supports, however, teacher capacity and willingness were greatly improved. Teachers also raised concerns over the relevance and appropriateness of the curriculum for some students, the absence of alternative forms of accreditation and the key importance of social development for many of these students.

School level factors influencing special class provision

Part of this research examines the role of the school in creating positive special class environments. Findings highlight the importance of school leadership in influencing the role and purpose of special classes. There appears to be some variation in the purpose of the special class across schools particularly according to the severity of need of the students in the class. Some principals believe they offer a 'safe haven' for students, others see them as places to bring students academically up-to-speed, others suggest the class offers students both. Concerns were raised by principals and teachers at post-primary where the special class can be negatively perceived by students in the class and their peers in mainstream.

The level of day-to-day integration of students into mainstream and longer-term movement into and out of special classes over time is also influenced by school level processes. In particular, the findings suggest that student mobility is greater in schools with strong leadership, a positive school climate and a whole-school approach to inclusion.

Special class provision and provision for students with SEN more generally is also influenced by greater levels of demand for SEN provision in certain school contexts. Some school principals interviewed raised concerns about school admissions policies creating soft barriers to accepting students with SEN and thus concentrating these students in other, often disadvantaged schools. This in turn, principals felt, impacted on the reputation of the school in the community and morale within the school itself.

Students' experiences

Overall, the findings indicate that the experiences of students in special classes vary widely by the type of school and designation of the special class. In particular, teacher interviews highlight the significance of having a whole-school approach to inclusion and where teachers have expertise in SEN education to achieve positive student experiences. This was particularly prevalent for students in Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) classes. The findings are mixed in relation to the experiences for students with medium levels of need in classes with Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD) and Speech and Language (SLU) designation. Teachers report that students in these classes are more likely to make progress where they themselves had high levels of expertise and support from the school principal and mainstream staff. In the SLU, teachers felt positive about the class where they were supported by outside professionals (such as Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists). The findings suggest that special classes for students with lower levels of need or with no identified need produce the most negative

experiences for students. This pattern is most marked at post-primary level where special classes are more likely to be negatively perceived by the students attending the class and their peers in mainstream.

ASD classes were in operation at primary and post-primary level for students with ASD diagnoses. Students in these classes often had Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and structured timetabled school days with integration in mainstream (where possible). Although academic progress was considered important, there was a strong emphasis on social development and life skills for this group of students. There was, however, little movement of these students over the study period and little expectation for students to ever transition to mainstream classes. Students in these classes were more likely to report having positive attitudes towards school compared to students in the other special class groups. There did not seem to be stigma attached to attending ASD classes, even for post-primary students. Based on the views of principals and teachers, these classes have stronger parental involvement in their children's progress in the special class compared to other classes in the case study schools.

The second type of provision examined in this study was a Speech and Language class. These classes largely operate at primary level and students typically had medium levels of need. Similar to the ASD classes, students in the SLU case study were also assessed, although students only ever attended the class for a fixed period of time.[2] As a result there was a high level of movement for these students between wave 1 and wave 2 of the study as students returned to their mainstream base schools. There seemed to be a trade-off however between returning full-time to a mainstream class after the time spent in the SLU and little or no integration with mainstream classes during the intervention period.

The third group comprised classes with MGLD designation. Students attending these classes were also considered to have medium levels of need and the emphasis is on 'bringing students up to speed' to manage academically in mainstream when they return. At post-primary, there was some evidence among the students (particularly in the focus groups) of stigma attached to the MGLD classes and a possible awareness of 'being different'.

The final group includes classes with no SEN designation (and without official sanction from NCSE/DES) with students with lower levels of need or those with no identified disability or SEN. This group are primarily at post-primary level and their placement in the special class is based on teacher judgement. For these students, the teaching emphasis is often on behaviour management and student retention. The classes are more fluid in terms of the day-to-day integration for students in mainstream classes for specific subjects. Students in this grouping are also more likely to report negative perceptions from their mainstream peers and they have a greater awareness of under-achieving academically. Further, and according to teachers and principals, there is less parental involvement in these students' education compared to other types of special classes and in some cases parents are not informed that their son/daughter is in a special class. There is some evidence that these special classes are acting as a low stream class within post-primary schools.

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2   These classes are designed to provide a teacher and speech therapist to support a small group of students in an intensive way over a two-year period (DES, 2005).

Policy implications

The findings highlight the need for further discussion around the role and purpose of special classes in Irish schools within the context of inclusive education. The implications for policy focus on three main areas described in the findings of the report:

1. The role of school leadership in developing an inclusive school and positive special class setting;

2. The importance of teacher capacity, expertise and willingness to work in specialised settings; and

3. The variation in student experiences in special class settings and the role of the special class in meeting their needs.

School leadership

It is recognised that school leadership plays a critical role in supporting change for inclusion within a school (Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, and Petry 2013). Findings in this report show that the role of the principal is key in promoting inclusive school cultures where special classes can operate most effectively. Positive leadership appears to directly impact on how teacher expertise in special class settings is used with obvious positive implications for the students attending these classes. The findings highlight the need for formal guidelines for school principals on how to establish and operate a special class. Furthermore, a network of support for principals, including an information contact point, would resolve many issues identified in this research around the set-up and running of special classes in mainstream schools. In particular, ensuring flexibility in curriculum pathways/certification and timetabling would allow for variation in provision for students in special classes. At system level, however, greater flexibility in the number of students required to set up and retain a special class would enable greater mobility among students to go into, and move out of, the special class when required, which might act to normalise the space and reduce stigma.

Teacher expertise and capacity

Stemming from the research findings around school leadership, the report highlights ways in which special class teachers can create positive academic and social outcomes for students in their classes. Our findings suggest a link between appropriate teacher placements, teacher skills/ expertise and positive student experiences. Improving access to professional development for teachers prior to taking up positions (pre-service education) in special classes in addition to continuing professional development would greatly enhance teacher confidence and ability to differentiate their teaching in special classes. Increased contact and support from mainstream colleagues might also aid integration for students as well as removing the sense of isolation experienced by some special class teachers. Incentivising the position, financially or otherwise, might also improve teacher willingness and increase the level of regard held for the position. The findings also highlight the negative consequences of cuts in broader professional services (such as Occupational Therapists, Speech and Language Therapists) working with special classes over the last number of years.

Student experiences in special classes

The diverse nature and ability of students with SEN makes any discussion around student outcomes difficult. One common theme, however, is the need for teachers to differentiate the learning goals and outcomes to meet students' individual needs. This tailored approach to teaching is clearly linked to the type of school leadership and, in turn, the extent to which teachers have specialist expertise. In order for teachers in special classes to meet students' needs, it is critical that they are supported within the school context itself, through professional development and through positive teacher-parent relations.

Difficulties around student transitions from special classes in both primary and post-primary school were highlighted in this report. In particular, responsibility seemed to fall on individual teachers for ensuring a smooth transition and monitoring a student's progress after the transition is made. Formal transition structures or guidelines for schools, including the recent introduction of Education Passports for students transitioning from primary to post-primary schools, would help to ensure that responsibility for a successful transition is at the school level.

Finally, the study highlights some issues about the relevance of the curriculum for students with SEN. In particular, the curriculum at post-primary level seemed, at times, ill-suited to the needs or capacity of some students. Further discussion needs to take place around this issue of curriculum and certification, particularly with the introduction of Junior Cycle reform which may address these issues with the opportunity for some students to take the Level 2 Learning Programme for students with general learning disabilities.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction: Special classes in Ireland

In Ireland, there has been intense debate as to the most appropriate educational setting for students with special educational needs and disabilities in recent years (Ware *et al*. 2009; Travers 2009; NCSE 2011). Much of it has stemmed from the introduction of the EPSEN Act (2004) which emphasised the need for more inclusive education where students with special educational needs can be educated alongside their peers in mainstream settings. Section 20 of this Act also specifies that the NCSE should ensure that a 'continuum of special needs provision is available as required in relation to each type of disability'. Special classes are part of that continuum and are intended to cater exclusively for students with special educational needs, with most classes admitting only students from a specific category of need (Ware *et al*. 2009). Policy documents have consistently promoted the need for special classes to be an integrated and flexible setting within the mainstream school context (NCSE 2011). The NCSE's policy advice paper on The Future Role of Special Schools and Classes in Ireland (2011) recommends a continuum of provision for students with special educational needs and a 'fluid approach' to be taken to pupil placement (NCSE 2011, p.88).

For the purposes of this study, and following consultation with stakeholders,[3] a special class is defined as one formed primarily for students with special educational needs which is their main learning environment (McCoy *et al*. 2014a). Special classes can be established in two ways:

1. Through SENOs working directly with schools, the local Health Service Executive personnel and the DES, who identify unmet need and/or emerging demand for special classes. The designation of the class follows the need/demand identified.

2. Through schools which proactively apply to the local SENO for a special class. This could be the case where principals have knowledge of an incoming cohort of students with a specific need. The designation of the class follows the need/demand identified (NCSE 2011).

Generally students in special classes have a professional diagnosis of disability. Special classes have a reduced pupil-teacher ratio and an allocation of SNA support. In the case of ASD classes, for example, the pupil-teacher ratio is 6:1, while in the case of classes for students with mild general learning disabilities (MGLD) one teacher is appointed for every 11 students and no more than 11 students can be placed in such a class. To retain sanction for a special class, the school must maintain a certain number of students in the class as specified by the retention ratios (McCoy *et al*. 2014a, p.30).

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3   This functional definition was arrived at following discussion among the research team and between the team, the funders (NCSE) and the advisory group set up to guide the study.

The Phase 1 national survey of schools found a substantial number of special classes in operation in September 2011: 357 at primary and 302 at post-primary level. In total, 7 per cent of primary and 24 per cent of post-primary schools operate at least one special class. The findings also show considerable growth in this form of educational provision in recent years, particularly at post-primary level where over half of classes were established between 2009–2011. At primary level over 90 per cent of special classes are formed on the basis of a sanction by the NCSE/DES, with the remaining share established by schools pooling resource teaching or other resources (McCoy *et al*. 2014a). The pattern differs at post-primary where a considerable share (51 per cent) of special classes emerged though pooling of resource teaching hours and many have no specific special educational needs' designation.

The Phase 1 study found that special classes play a more focused and specialised role in primary and serve a broader function at post-primary catering for more diverse groups of students (in terms of need). Sixty per cent of primary special classes are designated as ASD classes, representing the dominant form of provision for students with such needs, particularly in recent years. Such classes are also typically highly specialised in terms of the types of need of the students and in the range of year groups in the class. At post-primary, ASD classes account for less than one-fifth of special classes, with much greater diversity in special class designation than at primary (McCoy *et al*. 2014a). Finally, the phase 1 national survey also found that allocation to such classes is relatively permanent for students; where mobility to mainstream classes does occur it is heavily influenced by teacher assessments, even though the initial placement in special classes is largely determined by formal assessments and the advice of SENOs or NEPS (McCoy *et al*. 2014a).

Whether to incorporate all young people into mainstream classes or to divide them into different streams or classes in a mainstream setting has been a crucial issue for educational policy internationally. While this discussion has traditionally focused on ability grouping or tracking students according to curriculum or programmes (Pijl, Skaalvik, *et al*. 2010; Avramidis 2010), it is at the centre of more recent debates around inclusive education and types of provision for students with special educational needs (SEN). Internationally research on special classes has been sparse due mainly to the varied systems of special education operating in different national contexts. Where research does exist, it calls into question the motivation of having special classes for schools and students and focuses on the social impact of placing students in separate provision (Hegarty 1993; Crockett *et al*. 2007).

Special classes in mainstream schools have been a feature of Irish education since the 1970s. Little is known, however, about the experiences, progress and outcomes of students in these specialised settings. Dramatic changes in education policy for students with special educational needs over the last decade make the need for in-depth examination of the experiences of students in special class settings all the more relevant. This chapter provides a brief overview of policy and literature relating to student experiences in specialised settings in Ireland and internationally. It introduces the research questions for the study and provides details of the methodology adopted. The chapter then considers the ethical review process undertaken as part of the study and the limitations of this research.

1.2   Overview of special education research and policy

This section examines research on specialised settings for students with SEN with a particular focus on student experiences in special classes or units.[4] Policy and research reports and peer reviewed journal articles were used in the literature search where the content contained relevant information about special classes in mainstream schools and, where available, information on student experiences, progress and outcomes in special class settings. The literature was accessed in a variety of ways using searches in Educational Research Abstracts (ERA) Online which gives access to seven educational research journals.[5] Key peer-reviewed international journals, not only in sociology of education, but also in the disciplines of disability and inclusive education, were made available through this website. Using the advanced search tool, texts in the area of special classes were identified using keyword search terms. Literature was also sourced through reference lists in the literature and much of the Irish references were gathered through the NCSE's online database of research and policy.

The first part of this literature review examines the ongoing national and international debates around the effectiveness of special classes in the context of inclusive education. Focusing specifically on Ireland, the second section of this review of literature examines existing evaluations of special classes and types of provision for students with speech impairments and ASD. The final section examines a number of issues raised by a recent study of special schools and classes which led to this research study being commissioned.

1.2.1   The effectiveness of special classes?

Research on the impact or effectiveness of special classes is limited due mainly to variation in the type of supports available to students with SEN internationally and differences in the language and terminology used for the various types of separate provision across different national contexts. Much of the research on separate educational settings in mainstream environments is characterised by methodological problems such as small sample sizes or where comparison groups are not truly comparable because students educated in specialised settings are more likely to differ from other students (Dyson 2007). Measuring progress is also difficult for this group as progress is more likely to be slower and may not be picked up in test scores, for example. Overall, research on the impact of inclusion on the outcomes of students with SEN has generated mixed findings (Mitchell 2010). Research from the United States, for example, highlights that there is no compelling evidence that placement in special or mainstream education is the critical factor in student academic or social success (Hocutt 1996). A more recent US study also found that the classroom environment and quality of instruction have more impact than placement on the success of students with disabilities (Dyson 2007). Similarly, in the UK studies have shown that the most important factor influencing outcomes for students with learning difficulties was not the type of provision but the quality. This research found better provision in resourced mainstream schools than elsewhere (OFSTED 2006).

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4   It should be read in conjunction with a more extensive review of literature in the Phase 1 report by McCoy *et al.* (2014) where broader international debates around special classes within the context of inclusive education were discussed.

5   Journals include Educational Technology Abstracts, Multicultural Education Abstracts, Research into Higher Education Abstracts, Sociology of Education Abstracts, Special Educational Needs Abstracts, Educational Management Abstracts and Technical Education and Training Abstracts.

As discussed in the literature review in McCoy *et al*. (2014a), some studies argue that the 'internal segregation' of a special class in a mainstream context undermines the self-esteem of students perceived to be lacking the intellectual and physical ability to participate in the normal classroom (Crockett *et al*. 2007; Dyson 2007; Griffin, Jones, and Kilgore 2007; Tankersley *et al*. 2007). Focusing on the attainment of these students in special classes or mainstream settings, studies have concluded that those with disabilities placed in special classes did not achieve better results than those placed in ordinary classes and that the dominant trend was in favour of regular classes (Jenkinson 1997; Hegarty 1993). Others suggest, however, that these students benefit from special class placement not only because of the appropriate curriculum but also because attending classes with classmates with the same disabilities enhances their confidence and self-esteem (Jenkinson 1997).[6]

More recent studies have begun to raise the issue of the impact of inclusion on the profile of students remaining in specialised settings and in particular the possibility that students with more severe disabilities are less likely to attend mainstream education and are more likely to remain in special class settings. In Northern Ireland, one study carried out by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) examined SEN provision in special units for students with moderate learning difficulties attached to mainstream primary and post-primary schools (ETI 2010). The findings show that the profile of students in these units is changing rapidly over time and, in particular, is becoming more diverse and complex. The report states that the idea that these units are a stepping stone to full integration into the mainstream class was an unlikely outcome for the students given the severity of need (ETI 2010). For these students with severe levels of needs it appears that mainstreaming or integration may not be possible and they may spend 'most or all of their school day in a separate designated classroom' (Tankersley *et al*. 2007).

1.2.2   Evaluations of special classes and units in Ireland

In Ireland, the operation of special classes dates back to the 1970s but it is only in recent years that there has been a growing research and policy focus (Ware *et al*. 2009; NCSE 2011) due mainly to the increased use of special classes as a method of provision for students with SEN in mainstream schools (Parsons *et al*. 2009; NCSE 2013). In particular, the number of special classes for students with ASD has increased considerably in the last decade (Symes *et al*. 2010; Parsons *et al*. 2009).

The discussion around special class provision must be set within the context of inclusive education for students with SEN who, according to the EPSEN Act (2004), 'shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs' [EPSEN, 2004, section 2]. The Act does, however, specify two exceptions to this:

> … unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child [with special educational needs] is such that to do so would be inconsistent with (a) the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act, or (b) the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated [section 2].

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6   See McCoy *et al*. (2014) for more detail on literature in this area.

The Act also states that one of the functions of the NCSE is 'to ensure that a continuum of special educational provision is available as required in relation to each type of disability' [EPSEN, 2004, section 20 (1) (g)].

Although there are no specific policy guidelines for primary schools, at post-primary level, policy clearly emphasises that mainstream instruction should be used over special classes, wherever possible. Students, therefore, should be 'taught separately in the special class setting only when it is in their interests and at points in their timetable when they are unable to participate beneficially in lessons in mainstream classes' (DES 2007). More recently, the NCSE issued policy advice to the DES on special class provision for all schools. This stated that special classes should continue for students with particular needs and it made recommendations to help schools ensure the provision of special classes would be both effective and inclusive (NCSE 2011[7]). The main points of advice for schools with special classes included:

- schools should take an inclusive approach to allow students to join mainstream classes to the greatest extent possible;

- special classes should be organised on a flexible basis to provide for specialist interventions specific to student needs;

- access to special classes should be provided on a planned, equitable and transparent basis;

- schools should develop a formal policy on how children in special classes should be included in mainstream for set periods of time as appropriate and ensuring regular reviews of students' experiences and outcomes (NCSE 2011, p.16).

Similar to studies internationally, evaluating the effectiveness of special classes in Ireland is complex given the varied nature of need in any particular class setting. A number of studies has sought to better understand the role of special classes, particularly classes with specific designations in mainstream schools. One study, for example, evaluated the extent to which language units for students with Specific Speech and Language Impairments (SSLI) were meeting students' needs (DES 2005). Speech and Language classes have been operating in Ireland since approximately 1990 and at the time of writing there were 367 students enrolled in such classes. The aim of these classes is to address the students' speech and language difficulties through 'appropriate education and intensive speech and language therapy within the context of a broad and balanced primary school curriculum' (DES 2005, p.5). They consist of classes attached to mainstream primary schools with a full-time teacher assigned and a low student teacher ratio of 7:1. Services are then provided to the small class grouping such as a speech and language therapist and a psychologist (both employed by the Health Service Executive) who visit the class for certain hours in the school day or week. In some instances the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) provide psychological support services for the class. Although Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) are not automatically assigned to SLUs, the NCSE Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) may allocate SNAs to a number of individual students enrolled in the class. Making speech and language classes relatively distinct from other forms of specialised provision, the emphasis is placed on early intervention with students generally placed

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7   The NCSE provided this advice in the absence of robust empirical evidence as to the effectiveness of special class provision.

during infant or first-class level for a period of two years. Some primary schools, however, operate two classes, a junior and a senior class and some students transfer to the senior class following a placement in the junior class (DES 2005). These classes are distinct from other special classes in that they are based on early intervention for a set period of time. Overall, the report was positive about the impact of these classes where students would leave their base school and attend these classes for a period of two years. It did, however, raise concerns about the admissions procedures used by schools for these classes and emphasised the importance of these classes having access to 'requisite teaching, speech and language and psychological support' (DES 2005).

A year later another evaluation was published by the Department of Education on provision for students with ASD (DES 2006). Using qualitative and quantitative information from parents, school principals, directors of centres (such as ABA centres) and staff members, the report specifically evaluated educational provision in ten special classes for students with ASD in seven mainstream primary schools.[8] The findings highlighted a range of positive features of practice in ASD special classes including:

- positive staff-student interactions;

- parental involvement in their child's education;

- a balanced range of individual work, group work, class work;

- structured opportunities for social interaction; and

- regular assessment, monitoring, and recording of student's progress (DES 2006, p. 74).

The report pointed, however, to a number of areas for development which included:

- establishing procedures for earlier intervention and diagnostic services;

- including a summary of professionals' reports, summative assessment findings and parents' observations in individual student's files;

- engaging in a risk assessment that systematically addresses the sensory and perceptual sensitivities of students with ASD in relation to lighting, acoustic levels, heating and ventilation systems, and classroom displays and colouring;

- allocating parents a central role in the implementation of IEPs in all schools;

- structuring class timetables in accordance with the time allocation for each curriculum area; and

- adopting reverse inclusion[9] and 'buddy systems' as a feature of inclusion policy and practice (DES 2006, p.75).

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8   The report states that there were 88 special classes for students with ASD at the time.

9   Reverse inclusion is used to help students with SEN to interact with their peers by including students from mainstream classes in special units for set periods of time.

Taking a broader perspective on special class provision, more recent research by Ware *et al*. (2009) sought to examine the operation of a range of special classes in Ireland. This research found that special classes can facilitate the inclusion of students in mainstream classes (see also Travers *et al*. 2010 for similar findings) and can offer a 'safe haven' for some students where there is a favourable student/teacher ratio and flexibility in teaching exists (Ware *et al*. 2009; Travers *et al*. 2010). Instead of travelling long distances to special schools, the research suggests that special classes enable students to be educated near home and offer flexibility in the organisation of teaching and curriculum provision (Ware *et al*. 2009). This study raised concerns, however, about how little we know about teacher qualifications in special classes, the length of time students spend in the class and the lack of continuity between primary and post-primary school. Moreover it noted the lack of information on the increased use of the special class in Ireland in recent years, particularly for students with autism (Ware *et al*. 2009; Parsons *et al*. 2009).[10]

1.3   Research questions and methodology

This research study has been commissioned by the NCSE in response to the findings of Ware *et al*. (2009) and the policy advice paper on special schools and classes which recommended further research on special classes (NCSE 2011). Given the importance of evidence-based policy-making, particularly in the context of contracting resources, the NCSE commissioned this broader study of special classes. Given the scale of the study it was decided to have two separate but linked reports and in May 2014 the NCSE and ESRI published the phase 1 report by McCoy *et al*. (2014a). Across the two reports the following research questions are addressed:

1. What does the international literature, evidence and policy tell us about the operation or effectiveness of the special class model for students with SEN?

2. How did the system of special classes in Ireland evolve over time and what factors have driven the development and use of this model?

3. How is the model currently operating in the Irish system?

4. How effective is the current model in terms of serving students' educational needs and their entitlement under the EPSEN Act?

5. What lessons can be identified to inform the use of the special class model into the future?

1.3.1   Phase 1 study

The first phase of the research and subsequent publication by McCoy *et al*. (2014a) addressed the first three research questions listed above. This report used a large-scale quantitative national survey of mainstream schools to capture baseline data on the operation and key features of special classes. The following section summarises the research tasks and methodology adopted in phase 1 (see McCoy *et al*. 2014a for a detailed methodology) and presents the key research findings from this phase of the study.

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10   Information on special classes has improved since the publication of the Ware *et al*. (2009) report with the publication of annual data on new special classes by the NCSE on their website www.ncse.ie

1.3.2 Phase 1 research questions

The research tasks for the national survey of primary and post-primary schools (McCoy *et al*. 2014a) included:

1. A review of the international literature, evidence, policy and practices on the use of the special class model and its effectiveness for students with SEN, drawing particular attention to any studies which compare the experiences of students with SEN in special classes to the experiences of students with SEN in mainstream classes;

2. An outline of the development of the special class model in Ireland and a comprehensive review of existing administrative data on the extent and nature of special classes in primary and post-primary schools;

3. A national survey of schools to establish further baseline information about the operation and key features of special classes in primary and post-primary schools. The aim of this large-scale survey was to understand: the nature, use and distribution of special classes in the education system; the criteria and processes by which students are placed in these classes and/or reintegrated into mainstream classes; the duration and nature (full-time/part-time/graduated) of placement in special classes; the number of students progressing from special classes and the progression routes followed by these students; the teaching personnel, teaching strategies and assessment practices being deployed in special classes; curricular issues and certification options in special classes; other resources deployed in special classes; the role of other professionals in special classes (e.g. special needs assistants, psychologists, speech and language therapists etc.); the designation of special classes and the needs of students being placed in these classes; and any other features of special classes relevant to addressing the study aims.

In addition to gathering detailed baseline information, the McCoy *et al*. (2014a) report examines the characteristics of schools with special classes, the structure and operation of special classes in schools and the types of teaching and learning in special classes (McCoy *et al*. 2014a). It provides an extensive review of policy and literature in the area of special class provision both in Ireland and internationally and provides an historical overview of the development of special class provision in Ireland. It also provides a detailed account of the number of special classes operating at primary and post-primary levels, the designation of these classes, how students are placed in special classes and details the types of teaching and other resources used to support students in these settings.

1.3.3 Phase 1 findings

The key findings of McCoy *et al*. (2014a) can be summarised as follows:

*   There is variation in the manner in which special classes are formed, with the majority formed with official sanction from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) or the NCSE. Many post-primary classes, however, were created through the pooling of resources and without official sanction from the DES/NCSE;

- A large share of special classes at primary level, particularly in recent years, are provided for students with autism;

- At post-primary, special classes vary much more in the types of needs provided for, in some cases (particularly for classes which are not sanctioned by the NCSE) including students without special educational needs;

- There is a lack of integration for students in special class settings with many students remaining in that class for the entire day; and

- In terms of the nature of provision, this report highlighted how students in special classes typically spend most, if not all, of the week together in their own class setting and predominantly remain together across school years. At post-primary level, many special classes are assigned one teacher to cover all curricular areas.

1.3.4 Phase 2: qualitative study of special classes

The second phase, which is the basis of this report, provides a more in-depth examination of the role and operation of special classes. This phase involves:

A more focused longitudinal study (over two academic years) of a sub-set of special classes tracking the experiences, progress and outcomes for the cohort of students in these classes and evaluating the operation of these classes over the period of two years.

This research aims to supplement the large-scale national patterns identified by McCoy *et al*. (2014a) with more in-depth insights into experiences in relation to special classes in a smaller number of schools.

Selection of case study schools

This research phase involved questionnaires and in-depth interviews with school principals, special class teachers and students in special classes at primary and post-primary level. Six primary case study schools were visited at two time points with the first wave carried out in March and April 2013 and followed up in May and June 2014. These students were in third class (or the equivalent age) during the first visit and completing 4th class (or equivalent age) at the second wave. The researchers found that in primary schools in particular, students in special classes (particularly ASD classes) were grouped into junior and senior classes rather than 3rd and 4th classes. As found in the phase 1 report by McCoy *et al*. (2014a), the ages (or year groups) of the children in the junior and senior special classes varied widely at primary level (p.97). At post-primary level, six schools were visited in May and June 2012 and followed up in May 2014. The majority of post-primary students were in first year during the first visit and completing third year by the second visit. Again in line with McCoy *et al*. (2014a, p.97) the case study research found a smaller spread of year groups within post-primary special classes.

A theoretical sampling procedure was used in selecting case study schools to include a range of school dimensions such as Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) status, regional location and gender mix, as well as school type (such as Gaelscoileanna, Educate Together and Catholic ethos schools at primary level and secondary, community/comprehensive and vocational at post-primary level). A particular focus of school selection was capturing the main class designations at primary and post-primary level.[11] At primary level, five of the six schools selected were non-DEIS with just one rural DEIS school in the sample.[12] In selecting the case study schools at primary level we reflected the national patterns and three of the six schools with special classes had ASD designation, two had Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD) designation and there was one Speech and Language class. Schools at primary level varied little in the type of special class model that was operating in that most case studies operated the special class as the base class of the students. There was some variation in the amount of integration into mainstream activities (Table 1.1).

At post-primary, of the six schools used in the longitudinal analysis, three were DEIS and three were non-DEIS. Reflecting the greater diversity in special class designation at post-primary at national level (Table 1.2), two of the post-primary case study schools had ASD classes, two had MGLD designation and two had no designation. The types of special class models used at post-primary varied more than primary, although for the majority of students the special class was being used as their base class with a range of integration approaches used.

By selecting case study schools from the Phase 1 National Survey of Schools (McCoy *et al*. 2014a) the research allowed for a detailed study of the population of schools with special classes. Figure 1.1 highlights the formal designation of special classes identified by the national survey (McCoy *et al*. 2014a). At primary level, 60 per cent of the special classes are designated for students with ASD. This is well ahead of the 14 per cent designated for students with MGLD and 11 per cent for students with specific speech and language disorder (p.90).

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11 After stratification of the population of schools by these variables, a purposive sample was chosen.

12 This does not reflect the national pattern: McCoy *et al*. (2014) found Urban Band 1 DEIS schools were significantly more likely to provide special classes than other school contexts. However, in selecting the case study schools, the aim is not to achieve a representative sample of schools, but rather to reflect key dimensions of variation.
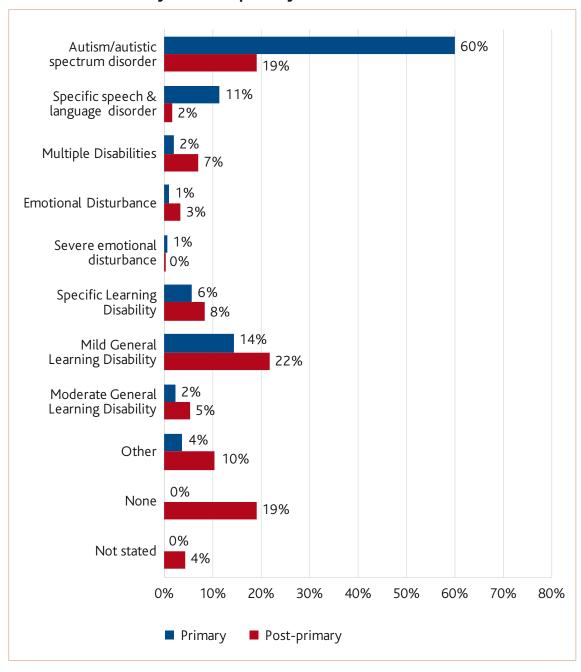
Figure 1.1: Special Educational Needs Designation of Special Classes at Primary and Post-primary

Source: McCoy *et al*. 2014a, p.90.

Table 1.1 and Table 1.2 outline the four groups of special class provision examined in this report: five ASD classes, four MGLD classes, one speech and language class and two classes with no formal designation.

Table 1.1: Primary Case Study Schools

	DEIS status	Region	SC Designation	SC Model[1]
P01	Non-DEIS	Rural	ASD	Full-time, little integration
P04	Rural DEIS	Rural	ASD	Full-time, little integration
P09	Non-DEIS	City	ASD	Full-time, some integration
P25	Non-DEIS	Town	MGLD	Part-time, fully integrated
P30	Non-DEIS	Town	SLU	Full-time, little integration
P31	Non-DEIS	Town	MGLD	Full-time, some integration

[1] Little integration reflects few, if any, students joining mainstream students during the school day/week; some integration refers to some students joining mainstream students for specific class periods during the school day/week.

Table 1.2: Post-Primary Case Study Schools

	DEIS status	School type	Region	SC Designation	SC Model[1]
PP01	Non-DEIS	Community School	Rural	ASD	Full-time, some integration
PP06*	Non-DEIS	Secondary	Rural	MGLD	Full-time, some integration
PP08	Non-DEIS	Secondary	Town	ASD	Full-time, little integration
PP10	DEIS	Community College	Town	MGLD	Full-time, some integration
PP13	DEIS	Community College	City	No Designation	Full-time, some integration
PP14	Non-DEIS	Vocational School	Town	No Designation	Full-time, some integration

* Wave 1 only (principal declined to participate in wave 2)

[1] Little integration reflects few, if any, students joining mainstream students during the school day/week; some integration refers to some students joining mainstream students for specific class periods during the school day/week.

The information derived from the sample of schools selected has been utilised in this report to explore processes within schools with special classes in mainstream primary and post-primary education. As with any qualitative research, the authors acknowledge that caution must be taken in making generalisations about a small sample of schools.

1.3.5 Groups of special class provision

McCoy *et al*. (2014a) identified clusters of special classes by examining the number of year groups and the number of SEN types in any special class (p.99). Overall, the findings show the largest cluster of special classes (54 per cent) has a narrow range of year groups and few different types of SEN (Table 5.7, p.102 for a cluster breakdown by primary and post-primary level). The second largest cluster (25 per cent of special classes) are more distinctive in that they have a wide range of year groups in the same class but few different types of SEN. Approximately half the special classes in the first two clusters have ASD designation. The third cluster contains

21 per cent of special classes and has a narrow range of year groups but a larger number of SEN in the same class. This cluster is most likely to contain special classes with no official designation and students with no official diagnosis (McCoy *et al*. 2014a, p. 99). Although the McCoy *et al*. (2014a) report highlights a wide range of special classes operating in mainstream schools in Ireland (p.102), this report focuses on the most prevalent special classes in terms of designation and not the full range of special classes in operation.

Also highlighting the variation in the forms of special class provision, the NCSE recently published its official list of special classes in mainstream primary and post-primary schools. These classes operate under a range of designations at primary and post-primary (Table 1.3).

Table 1.3: Types of NCSE Special Classes in Primary and Post-primary Schools Academic Year 14/15

Primary Class Types	Post-primary Class Types
Autism/Autistic Spectrum Disorders	Autism/Autistic Spectrum Disorders
ASD Early Intervention	Mild General Learning Disability
Mild General Learning Disability	Combination
Specific Speech and Language Disorder	Multiple Disabilities
Hearing Impairment	Other
Specific Learning Disability	Emotional Disturbance
Multiple Disabilities	Hearing Impairment
Severe/Profound General Learning Disability	
Severe Emotional Disturbance	
Emotional Disturbance	

Source: NCSE 2015.

It would obviously be impractical to carry out any meaningful analysis on a large number of special class designations. This study uses a number of models of special class provision which makes it possible to identify four common groups of special class provision. The groups have been created based on the understanding that special classes can be categorised according to both the type of designation assigned to the class and the severity of need among students in the class (McCoy *et al*. 2014a). The groups of provision are identified in Table 1.4 below.

Table 1.4: Groups of special class provision

Type of designation	Severity of need
ASD classes	Typically higher levels of need
Speech and Language classes	Typically medium levels of need
Classes with MGLD designation	Typically medium levels of need
Classes with no designation	Typically lower levels of need and no formal diagnosis/assessment of need

The research team formed judgements regarding severity based on their interviews with school principals, teachers and observations within the class settings, in particular considering the levels of support provided to students, their capacity to engage with the curriculum and expectations of their educational outcomes. The levels of need are defined relatively across the case study schools, and serve to allow comparison of different special class contexts. This classification does not necessarily correlate with the classifications used for formal designated classes. For example, students in mild GLD official classes might be considered to have mild or lower levels of need, while those in moderate GLD classes would be associated more with having moderate or medium levels of need.

Given the small sample size, the authors acknowledge the difficulties in generalising about such a varied form of provision. However, this classification allows for greater insight into whether these different settings are more or less positive in terms of serving children's educational needs. It must also be acknowledged that much variation exists both between special classes and within these groupings. Furthermore, in discussing students in special classes, they have been categorised according to their primary characteristic, predominantly their disability or special educational need. We acknowledge, however, that some students have more than one special need.

1.3.6   Qualitative research methods

To summarise, this report draws on a range of information gathered during school visits in order to provide a holistic account of student experiences in special class settings. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Using QSR NVivo 8, the responses were coded under specific themes identified from the reviewed SEN literature and from the interviews with young people themselves.

Data were collected using a variety of methods.

School record sheet

Principals were asked to complete a one-page school record sheet which detailed the class placement of the student at two points in time in addition to information about any supports received, any issues arising with the student and confirming whether consent was obtained. All principals completed the school record sheets at wave 1, while one primary principal and two post-primary principals did not do so at wave 2.

Teacher-on-pupil questionnaires[13]

Teachers were asked to supply detailed information tracking (third class) special class students over a two-year period. For each primary and post-primary school child, special class teachers were asked to complete a survey which gathered information on the time each individual child spent in the special class, the progress of the child, their attitudes towards school, their attendance patterns and their progression routes on departure. During wave 2 of this study, teachers were asked to provide up-to-date information on the progression of these students – including whether they remained in a special class (or the timing of departure) and their progression to post-primary school. Response rates proved much stronger during the first wave of contact with the schools. A total of 57 questionnaires were completed in respect of students in the special classes at primary level and 33 questionnaires for post-primary students in special classes (representing overall response rates in excess of 80 per cent). The numbers of completed questionnaires were lower in the second wave (less than 50 per cent) of data collection and in some cases teachers responded in respect of students where they had not responded in the first wave. For this reason, much of the analysis focuses on the findings based on the teachers' reports on students in the first wave.

In-depth face-to-face interviews with principals

Although not part of the original research design it was apparent to the research team that a wide range of factors and processes influence the experiences of students in special classes. The role and views of the principal were therefore considered important in understanding how the special class model operates in the school. Principals in each of the case study schools participated in interviews at each wave of data collection.

In-depth face-to-face interviews with teachers

The teacher interviews examined a wide range of factors that can influence the experiences of students in special classes. The main themes considered included: the structure and operation of the special class within the school; teaching and learning within the special class; and information about the experience and progress (as measured by their placement) of each of the students in the special class at two time points (where consent had been obtained from parents and the students themselves). Teachers in each of the case study schools participated in interviews at each wave of data collection (a total of 16 teachers).

Student questionnaires and focus groups

Education research has consistently highlighted the importance of taking account of the 'student voice' and the potential contribution of the student perspective to school improvement and policy development more generally (Smyth, Banks and Calvert 2012; Macbeath *et al*. 2001; Rudduck and Flutter 2004; Sammons *et al*. 1994). The aim of the case study research was to allow a focus not only on the views of school personnel but also on the 'student voice' (Williams *et al*. 2009) by exploring the extent to which their school experiences and engagement changed over time. The student voice can inform policy-making by taking account of the perspective of

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13   See Appendix for a sample teacher-on-pupil questionnaire for primary school students.

young people and improving our understanding of students' experiences of teaching and learning. This is particularly important for students with SEN who were traditionally considered difficult to access or whose disabilities may impair their capacity to communicate. Internationally, the voice of children with SEN is largely absent from education research (with the exception of Shah *et al*. 2010; UNESCO 1994; Shevlin *et al*. 2003) due mainly to issues around authenticity and reliability (Scheepstra *et al*. 1999). In order to capture student views on their education and special classes more specifically, where possible (and with signed parental consent[14]) students in special classes were asked to:

- Complete a short student questionnaire seeking detailed information about their overall experience in the special class. It gathered information about how they felt about school, their subjects, teachers and life more generally. A total of 127 post-primary students completed questionnaires, 81 of which were completed at wave 1. Given a generally greater complexity of need among primary students (as well as their younger age) much smaller numbers completed questionnaires so the analysis focuses on the post-primary students who participated in this data collection.

- Participate in focus group interviews with other students in the special class. It became evident during the first wave of fieldwork, however, that this would only be possible for those with less complex SEN or no diagnosed SEN. Where these interviews did take place and there was sufficient content for analysis, it was at post-primary level and without the presence of their teachers or other school personnel. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and involved questions around academic experiences, peer relations, social participation and expectations for the future. A total of eight focus group interviews were undertaken with post-primary students (nearly all undertaken at the first wave), each focus group comprising five to seven students. Just one focus group was undertaken with primary students at wave 1. This component of the analysis thus draws solely on students' views from the post-primary focus groups.

The topics covered in the interviews with young people in special classes included the following:

- Opinions of being in the special class

- Views of the curriculum

- Expectations for the future

Other Sources

The report also uses principal and special class teacher qualitative data for a comprehensive examination of student experiences where commonalities and differences within the same school could then be explored. Teacher-on-pupil questionnaires and principal and teacher interviews enabled identification of respondents' convergent or divergent views across a range of areas discussed during the interviews and helped to identify common issues that the interviewees

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14 School principals were asked to send information and consent packs to the parents of students in the special class, to notify them about the research, provide information and seek their written consent to their son/daughter participating. Only where such consent was provided could students participate in the study. Further details are provided in section 1.4.

considered important (Darmody *et al*. 2011). Again these data were analysed using the QSR NVivo 8 software to identify emerging themes. Each interviewee was assured confidentiality and all efforts have been made to protect their identity in this report.

1.4 Research ethics

Given the nature of the study working with children with SEN the ESRI/TCD research team completed a thorough ethical review process. A crucial feature of the ethical considerations was in gaining 'voluntary informed consent' from parents of children with SEN in order to carry out research in the case study schools (BERA 2011). All parents and schools were provided with a detailed information leaflet on the project and an overview of what the qualitative interviews with principals themselves and staff would entail. A cover letter also provided information about the study and the rationale behind collecting this type of qualitative data. In the information leaflet, both parents and principals were assured of the voluntary nature of their child's involvement as well as given assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Furthermore, the contact details of the researchers were provided in case principals wished to make contact about the study. There were strict guidelines to be followed for researchers working in the case study schools. These included:

- Two researchers had to be present for all research conducted in the case study schools.

- Researchers had to have with them the telephone numbers of the study team as well as the telephone number of the local Garda station.

- In line with the DCYA Children First Guidelines, protocols were put in place for dealing with potential child protection issues.

- All qualitative data collected was stored in a password protected data file restricted to team members.

- Interviews were transcribed and subject to confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout the report.

- Paper records were stored in a secure and locked filing cabinet with access only by the research team.

1.5 Limitations

Methodological issues are not unknown in special education research particularly when examining student progress or experiences over time. Samples sizes are often small and comparison groups are 'unlikely to be truly comparable' as students identified with SEN are more likely to differ from other students 'in important but unmeasured ways' (Hocutt 1996, p.86). This section highlights two main limitations of this research including: issues around the small sample size in case study schools; and difficulties in using focus group qualitative data based on students with less severe need.

Chapter 4 provides analysis of the data which consists of a total of 57 teacher-on-pupil questionnaires at primary level and 33 teacher-on-pupil questionnaires at post-primary level.[15] It is worth noting at this point that the analysis is predominantly based on wave 1 data given the lower response rate in wave 2. Other difficulties arose where in some cases teachers provided information about students where they had not responded in the first wave. Furthermore, different teachers completed the questionnaires for some of the classes in the second survey wave. Given these difficulties as well as the small sample size, the data is used to provide insights into how children are faring, rather than providing quantitative analysis.

It was also intended that focus group interviews would be undertaken in case study schools at two time points in order to examine student experiences of being in a special class over time. During the course of fieldwork, it became apparent that this would not be possible in special classes where students had severe and moderate levels of need. Some of the students were, for example, non-verbal, others had severe speech impairments and, in some classes, students lacked confidence in speaking before the group. The material gathered from interviews at primary level was particularly limited. At post-primary, interview material was only usable in special classes where students had lower levels of need. Thus the student voice evidence is limited in that material used does not represent special classes in all case study schools, but only special classes with either MGLD or with no designation at post-primary level.

1.6   Report outline

The remainder of the report is outlined as follows. Chapter 2 considers the school level factors influencing the role and operation of special classes. Chapter 3 then explores the teaching and learning in special classes. Chapter 4 focuses on individual student pathways using groups of special class provision. This chapter also outlines models of best practice based on the case study schools. Chapter 5 provides an overview of findings and discusses policy implications.

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15   The original research design involved two main components including a survey of 100 schools and qualitative case study research in 12 case study schools with special classes. A number of methodological issues arose with the 'Survey of 100 schools' component of the research during wave 1 of the study. The research team experienced problems in getting schools (particularly post-primary schools) to agree to participate in the study leading to a much smaller sample of respondents than expected. There were clear statistical dangers of using incomplete data. At this point it was agreed that any quantitative information gathered from the wave 1 surveys would be used for context in the final report rather than any detailed analysis. In wave 2, it was decided to seek only information from the case study schools where researchers had direct access to the principals and school staff working in special classes. Given our presence in the case study schools, the response rate in these schools was relatively high (in wave 1 in particular). It was decided that this information could be used qualitatively to enhance the case study research.

2. School Structures and Special Classes

2.1 Introduction

The research findings highlighted how special classes do not just operate in isolation but are instead part of a whole-school approach to special educational needs and inclusion more generally. During the qualitative interviews with special class teachers and school principals, it became apparent that a number of school level issues influenced the role and operation of the special class. This chapter outlines a number of themes relating to the attitudes towards inclusion and the role of special classes within the broader school structure. The first theme utilises the in-depth qualitative interviews to examine the issue of school admissions regarding students with SEN. This theme arose during fieldwork in post-primary schools where the issue of school reputation and 'cream off' were highlighted as problematic where schools had special classes or were known for having high intake of students with SEN. The second major theme relates to variations in the purpose or meaning of special classes across the case study schools. This relates to the third theme addressed in this chapter around the types of special class provision in schools.

2.2 School admissions

The issue of school admissions policies influencing student intake has been a topic of debate in education literature for some time, particularly in relation to newcomer students (Smyth *et al.* 2009). The Admissions to Schools Bill is currently going through the Oireachtas with the aim of bringing fairness and structure to enrolment policies at primary and post-primary level. At present, all schools are required to publish their own admissions policy and different schools use different criteria for enrolment when they are oversubscribed (Darmody *et al.* 2012). School admissions were a significant issue in a number of primary and post-primary case studies. Both principals and special class teachers discussed the issue of 'cream-off', how the school was used locally as a 'dumping ground' for students with SEN and how this impacted on the reputation and morale amongst the staff. This emerged as a particular issue for schools with special classes in urban areas with a socially mixed catchment area. It was seen to have huge implications for special class teachers and school morale.

One special educational needs coordinator discussed how he felt local schools were directing students to his school due to perceived availability of additional resources:

> The local schools were gently diverting students in our direction, you know. Which initially was to our benefit because we were then gathering the resources. (PP08, ASD class, SEN Coordinator, Wave 1)

At another school with a special class with no formal designation, the special class teacher was aware of the reputation among parents of the school in the small town as being supportive for students with SEN:

> We have to accept every student that comes to our door. Which is, we seem to be the only school in the town that has … like when a parent will come and tell you, the other schools may not necessarily say, no you can't come. But a parent would've said to me, well we weren't made feel welcome. (PP10, MGLD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

As a result, the profile of the school was changing over time as more and more children from disadvantaged families with SEN came to the school:

> We have no choice … we can't not look after these kids. We can't tell them that, you know, we can't meet their needs, we want to encourage the academic kids to come. But we're losing them because of the number of disadvantaged kids, or the number of special needs kids that we're getting to [our] school. (PP10, MGLD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

One school principal felt that local schools were promoting his school to parents where behaviour was an issue for students:

> You know, recommend the kids who mightn't be getting on in their own local schools, you know, down the road … they'd be, they'd be, advocated for here … they might find some children challenging and it might be suggested they might fit in here. (P25, MGLD, Principal, Wave 1)

Another difficulty raised by school principals was having to take students in that they could not support:

> The other concern I would have as well would be that under Section 9 of the Education Act we are responsible to provide a child with an education suitable to their needs and when we can't, what do we do? (P31, MGLD, Principal, Wave 2)

One teacher in an ASD class also found that the special class setting was not suitable for some children with more severe needs, particularly when staff at the class were not trained:

> Like the, this environment is actually quite, it's lovely for some kids if they're mild to moderate – mild and moderate – it depends – when – and some kids are just too severe, they need … a special school, they really do, you know, they need – because they have medical needs as well, you know, and … I think there's a place for special schools and there's a place for these units – definitely – but staff need to be trained. (P04, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

One principal felt that parents, eager to have their child educated in a mainstream setting, might not always know what is best for the child:

> It's all down to what the parents' wishes are. And we kept saying but what about the good of the child. Is the parent always in the best position, always now, now the parents know it's their own child, but is the parent always in the best position to know what's best for their child, you know, and what do schools do then in that situation. (P31, MGLD, Principal, Wave 2)

2.3   Setting up and running a special class

McCoy *et al*. (2014a) highlighted the need for clear guidelines for schools on criteria for eligibility, the process of setting up a special class, pupil-teacher and retention ratios, and the role and function of special classes. Classes can be either established through SENOs working directly with schools, the local HSE personnel and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) who can identify unmet need and/or emerging demand for special classes. Another way in which special classes can be established is through schools which proactively apply to the local SENO for a special class. This could be the case where principals have knowledge of an incoming cohort of students with a specific need. The designation of the class follows the need/demand identified (NCSE 2011). In relation to establishing a special class, the NCSE has noted no set number of students must be present for any category of special educational needs. The SENO determines the need for such a class to be set up. According to the NCSE, this determination takes into account the likelihood that the numbers will increase to the official retention ratios over a period of time (McCoy *et al*. 2014a, p.30). Findings from the qualitative interviews highlight frustration among principals that there are no official guidelines on how to set up a special class. Qualitative interviews with principals also highlighted a lack of knowledge in setting up the special class initially and also operating the special class thereafter. Some principals were confused as there were 'very few guidelines for that, that we could find' (P09, ASD class, Principal, Wave 1). Others argued the need for a resource pack to be made available to schools 'to say okay, these are the steps that you take in terms of establishing a class, these are the supports you need and make sure that you get all of that in place at the start'. Instead they described how they 'had to make it up as we went along' (P04, ASD class, Principal, Wave 1). Some recalled their inexperience and uneasiness about setting up the class without any guidelines. In one school, however, this lack of support led them to creating their own special class model that works for them in that school:

> I was naive and thinking that someone would come in, you know and just show us what to do ... I firmly believe that the model we created ... it's not perfect, it's far from it and we're looking at all the time to improve it. (PP08, SEN Coordinator, Wave 1)

It could be argued that the variations in the overall purpose of special classes in schools and in how their provision is structured may stem from this initial lack of awareness and understanding of how to set up and operate a special class within a mainstream school.

Depending on the special class designation, classes must maintain a certain number of students as specified by the retention ratios to retain sanction (see McCoy *et al*. 2014a, p. 33; DES Circular 0038/2010, p.5). This was raised as an issue during interviews with special class teachers, particularly classes for students with MGLD. One special class teacher described the negative impact of the retention figure on whether students transition to mainstream:

> This retention figure is like a little axe over you … there is one child in the class this year who probably could come out of it … so while you don't want to sort of, what would you say, not condemn, but you know, you have to, to see that well if you take one particular child out of a class you could actually jeopardise the class. (P25, SC teacher, Wave 1)

In another MGLD class, the teacher felt that the class was under threat for the last 'two or three' years:

> There's been a question mark whether the class will stay on and luckily we've been, we've a very proactive principal, we're very lucky he's been able to kind of basically fight to keep the class 'cause that's essentially what he had to do. So I think it's safe for next year … but eh to keep the class we have to have nine children … the principal really has struggled to keep the class open. (P31, SC teacher, Wave 1)

Another principal felt that the system was too bureaucratic and that it was morally wrong that children's assessments determined whether they qualify for a place:

> It's a numbers game … it's about labels and numbers … it's terrible to think that your child won't get support unless they qualify. We are looking at reports on children hoping that they qualify which is a terrible … there's something morally wrong with it but that's just the way the system works. (P31, MGLD, Principal, Wave 1)

These findings highlight concerns among teachers (and school principals) to maintain special class numbers in order to retain their special class (meeting retention ratios), with resulting incentives to keep students in special class settings even where a transition to a mainstream class may be deemed appropriate. Further, there is evidence that the funding system as operating at the time of this research creates incentives for teachers and parents to label children and young people as having special needs in order to get extra resources.

For other schools, particularly schools with ASD classes, the issue of opening and retaining a special class was not seen as a difficulty. One school had been approved for the building of two new classrooms for existing autism classes but were unsure whether to open a third class. The principal felt that the Department of Education and Skills were 'really helpful' and 'put absolutely no blocks in our way' in getting quick approval for a special educational needs unit to be built in the school:

> So I contacted the Department and I said look, you know, we need two new classrooms, we've been asked to take a third thing, a third special class, what can we do, what are the chances of a special needs unit and they said no problem … they were very open to it and they said can you have a proposal in, what, 48 hours or whatever? I said yeah, so I sat down and put together a proposal. (P01, ASD class, principal, Wave 2)

2.4 The role and purpose of special classes

Opinions varied among principals and teachers as to the role and purpose of the special class in the school. Findings in this section highlight different interpretations of inclusion and of the role of a special class within the broader school context. Some principals and special class teachers questioned the ability of some students with complex needs to cope in mainstream at all. Others argued for clarity around the purpose of the special class in relation to the academic and social outcomes of students. These differences in opinion were particularly evident in the extent to which children and young people in special classes were integrated with mainstream classes. One principal in a rural DEIS primary school described the 'idea' of the class:

> The whole idea of an ASD unit in a mainstream setting would be that you'd have an inclusive type of an environment where everybody had a place and a part to play and where there would be a good movement between the children in the unit and the mainstreamers. (P04, ASD class, Principal, Wave 1)

Other schools felt that the mainstream environment could only do so much for children with ASD for example. In one primary school the principal described the practicalities of mainstream teachers teaching 28 students over 12 subjects:

> You're bound to lose people, you're definitely losing children with ASD because em, you know, their receptive language may impair on that, you know. There's a whole aspect of language, so I don't think any child should be in the mainstream class unless they're very, very able. (P09, ASD class, Principal, Wave 1)

This principal felt that the objective of the special class must be clear for students, teachers and parents. In particular he made the distinction between the emphasis being on social skills or academic goals:

> If what your priority is, is socialisation and you just say well okay, my child has a particular disability and they, I'm happy for them to achieve whatever they can as long as they make friends and have a happy life coming into school and that's my priority for them. But if you're saying I want my child to come into the mainstream class and I want by the time they leave sixth class that they're reading and writing on a par with their peers that they're scoring above 50 percentiles in standardised testing, that they're going to go into secondary school and take their exams and enrol in university and go on to do whatever else. That if you have that plan, you know, and that's what you want, then you start at four and looking where is the best way to achieve that plan and my view is the best way to achieve that plan is the special class because you have the ability to take the individual plan and have one-on-one instruction. (P09, ASD class, Principal, Wave 1)

One primary school principal spoke of how they had started off with the goal of mainstreaming children in the special class but that their experience over time taught them that that wasn't necessarily a success:

> We were so kind of aspirational about the whole thing, you know, and we thought, I remember we thought that if we had children in a special class and that if we included them fully in mainstream that we had succeeded … we actually thought that that's what success was. (P01, ASD class, Principal, Wave 1)

At one large post-primary school, the principal felt that despite some opposition from parents the aim of the special class was to include the young people in mainstream education:

> Your ultimate aim with the students and the ASD class would be to mainstream them, to integrate, you know it's not exclusive, it's never going to be intended to be an exclusive situation … you need to let him out, we want to get him out into the open, integrate him in the class which is all part of their social development as well. (PP08, ASD class, Principal, Wave 1)

2.4.1   A safe haven for students?

Irish research on special classes has highlighted how one of the potential benefits of providing this type of class setting is that it offers certain students a 'safe haven' from mainstream classes (Sinclair *et al*. 2003). Based on interviews with principals and teachers, this research also found clear evidence that some students enjoyed the safety and security of being in a special class. One primary special class teacher described how the students in the special class are vulnerable and 'don't always get the subtle nuances and … banter, that might go on in the mainstream class'. This teacher described how the special class allowed them to feel safe, a place where 'they're free to kind of express themselves …' In particular, this teacher's 'main … priority here … is actually their self-esteem, that they feel good about themselves … above everything else' (P25, MGLD, SC teacher, Wave 1). In another primary school, the special class teacher discussed how the special class offered a place of calm where students could be at ease:

> So I think because it's a small environment it's calm, there's lots of opportunities to talk they kind of, they, they seem to be able to connect to each other more … (P31, MGLD, SC teacher, Wave 1)

This teacher felt that although this group of students will always struggle academically the special class gives them social skills such as making friends and playing with one another:

> It brings them on hugely they learn kind of how to make friends and how to play together … they're always going to have difficulty academically, you know. (P30, SLU, SC teacher, Wave 1)

Another primary school special class teacher described the positive impact of the special class environment on one ASD student who had been attending a mainstream class:

> One of the children in my class came from the mainstream, he was in mainstream, but he's, he was, he said when he came here that it was the first time he was going to school without a pain in his heart every day … it would make you cry, wouldn't it. (P09, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

At post-primary, another special class teacher recalled the experience of one first-year student who 'came to the front door and he hugged the door and he said this is the only place I feel safe'. This teacher believed that the special class offered a space where 'nobody is going to hurt them, nobody is going to slag them, if somebody says something there's always an adult to go to, so it's a very safe place' (PP08, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1). In another school, one teacher spoke about the difficulties in mainstreaming young people with autism for certain subjects:

> There are some of the subjects, anything to do with the practical subjects, where there is a lot of noise, none of the children go to those, because the noise level would just be so intimidating to them. (PP01, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

Describing the experience of mainstreaming one particular student, this teacher felt that:

> The difficulty I think was, the actual number of children in the room was one problem, then the actual security, he was leaving the security of this environment and he just could not cope with the other parts of the building. But we have got him used to going to the Computer Room, now six of them go to the Computer Room on a Wednesday for Computer Class, so at least he has one step into being integrated in some aspect of mainstream. (PP01, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

2.4.2   Allow access to the/a curriculum?

Other special class teachers interviewed discussed how the purpose of the special class was to provide more individualised and tailored instruction to students. One principal of a school with an SLU described the curriculum as 'very free and loose' creating a 'lovely atmosphere' (P30, SLU, principal, Wave 2). The teacher in the SLU also spoke about how effective the two- or three-year intervention was for some students:

> You kind of see the progress that they make during the year and especially as well in the junior [infant years] end … they make big kind of jumps. (P30, SLU, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Much of the positive feedback for this teacher is from parents after the children leave the class:

> We hear then from say parents who come to the parent teacher meetings or coming to see me, how they have improved and their confidence has improved … you can see kind of they have come on in confidence even and just kind of communicating with others and that's nice to hear when they're leaving the school. (P30, SLU, SC teacher, Wave 2).

In another primary school, the principal described how the mainstream can only offer so much to students with severe difficulties:

> Some of it definitely does need to be one-to-one in, in a way that you wouldn't necessarily get in the, in the mainstream class. (P09, ASD class, Principal, Wave 1)

For this school, the special class offered a space where instruction could be tailored to the needs of individual students:

> We would have set priority needs … so it might be social skills, it might be improve their Math and improve their literacy skills, from those three priority learning needs we break them down and then we'd have specific targets of what we'd hope to achieve. (P09, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

2.4.3 Negative perceptions of the special class

Negative perception, stigma and student dissatisfaction at being in a special class were evident only in post-primary schools were students were older and had greater levels of awareness. This was particularly a feature of classes which had no designation and students had lower (or no) levels of identified need. Teachers and students in the case study schools described the problems of having a separate class grouping, often with a reduced curriculum and in a different part of the school which could be then the source of stigma. In one school with a non-designated special class, the teacher felt that 'the kids can feel a little bit removed from their peers' and experience frustration at the stigma of being in a special class. The physical location of the class is important to these students who are in full view of mainstream students:

> They are absolutely aware [of being different]. There's even I feel issues with where the classroom is located. Because that's kind of a social area out there and a lot of them feel kind of that they are being seen coming in here. They are all right in first year normally, in second and third year they really know and they are kind of [more aware]. (PP14, SC teacher, non-designated, Wave 1)

She found that the students in the special class often waited until the mainstream students had gone to class before going in so that they would not be seen:

> They would even wait until everybody is gone off the corridor and then come in after everybody has gone so nobody sees them coming in here. (PP14, SC teacher, non-designated, Wave 1)

Students in this class know that their placement back in mainstream depends on their academic progress in the special class. The special class teacher felt that this was difficult for them as they were trying their best:

> I do kind of feel sorry for the kids who really are trying to get back to mainstream and it's not really happening for them you know. It is kind of I suppose difficult and they are trying their best and you know when their best isn't good enough to get back to mainstream it's kind of a little bit hard. (PP14, SC teacher, non-designated, Wave 1)

Between the two waves of the study one school changed from having a special class (with MGLD designation) to mixed ability. The main reason behind this was the stigma associated with the class in the school and in the town more generally:

> … there was a certain name put on those kids for the summer. And they had to endure, in the housing estates, being called a spa, or whatever. That you were going to this, I can't even think of some of the names that were put on them. Like for, for this particular class … before they even started they knew where they were going, going to be put. (PP10, MGLD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Socially the move to mainstream provision was seen as beneficial for the students, although academically the special class teacher had some concerns about how they were faring in mainstream:

> They've an awful lot more confidence in themselves, that's the big one. You know, in some ways they're kind of missing out maybe in, in attention like with the teacher whatever, because they get brilliant attention. You know it was say seven on one, now there's 23 of them. And like they would be, say, a relatively boisterous group so, you know, to maintain. You know trying to get around to everybody is difficult. But socially, they probably have made big strides, whereas maybe academically they would've been possibly better off in the smaller group. (PP10, MGLD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Perceptions of feeling different among students, however, seemed to be associated with lower levels of need. In other special classes where the levels of need were greater, special class teachers felt that students were often unaware of being in a separate class:

> None of the others realise that they are different from other children, and sometimes it may be easier for them in life, I don't know? (PP01, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

As mentioned, stigma and the special class only emerged as an issue at post-primary. At primary level, students were younger and less aware of being different:

> They're back in their [mainstream] classes for all the social bits, and for what matters they're considered part of a class. In the meantime … you can get hours … so many kids [are] leaving [mainstream] classes now that there's no [stigma] even though it's a special class. (P25, MGLD class, Principal, Wave 1)

2.5   Variations in special class provision

2.5.1   Flexibility in special class structures

This section examines two key issues, the extent to which special class groupings are relatively permanent placements and the amount of time students spend within the special class setting. Drawing on the Phase 1 National Survey of Schools, McCoy *et al.* (2014a) found a considerable share of primary and post-primary special classes remain relatively permanent groupings, with students typically remaining together across years (37 per cent and 42 per cent across primary and post-primary schools respectively). Further examination of national patterns was undertaken, with a view to providing context for the case study analysis. Tables 2.1 and 2.2 examine the extent to which primary and post-primary schools differ in the probability of special class students remaining together across school years. For both sets of analyses the outcome variable examined is whether school principals report that their special class students usually remain together across school years. Key school and class characteristics are examined to assess whether there is any systematic variation in the permanence of special class groupings across different schools.

At primary level (Table 2.1), there is some evidence that the nature of special educational need catered for within the special class plays a role in the relative permanence of the grouping. Students in classes designated for MGLD students are more likely to remain together as a group over the school years. However, the number of students within the special class is also significant (after taking account of class designation) – increasing class size reduces the likelihood of a special class placement being relatively permanent. Since more complex needs attract lower pupil-teacher ratios, this result most likely reflects classes with less severe or complex needs being more likely to move students into and out of the special class setting. However, classes with an MGLD designation are distinct and do not follow this pattern, with the placement much more likely to be a permanent one. When we take account of class designation and size, we find that school size is also a predictor of the relative permanence of special class placements. Relative to mid-sized schools (100–149 students) all other school size groups are more likely to have more permanent special class placements. It is difficult to understand why this might be the case. Other school characteristics, such as DEIS status, do not emerge as significant predictors of the permanence of special class placements.

Table 2.1: **Logistic Regression model[16] of the association between special class students remaining together across school years and school and special class characteristics (primary level)**

Constant	-0.474
Special Class Characteristics	
Class designation (ref: other)	
MGLD	2.759***
ASD	-.037
Special class size	-.329***
School characteristics	
School size (ref: 100–149)	
1–49 students	.484*
50–99 students	1.514**
150–230 students	1.457*
231+ students	1.386*
DEIS (ref: non-DEIS)	
Urban band 1	-.368
Urban band 2	-.231
Rural	-.113
School type (ref: boys school)	
Girls primary	.267
Co-educational primary	-.361
Language Medium (ref: English medium)	
Irish medium	20.883

Note: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05

At post-primary level, there is no significant variation across classes of different size and designation in the probability of the class grouping being a permanent arrangement (Table 2.2). However, classes that are sanctioned by the DES/NCSE are more likely to adopt this more permanent type, while those established by school principals through the pooling of resource hours are more likely to adopt a more flexible approach to special class placement. School type

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16   To understand the processes shaping the permanence of special class placements (and other outcomes) we need to control for a number of factors simultaneously in a regression model; this allows us to estimate the extent to which each factor examined predicts the outcome in question when other factors are taken into account.

and DEIS status do not appear to impact on the permanence of special class groupings, with the exception of vocational schools which are more likely to make the placement relatively permanent, all else being equal.

Table 2.2: Logistic Regression model of the association between special class students remaining together across school years and school characteristics (post-primary level)

Constant	-2.127*
Special class characteristics	
Class designation (ref: ASD)	
MGLD	.866
Other	.730
Non-designated	.594
Special Class Size	-.004
Sanctioned class (versus non-sanctioned)	1.545***
School characteristics	
High SEN school (>15%)	.676
School size (ref: 400–599)	
<200 students	.262
200–399 students	-.186
600+ students	-.615
DEIS (ref: non-DEIS)	
DEIS	-.935
School type (ref: community/comprehensive)	
Girls secondary	.059
Boys secondary	-.912
Co-educational secondary	1.134
Vocational	1.500*

Note: ***$p<.001$; **$p<.01$; *$p<.05$

The second set of analyses considers whether students placed in special class settings spend the full week together as a group, again considering key variations across school and class contexts at primary and post-primary levels. At a descriptive level, schools varied widely in the extent to which special class students were integrated with other student groups. As shown in McCoy *et al.* (2014a), between one-fifth and one-quarter of primary and post-primary special class students spend the full week together as a class grouping, with no integration arising with mainstream classes. This is clearly contrary to broader policy objectives (as discussed in Chapter 1). A logistic regression model was run, examining the simultaneous impact of school size, DEIS status, school gender-mix and language medium on the probability of a special class grouping spending the full week together. By including a range of school and class characteristics simultaneously, the analysis allows us to explore the net effect of these characteristics taking account of the other characteristics. In other words, are Urban Band 1 schools more likely to allow for some integration for special class students, taking account of the size and designation of the class and other school characteristics? Table 2.3 shows the results of the model, with little difference across school contexts. Interestingly, students in a MGLD designated special class at primary level are significantly less likely to spend the full week together in that class than classes of other designations. In contrast, special class students in Urban Band 1 DEIS schools are more likely to spend the full week together than non-DEIS classes, even after taking account of the designation and size of the special class group. These are important findings and suggest some key differences across schools and classes in the extent to which special class students have the opportunity to spend time with mainstream peers. At post-primary level, non-designated special classes are more likely to spend the full/most of the school week together than ASD classes, reflecting more rigid class allocation among such schools (Table 2.4). This may play some role in explaining more negative school perceptions among such students in non-designated classes. Levels of student integration do not vary systematically across schools of differing type, size and DEIS status, with the exception of greater levels of integration in small to medium schools (200–399 students).

Table 2.3: Logistic Regression model of the association between students spending the full week together and school and class characteristics (primary level)

Constant	-0.786
Special Class Characteristics	
Class designation (ref: other)	
MGLD	-2.128**
ASD	-.359
Special class size	-.097
School characteristics	
School size (ref: 100–149)	
1–49 students	1.301
50–99 students	-.410
150–230 students	.070
231+ students	-.500
DEIS (ref: non-DEIS)	
Urban band 1	1.352***
Urban band 2	-.089
Rural	-.346
School type (ref: boys school)	
Girls primary	.426
Co-educational primary	.571
Language Medium (ref: English medium)	
Irish medium	-20.410

Note: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05

Table 2.4: Logistic Regression model of the association between special class students spending the full/most week together and school and class characteristics (post-primary level)

Constant	-.892
Special class characteristics	
Class designation (ref: ASD)	
MGLD	.680
Other	-.637
Non-designated	2.015*
Special Class Size	.025
Sanctioned class (versus non-sanctioned)	.619
School characteristics	
High SEN school (>15%)	.724
School size (ref: 400–599)	
<200 students	-.827
200–399 students	-1.062*
600+ students	.520
DEIS (ref: non-DEIS)	
DEIS	.956
School type (ref: community/comprehensive)	
Girls secondary	-.046
Boys secondary	.250
Co-educational secondary	1.451
Vocational	.325

Note: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05

2.5.2   Levels of integration with mainstream – qualitative analysis

Similar to the findings in McCoy *et al*. (2014a), the qualitative interviews highlighted much variation in how schools structured special classes within the broader school setting. Some special classes in the case study schools operated on a part-time basis where students would attend in the morning and return to their classes in the afternoon. In other classes, students remained in the special class for the entire day and the class operated independently of the mainstream timetable. One MGLD class at primary operated a structured morning and afternoon timetable which the special class teacher felt suited the students:

> They like the routine and they know where they are for the morning and they know well then we go back to class … (P31, MGLD, SC teacher, Wave 1)

Other primary schools took a more tailored approach, integrating students from the ASD class or MGLD classes for specific subjects:

> Some of them will integrate quite a lot, say like in English and Maths, Music, Art and PE, and then some children may not integrate for Maths … you know, they're not able to keep up. (P09, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

> Most children in special class are in the mainstream class at least once during the school day, now some em, are there for things like reading and mathematics and things like that … but it's child specific, and eh, I suppose how it fits in with the learning plan. (P31, MGLD class, Principal, Wave 1)

One principal spoke about wanting to integrate students more into the mainstream but found difficulties in doing so. As a result, students from the speech and language class were only integrated for certain activities such as sports:

> Integrated for sports day now. I mean, they're totally accepted in this school. The other children take no notice of it. But I think we could integrate them more. We'd like to integrate them more. (P30, SLU, Principal, Wave 1)

Other special class teachers in ASD classes felt that it was important for the students in the class to be around their peers to model behaviour:

> Really they should have kids who have, your typical behaviours and they're copying their behaviour. Rather than 18 of them … firing off each other, not able to ignore each other, you know. (P01, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

One teacher working in an ASD class also described the importance of children with ASD being around their peers, in both academic and social spheres:

> It's amazing to see the progress of how far they've come and learning from their peers, their, do you know, typical, their typically developing peers, you know, it's great to see them learning from each other. (P09, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

On returning to the school during the second wave of the study, this same teacher described how rewarding it is to see the students change and improve socially over time:

> When you look and you see some children that when they started and where they are now in June, or three years ago and where they are now, it's really actually, it's super rewarding to look back and be like, wow, you know. There's a lot of those wow moments here like. (P09, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

At other case study schools, and particularly in the SLU case study, the placement was full-time with little integration in mainstream. This may be due to the fact that children travel from other schools to take up these placements for a specific period of time (generally two years). At the end of the children's placement, the school organised structured integration in preparation for their return to their base school and a mainstream class:

> At the end of the one- or two-year intervention [SLU] for the last term they will do a bit of integration maybe for an hour a day in a mentoring class just to get them ready to go back in. (P30, SLU, Principal, Wave 1)

Integration was also limited for primary students in ASD classes where principals and teachers commented that they would like to have more integrated activities for students in the special class. For many classes, however, there was little interaction with mainstream peers but some shared spaces at the school:

> They share, they share our playground with us but not at the same time ... that's our sensory garden and courtyard and all that. We share all that, that's all mainstream. (P01, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

Transitioning back to mainstream appeared to depend on the level of need of the students. Principals and teachers working with ASD classes were open about the lack of movement of students into mainstream:

> So far every child that we have had in the special class has stayed in the special class up until sixth class ... so far nobody really we feel has achieved that level where they could operate on their own. (P09, ASD class, Principal, Wave 1)

In the SLU, however, all children transition back to their base schools after their time in the class. One teacher spoke about how the move back to their base school can be difficult for the children to 'settle in well':

> We're hoping that after their time here they will have improved and be able to cope in the mainstream and go on to college or whatever they want to do when they're finished. I suppose you know they may still need the support from their, when they go back to their base school they might get learning support or resource hours there, they might continue to go to a speech and language therapist to see how they offer the therapy and they seem to have follow ups from them anyway. So they probably will have ongoing difficulties but we hope that we give them the skills and I suppose the confidence to go on and to cope as well as they can in the mainstream. (P30, SLU, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Where possible, this teacher followed up with the progress of students who had left the SLU to make contact with their mainstream teachers, offer support and see how they were getting on:

> It's really kind of just letting the teachers know that there's support there and they can always ring here and ask and I know some of the children are going back we've already had phone calls from the schools they're going back to about how they are and kind of where they might have difficulties and how to help them adjust so there's always that kind of open door policy, people are more than welcome to come. (P30, SLU, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Integrating students into mainstream subjects seemed to be more difficult across all post-primary case study schools. Often where the principal was involved in a whole-school approach to inclusion, integrating students for specific subjects took place. For children with less severe need in a non-designated special class, one special class teacher described how students came to the class for specific subjects such as English and Maths:

> For English … they would come to me for all of their English classes. So they would have four classes of English a week, and that small group come to people every time they have English. And then the other classes go to their own respective teachers. It's the same for maths … they would go to that special class teacher for every class of maths. (PP14, non-designated, SC teacher, Wave 1)

The teacher in this class was concerned, however, about some of the students who wanted to remain in mainstream. She felt that a team-teaching approach with special and mainstream teachers might overcome these issues:

> They might not feel withdrawn then. We did have a student this year who really feels that he wants to get back into mainstream, he's trying his best and em … it's very hard for him I suppose. He's not too keen on having to come here all the time. (PP14, non-designated, SC teacher, Wave 1)

This class operated a review system throughout the year where teachers and the young people were involved in the decision to return to mainstream:

> Two of the students after Christmas exams were identified as not needing to be here anymore. And they were asked if they would like to return to mainstream and they did … now we did keep an eye on them, we made sure their teacher knew obviously. (PP14, non-designated, SC teacher, Wave 2)

2.5.3   The impact of resource cutbacks on special classes

As noted in McCoy *et al*. (2014a) prevalence estimates suggest that approximately one in four students have a form of special need (Cosgrove *et al*. 2014; Banks and McCoy 2011). Administrative data from the DES also shows an increase over time in those identified and in receipt of supports (Banks and McCoy, 2011, p.68). The SEN budget has increased steadily over the past ten years and in 2011 amounted to approximately 15 per cent (€1.3bn) of the entire

education budget (DES, 2011).[17] The case study schools were visited during a period of economic contraction where school personnel interviewed emphasised the impact of reduced provision in occupational therapists, speech and language therapists (Health Service Executive, HSE), educational psychologists (NEPS) and SNAs (NCSE). The majority of those interviewed referred to the negative impact of reduced supports on their work and the education of the students:

> With the cutbacks in special needs it's absolutely impossible and like these are the kids that need the help the most. (PP14, SC teacher, Wave 1)

> The occupational therapy input has been patchy, we haven't had the same level of input [as SLT] at all at all. (P04, Principal, Wave 1)

> I mean the support is gone to much less than what it was … say in terms of the SLT and the OT and all of that … we'd certainly like more of that … you'd like it more regular. (P01, Principal, Wave 1)

> One major missing link in all of this for us anyway is the clinical input where the psychologist is available to us, OTs, speech and language therapists. (P09, Principal, Wave 1)

A principal of a school with an MGLD class also reflected on changes in SNA provision over time:

> Things have improved but then you look at ten years ago here we had 15 SNAs and now we have only four, to look after the same profile, the profile of the children hasn't changed. (P31, MGLD, Principal, Wave 2).

A special class teacher in the same school argued that cuts to SNAs at their school limited the opportunity for integration for students in the special class:

> It's fine when they [students from the special class] are in my class but when they are in their mainstream class there's some kids with huge needs and they have no SNA because SNAs have been cut. So the principal is, like obviously the kids in the mainstream are being affected then which isn't fair because I mean their learning is being upset. (P31, MGLD, SC teacher, Wave 1)

One principal of a school with three ASD classes, described how over the period of the study the supports for children with ASD had been impacted:

> … the most negative thing from our point of view is the access to the SLT, the OT, the psychiatric services, all of that and the dilution of [name of ASD outreach centre].

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17   The budgets for 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010 were €605m, €706m, €838m, €900m, €1bn and €1bn respectively (DES, 2011 http://www.oecd.org/ireland/49624509.pdf).

In particular, the restructuring of the ASD outreach centre meant that the on-the-phone supports were lost:

> Only this week I was trying to get [name of ASD outreach centre] and I rang their regular number and it's oh no, these are part of that now so you need to ring this number, now I know we'll get used to all of that but when you don't know who is, you don't know who you're working with anymore and like there was a time when we had an OT and she came to the school every Wednesday and we had an SLT and they came every Friday and like, and that was like, initially back in 2000 up to about 2000 – 2000 and – up to about two years ago the support was fantastic in that you had the OT and you had the SLT and you had, you know, you had the psychiatrists and I mean there was a social worker there, I mean there was a [name of ASD outreach centre] team there that we knew and we knew them really well because we were interacting with them the whole time. Now I'm actually not sure who the psychologist is. (P01, ASD class, Principal, Wave 2).

For children attending the speech and language class, the principal expressed concern that children were being moved from their base school to attend the class but that the amount of SLT they were receiving had been reduced:

> We had the language therapist almost full time now there are three half days … I mean if they were being removed from their base school from their home communities to come into this setting they should get far more. They did initially but it has been diluted and diluted and that's an issue and the teachers see that happening as well. (P30, SLU, Principal, Wave 2).

The special class teacher at this school also expressed concern at the reduction in SLT:

> I remember when the speech and language unit was set up first there was a speech and language therapist there all day full time … if there could be more of that even more time for the language unit it would be great. (P30, SLU, SC teacher, Wave 2).

The principal raised another issue around children in the SLU regarding their loss of resource hours on returning to their base schools. She described how on completing their time in the SLU they would return to their base school but may have lost their resource hours:

> Those children … have resource hours … in their own school. Ok they come here [to the special class] and they get their two years and by and large they improve [and as a result] they don't get their resource hours back … I think that's wrong – those children should have their resource hours, they still have the problem it's very pervasive it doesn't go away … they have to be so many points above a standard deviation and if they're that many points up they don't get their resource hours back [when they return to their school]. (P30, SLU, Principal, Wave 2)

2.6   Summary

This chapter has used data from the Phase 1 National Survey of Schools and Phase 2 qualitative data from interviews with school principals and special class teachers. By using both quantitative and qualitative sources in this way, it provides a detailed overview of the role of the school in creating an inclusive environment for special classes to operate. The qualitative findings highlight more in-depth insights into how principals in the disadvantaged case study schools feel that other schools' admissions policies allow them to create soft barriers to admitting students with SEN. This in turn, they felt, impacted on their reputation in the community and morale within the school itself. These findings highlight concerns among teachers (and school principals) about maintaining special class numbers in order to retain their special class (meeting retention ratios), with resulting incentives to keep students in special class settings even where a transition to a mainstream class might be deemed appropriate. Further, there is evidence that the funding system as operating at the time of this research creates incentives for teachers and parents to label children and young people as having special needs in order to get extra resources.

This chapter highlights the varied views held by principals on what the special class is for. Opinions varied according to the severity of need of the students with some principals believing they offer a 'safe haven' for students, others seeing them as places to bring students academically up-to-speed, and yet others suggesting the class offers students both. In many cases, trade-offs were being made between social and academic achievement for the students. While some teachers felt that the students could benefit socially from being integrated into mainstream, it is less clear that this had a positive effect on learning and achievement. This was particularly the case at post-primary level, where concerns were raised that the special class can be negatively perceived by students in the class and their peers in mainstream classes.

Finally, this chapter explored the structure of provision in special classes across different school contexts using both quantitative and qualitative data. Findings show that, overall, students tend to remain in special classes over time. Depending on the severity of need, students can be integrated into mainstream during the school week, particularly where schools have strong leadership and are taking a whole-school approach to inclusion.

3.   The Organisation of Teaching in Special Classes

3.1   Introduction

This chapter considers a range of key issues around the allocation of teachers to special classes at primary and post-primary levels. The chapter begins by looking at the processes shaping teacher placement in special class settings, followed by an examination of the extent to which teachers feel equipped to meet student needs in these settings. The role of wider school personnel and supports is then considered, in particular assessing the extent to which special class teachers operate independently or as part of a broader team. The role played by non-teaching staff, particularly SNAs, is also considered. The extent to which schools and teachers prepare, and draw on, Individual Education Plans (IEPs) is discussed. Finally, the report examines the nature of curricula offered and taken in special classes, assessing the extent to which special class students follow distinct curricular and programme pathways.

3.2   Teacher placement in special classes

In line with previous research (de Boer *et al*. 2013), findings show that schools varied widely in the approaches taken to allocating teachers to special class settings. For some, they allowed teachers, often with particular interest or expertise, to volunteer, while others requested teachers to take that role, often for an initial period of a year. In one primary school, a teacher had been approached to teach the special class as the principal felt they had experience of teaching SEN students.

> The principal was allocating all the classes and I think he found it difficult to get someone to take it [special class] and he actually came to me 'cause I had had a few special needs kids in my mainstream class. And he asked me would I, I suppose maybe he thought I had experience of working with special needs children so he came and asked me so I felt I couldn't say no even though at the time I didn't particularly, wouldn't have wanted it but I took it on anyway. (P31, SC teacher, Wave 1)

Similarly, some principals seemed to be making more informed selections – identifying teachers with particular expertise and aptitude for the role.

> … it's a carefully selected post where … the pupils' needs being number one … You must be able to communicate with the parents as well and keep them on board, and be interested in life in general and be interested in the children and all their comings and goings outside school, be interested to make sure they're always included and, be interested to see, I suppose be interested in them getting on as well. (P25, Principal, Wave 1)

Principals also spoke about the challenges they faced in placing teachers in special class settings, but to some extent this depended on the level of integration across the school and the extent to which a whole school approach to SEN support was adopted (an issue which is discussed later).

> Usually here a teacher spends three years in a class … people haven't wanted it in the past because of the special children that have gone in there, behaviour problems … because it had a bad name I said right we won't make it three years do two years for me. Most years I'm going begging but no [name of teacher] doing a third year this year for me. It's getting better, it is getting better and we're also doing more integration with the classes, we're getting the other classes more involved. (P30, SLU, principal, Wave 2)

This view was echoed among some of the special class teachers interviewed. Once the burden fell on one teacher they found it difficult to return to mainstream teaching as other teachers were reluctant to take on the special class teaching role.

> I am burnt out now … nobody even wants to come in to the resource class, the principal went around all the classes to ask would they like to go in to that class and they said no, and I respect that, I'm not going to force anybody to come in. So I'm apparently looking for another job. (P04, SC teacher, Wave 2)

While many special class teachers interviewed spoke about their role as particularly rewarding, they noted the importance of being suited to that role and finding it enjoyable.

> You really have to enjoy your job, you really have to like it and I do thankfully … it is a different kind of teaching … it's not teaching maybe that you were trained in when you went to, you know, university or whatever, you know, it's a specific kind of teaching and you have to really enjoy it. (P09, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

> I really like it yeah. I really enjoy working with the kids. Again it is repetitive, it is kind of challenging because it's so repetitive, because it's kind of you are doing a lot of the same thing all the time but I try and vary it as much as possible, not just for them but just for me as well. So I'm showing them different ways of doing things all the time. But [I] really do love it, and the kids are so nice, the kids are so good. (PP14, SC teacher, Wave 1)

For some, they were surprised by the students in the special class, their level of engagement, responsiveness and progress, finding that they got greater professional fulfilment than they had anticipated. Even something as simple as students interacting among themselves was unexpected.

> … for a start I hadn't expected them to be so chatty. I thought that I would really miss the dynamics of a class. Because in a [mainstream] class they're all, you know, you've 20, there's buzz, there's chat. You can talk about current affairs or the news or anything. But I hadn't expected the boys to be so chatty. Ah sure they talk, you'll see now when you go in. They won't draw breath. (P01, SC teacher, Wave 1)

However, many teachers spoke of the challenges the special class environment brought, from balancing difficult behaviour and learning, a more 'intense' environment, to not getting the same level of response back from students.

It's a very, very intense it really is so intense. And a lot of the kids come in with kind of behavioural difficulties and it's down to frustration it really is but you know it's like it's just very intense to try and get the behaviour side of things sorted ... You know even this thing of, the fact that they don't understand everything you're saying to them ... so you have to break everything down ... when you go to ... college and you're saying ... I'll be a primary school teacher that's not what you are going into train for. And I know everyone, like, trains and you might have one child with speech and language needs in your class and you might have one child that's autistic or whatever but it's very different when you're thrown into a class [where all children have special needs]. (P30, SC teacher, Wave 1)

It is a challenge, there's no doubt about that, that's difficult work and the teachers will say to me that the difficulty with it is visibly mainstream, that you do a certain amount with children in mainstream and you get a response back, but the response isn't as obvious with children in the unit and that can be taxing at times ... that I would hear every so often. (P04, Principal, Wave 1)

One issue that emerged in the Phase 1 National Survey of Schools (McCoy *et al.* 2014a) was the operation of a one-teacher model in special classes at post-primary level. A significant share of schools (40 per cent) followed this distinct approach where teachers were apparently covering the full curriculum (McCoy *et al.* 2014a, p.112). This raised significant questions, particularly in terms of the capacity of one teacher to fulfil the requirements of a full spectrum of subject areas. Additional analyses of the Phase 1 National Survey data provide further insights into this important issue, in particular assessing if this is a distinct feature of certain types of special classes and school contexts. McCoy *et al.* (2014a) found that DEIS schools were less likely to follow such a single teacher model, reflecting the lower pupil-teacher ratio in such schools. In addition, larger schools were also more likely to allocate one teacher to the special class, although it was not immediately clear why school size would make a difference.[18]

Table 3.1 shows the probability of one special class teacher working with the special class for most of the time, taking account of characteristics of the special class and school. MGLD, 'other' and non-designated special classes are all less likely to have one teacher than ASD classes, but the differences are not statistically significant. DEIS schools are also less likely to have one teacher teaching the special class, but again the differences are not significant. School size emerges as the only significant predictor once the range of characteristics are taken into account – medium-large schools (400–599 students) are less likely to allocate one teacher to the special class – the difference between medium schools (200–399 students) and medium large schools being significant. Hence, while we find a large share of post-primary special classes are being taught by one teacher (40 per cent, McCoy *et al.* 2014a, p.112), we do not find systematic variation across school contexts in the prevalence of this practice. Among the post-primary case study schools, we did not have any schools where one teacher was allocated to the special class for all subject areas.

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18   When we model the probability of a post-primary school allocating one teacher to the special class, we find that these results no longer hold when we take account of a range of class and school characteristics – in other words when we compare across schools and classes.

Table 3.1: Logistic Regression model of the association between one special class teacher and school and class characteristics (post-primary level)

Constant	.453
Special class characteristics	
Class designation (ref: ASD)	
MGLD	-.814
Other[1]	-.205
Non-designated	-1.612*
Special Class Size	-.063
Sanctioned class (versus non-sanctioned)	-.110
School characteristics	
High SEN school (>15%)	-1.255
School size (ref: 400–599)	
<200 students	1.439
200–399 students	1.181*
600+ students	1.023
DEIS (ref: non-DEIS)	
DEIS	-.950
School type (ref: community/comprehensive)	
Girls secondary	.262
Boys secondary	.722
Co-educational secondary	.580
Vocational	-.061

Note: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05

[1] Includes speech and language disorder, specific learning disability, multiple disabilities.

3.3 Expertise/capacity to meet student need

Special class teachers at both primary and post-primary levels frequently expressed their dissatisfaction with their level of training and frustration with their capacity to meet the needs of students in special class settings. Some had accepted a special class role completely unaware of the requirements of that position and the complex needs of the students, while others observed that a special class teacher has to cover a diverse range of roles and responsibilities.

> I'm trying to be a psychologist, a psychic – a doctor – a nurse – a principal, you're trying to be everything, a minder, and then, you know, you're trying to – it's very difficult … and then you're trying to teach as well, it's very, very, very hard. (P04, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Many felt they had been 'thrown in at the deep end' completely unprepared for the special class teaching role, particularly teachers allocated to classes with more complex needs and ASD classes. Only with time and, crucially, support from other teachers, did some of these teachers then feel more comfortable and at ease in the special class setting. The results highlighted the central importance of teacher support – both in terms of their own professional development, but equally in terms of peer support in dealing with social and personal issues as they arise.

> I was working in the junior class, it was very, very, very challenging and it was, they have the hard cases, kids who are eating stones and pulling their hair out … but I got great support from all the other teachers that were there and SNAs that were there, they used to give me some advice – don't wear long earrings, don't wear long jewellery, necklaces, don't stand behind a child who will head butt you from behind … it's draining, physically and mentally draining, yeah. But you do need support from your colleagues. (P04, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

> They're starting from scratch … the first day I walked in and I just went 'I'm walking out of here', I was going to walk out … And there was another teacher there who said just stick it out, stick it out – she was very positive – you'll love it and it's great and … and the whole week – I stuck it out for that day and then I went in the next day and I just – the whole week I cried … and then when Friday came I didn't, I stopped looking at their disabilities and started looking at what the kids could do … I looked at the children and I just, I actually really like, I really, really enjoyed it. (P04, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

> I felt very unequipped to deal with it. Felt very inexperienced, felt I'm not going to be able to manage this. And even my first course that I did, which was way back in September and you know, when I only barely knew the boys' names. I remember talking to people and saying, I'm not going to be able to do this at all and how will I manage it. (P01, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

Many of the teachers spoke of the need for greater guidance and advice in advance of taking up a special class teaching role. They often took up the position without a clear expectation of what the role would entail, how their work might differ to teaching in a mainstream setting and the complexity of student need and behaviour they would face.

> Coming into it in the beginning I really didn't know what was involved as such … even though I'm teaching in this school it's very different … even the teachers in this school might not be fully aware what goes on with the language class. So I suppose maybe if there was training or even kind of just some sort of a manual or something you know I mean to kind of help. (P30, SLU, SC teacher, Wave 2)

> I think, on behaviour – challenging behaviour that we face every day – how we deal with that – we do need something [training] in the area. (P04, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Some also spoke of difficulties they faced in communicating with parents, which compounded the challenges they faced in meeting the needs of the students, as well as dealing with school staff and management.

> It's a very, very hard place to work because physically, mentally you're trying to deal with the challenges of the children, you face the challenges of parents who may have a special need themselves, and that's why – I always find as well any meetings I have I will always have somebody with me because the words can be interpreted differently and you may offend, you know, you have to be very, very careful. And I just – I like to have somebody with me, a team, somebody just to back me up and be a witness to anything that anyone would say. And then you're dealing with management – the staff – who are not trained … It's very challenging and I just, I'm burnt out. (P04, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

The additional staff member(s) in the class, typically SNAs, was also something the special class teacher had to adapt to and develop a different way of teaching as a result. A number of the special class teachers had not worked with SNAs in the past, and they had to learn to 'manage' other adults in the classroom. Again, a number of teachers were unclear about the different roles and guidance was not always available.

> I think as well when that was probably one of the challenges I experienced when I moved into the special class because, like that it's one thing to have a class to manage, you can be in charge of your students, but it's another thing, not that you're in charge of the SNA, but certainly just managing that, managing that whole, that was a new dynamic for me. (P09, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

The extent to which teaching and non-teaching staff had particular qualifications to work with students with additional and complex needs varied significantly across the case study schools. In some schools, while qualification and skill levels were initially low, over time this was addressed through post-graduate courses, in-service and other professional development programmes. However, a number of teachers and principals felt that recruiting highly qualified teachers was important and doing so considerably enhanced the operation and effectiveness of the special class from the outset.

> There are five of us now, five of us qualified resource teachers, so we'd always make sure that when they do come in and if they stayed with us that we'd get them qualified then you know. There's seven in total who are qualified, qualified resource or the autism specific qualification. (PP08, ASD class, SEN Coordinator, Wave 1)

> We've tried to put [ensure] that they're fully qualified resource teachers, because it is expert, it is trained work. And the board of management has certainly stated from a policy point of view that preference is given to qualified resource teachers. And the department has tried to upskill teachers who have come into the department [the special education team] over the last number of years to say listen do some extra courses, do some you know continuous professional development on this. (PP08, ASD class, Principal, Wave 1)

> [Name of teacher] has done further study, quite a few, three I think … [one a] Masters in special ed, which is a lot and then we've got two I think, two other teachers have special ed diplomas, two of the other teachers have masters but not in special ed. So there's a reasonable team there. (P31, MGLD class, Principal, Wave 1)

Teachers themselves were cognisant of the importance of enhancing their skills and pursuing further study, such study often being undertaken at their own initiative. Perhaps reflecting the type of teacher allocated to, or opting to teach, in special class settings, teachers showed considerable motivation and enthusiasm in this regard.

> I'm constantly training, looking for ongoing professional development – I've done an ABA (Applied Behavioural Analysis], which I've to do assignments for – and I will further – I've done my SCM, I want to continue my masters, my first year masters is completed – you know, I want to keep going, you know, and you should keep going, you know, you should keep learning. (P04, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

> I'm trained in St Nicholas Montessori, that's where I trained … she focuses a lot on the sensory issues – like the sensory needs of children. So yeah, she was ahead of her time, she was working with special needs since the twenties – yeah, my training is really coming to the fore with this … I went on to do a post-graduate, I did the diploma in special education in [name of college] … now I do a little bit of guest lecturing with St Angela's. (P04, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Many teachers and support staff across both primary and post-primary schools spoke about the role and contribution of the Special Education Support Service (SESS).[19] Feedback was almost universally positive – ranging from the valuable information, guidance and professional development support provided, but also in terms of practical supports like providing a substitute teacher while a teacher attended a training course. Importantly, supports are not confined to those working with special class or special need groupings, but they also provided information, advice and guidance at a whole-school level.

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19   The SESS is an organisation of the DES that provides continuous professional development for school personnel working with students with SEN. Its aim is to improve teaching and learning in special education.

… SESS providing all the training, all of that sort of stuff, professional development, resources, the building, all of that has been really positive. (P01, ASD class, principal, Wave 2)

So I really found that the [SESS] course was very beneficial. I wouldn't have been that happy really doing it [teaching in the special class] without that support you know so it was a good year for me to do it. (PP14, Non-designated class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

Through the SESS, they're great you see and it's practical too because from a very simple point of view they will put in a sub, for the day … when you're gone. (P01, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

SESS came on board just at that time and they started providing all sorts of training and like they would come in and talk to the whole staff about autism and what autism meant. (P01, ASD class, Principal, Wave 1)

For the teachers and other staff members engaging with SESS services, the benefits related not just to the information and learning gained, but also in terms of the networking and peer support developed as a result.

The SESS would be brilliant as well, any courses that they run, you know, they would be just day courses. And they're great and then, you know, it's kind of, you find, you know, break time, lunch time are nearly the best, you get the most out of that, you know. While the content is good, you know and the approaches are good but to talk to other people is, is just brilliant. (PP01, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Finally, a number of teachers felt that rotating teachers in the special class has wider benefits for a school, with experience of teaching within a special class setting enhancing teaching skills for meeting diverse student needs in mainstream classes.

I think even the teachers who've been in the unit and have gone back to mainstream [benefit] … I suppose spotting maybe children with language difficulties … [being] able to help children maybe with their understanding or with their comprehension and things like that and I suppose it gives you more patience as well that helps as well when you go back as well … whatever class you're in you know you have different children in front of you each year and different maybe areas that you need to work on and different maybe difficulties within that class. (P30, SLU, SC teacher, Wave 2)

… I can't wait to even go back to mainstream because I think I'll understand, like looking back at when I was teaching mainstream like I wasn't doing it right. Even though in college we did a little bit around you know Special Ed but I mean I think you have to do it to understand it, definitely, and I think every teacher should … have an opportunity maybe because just you see it from a totally different light … I was always worried about words and they can't read and they haven't got the maths concept whereas now I have a look at the whole broader picture. (P31, MGLD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

... we're far better teachers because we've [taught in] autism classes ... I absolutely think that, I think it has improved us so much ... I think it opened our eyes and I think it certainly, I think it changed our thinking ... and it's all about behaviour ... I don't know what would phase them now with behaviour now at this stage. (P01, ASD class, Principal, Wave 1)

3.4   Whole-school approach

The location of the special class within a school and the level of integration with mainstream classes varied considerably across school settings. While some schools promoted considerable interaction among teachers and students in mainstream and specialist settings, in others the two remained largely separate. A number of primary and post-primary schools were promoting a more integrated approach, with integration and reverse integration evident. This involved both students and teachers.

> Different children go to different locations, depending on their ability to access a curriculum in those classes. (P04, ASD class, Principal, Wave 2)

> What the principal likes to do here, is keep us in the mainstream as well. So we're not completely isolated from the rest of the school. So I found that hugely beneficial in my teaching in mainstream as well. Because students with autism are such literal and visual learners, you kind of, bring that experience in some of the resources that you create down here. You bring into mainstream. (PP01, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

However, rigidities in school organisation and timetabling often created barriers to meeting the needs of students in special class settings and allowing a more flexible approach.

> I know myself I was a mainstream teacher, it's very hard to get, to change your whole timetable around to suit and meet everyone's needs so that might be one of the limitations. (P31, MGLD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

> They [mainstream teachers] do create barriers, they do and you just cannot respond to the needs of the students if you are fixated with following a path on a timetable. (PP08, ASD class, SEN Coordinator, Wave 1)

A feeling of 'fear' and reluctance on the part of mainstream teachers was also noted by some of the special class teachers in the case study schools. This resulted in mainstream teachers not working with special class teachers or students, or not participating in broader extra-curricular or yard-duty activities with the special class students.

> A   You don't really get mainstream teachers coming down to us – only if they have to ... all I keep hearing as well from the teachers is 'I don't know how you do it, I wouldn't be able to do it, I don't know how you do it', you know.

> **Q   And what is that, is that, the hesitance, is it fear, is it ...**

A   I think it's fear, it's – because they can tell, like a lot of mainstream teachers … they don't feel comfortable, you know, in that environment or … they don't understand the whole area of special ed, you know, or special, ASD kids and look, I don't, I don't expect them to, you know. (P04, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Yeah, I mean people are supportive, you know, and you'd say to them … can I plan with you and they'd say oh yeah, no problem, but I think it's forgotten about, you know, … There is I think still, amongst some of the staff, a certain nervousness around out here. I know that kind of became obvious when we needed extra help with yard duty and there was – not a resistance to it, that's not fair – I think there was a nervousness around it from some people thinking 'and what will I do if there's a meltdown, what do we do, how do we cope'. (P01, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Teamwork emerged as a key feature of special classes with greater levels of integration and a more positive place in the school, particularly across the primary case study schools – both in terms of the benefits of support from mainstream teachers and the benefits of a team of special needs teachers working together.

It's great to have the support of the mainstream teachers too … so they're following their timetable, they know that I've two children coming to first class, so they really try to do art on that time, I'm doing this on such a time and stick to it, and that's, you know, and that's, you know, because teachers can often 'oh you know, I actually, you know we're not going to do that today, we're going to do that tomorrow', if that does happen then a note is sent down or a child saying you know actually we're doing art now instead of in two hours or whatever, you know, it's great, that support is great to have. (P09, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

All of the teachers, speech and language teacher, resource teachers, the EAL teachers, mixed class teacher and the general allocation learning support teachers we all meet as a team about four times a year. (P31, MGLD class, Principal, Wave 1)

… that would be school policy. So like the resource teachers in the school, the learning support, we kind of all would work at the same, we'd have special education meeting and we'd you know work towards or, we'd have targets or time frames to have things completed by, so. (P31, MGLD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

I've four learning support, three, I've seven, I've seven other teachers. They're all considered a team and you know the, the special class would be considered part of that team as well. Yes they will go ah yeah, you know, I mean there's huge communication here. (P25, MGLD class, Principal, Wave 1)

However, in other schools, special class teachers spoke of the isolation they felt in not being a part of broader school processes, particularly curricular planning processes, often being forgotten when key planning meetings were being held.

I'm doing a fourth, fifth, sixth class programme, so I find I spend a lot of time on my own just trying to think of academically what I'll do with them, and that's hard … I was supposed to be doing planning with the fourth class teachers this year but it didn't really work out or – I don't know – I was forgotten a few times and then when I did go they were ahead in the things that I couldn't marry in with it. (P01, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

3.5   Non-teaching staff

The centrality of the SNA role emerged in many of the special class contexts, at both primary and post-primary levels. Teachers invariably spoke about the SNAs they worked with, many highlighting the valuable contribution SNAs were making in ensuring the smooth operation of the special class and allowing a tailoring of teaching and learning to individual students.

… she could come into class and sit there for 20 minutes with nothing in front of her. You know and [name of SNA] … gets her focused but even for the whole class, now she'd be great. If they haven't got their notes, [SNA] has the notes, she helps them get caught up … it's nearly like a second form teacher … she is very good at helping them keep track of what they need to be at … and that extra bit of support socially in terms of someone else with them to go to, you know, is really useful. And she just kind of keeps them all on track. (PP13, non-designated class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Teachers and principals were somewhat divided on the most appropriate role for an SNA. A number of teachers saw the role of SNA as extending beyond the caring role, while others noted that many SNAs lack the relevant qualifications that would enable them to move into a teaching role.

I think that maybe in terms of the SNAs working in that area, that there is some scope for, for moving that on too … I know that there's a debate about it at the moment and the NCSE have issued new guidelines in relation to the actual working of the SNA … I would see that that SNAs would be much more involved in the actual delivery of programme with the teacher and under the direction of the teacher … and in many cases those SNAs are very well qualified people … at the moment the requirement to be employed as an SNA is that they would have a junior certificate level of education. In many cases they have much more than that and I would say, let's say, at least a Level 6 FETAC qualification would be, in my estimation, a good start. (P04, ASD class, principal, Wave 2)

Another big issue I have is with SNA training, they're coming in to an environment with no training and that's in the whole country. The courses I give with St Angela's, they're all for SNAs who are employed in schools, okay, and I'm doing this for the last five years and the biggest issue I have as a teacher as well down here is stress with dealing with – managing SNAs … there's staff here, they're not trained. (P04, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

The role of other professionals and specialist supports was noted by many case study teachers, typically providing an important means of gaining further knowledge and understanding about meeting the needs of SEN students.

> I'm always learning from the other specialists, professionals, ... for example, you know, you were working in an academic environment but these kids need movement breaks ... they've a lot of sensory issues and we feel the best use of the sensory room if they have movement breaks, like for example jumping on a trampoline, getting them to use a swing for ten minutes ... to get them back on task again ... How to use a sensory room appropriately ... he [the OT] devised a programme and he showed us, he showed us different techniques for each individual child ... so since incorporating a lot of the movement breaks I am getting more out of my kids and they're more settled, more calm. (P04, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

More generally, the importance of multidisciplinary supports was noted across many schools, but equally the level of resourcing for mainstream schools by comparison with special school settings was highlighted.

> And I never, nobody has the answers, that's why I like to work with a team, a multi-disciplinary team – just unfortunate – like, we don't have that all the time here, in a special school they would have that, they would have a lot more support, outside professionals coming in. (P04, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

3.6   Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

IEPs were in place across many of the schools, although only a minority of stakeholders talked in any great depth about their role and impact. In terms of the development of the IEPs teachers varied in what they saw as the objective of the Plans. Some thought they were 'idealistic', while others placed great effort in developing a broad and reflective Plan for each student.

> I mean your IEP, is idealistic in a lot of cases. You know, em, put nice English on it. It looks well in the file but you know, like things evolve as the year goes on, you know. Like, you might have had a target for someone that they were going to integrate into mainstream class. That might have been one of the targets in IEP. But then as the year goes on, maybe something completely different would strike you as being a bigger need ... the IEPs are a fancy ... it's like the buzz word. (P01, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

> Well we look at their strengths, first and foremost look at the children's strengths and see where they're gonna be successful ... with the junior class, a lot of say Junior Infants it's a lot of social, you know, and so the children, those are my guys, and so there's more opportunity maybe from our mainstream because they're able for it, you know, and they always go down with a SNA. And then I think as they get older it becomes a little bit more limited because it could become a lot more academic and maybe their strengths don't lie in the academics but, you know, we do a lot of activities, you know, when they're going on any school trips or they're going on any outings, our guys go along too, you know. (P09, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Planning and monitoring was a key component in schools which considered IEPs important – with regular meetings assessing progress and challenges in meeting targets. Parents and, where possible, specialist support staff, were also seen as part of the review process, but a number of school personnel observed a reduction in such supports in recent years.

> All the children would have an IEP. So I would meet with all the parents eh in September for about a half an hour and we would discuss, first of all I'd ask them what their hopes or what their concerns are to start off with … together, like I'll outline what my hopes are for their IEP for the next three to four months and then I meet them in January again to do out the next IEP or, or maybe do the same IEP depends on how the child is progressing or maybe just continue on what they are doing or maybe it might be something totally new. And then I meet them all in May again. (P31, MGLD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

> A   I have three IEP meetings a year and I always get, I try and get some specialist in, speech and language therapist or OT … I used to always have them on board now, but I can't get them anymore, this last year was just, the service was very poor.

> **Q   So you're meeting with parents about the IEP and then you try and get a specialist in?**

> A   I try, yeah, I try and get a team – I used to have the speech and language therapist, we used to draw up the IEP together because – and the two priority needs on an IEP are communication and language and social, personal and health education – I've three targets every nine weeks and they're realistic targets, smart targets … [But] it's very hard to do informal assessments unless you get a speech and language therapist on board. (P04, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

The value of IEPs for special class settings was particularly observed, not just because of the complexity of needs often involved, but also to ensure individual student needs are addressed and monitored over time.

> Yeah, definitely [IEPs are important] … you'd need it in the special class for sure because they're all so individual and eh, you know, because of the issues that you deal with, with autism like lack of language and things like that, you know, one to one teaching can be a big part of reinforcing any concepts that you're not picking up or that you may need to pick up. You definitely need to have that individual, em, base line I suppose where everybody's at and then where you're trying to bring them to. (P09, ASD class, Principal, Wave 1)

3.7 Curricular issues

The curriculum followed across primary and post-primary special class settings also emerged as a significant policy issue in the report of the Phase 1 National Survey (McCoy *et al*. 2014a). At primary level students in special classes were typically not offered Irish, while at post-primary level Irish was again typically not taught in special class settings. The Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP)[20] featured strongly in curricular provision, as did the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)[21] programme, raising some questions for schools not in a position to offer these programmes (the JCSP programme for example is only provided in DEIS schools). The case study research provided important additional insights into a range of curricular issues for special classes at both primary and post-primary levels.

The nature of the curriculum offered to students in special classes, particularly students with more complex needs, was an important issue for a number of special class teachers. The relevance and accessibility of the post-primary curriculum was of particular concern – the capacity of students to progress through the curriculum was questioned. This may also reflect teacher capacity to differentiate and support access to the curriculum. Furthermore, the absence of accreditation for those not achieving the standard junior or senior cycle programmes was raised – such students leaving school often with no qualifications.

> … there's one student I would have in second year, really she isn't getting through the curriculum no matter how many times I help her or try to do anything with her. In maths it's very, very difficult for her. I don't see that she's going to pass the junior cert even at ordinary or foundation level. We know that from speaking to the psychologist that we had that retired in February that really she should be in a special school. So it's just her ability really but apart from that all of the other students are well able to do their junior cert. (PP14, non-designated class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

> That's always been a major issue for me personally, because I always felt that there was a question of a serious injustice that a child is not, doesn't have the possibility of having the work that they actually do in the school recognised, so we have had two or three boys who have left the school with nothing, no junior cert, no junior cert programme, no FETEC programme. (PP08, ASD class, SEN Coordinator, Wave 1)

The importance of social development and social outcomes was highlighted, and considered a key issue for many students located within special class settings.

> … so a lot of my kids will attend to geography, history, science and all that, so on and so forth, okay, but really what's priority for them is the social – for example, social maths – I was introducing, for example, money, I'm looking at priority needs for these kids because they're coming in to teenage years … and twice a week we went down to the shop and they, we would type up a shopping list and then we would go to the – we would go on

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20 The JCSP is a junior cycle programme run by the DES and the NCCA aimed at young people who might leave school without a formal qualification and are struggling to cope in post-primary school. The programme is aimed at making students more confident about taking the Junior Certificate Examination.

21 The LCA is a two-year self-contained pre-vocational for senior cycle programme students. It is run by the DES and aims to prepare students for the world of adult and working life (DES/NCCA 2004).

the bus – and then we'd go get – find the items in the shop they had to purchase and so on and so forth ... they may seem confident and they're very good academically, they can read and they can write and, but yeah, they don't know how to shop, they – they're learner dependency, you know, and – just the going – just simple things like that – and functional money maths, that's what I'm actually doing at the moment, doing all year. (P04, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

One teacher also saw her role as trying to help the students to become aware that they were different to others and how that difference might impact on their day-to-day lives. The Friends for Life programme (Chamberlain *et al*. 2007) was highlighted by one teacher.

> ... I just decided that I should address the fact that they were a class of six and maybe, I always thought maybe that if they were more aware and more aware of, kind of better able to understand the challenges and difficulties that they would have ... [I asked them] do you ever think about why we're in a small class and one boy said I'm in it because I have autism and then another boy said yeah, I think I've autism as well, and then the boy who was new kind of said hang on a minute, so people know they've autism and I said yeah, so like 'and it can be talked about?' and I said 'of course' – 'so we don't have to keep autism a secret, we can just talk about it' – and I said yeah ... [The] Friends for Life is a programme run by NEPS ... it's huge in to looking at your emotions and I suppose in its simplest form it asks you to classify thoughts in terms of red thoughts and green thoughts, so a red thought might be I'm going in to a room of strangers, I'm not going to be able to cope, I'm going to panic ... we do a huge amount of discussion and we do it as a group sitting there at the table. So we would discuss, oh I'd say we do about a half hour to 40 minutes a day of just discussion about life, about meaning, about what upsets them, what, how they can improve, how they can help themselves. (P01, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Special classes across the case study schools at primary and post-primary levels differed widely in terms of the structure of the school day and the nature of teaching and learning. Where students were integrated into mainstream classes for periods during the day, typically a more structured timetable was followed, although the importance of flexibility is also noted.

> ... it's very much, goes by timetables then because when they're integrated ... say you know if they go to maths at half nine they got to maths at half nine they're back at half ten, and then they might be going somewhere else for religion later on in the day. So it's a lot of kind of working around timetables and keeping everything going ... Then there's religion time as well during the day when integrated and the speech and language therapist comes on Wednesday, Thursdays, Fridays so again kind of have to balance her timetable as well and work everything around that ... So there's a lot, awful lot of planning involved. (P30, SLU, SC teacher, Wave 2)

3.8   Summary

This chapter has highlighted a number of key issues relating to the organisation of teaching in special classes across primary and post-primary schools. School principals varied considerably in their approach to allocating teachers to special classes – in some cases seeming to allocate teachers with considerable expertise and motivation for teaching students with more complex needs. The phase 1 study also highlighted that 40 per cent of special class teachers at post-primary level are covering the full curriculum, raising important questions over why these classes are following a significantly different teaching model to their peers in mainstream. Probably not unrelated to this, in a significant share of schools special class teachers felt ill-equipped to meet the needs of students, finding the role particularly challenging and reporting that they did not have the required skills and qualifications to teach in such a setting. To some extent these experiences mirrored a broader school ethos and climate around inclusion – these teachers were typically more isolated from other teachers in the school, there was little evidence of a whole-school approach to meeting student need and student integration was less developed in these settings. Hence, these teachers felt isolated, 'thrown in the deep end' and lacking the relevant information and support from the broader school organisation. Input from the SESS and other professional supports were, however, talked about positively, with teachers across many of the special class settings gaining valuable information and help. Hence, the results highlight the centrality of support for teachers working in special class settings, with backing from principals, other teachers and a range of support services and professional organisations key to ensuring teachers are well-equipped and maintained in their role. The results also highlight the benefits of teamwork, teacher rotation and overall within-school cooperation and support in relation to special class teaching. Finally, teachers raised some concerns over the relevance and appropriateness of the curriculum for some students, the absence of alternative forms of accreditation and the key importance of social development for many of these students.

4. Student Experiences in Special Classes

4.1 Introduction

One of the primary aims of phase 2 of the research study on special classes was to explore the experiences of students in these classes. The longitudinal research within the case study schools sought to compare the educational pathways of students in different types of special classes over an 18-month to two-year period. As outlined in Chapter 1, special classes in six primary and six post-primary schools were visited at two time points between 2012 and 2014. Chapters 2 and 3 focused primarily on research findings at the school and special class level. Using teacher-on-pupil questionnaires, teacher qualitative interviews, student questionnaires and student focus group interviews, this chapter provides an understanding of special class provision from multiple (school personnel and student) perspectives. It is again worth noting however the methodological challenges experienced by the research team in trying to do this (see Chapter 1), and the particular difficulties in securing comparable data over time. Problems around student access and sample size are not unknown to special education, particularly when measuring change longitudinally. Furthermore, Hocutt (1996) believes that being a more heterogeneous group means that students with SEN are more difficult to compare to one another. In addition, she states that, because the progress of students with SEN is slow, the effects of a special education placement (or being in a special class) may not be evident in a given timescale.

As described in section 1.3.2, there are a large number of special classes currently in operation each with different designations. In order to provide meaningful analysis of patterns within and between special classes, we have identified four groups of special class provision based on the class designation and the typical severity of need of the students in that class (while acknowledging variation across students within the special classes). As outlined in Table 1.4, the special classes used in the analysis for this chapter are: ASD classes; a Speech and Language class; classes with MGLD designation; and classes with no designation. Using these categories, the analysis in this chapter is divided into four main sections: the chapter first focuses on students' own views of being in a special class using survey information and focus group interviews. Student attitudes to school more generally are examined in addition to their views on teaching and learning in a special class setting. The next section uses data based on teacher-on-pupil questionnaires to examine student progress in certain subjects at school, student access to SNAs and how students fare in relation to the pace of instruction and classroom interaction in the special class, largely in wave 1 of the study. The third section in this chapter provides a tabular overview of student pathways in special classes over time (where such data was available). Using teacher-on-pupil information this overview piece is followed by a more in-depth analysis of individual student pathways, highlighting the factors influencing student experiences. The final section of this chapter provides a detailed examination of two case study schools which are highlighted by the research team as models of best practice in the area of special class provision.

4.2   The student voice

Students were asked to participate in focus group interviews with researchers in addition to completing student questionnaires. For the most part, the focus group interviews took place at post-primary level during the first wave and comprised between five and seven students. The content of both the focus group interviews and the questionnaires centred on a number of themes including: student attitudes to school; student and teacher relations; teaching and learning in special classes and (in wave 2) any change in opinion over time. It was hoped that by using both group level information and individually completed questionnaires, students' true opinions around school could be examined. As outlined in Chapter 1, however, caution should be used in interpreting this data for a number of reasons. First, as noted earlier, focus groups were often only possible in special classes where children's needs were less severe (and among older age groups) and as a result these interviews might not represent children and young people in special classes more generally. The interviews could, however, highlight important issues around student experiences being in a special class, particularly in relation to potential stigma. Secondly, although all students in case study schools were issued with questionnaires, not all questionnaires were returned at the two time points and, questionnaires were often filled out by children and young people with less severe needs. This will have implications for the extent to which the findings are generalisable across all SEN groups.

In wave 1, researchers carried out one focus group interviews with students at primary and six at post-primary. In wave 2, two focus group interviews were carried out at post-primary with just one of these schools interviewed at the two time points. The primary student interviews were, however, quite limited[22] and are therefore not used in this analysis. The material used in this section therefore stems from the post-primary focus groups with students with medium or lower levels of need in special classes with either MGLD or with no designation. Students were asked to give their views on a range of issues within their schooling including their experiences of their school, what actually helps them in their learning, how their class groupings were established, what qualities are associated with effective teachers, how discipline issues are managed and the social aspects of schooling.

This section also uses student questionnaire data and the analysis focuses on the post-primary data particularly where data was collected at the two time points. A total of 127 post-primary students completed questionnaires, 81 of which were completed at wave 1. The questionnaires asked students about a number of aspects of their school life including their attitudes towards school and aspects of teaching and learning in special classes. Based on the analysis of both focus group interview data and survey data at two time points, the overall findings indicate that student views and opinions of school generally remain the same over time.

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22   While a diversity of research instruments were utilised, some of the primary students had greater difficulties expressing themselves due to their speech difficulties, intellectual disabilities or more general issues around confidence.

4.2.1 Attitudes to school

It is increasingly recognised that children with SEN have more negatives experiences in school than their peers without (Humphrey *et al*. 2010; Pijl and Frostad 2010). In Ireland, research has also shown that children with SEN, particularly those with multiple disabilities, emotional and behavioural difficulties and learning difficulties are more likely to report disliking school compared to their peers (McCoy and Banks 2012). Contrary to these findings the focus group interviews highlighted how the majority of students interviewed had positive perspectives of their schooling and commented, for example, that they *'enjoy coming to school'*, *'felt supported by their teachers'* and *'know there is someone to talk to if needed'*.

Students attributed these positive perspectives to a number of factors including their friendships with peers, the range of extracurricular activities available, particularly sport for boys, and the mentor system in place in some schools. Despite this positive perspective a number of difficulties were identified by the students. In line with previous Irish research on the experiences of students in junior cycle (Smyth *et al*. 2007) students highlighted how curricular demands had increased exponentially as they progressed through school, as exemplified by comments such as *'It's got tougher'*, *'teachers are asking too much from us'* and indications that students found the Junior Certificate year in school very stressful. One pupil was resigned to failure as he said: *'I'm going to fail anyway, I knew that when I started first year'*.

Pupils were also asked how they felt about school in the student questionnaires. A number of questions sought information about student attitudes to school at two time points. Interestingly, student attitudes to school over time did not change with many reporting similar findings around liking school, their teachers and the 'best thing' about school. The survey findings show slight differences in responses to the question 'How do you feel about school?' depending on the severity of need of the students.

Students in classes with higher levels of need which included ASD classes were more likely to report having positive attitudes towards school compared to students with medium levels of need such as those in the SLU case study and MGLD classes. Students were also asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'My school is a place where I really like to go each day'. The findings from the case study schools show that students with medium levels of need, i.e. those in the SLU case study or MGLD classes, were the most negative with high numbers disagreeing that they really like to go to school compared to students in other special classes. Students were also asked an open-ended question about what they felt the 'best thing about school was'.

Whilst there is variation in what students like about school, there is no marked variation between case study schools in what students like about school with students enjoying socialising, teachers and sports. For students with higher needs, for example, responses tended to focus more on specific subjects that students enjoyed '*doing cooking and home ec. And maths and English and reading a book. I like doing computers and typing story'*. In classes for students with medium levels of need (i.e. an SLU and an MGLD class) students seem better able to articulate their answers and more likely to report liking the social elements of schools in response to this question: *'playing football with the school because I am out of school and the banter with the lads'*, *'meeting up*

with friends and having fun'. Similarly for students in classes with lower levels of need, students enjoyed a range of school activities such as meeting with their friends, taking part in sports and certain subjects: '*I can see my friends everyday. Do my favourite subjects'*.

Students were also asked to complete an open-ended question about what they would change about school. These answers varied widely between the case study schools with students across schools generally reporting changing their teachers or the level of homework. There was a lower overall response rate from students with higher levels of need for this question, however.

The focus group interviews highlighted a number of issues around the perception of the special class within the school and the possible stigma associated with being in it. In three case study schools, students with medium and lower levels of need stated that they were aware that they had been classified as the lowest achieving group according to ability and assigned to their classes on this basis. In one school with an MGLD class the students characterised the three class groupings in their year as '*smart'*, '*medium'* and '*thick'*. These students believed that the school work expected from them was of a lower standard compared to the other class groupings: '*The work was different because we were the thicks – the work was easier'*. In another case study school, the students in the special class had lower levels of need and were also aware that they were the lowest group in their year and as a result: '*we're on the lowest books, what we're learning is baby stuff'*. In another special class with lower levels of need students believed that they were very unpopular with their teachers as the class had a poor reputation due to undisciplined behaviour.

4.2.2   Teaching and learning

Both the focus group and student questionnaires asked specific questions around student views of their teachers, the teaching approach and methods used in the special class and types of class groupings used. When asked what characterised a 'good teacher', students in the focus group interviews stated it was someone who is kind, listens to pupil opinions and as one pupil commented: '*does not take things overboard'*. Students also favoured teachers who dealt with undisciplined behaviour in a fair, consistent manner.

Students generally believed that the smaller class groupings particularly for subjects such as Maths were very helpful to them in their learning. Within these settings students felt that they were more likely to ask questions than in the traditional larger class grouping and to receive the appropriate support from the teacher. Students also believed that having well behaved students in the class was a significant support for effective learning. However, students in half the post-primary schools reported incidents of ill-discipline and ineffective teacher and school responses.

The student questionnaires asked students to think about the extent to which teachers provided feedback on their work in the special class. Interestingly, more students with higher levels of need received positive feedback about their schoolwork compared to students with medium and lower levels of need. In terms of the teaching methods adopted in class, the questionnaires also highlighted how teachers in classes for students with higher levels of need were much more likely to use technology such as CDs/DVDs. Computers were least likely to be used in special classes for students with medium needs (SLU and MGLD classes).

4.3   Student pathways over time

During the two waves of the study special class teachers were asked to provide information about the experiences and progress of students in their special class. As noted above, this data has been analysed by using four class types: ASD classes; Speech and Language classes; classes with MGLD designation; and special classes with no designation. Given the small sample size this evidence does not allow quantitative analysis, but does provide useful insights into student experience, which complements the qualitative interview data from teachers and students.

4.3.1   Analysis of teacher-on-pupil questionnaire data

Teachers of all special classes in the case study schools at both primary and post-primary levels were requested to complete questionnaires providing their assessment of, and opinion on, the performance and progress of students in the special class and their expectations regarding their future education placement. Researchers typically left the questionnaires with teachers to complete when they had time available and requested that they return them in the prepaid postage envelopes as soon as possible.

At the first wave of the survey, a total of 57 questionnaires were completed in respect of students in the special classes at primary level and 33 questionnaires for post-primary students in special classes (representing overall response rates in excess of 80 per cent). The numbers of completed questionnaires were lower in the second wave (less than 50 per cent) of data collection and in some cases teachers responded in respect of students where they had not responded in the first survey wave. Further, reflecting changes in teacher allocation to special classes and teacher turnover over the period, different teachers completed the questionnaires for some of the classes in the second survey wave.

For these reasons much of the following section focuses on the findings from the first survey wave in the primary and post-primary schools. These included ASD classes with students with higher levels of need, MGLD classes and an SLU case study which had students with medium levels of needs, and special classes with no designation with students with lower levels of need (see section 1.3 for details on the special classes used). Given the small sample sizes, it is not possible to conduct detailed quantitative analysis of the survey data. However, broad descriptive analyses allow some general insights into teachers' perceptions of the students in the special class settings.

Teachers were asked to indicate how well the students were doing relative to other students of their age in English, Maths, Irish and Physical Education. While it may be expected that students attending special classes may perform less well academically, the main focus here is to look at variation across the different special class settings and not how they are doing relative to other students either with or without SEN. In line with the results from Phase 1, most students in the primary special classes did not take Irish. At post-primary level, half of the students were taking Irish almost all of whom were rated as weak in this subject area. For Maths, primary special class students were described as 'poor' or 'below average' – with the former more typical of students in MGLD class settings. Greater numbers of primary students were assessed as 'below average' for

English, particularly for one of the MGLD classes (P31) and two of the ASD classes (P01 and P04). In respect of Physical Education, teachers typically rated primary students in special classes as 'below average', with a sizeable minority rated as 'poor'.

For post-primary students, the bulk of the students in special classes are rated as 'below average' in English and Maths, with smaller numbers considered to be 'poor' relative to other students of their age. Students in PP13, a class with no designation and lower levels of need, were all rated as 'below average' rather than 'poor' in these two core subjects. For physical education, post-primary special class students were often rated as 'below average', particularly in classes with lower levels of need, but a sizeable share were also rated as 'above average' in this domain.

Teachers were also asked to report how students were faring in relation to teaching, learning and general school engagement – including keeping up with the pace of instruction, participating in class, interacting with classmates, participating in lunchtime activities, attendance patterns and homework completion. Taking the primary special class students, teachers generally indicated that the students could follow the pace of instruction 'sometimes' or 'often'. A sizeable share of students in the SLU class 'rarely' kept up with the pace of instruction. Participation in class showed similar findings among the primary students, suggesting that these students coped better with engagement in class.

Students in MGLD classes in particular seemed to fare better in terms of classroom participation. Interaction within the classroom varied across the students with sizeable numbers interacting 'sometimes', 'often' and 'always' according to their teachers. Students in the SLU class appeared to struggle more with day-to-day classroom interaction, something which was not apparent in the qualitative interviews with teachers. While the bulk of students 'often' participated in lunchtime activities, there was considerable variation across students with some 'rarely' or only 'sometimes' participating. Participation levels seemed to vary within and across special class groups. Attendance patterns also varied across the groups, with average non-attendance since the beginning of the school year greater for students in two of the ASD classes (P04 and P09) and lower in the SLU class. Virtually all of the non-attendance is attributed to 'health reasons'. Teachers report that homework is always or nearly always completed for the vast majority of the special class students, recording small numbers of students who occasionally do not complete their homework.

At post-primary level, teachers similarly reported on a range of measures of how students in special classes engage with school and classroom life. While a sizeable number 'often' or 'always' keep up with the pace of instruction in the class, some students were 'rarely' able to do so, particularly in PP10 which was a special class with MGLD designation. The pace of instruction seemed less of a challenge for students in PP13 (a class with no designation) where students had lower levels of need. Such students were also reported to participate in class more regularly – typically 'always' – while students in ASD classes (PP08 and PP01) were reported as only 'sometimes' participating in class. Interaction with classmates is generally high – with only a small number of students reported as 'never' or 'sometimes' interacting well with their peers. Students who 'never' interacted with their peers tended to be in ASD classes.

Participation in lunchtime activities showed a good deal of variation – some students falling into each of the categories 'rarely', 'sometimes', 'often' and 'always'. Students in the MGLD class in PP10 were particularly likely to 'rarely' engage with lunchtime activities. Overall attendance levels appear high – with few days of non-attendance reported since the start of the school year. While most non-attendance relates to health reasons, some teachers indicate that 'other family reasons' explain some non-attendance. Non-attendance levels seem somewhat higher in PP10, although small numbers mean this should be interpreted with caution. Homework non-completion is more prevalent than among the primary students with a considerable minority 'regularly not completing' their homework.

Teachers were also asked to indicate how often the students attended the special class (days/hours per week), the suitability of the placement, how students felt about being in the special class and whether they expected the students to move to mainstream education over the coming two years. For primary level students 60 per cent of students attended the special class full-time while the remainder attended a few hours each day – this was particularly the case for students in MGLD classes, all of whom attended part-time. There was a similar divide for post-primary special class students – where students in ASD classes and in the lower need grouping (PP13) attended full time while those in the medium category classes typically attended for a number of hours per week.

In assessing the suitability of the class placement, teachers were asked to indicate if the pupil's educational needs were being met in their current environment. For three-quarters of primary special class students, teachers felt their needs were 'definitely' being met, while for the remainder their needs were met 'somewhat'. At post-primary level teachers indicated that almost all students had their educational needs met in their current environment. Teachers largely indicated that students in the case study special classes across primary and post-primary schools 'do not appear to notice' or 'do not notice at all' that they are in a special class setting. However, teachers felt that students in the SLU 'feel a little different' and a number of students in the medium need class (PP10) 'feel very different'.

For the largest proportion of students in primary special classes, teachers did not expect the students to move into mainstream education in the coming two years, with only one teacher expressing confidence that only a fifth class student would make that transition (most of whom were in the SLU class, where transition to mainstream was part of the intervention). Similarly, the greatest proportion of special class students at post-primary level were expected to remain in that class over the following two years, with less than one-third expected to transition to mainstream.

Finally, teachers indicated whether each student had an IEP. While all primary students did have such a plan, this was the case for just over half of special class students at post-primary level. This possibly reflects school practice around IEPs or the diversity of student need across post-primary special classes, with students attending the class with lower levels of need (PP13) not having IEPs to guide their education.

4.3.2 Tracking student pathways over time

In this section we tabularise student pathways in special classes over time followed by an in-depth examination of the experiences and progress (as measured by their placement) of a sample of these students. Using a combination of data from the school record sheets completed by principals, teacher-on-pupil questionnaires and qualitative interviews with school personnel, Tables 4.1 and 4.2 provide detailed information on individual students in special classes by highlighting first the special class designation, the student's pseudonym and disability type as reported by their teachers. The table is then divided into information at wave 1 and at wave 2. Wave 1 findings show basic information about their placement based on the school record sheet data, whether their placement was full- or part-time, and whether their teacher thought they would move to mainstream in the following two years. The wave 2 columns provide follow-up information about student placement, whether the placement remained full- or part-time and information about teacher expectations for this student in the future regarding mainstreaming.

Table 4.1 highlights that the individual student pathways of students in the three primary ASD classes are quite similar. Students were typically in the same setting over the two waves of the study and their level of integration (changing from full-time to part-time placement or vice versa) generally remained the same. In line with the findings of McCoy *et al*. (2014a), these autism classes had a narrow range of disability types and age ranges with students often split into junior and senior classes.[23] Almost all students in the case study schools were full-time in their special classes over the two waves. Furthermore, where teachers described their expectations of these students at wave 1 and wave 2, smaller numbers were expected to move to mainstream either between the waves of the study, but also in the future, than remain in the special class. In P09 there is some evidence that, over the two waves, students were more likely to be integrated into mainstream classes for part of their day with five out of the six students participating in some integration by wave 2 compared to just one student in wave 1. Similarly in P01, two students were reported to be participating in integration into mainstream by wave 2. Both students were expected by their teachers to leave primary school to join a special class in a local mainstream post-primary school.

Table 4.1 also shows how, in contrast to the ASD classes, the other three special classes at primary level were quite diverse with two MGLD classes and one SLU. The two MGLD classes operated similar models of provision with students attending for a couple of hours each morning for certain subjects. In the afternoon, these students would join their mainstream class. Compared to the ASD classes, teachers in MGLD classes were more likely to expect their students to be in mainstream by wave 2 (10 out of the 17 students in the two MGLD classes were expected to either definitely be in mainstream or the teacher wasn't sure). In one of the classes, however, the teacher's expectation for the students in the future was heavily influenced by her concerns about the students' ability to cope in mainstream settings where no similar special class was available.

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23   Students in the senior classes were the focus of this analysis, however, in that they were between 3rd and 6th class.

The SLU operates as a distinct form of provision from the ASD classes and the MGLD classes in that the emphasis is on a set period of intervention to bring students 'up-to-speed' with the rest of their mainstream class (see Chapter 1 for existing literature on SLU provision). Students in this class left their 'base school' to attend another school operating the SLU with some students travelling long distances to attend the class. The feedback from teachers regarding students in this class was far more positive than in the other special classes and students seemed to make significant progress during their time. Not surprisingly, there was far more movement out of the SLU over the two waves with three out of the seven students having left the class to return to their base school and the remaining four students just about to leave. One notable feature of this process, however, was concern among teachers regarding the reintegration back to mainstream and the lack of structured support for students when making this transition.

Table 4.1: Student pathways at primary level

	Disability	Wave 1 Placement	Wave 2 Placement	FT/PT Wave 1	FT/PT Wave 2	Expect to move to mainstream?
P01 ASD Class						
Nathan	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT with integration	Maybe/not sure
Derek	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT with integration	Maybe/not sure
John	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT	Not in 2 yrs but eventually
Felim	ASD	SC	NA	FT	FT	No, do not expect
Tim	ASD	SC	NA	FT	NA	No, do not expect
P04 ASD Class						
James	ASD	SC	Special school	FT	NA	No, do not expect
John	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT	No, do not expect
Conor	ASD	SC	SC PP	FT	NA	No, do not expect
Cormac	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT	No, do not expect
Julien	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT	No, do not expect
Rose	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT	No, do not expect
P09 ASD Class						
Emma	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT	No, do not expect
Thomas	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT with integration	No, do not expect
Aaron	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT	No, do not expect

	Disability	Wave 1 Placement	Wave 2 Placement	FT/PT Wave 1	FT/PT Wave 2	Expect to move to mainstream?
Ian	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT with integration	No, do not expect
Brendan	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT with integration	No, do not expect
Graham	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT with integration	No, do not expect
John	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT with integration	No, do not expect
P25 MGLD class						
Alan	MGLD	SC	MS PP	PT	FT	Yes, definitely
Larry	MGLD	SC	SC	PT	PT	Maybe/not sure
Vincent	MGLD	SC	SC	PT	PT	Maybe/not sure
Louise	ASD, MGLD	SC	SC	PT	PT	Maybe/not sure
Mary	Dyspraxia	SC	SC	PT	PT	Maybe/not sure
John	MGLD	SC	MS primary	PT	NA	No, do not expect
Tiernan	MGLD	SC	MS primary	PT	NA	No, do not expect
P30 SLU						
David	SLD	SC	SC	FT	FT	Yes, definitely
Alan	SLD	SC	SC	FT	FT	Yes, definitely
Emmet	SLD	SC	SC	FT	FT	Yes, definitely
Anita	SLD	SC	SC	FT	FT	Yes, definitely
Karl	SLD	SC	SC	FT	FT	Yes, definitely
Aidan	SLD	SC	MS	FT	FT	Yes, definitely
Emma	SLD	SC	MS	FT	FT	Yes, definitely
Adam	SLD	SC	MS	FT	FT	Yes, definitely
P31 MGLD class						
James	EBD	SC	SC	PT	PT	No, do not expect
Conor	SLD	SC	SC	PT	PT	Maybe/not sure
David	Sensory needs	SC	MS	PT	FT	Maybe/not sure
Adam	SLD	SC	SC	PT	PT	No, do not expect
Norman	BMGLD	SC	SC	PT	PT	Yes, definitely
Liam	SLD	SC	SC	PT	PT	Maybe/not sure

	Disability	Wave 1 Placement	Wave 2 Placement	FT/PT Wave 1	FT/PT Wave 2	Expect to move to mainstream?
Karl	Motor difficulty	SC	SC	PT	PT	Yes, definitely
Margaret	Dyslexia	SC	SC	PT	PT	No, do not expect
Claire	EBD	SC	SC	PT	PT	No, do not expect
Lisa	DS, MGLD	SC	SC	PT	PT	No, do not expect

Source: School record sheets, teacher-on-pupil questionnaires and teacher interviews.

Notes: SC is special class; MS is mainstream; NA is where information was not provided; FT is full-time and PT part-time; BMGLD is Borderline MGLD: EBD is Emotional Behavioural Disability; PP is post primary; SLD is speech and language disorder; DS is Down's syndrome.

At post-primary, Table 4.2 shows how both ASD classes were similar in that students remained in the classes over time and the majority (10 out of 13) attended on a full-time basis. In P01, however, three of the students were integrated for some subjects at both time-points (one student had left the school, however). In terms of teacher expectations, 11 out of the 13 students in the ASD classes were expected to remain in the special class setting by wave 2 of the study.

Table 4.2 shows that two of the case study schools at post-primary level have MGLD classes where students attended on a part-time basis and take certain subjects with other mainstream classes. In PP10, the special class teacher was positive about the experiences of the students, however, between the two waves this class disbanded and all students were integrated into the mainstream classes. For two of the students in particular their positive progress was due to being back with their peers. The PP06 class was only available during wave 1 and the teacher expectations of the students were low.

Finally, two of the special classes at post-primary had no designation. These classes were often similar to the MGLD classes in that students did attend mainstream for some subjects. Teachers differed in their expectations of students in these two classes in that they were far more likely to expect students to be fully mainstreamed over the two waves of the study (9 out of 14 students were expected to be in mainstream by wave 2). Furthermore, two of the students in PP13 were expected to complete some subjects in the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and a further four were due to enter the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme the following year. The teacher did raise concerns, however, that by being in the special class, students had not been 'pushed' enough academically.

Table 4.2: Student pathways at post-primary level

	Disability	Wave 1 Placement	Wave 2 Placement	FT/PT Wave 1	FT/PT Wave 2	Expect to move to mainstream?	Expectations for the future?
PP01 ASD Class							
Martin	ASD	SC	SC	PT	PT	No, do not expect	LCE
Joan	ASD	SC	NA	PT (integrated for one or two subjects)	NA	Yes, definitely	NA
Tim	ASD	SC	SC	PT (integrated for one or two subjects)	PT (integrated for one or two subjects)	Not in 2 yrs but eventually	Further education
Ray	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT	No, do not expect	NA
Niamh	ASD	SC	SC	FT	PT	No, do not expect	Sheltered workshop or something similar
Mags	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT	No, do not expect	NA
Norah	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT	No, do not expect	NA
Conor	ASD	SC	NA	FT	NA	No, do not expect	Student had behavioural problems. Had gone to another MS school.
PP08 ASD Class							
Pat	DS	SC	SC	FT	FT	No, do not expect	NA
Mick	DS	SC	SC	FT	FT	No, do not expect	NA
Edward	ODD	SC	SC	FT	FT	No, do not expect	NA
Colm	Asperger's	SC	SC	FT	FT	No, do not expect	NA
Ken	ASD	SC	SC	FT	FT	No, do not expect	NA

	Disability	Wave 1 Placement	Wave 2 Placement	FT/PT Wave 1	FT/PT Wave 2	Expect to move to mainstream?	Expectations for the future?
Dominic	ASD	SC	SC	PT (integrated for one or two subjects)	FT	No, do not expect	NA
PP06 MGLD class							
Andrew	MGLD	SC	NA	PT	NA	No, do not expect	NA
Julie	LD	SC	NA	PT	NA	No, do not expect	NA
Cian	MGLD	SC	NA	PT	NA	Maybe, not sure	NA
Gar	No diagnosis	SC	NA	PT	NA	Maybe, not sure	NA
PP10 MGLD class							
Stephen	MGLD	SC	MS	PT	FT	Yes, definitely	LCA
Sam	MGLD	SC	MS	PT	FT	Yes, definitely	LCE
Ciara	MGLD	SC	MS	PT	FT	Yes, definitely	LCA
Alan	MGLD	SC	MS	PT	FT	Yes, definitely	LCA
Aine	MGLD	SC	MS	PT	FT	Yes, definitely	LCA
Paul	MGLD	SC	MS	PT	FT	Yes, definitely	LCE
Cian	MGLD	SC	MS	PT	FT	Yes, definitely	LCA
PP13 No designation							
Maeve	No diagnosis	SC	SC	PT	PT	Not in 2 yrs but eventually	Not sure if she will pass the JC, expected to do the LCA in the future
Mary	No diagnosis	SC	SC	PT	PT	Not in 2 yrs but eventually	LCE
Cathy	Social problems	SC	SC	PT	PT	Yes, definitely	LCE
Laura	No diagnosis	SC	SC	PT	PT	Not in 2 yrs but eventually	LCA
Claire	Dyslexia	SC	SC	PT	PT	Not in 2 yrs but eventually	LCA
Cora	No diagnosis	SC	SC	PT	PT	Not in 2 yrs but eventually	LCA

	Disability	Wave 1 Placement	Wave 2 Placement	FT/PT Wave 1	FT/PT Wave 2	Expect to move to mainstream?	Expectations for the future?
PP14 No designation							
Cormac	Dyslexia	SC	SC	PT	PT	Yes, definitely	Not sure as student has little interest in education after school
Patrick	BMGLD	SC	SC	PT	PT	Yes, definitely	Not sure
Ciara	No disagnosis	SC	SC	PT	PT	Yes, definitely	NA
Evan	Dyslexia	SC	SC	PT	PT	Yes, definitely	NA
David	Dyslexia	SC	SC	PT	PT	Yes, definitely	NA
Lee	ADHD	SC	SC	PT	PT	Yes, definitely	NA
Tim	Dyslexia	SC	SC	PT	PT	Yes, definitely	NA
John	No diagnosis	SC	SC	PT	PT	Yes, definitely	NA

Source: School record sheets, teacher-on-pupil questionnaires and teacher interviews.

Notes: SC is special class; MS is mainstream; NA is where information was not provided; FT is full-time and PT part-time; BMGLD is Borderline MGLD; DS is Down Syndrome; LD is learning disability; LCE is Leaving Certificate Established; PP is post primary; JC is Junior Certificate; LCA is Leaving Certificate Applied; and OPP is oppositional defiant disorder.

4.3.3   Teacher insights into student pathways

Tables 4.1 and 4.2 provide a basic analysis of students in a special class over time but the discussion lacks more detailed information about the factors influencing students' experiences, progress and outcomes in the special class over time. The purpose of this section is to use qualitative interviews with special class teachers to examine the factors influencing individual student pathways over time.

4.3.3.1   Primary and post-primary students in ASD classes

At primary level, this group was characterised by students who were about to begin the process of transitioning to second level. In wave one, many of the teachers spoke about increasing integration over the next academic year to prepare students for the transition to post-primary. The interviews in wave two therefore focused on whether integration had been successful for particular students and teacher concerns about the upcoming transition. During the wave 1 school visit, one special class teacher in an ASD class described how one student, Niall, had 'been in fifth [class] a lot' but that now she planned to increase integration to prepare him for going to another class in a mainstream secondary school:

> I would see myself doing huge integration with him next year ... That I would see him maybe 70 per cent mainstream and 30 per cent with me. [He is] Totally into computers, computer games ... polite mannerly child ... we need to prepare him for secondary school. Because ... he would be well able to go into mainstream, you know, go in for [particular] subjects into a mainstream class. (Niall, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

By the time of the second school visit, however, it seemed that this transition process had not been easy as Niall had not secured a school placement until very recently:

> Up till two weeks ago it was panic stations, he had no school, his parents took a Section 29[24] against the school ... (Niall, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Preparing for the transition was clearly an important part of the work in this class and the teacher described how she had already visited the school with Niall and was in the process of making contact with his future teachers to pass on relevant information about his needs:

> So all we've done so far is I've gone out to visit the school ... I phoned the school this morning so that teacher is supposed to phone me back and we'll meet, I'll meet her now and chat and just have a one to one chat ... (Niall, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

For other students, the emphasis was on improving academic ability and social skills. At wave one Mark was in the junior ASD class at a mainstream school. His teacher was happy with his progress at this stage, particularly in reading:

> ... Yeah, he's only started reading in the last two years and now he's really advanced ... Well for me the last six months I've seen progress, but Mark's learning, he's learning now, his big thing is to wait, to put up his hand before he interrupts ... he loves maths ... He loves maths and he takes a pride in it, he likes drama but says he's embarrassed, this kind of thing. (Mark, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

Mark's school adopted a whole-school approach to inclusion and, where possible, students in the ASD classes attended mainstream classes. His ability in maths meant that Mark went to mainstream maths class with the help of an SNA:

> But he can learn, he's very smart, he can learn, you know, I suppose he goes to fourth class maths, he's, you know, he struggles with it but he enjoys it and with the support of the SNA he can manage in there, you know ... yeah, and he's proud of that. (Mark, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

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24 An appeal may be made to the Secretary General of the Department of Education & Skills in respect of a decision by a board of management or a person acting on behalf of a board of management to:
   · permanently exclude a student from the school, or
   · suspend a student from the school for a cumulative period of 20 school days in any one school year, or
   · refuse to enrol a student in the school.
   See more at: http://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/Appeal-against-Permanent-Exclusion-Suspension-or-Refusal-to-Enrol/#sthash.tby3SYGX.dpuf

However, socially, his teacher noted that Mark was a sensitive boy:

> He's keeping track of the day, so he's very aware … Maybe a little bit over-sensitive, you know, can get upset easily, but he can stand up for himself as well, but he needs his own time out as well. (Mark, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

By wave two, his teacher was very happy with his progress believing he is 'very settled now' and describing how he has 'excellent reading ability, his language has improved immensely, his receptive and his expressive language'. She felt that Mark works best on a one-to-one basis and 'is meticulous about his work and his presentation, handwriting, art work, anything like that'. As well as attending the class, the teacher felt that his progress was much helped by his 'excellent support network at home':

> His Mum puts in an awful lot of work with him as well so, you know, you can see that paying off as well in spades. (Mark, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

At post-primary, student pathways looked less certain for students in ASD classes. In wave one, teachers spoke mainly about students' personal attributes and how they were getting on day-to-day. By wave two, attention had shifted to where these students were going, what exams they were expected to complete and their lives after leaving school. In one ASD class, the teacher in the ASD class spoke about the progress of a student, Niamh, who was 'very quiet' and 'doesn't say very much at all'. In terms of her education she felt that Niamh tends to find 'some aspects of school difficult' but was happy that she would try most tasks:

> She would never say it to you, she never will say 'she can't do something' she will try it. If you give her a comprehension test, just a piece of work, and say the 'who, what, or where' when you come to 'why' she has no comprehension of why something happened. (Niamh, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

In terms of her life after post-primary education, this teacher felt that Niamh will 'never live independently'.

By wave two, Niamh had not done as well as this teacher expected in terms of grasping basic life skills such as money and time:

> Niamh's plateaued really, she's reached a certain level with regards to her, her academic. So English and maths in particular and she finds it hard to get over that hurdle. In maths at the moment, we're dealing with two of the concepts that, that kids with autism would find particularly difficult, money and time. So money, she can identify all of her coins and she, she knows all of her notes … (Niamh, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

The teacher felt that school had done all it could for Niamh and that it would be best for her to leave school and enter a sheltered workshop which would be more suited to her needs:

> So we're hoping with Niamh you know, ... transition on next year, or after sixth year, we're thinking maybe some kind of, sheltered workshop ... some kind of repetitive task, you know, would be ideal for her. She's doing work experience at the moment in [local shop] for an hour, an hour a week and she, she hugely enjoys that. (Niamh, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Within the broad spectrum of ASD, some students within these classes were progressing well and attending mainstream classes for specific subjects. One student in particular, Daniel, who has Asperger's Syndrome, has major difficulties around speech and sound. The special class teacher spoke about his progress both socially and academically since he arrived at the class:

> When he came in first, we transitioned him in last year, first of all we didn't get him inside the front door the first time, when he eventually came in he was hiding under tables so it took him a long time to come but eventually he did settle in. And as he settled in we realised that [Daniel] is probably the brightest of them all in here on the academic side of things, he can retain, he can write to a certain extent, he has a problem with spelling because of his speech, he can't hear the sounds or make the sounds in order to spell them. (Daniel, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

In terms of progression, the teacher felt that he will 'do some subjects in the Junior Cert'. Parental influence was reported as playing a role in Daniel's placement in mainstream in that they were concerned that his speech difficulties may create issues around bullying:

> The problem with [Daniel] and putting him into a mainstream class is the teachers won't understand him and he will be slagged by the other kids, he's had that all his life, the parents are very reluctant for him to go into the main school. (Daniel, ASD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

4.3.3.2   Primary students in Speech and Language Classes

Compared to the students in ASD classes, students in the speech and language class were seen to have made far more progress over the period of the two waves. In the intervention setting of the speech and language class, students made 'huge' gains both socially and academically. One special class teacher described how:

> The foundation blocks are the first year ... The first year is real basic stuff like you know that the concept the following directions, all that. Then the next year it's more grammar and, kind of correcting their writing often they write as they speak so if they drop sounds they leave it out, or, you know, the way they write their grammatical errors come into that as well. (SLU, SC teacher, Wave 1)

One student in this class, Anita, had a SSLI and difficulties in understanding basic instruction. Her teacher was extremely happy with her progress over time:

> When she came she was a very quiet little girl, huge difficulties around those kind of instructional things like … I might say to her 'just stand up there Anita and get your bag' and she'd be lost … just was really confused, you know … she's made great gains as well this year she just struggles a bit more with her confidence she's that little bit more unsure of herself … and I think that's one of the benefits of getting them in [to the SLU] that bit earlier. (Anita, SLU, SC teacher, Wave 1)

By the second wave, Anita's time in the class was seen to have had an impact and her teacher was preparing her for the transition back to her base school:

> I mean she's come on an awful lot even her mother was saying she's very happy … she seems to be a lot happier in herself so hopefully when she's goes back she'll be able to mix in well and I know her sisters will be in the school as well which will be helpful. (Anita, SLU, SC teacher, Wave 2)

This teacher also made efforts to contact the base school and provide Anita's new teacher with relevant information about Anita's ability and needs more generally:

> I actually spoke to the learning support teacher in the school she's going back to and just explained all this on the phone and let her know and so she's aware that she's coming and to kind of be able to help her when she does go back and to adjust. (Anita, SLU, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Anita's classmate, Angus, was in a similar situation in that he was about to transition back to his base school. Although he had difficulties with basic comprehension his teacher felt that he was making huge progress since he arrived at the class:

> He has kind of trouble around his comprehension … but again he's come on hugely, he would have been now the child that instructions and he was just lost with them, you know whereas that has kind of come along it's difficult for him, you know, when he reads a passage or that kind of … you know comprehend what's being said in it. (Angus, SLU, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Alan was due to make the transition back to his base school as well but his teacher felt that he would not struggle as much as he had kept contact with his friends while he was attending the special class:

> Alan would have stayed very much in contact with the children from his school in his class through soccer and activities like that and so he was well able to settle back into school and you know he really didn't lose his friends as such or he kept in contact with them. So we'd encourage that as much as possible to join in maybe if there are teams to join in or soccer groups or things like that or things that are being organised by schools to try and I suppose help them when they go back that they have their friends there and they keep in contact with them even if it's just going to birthday parties and things like that. (Alan, SLU, SC teacher, Wave 2)

4.3.3.3   Students in classes with MGLD designation

The model of provision in MGLD classes differed from the other special classes in this study in that students attended the special class on a part-time basis (generally for the morning). The majority of these students had a diagnosis but, as mentioned in section 2.3, many teachers were unhappy about the lack of flexibility around retention ratios. In addition to academic progress, building confidence was a major part of these special classes. One teacher described how the class acted as a safe haven for one boy who benefited from the supportive environment:

> [Vincent] would probably be the most innocent and naive, he's in fifth class now, so he's the guy in the class who'll make the silly statement that everybody, you know, laughs hysterically, he's the guy who would be bullied … okay, and there have been issues, but he, you know, he's comfortable enough down here that he can tell me what the issues are and that it can be resolved … (Vincent, MGLD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

By wave two, Vincent's teacher was planning his transition from primary school and felt that his ability was somewhere between a special class in a mainstream school and special school:

> You see there is a special school but [name of school] has a different profile so Vincent wouldn't really fit in there, if you know, do you know what I'm trying to say … he just wouldn't fit in so he's in a kind of a no-man's land. (Vincent, MGLD class, SC teacher, Wave 2).

She had quite important information for any of Vincent's future teachers but felt there was little mechanism in which to pass this on:

> He definitely needs a contact person [in post-primary], needs somebody … he may be vulnerable … the whole thing about colour coding and timetabling, just anything that we thought would help without telling them their business. Vincent has been down seeing … what the school looks like … how we work out a timetable, how you'd work out your books and things like that … (Vincent, MGLD class, SC teacher, Wave 2)

Variation in the levels of need among students with MGLD was more pronounced at post-primary level. In one MGLD class in a case study school, student ability varied widely. One student, Stephen, was just finishing his first year in the special class. His teacher describes him as 'immature' but has 'calmed down a lot' during that time. She felt he had also made progress academically:

> [Stephen] has really come on this year. He's really flourished really this year; he's doing two higher level subjects I think. And the rest would be ordinary and a couple of maybe foundation maths. But he's, he's finished his higher level maths work project and delighted with himself … has come on an awful lot socially. He was little bit wild I suppose, a little bit. (Stephen, MGLD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

Stephen's school provided the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCA) and his teacher felt that 'he's going doing LCA in fifth and sixth year and he'll do well. He will do well.' (Stephen, MGLD class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

4.3.3.4   Students in classes with no designation

Maeve is an example of a student whose teacher describes her care needs as being the primary reason for her being in the special class. At the first study visit, she is doing well in her first year in post-primary school despite having only a shared SNA (compared to a full-time SNA in primary school). Her teacher describes how happy she is with Maeve's progress:

> She's a very babyish first year, you know, very innocent but she's actually quite smart. She picks things up very quickly … and very cooperative and you know … I would say one of the better ones certainly very well behaved girl and she would be performing very well … (Maeve, non-designated class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

At this point in time, Maeve's teacher has quite high expectations of her in terms of future qualifications:

> My expectations for her actually she might be one who might go on to do the established leaving cert and not leaving cert applied. (Maeve, non-designated class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

By the time of the second case study visit, however, her teacher is disappointed with Maeve's progress:

> She's actually probably the person in the class has not progressed as well as maybe the others as much … but god love her, she really works and she tries … she's very, very eager to please. (Maeve, non-designated class, SC teacher, Wave 1)

Her expectations have been impacted by the change in Maeve's performance at school over the period:

> She should scrape it [JC] but I mean, it'll be tough, now she went down to foundation maths there … so I mean, I'm hopeful that she will get it, it won't be great … she'd do alright on the LCA, her keenness and her eagerness to work and to do things will really help her there. (Maeve, non-designated class, Wave 1)

In another case study school, students had been in a special class but the school was in the process of moving the students into mixed ability groups. The main reason for this (as described in section 2.3.1) was due to a negative perception or stigma surrounding the special class. During wave 1, the special class teacher described how one student was worried about their grades and trying to improve academically so that they could make the transition to mainstream sooner:

> He's a little bit unsettled at the moment, his mother did come into us, we noticed it anyway … he's always wondering how much, how many marks do we need to get into the, to get back into the other classroom. You know things like that, he's very worried about his up and coming tests now in the summer. So he really has worked very hard. (Cormac, non-designation, SC teacher, Wave 1)

His teacher was unsure, however, how Cormac would get on:

> But for Cormac I'm not too sure how it's going to work out depending on his summer test he could maybe get a chance to go back as well. (Cormac, non-designation, SC teacher, Wave 1)

Overall, she had good expectations for him as he wanted to be a farmer when he left school:

> I think he wants to be a farmer, you know so I'm not too sure how relevant they find it all. But I would have good expectations for him. (Cormac, non-designation, SC teacher, Wave 1)

4.4   Models of good practice in special class provision

The research team, drawing on their research experience in examining special education in Ireland and the valuable insights gained from visiting the diversity of special class settings, felt that two post-primary schools had developed their special class provision in quite unique ways that marked these schools out from the rest of the case study schools. In many ways, these distinctions were reflected in the organisation of the environment and the culture and leadership evident in the schools. Both schools operated from a strong principled commitment to inclusion based, in one case, on religious conviction and, in the other, on a strong sense of responsibility for catering to the needs of every child in the local community. Flexible provision is evident in both schools based on the individual needs of each child. However, this commitment to individualised provision has resulted in the development of quite distinctive though complementary approaches in both schools.

The first school which is a boys secondary school is clearly informed by a Christian ethos and driven by the vision of the special needs co-ordinator who from the outset wanted to ensure that the class did not become a separate space isolated from the mainstream:

> We sort of came up with the idea of a special class at the heart of the school but with lots of other students coming in and out of that particular space. (SEN co-ordinator, ASD class, Wave 1)

> While the unit has a specific number of students attached, it was evident that many more students from mainstream classes were availing of this space (up to 150 students). Teachers in the unit were determined to ensure that no stigma was attached to receiving extra support and had created a very welcoming environment where students could use kitchen facilities at break times and first names were used among teaching staff and students. The organisation and deployment of staff was significantly different to the rest of the school. At the beginning of the academic year teaching staff in the unit had blank timetables and timetables were developed based on the individual needs of the students: '… so as the year develops the needs of different students emerge, you know and we can respond to that'. (SEN co-ordinator, ASD class, Wave 1).

In effect, this means that the timetable is determined by student needs rather than the timetable dictating how and when support can be offered and who is available to provide this support. Each

staff member is assigned to a particular year group and the SEN co-ordinator takes responsibility for all discipline issues, thus enabling teaching staff to focus on student learning. The SEN co-ordinator and the SEN team focus on 'normalising the environment'.

Both the principal and the SEN co-ordinator pointed out that the admissions policy for entry to the unit had to be watertight and professional input was sought on devising an appropriate admissions policy. The ultimate aim is to enable students to participate in mainstream classes and the principal and SEN co-ordinator articulated very clearly that the unit would never become a 'dumping ground' for dealing with discipline issues arising in mainstream classes. Early school leaving has reduced within the school and the principal attributed this, in the main, to the work of the unit in supporting the more vulnerable students. This commitment to vulnerable students (not necessarily SEN) was expressed by a member of the SEN team as follows: '… also put a lot of emphasis on trying to draw the weaker or the marginalised or the ones who need extra help towards the centre'. (SEN co-ordinator, ASD class, Wave 1)

Peer interaction is facilitated in a number of ways including a peer mentoring programme involving Transition Year students and core students in the unit. This contact is highly valued by the students in the unit according to an SEN teacher: '… it's important for them to feel that they have a relationship with a senior boy, that there's a connection there' (PP08, SEN co-ordinator, ASD class, Wave 1). Staff were aware of the need to promote greater independence as students move into Senior Cycle and there is concern that transition to post-school provision can be problematic. Mainstream staff were initially concerned that the establishment of the unit could result in the school becoming a 'magnet school' for all students with SEN in the area. However, according to the principal, mainstream staff recognise the benefits the unit brings to the whole school as subject teachers feel supported in responding to the learning needs of students with SEN in their classes.

In the second case study school there is a mixed gender intake. The autism centre has been recently established and in common with the first school there is a strong emphasis on ensuring that the unit does not become isolated from mainstream provision. From the beginning the principal was adamant that support for students with autism would be provided within a school centre or resource department rather than a specialised unit which was believed to be less inclusive. Securing appropriate training for staff had been an urgent concern as training could not be sanctioned by the DES until the autism centre had been officially established. Integrating both the SEN support teachers and the students with autism into mainstream classes has guided the development of support. Each student has an individualized programme and, according to academic and social capability, students participate in mainstream classes. SEN teachers in the Centre as a general rule do not teach exclusively within the Centre and will often teach regular subjects in mainstream classes. In addition, mainstream subject teachers will often come into the Centre to teach students who are not participating in mainstream classes.

Before entering school, students with autism participate in a transition programme which takes place a few months prior to beginning in the school. In first year students identified their subject preferences and where feasible students will undertake these subjects in mainstream classes. Two students with higher ability have successfully completed the Junior Certificate course in a number of subjects and though most of their time is spent in mainstream these

students can access support from the Centre if required. It is evident that there is a wide range of abilities among the students (including some who are non-verbal) in the autism centre and this determines the groupings developed for teaching input. Some students require additional therapeutic support which has to be paid for by the school or by parents. The principal is adamant that the establishment of the centre has had positive benefits for the whole school:

> Do I believe that a centre like this can sit comfortably within a second-level school setting, well I believe it can, I believe it only enhances the school in terms of what people actually see and the skills and talents that these young people have and what they have to bring. I also think it highlights to the rest of the children within the school community that the school serves its community not just some of its community. (ASD class, Principal, School 1, Wave 1)

Both schools are characterised by a strong commitment to the education of the students within the centre through the development of flexible provision determined by the individual needs of each student and based on detailed knowledge of the strengths and limitations of each student. In both cases there is a strong whole-school approach that ensures that the students within the centre are valued members of the school community.

4.5   Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to examine the experiences of students in special classes over time. Using students' own commentary on their school experiences, findings were generally positive. It is also evident, however, that there are areas of concern that require serious consideration. Schools need to consider carefully how class groupings are established to receive extra support as there was some evidence that students were aware of their ranking within the school and this was having a negative impact on their evaluations of their own ability to cope with the demands of the curriculum and a national examination. Teacher inability to address instances of ill-discipline was seen to have a negative impact on the learning opportunities for those students in these class groupings. Many students were well able to articulate what and who helped them in their learning and the establishment of smaller classes with supportive teachers proved very beneficial in supporting pupil learning. Positive peer relationships were influential in pupil experiences of school and the availability of extracurricular activities was viewed as beneficial by students.

Using teacher-on-pupil questionnaire data, findings show that students in ASD classes have the most severe level of need of all students in the case study schools. Of the 12 case study schools, five are classified as ASD classes with three classes in primary schools and two in post-primary schools. The majority of students in this group had an ASD diagnosis although there were a small number of students with other disabilities. The majority of students were placed in the class as a result of a formal assessment. The learning experience for this group of students is individualised and tailored to their needs. For many, the emphasis was on social development and life skills. These students experience little or no integration with the mainstream classes and had little movement to mainstream education between the two waves of the study. For the majority of these students, there does not appear to be a stigma attached to attending

an ASD class. Another characteristic of this group is strong parental involvement and influence on their educational outcomes.

Students in MGLD classes are placed as a result of a formal assessment and diagnosis. At primary level the classes are provided on a part-time basis with high levels of integration into mainstream. There is some evidence of a stigma being attached to attending these classes, particularly at post-primary. Parental influence also plays a role for these students in class placement but also in student experiences more generally.

The speech and language class operated as a distinct 'model' of special class, with students attending the class by leaving their base school for a fixed period of time (often two years). Not surprisingly, over the two waves of the study this group of students had high levels of movement back to mainstream education in their base schools. There is a greater emphasis on academic attainment for these students but they have little integration with mainstream classes. These students have been impacted by cutbacks in a number of support and health services, in particular SLT and OT.

Students in classes with no designation are significantly different to the other groups in that they have lower levels of need with some having no identified difficulties. Emphasis in these classes is on student behaviour, student retention and life-skills. Findings for this group show a more fluid model of integration with mainstream for certain subjects but little evidence of transitioning into mainstream between the two waves of the study. In some case studies these students appeared to be in a low stream class with reduced curriculum. They are more likely to experience stigma and have an awareness of being different from their peers. According to the principal and teachers' perceptions, there is limited parental involvement or knowledge of the existence of a special class.

Overall, the findings suggest that special class placements are more positive where student needs are greater and more closely defined, particularly in ASD class settings. Perceptions of difference are most acute among students with lower levels of need (and in some case no diagnosed SEN). While these students are in post-primary settings (and hence older and more aware) they express clear concerns around being seen as different to their peers and the associated stigma. Further, these students are clearly viewed by their teachers as of higher ability than their peers in other special class settings, raising questions over the appropriateness of the placement for (some) of these young people. Further, the dominance of the one-teacher model in these classes, their parents' lack of awareness of their placement (and engagement) suggest questions need to be asked over whether this is the optimum placement for these students.

In the final section of this chapter, we examine models of good practice in special class provision. Two post-primary schools had developed their special class provision in quite unique ways that marked these schools out from the rest of the case study schools and, in line with previous research (Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, and Petry 2011), highlight how special classes can facilitate inclusion. Both had strong school leadership with a commitment to inclusive education. The case studies exemplify flexible provision based on the individual needs of each child.

5. Summary of Findings and Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

International research highlights that there is no compelling evidence that placement, in special or mainstream education, is the critical factor in student academic or social success. As a result the majority of countries operate what Cigman (2007) calls 'moderate inclusion', meaning there is a continuum of provision for students with SEN, including special schools, special classes or units in mainstream school and placement in mainstream classes (Asher *et al*. 1990). The aim of this report is to examine the experiences of students in special classes in Irish primary and post-primary schools. It is the second output from a broader study of special classes commissioned by the NCSE in 2011. This study sought to examine and evaluate the operation of special classes for students with special educational needs in mainstream education.

The Phase 1 report by McCoy *et al*. (2014a) provides baseline information on the operation and features of special classes in Ireland using a national survey of schools. This mixed-method longitudinal study builds upon the findings of the first report by utilising in-depth qualitative data gathered as part of case study research in 12 schools with special classes. It is intended that this publication, in addition to the findings from the Phase 1 report, will ensure that Irish educational policy around special classes for students with SEN is informed by robust empirical evidence about their role and operation. Interviews with special class teachers, school principals and students in special classes in addition to survey data gathered from special class teachers were used to gain insight into their understanding of the role of special classes and their perceptions of effectiveness in meeting the needs of the students. Further analysis of the Phase 1 National Survey of Schools was also carried out to complement some of the qualitative findings. This chapter provides a summary of the key findings of this report and highlights policy implications stemming from the research.

5.2 Key findings arising from the study

This section provides a summary of the key findings arising from the research (and that of Phase 1 of the study) on the current role and operation of the special class model. The discussion centres on a number of issues: first, issues arising in relation to teacher allocation to the special class, their capacity to teach students with SEN and opportunities for training; secondly, the relationship between positive student experiences, school leadership and a whole-school approach to inclusion; and, thirdly, variation in student progress in special classes, the extent to which they are being supported to reach their potential and access the curriculum.

The organisation of teaching in special classes

The findings of this chapter highlight important aspects of teaching in special classes in mainstream schools. The qualitative findings show that the process of placing teachers in special classes varies by principal, with some carefully selecting certain teachers for the role and others depending on teachers to volunteer (often resulting in recently qualified teachers taking up the post). Teachers emphasised the need for more training while teaching in the special class (with SESS in particular) but also before taking up the position. These findings highlight the increased strain on teachers teaching in special classes where they do not have adequate qualifications and there is a lack of support from the school principal and colleagues working in mainstream classes.

International and national research highlights the critical role of leadership in leading and supporting change for inclusion (Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, and Petry 2013). In reviewing the role of the principal in creating inclusive schools, studies have focused on three key tasks: fostering new meanings about diversity, promoting inclusive school cultures and instructional programmes, and building relationships between schools and communities (Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, and Petrya 2013). This report highlights the role of school leadership and whole-school thinking around inclusion in the successful operation of the special class. Student progress and teacher satisfaction in special classes were greatly enhanced where special class teachers felt supported by their principal and mainstream colleagues. Not only did this interaction provide social support for the teachers but it appears to benefit students in both special and mainstream classes.

Non-teaching staff were also considered in this chapter and in particular the role of SNAs in special classes. Most teachers in the case study schools were positive about their SNA support, particularly where a whole-school approach was taken to inclusion. In some schools, however, the lack of qualifications and expertise of some SNAs, and a lack of knowledge of what their role was in the special class, caused some inter-personal problems.

There was some variability in the use of IEPs across the case study schools. They were, however, most prevalent in ASD classes and the speech and language class where students had complex needs and specific academic and social goals.

One final aspect of this chapter examined the role of the curriculum in special class provision. Findings show that the post-primary school curriculum in particular was seen by some teachers as ill-suited to students' varied needs. Others questioned the value of the curriculum when students were not academically able for the junior and senior cycle programmes. While alternative programmes, such as JCSP and LCA, were available in some of the schools, the findings raise questions over the adequacy of curricular provision for students with SEN, particularly where schools are not in a position to offer these alternative programmes (as raised by McCoy *et al*. 2014, p.124).

The role of school structures in special class provision

Chapter 2 utilised data from Phase 1, the National Survey of Schools, and qualitative data from the case study schools to examine a number of broader school level issues which impact on the provision of special classes. One issue that arose among principals was that of school admissions policies regarding students with SEN. In particular, principals in the designated disadvantaged case study schools feel that other schools' admissions policies allow them to create soft barriers to admitting students with SEN. This, in turn, impacted on their reputation in the community and on morale within the school itself.

School context and attitudes to inclusion also seemed to influence the perceived purpose of the special class. In some schools, special classes, and in particular ASD classes, were seen to offer students a safe haven away from the mainstream environment. In other schools, classes with MGLD designation or the speech and language class were seen as providing a mechanism in which to bring students academically up-to-speed with their mainstream peers. Some school principals felt the objective of the class was to offer both social and academic support tailored to the needs of the students. These findings highlight a number of concerns about the role of special classes in creating difference among students particularly those with lower levels of need in post-primary settings.

This chapter examines differences in the structure of special classes across schools. First we examined data from the Phase 1 National Survey of Schools to understand variation across schools in the amount of time students spend in special classes across schools. Findings show that students generally remain together across school years, particularly students in primary school classes with MGLD designation. At post-primary, the way in which the class was formed appears to influence the extent to which students remain together across school years. Although the Phase 1 report found that students in special classes at post-primary tend to spend most if not all of their week together, the qualitative findings are more mixed. Students in classes with no official designation have more flexibility and integration with mainstream than those with DES/NCSE designation. In order to explore these patterns further, we utilised interviews with principals and special class teachers to understand different ways in which special classes are provided. In line with the quantitative findings (McCoy *et al*. 2014a), these findings also show variation in special class provision by school and the designation of the class with some operating full- or part-time classes (mainly ASD classes and MGLD classes) and others offering a full-time intervention for a fixed period of time (mainly the speech and language class).

Student experiences in special classes

Using interview and survey information gathered from school principals and special class teachers, the final chapter in this report examines the experiences of students in the special class. While there is wide variation in the ability and level of need among students in different types of special classes, as well as wide diversity within such groupings, this research examined the case study special classes in four general groups based on the special class designation and the relative level of need of the students (as judged by the research team visiting the schools) including:

Table 5.1: Groups of special class provision

	ASD Classes – typically with higher levels of need (primary and post-primary)	Speech and Language Classes – typically with medium levels of need (primary)	Classes with MGLD designation – typically with medium levels of need (primary and post-primary)	Classes with no designation
Placements	Assessed	Assessed	Assessed (primary)	Subjective
Level of need	Higher (autism)	Medium	Medium (primary)	Lower (learning difficulties/no identified difficulties)
Movement between Wave 1 and Wave 2	Lower	Higher	Higher	Lower
Focus	Emphasis on social development and life skills	Academic emphasis 'bringing students up to speed'	Integration (primary and post-primary)	Emphasis on life-skills, retention and student behaviour
Model	Structured teaching and learning, IEPs	Intervention model of provision	Small groups, structured teaching and learning (primary)	Low stream class; one-teacher model
Integration	Little integration	Little integration	Integration (primary and post-primary)	Fluid model with some integration for subjects
Experience	No stigma	Temporary placement; possible issues in transition back to mainstream	Possible stigma (post-primary)	Stigma and isolation, student awareness of being different
Parental role (based on staff views)	Strong	Strong	Weak	Weak

The findings indicate that the experiences of students in special classes vary widely by the type of school and designation of the special class. The Phase 1 report noted how ASD classes are generally well-resourced and attract lower pupil-teacher ratios (McCoy *et al*. 2014a). Overall, the case study research highlighted somewhat positive experiences for students in such ASD classes, although compared to other special classes. However, there were fewer opportunities to integrate students into mainstream during the school week. Such inclusion seemed more evident where there is a whole-school approach to inclusion and where teachers have gained expertise in SEN. There are mixed findings in relation to the experiences for students with medium levels of need in classes with MGLD and speech and language designation. Students in these classes seem to make progress, according to the special class teacher, where teachers have high levels of expertise, feel supported by outside professionals (such as SLTs and OTs) and have support from the school principal and mainstream staff. Special classes for children and young people with lower levels of need or with no identified need have the most negative student experiences. While these findings are based on just two special classes at post-primary level, they do raise important issues, particularly suggesting that these special classes are more likely to be negatively perceived by the students attending the class and their peers in mainstream.

The findings suggest that these students are more likely to feel unhappy about being placed in these classes and have an awareness of being treated differently. There is some evidence that these special classes are acting as a low stream class in some schools.

Of the four groups of special classes examined, students in the ASD classes were the most homogenous in terms of their levels of need (in line with the findings of McCoy *et al*. 2014a) and their outcomes over time, with little change in their class placement between the two waves of the study. Overall teachers were positive about the ASD class as a setting for these students, particularly where they felt supported by their principal, encouraged to attend training and education and where there was a whole-school approach to inclusion. Although the experiences of this group were consistent across primary and post-primary school, there was some evidence of increased levels of need among primary compared to post-primary students. Learning in these classes seems to be individualised and tailored to students' needs and student progress and experiences often depended on levels of ability. Despite these differences in academic objectives, there was a strong emphasis on developing life skills in the majority of ASD classes with many students making progress over time in these areas. There was little evidence of stigma attached to attending ASD classes, even at post-primary where students were older and perhaps more aware of being educated separately. At both primary and post-primary, the main area of concern for students in ASD classes was around transitions, either to post-primary school among primary students or from school to senior cycle, further education or the labour market (or sheltered employment) among post-primary students.

The speech and language class was only operating at primary level and was made up of students with SSLI who had no intellectual difficulties. It operates as a distinct model of provision and is viewed by teachers as an intervention aimed at bringing students up-to-speed academically. Students attended the class for two, or in some cases, three years before returning to their mainstream base school. Teachers in this class were generally positive about student progress in these settings; however, some were concerned about students having a longer school day and often long travel journeys to and from school. Teachers also expressed concern about the transition of students with SSLI back to their base school following a prolonged period in a different school. Teachers of students in the SLU specifically raised the issue of cuts in professional services such as SLTs and OTs impacting on student progress and experiences in these special classes.

Similar to those in ASD classes, students in classes with MGLD appeared to have more severe needs at primary compared to post-primary. At primary level, the MGLD classes were viewed by teachers as a way of improving student ability in some subjects. At primary level the MGLD class was part-time with students attending their mainstream classes in the afternoon. For students in MGLD classes, interviews with teachers highlighted the difficulties for some students making the transition from primary to either special schools or special classes in mainstream settings. Students in this group were also seen as socially unaffected by being placed in a special class with many primary school teachers in particular believing them to be unaware that their placements were different to their peers. At post-primary, students in MGLD classes were far more diverse in terms of academic and social ability. Students were more likely to be on a reduced curriculum, taking lower level subjects or doing the JCSP (or the LCA) programmes where they were available

in school. In one post-primary school, the teacher described how students were more aware of placement and perceived a stigma in being associated with the MGLD class.

The final group of special classes examined in the qualitative analysis relates to students in classes with no designation (without sanction from the NCSE/DES) who have lower levels of need or no identified SEN. These students form the most diverse group with varied school experiences and pathways over time. This type of class refers only to students in post-primary who were in first year and third year during the two study waves. The special class teachers interviewed, as well as students themselves, described how some students disliked being placed in this class, were aware of being different and wanted to go back to mainstream. Issues around student behaviour were more common among this group and students were often on a reduced curriculum or doing JCSP. Academic progress for this group appeared to be limited and there is some evidence that teacher expectations lowered over time as the Junior Certificate exam approached. These findings have some parallels with broader international literature on streaming and tracking across secondary schools and the negative implications these processes can have on student aspirations, self-concept and ultimately academic and educational outcomes (Avramidis 2010; Banks *et al.* 2012; Bossaert *et al.* 2011, 2012; McCoy *et al.* 2014b).

The final section of chapter 4 highlights a number of case study schools which stood out in terms of the structure and delivery of the special class. In both cases, these schools operated ASD classes at post-primary which the authors feel could provide valuable information and guidelines to other schools. The key to the success of the special class in both settings is a strong emphasis on flexibility in provision. Both classes were established by individuals with a vision of what the class was to be within the broader school structure. In particular, the classes sought to normalise special education within the school context and enhance the experiences of all students.

5.3   Key issues to consider in relation to special class policy into the future

Based on the research findings outlined above this section highlights the key lessons arising from this study in relation to special class policy and provision.

Defining a conceptual understanding of special classes

The findings outlined above point to the need for further discussion about the meaning and purpose of special classes in mainstream schools in Irish primary and post-primary schools within the context of inclusive education. It is evident from the report's findings and the findings of McCoy *et al.* (2014a) that multiple types of special class exist as a result of the diverse needs of the students attending, the designation of the class but also the school context in which the special class operates. Overall, the evidence suggests that special classes are generally not operating as a fluid and temporary form of provision[25] but rather constitute a typically permanent setting once students are allocated. Given the findings in this report (and in

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25   As advised in the NCSE policy document (NCSE 2011, p.16).

McCoy *et al*. 2014a) around the lack of movement out of special classes and the potential stigma associated with the placement, it is time to debate what special classes aim to achieve and whether a mainstream placement is the goal for these students.

Providing special class guidelines for school principals and special class teachers

Although principals had received limited guidelines on how special classes operated they seemed to seek out relevant information informally. In line with findings from the phase one report, this research suggests that formal guidelines on how to establish and operate a special class would be of benefit to principals. In doing so, however, flexibility at the school level would need to be maintained so that the structure and provision of the special class can be tailored to the needs of the students. Additional guidelines might be developed for schools providing special classes that are not officially sanctioned by the NCSE/DES. The report findings highlight the importance of flexibility in setting goals for students within and between special classes. Again, some guidelines for principals and teachers around student outcomes taking into account the designation of the class and ability of its students would improve teacher confidence and capacity and potentially improve the experiences and outcomes for students across different school contexts. A network of support for principals, including an information contact point or online forum, would help to resolve many of the issues identified in this research, such as teacher allocation and expertise and approach to integration.

Improving teacher training, capacity and outside expertise

A major aspect of the research findings relates to the role of teacher expertise in creating positive academic and social outcomes for students in special classes. Although teacher capacity is linked to the school climate and leadership in the school, our findings suggest a possible link between appropriate teacher placements, teacher qualifications and positive student experiences. Improving access to professional development for teachers prior to taking up positions in special classes would remove the feelings of being 'thrown in at the deep end' identified in this study. Furthermore, continuing professional development and increased communication or networks with other teachers in similar positions in other schools are likely to greatly enhance teacher confidence and ability to differentiate in special classes and prevent the risk of teacher burnout clearly evident in some of the case study classes. At the school level, our findings suggest that increased contact with mainstream colleagues can remove the sense of isolation among special class teachers, pointing to the importance of teacher collaboration and a whole-school approach to inclusion and meeting diverse student need. Furthermore, this increased contact and collaboration could also aid integration processes, increase the level of flexibility in timetabling and reduce the level of disruption in mainstream classes. It could be argued that restructuring the process of teacher placement, where all teachers spend a period in the special class, might remove the apprehension and fear amongst teachers in taking up the position. Incentivising the position, financially or otherwise, might also improve teacher willingness and increase the level of regard held for the post. The findings also highlight the negative consequences of reduced broader professional services (such as OTs, SLTs) working with special classes over the last number of years.

Emphasising the role of school leadership in special class provision

This report has highlighted how school leadership and a positive school climate directly impact on the role and functioning of the special class. Findings highlight that when principals adopted a positive whole-school approach to inclusion and the operation of the special class that teachers in turn felt more supported, had greater opportunities for professional development and were, as a result, more invested in the progress of the students. For principals, engaging with support services, such as the Centre for School Leadership, could resource and support principals aiming to improve students' learning.

The research findings also highlight the risks of negative labelling and stigma for some post-primary students in special classes. A whole-school approach to inclusion would allow staff to meet diverse needs more flexibly and in an inclusive manner. This would mean moving away from segregation where possible and emphasising the benefits for all of mixed ability groupings. In this way, students are neither segregated from their peers nor 'dumped' in mainstream classes, but are offered careful mixtures of provision in a range of settings. This policy issue is particularly relevant for classes in this study which had no specific designation and may be serving as a low stream class. Research has shown the long-term risks associated with streaming students according to their ability (Buysse *et al*. 2002; McCoy *et al*. 2014b). Furthermore, greater flexibility in the number of students required to set up and retain a special class would enable greater mobility among students to go into, and move out of, the special class when required which might act to normalise the space and reduce stigma.

Improving student experiences in special classes

Tailored instruction

The findings highlight the difficulties in discussing student experiences, progress and outcomes for such a diverse group. It is clear that there are difficult trade-offs to be made and the task of devising a system that fits the needs of individual children, in terms of both social development, attitudes to learning and academic achievement is a complex one. However, it was also clear that differentiating the learning goals and outcomes to meet students' individual needs was problematic where teachers lacked confidence and support. Successful provision and experiences for students with SEN was characterised by a positive school climate around inclusion and flexibility in teaching. In particular, it seemed that, where teachers customised instruction and individually assessed their students, reaching both social and academic goals was more likely. In some cases, student success at school was simply improved well-being or happiness, gaining a new social skill or a new hobby. For other students, improved academic ability over time was a more accurate measure of school engagement. In some cases, however, particularly where students had higher levels of need, tailored instruction using IEPs (often planned in conjunction with students' parents) played a significant role in positive experiences for students. In order for teachers in special classes to meet students' needs, it is critical that they are supported within the school context itself, through professional development and through positive teacher-parent relations.

Supporting students during key transition points

Research in Ireland has highlighted the difficulties of achieving coordination and cohesion within and between the different sectors of the education system; between the education system and other relevant systems, especially the Health and Welfare systems, often manifested in difficulties around diagnosis and assessment (Cambra *et al*. 2003). This lack of coordination is linked to difficulties during important transitions throughout the educational life-span of students. In line with previous research (Ware *et al*. 2009), difficulties around student transitions from special classes in both primary and post-primary school were highlighted in this report. In particular, responsibility seemed to fall on individual teachers for ensuring a smooth transition and monitoring a student's progress after the transition is made. Formal transition structures, including the recent introduction of Education Passports for students transitioning from primary to post-primary schools, will help to ensure that responsibility for a successful transition for students in special classes is at the school level.

Flexibility in the curriculum

The study raises queries about the relevance of the curriculum for some students with special educational needs. In particular, the curriculum at post-primary level seemed ill-suited to the needs or capacity of some students. Further discussion needs to take place around this issue of curriculum and qualifications particularly in the context of Junior Cycle reform which may address these issues with the introduction of the Level 2 Learning Programme for students with general learning disabilities.

Special classes and students with lower levels of need

There is a particular policy issue around the placement of some young people with lower levels of (or no identified) special need in post-primary school in special classes. Findings in this report highlight that these students formed the most diverse group in terms of ability and experiences. Special class teachers interviewed described how some students disliked being placed in this class, were aware of being different and wanted to go back to mainstream. The findings highlight the importance of formally and informally incorporating the student voice into school policies and practice. The findings, particularly evident in the Phase 1 report, also highlighted concerns over the allocation of one teacher to some post-primary special classes to cover most/all of the curriculum.

The findings of this report and those highlighted in the Phase 1 report by McCoy *et al*. (2014a) highlight the complex nature of special class provision in Irish primary and post-primary schools. The growth in special classes in recent years has added to the changing profile of mainstream education and SEN provision more generally. Special classes operate within the broader challenges around the placement of students with SEN in Irish mainstream schools including: levels of school engagement (McCoy and Banks 2012; Cosgrove *et al*. 2014); disproportionality in SEN identification (Banks, Shevlin and McCoy 2012); and the impact of different school contexts on this process (McCoy *et al*. 2012). One of the primary research questions for this study was whether special classes work for students with special educational needs. The findings of this

report (and McCoy *et al*. 2014a) suggest that there is no simple answer to this due mainly to the wide variation in the models of special class provision. This variation is deeply influenced by school contextual factors, leadership and the nature of need within the class setting. The research identified four groups of special classes and suggests that, subject to changes identified in section 5.3, certain special class settings appear to provide a positive environment for students. The findings highlight the need for greater discussion around how best to provide for the full diversity of need within the school system. In particular, there seems to be policy emphasis on providing special classes for students with ASD raising questions over whether the level of resourcing for students with other types of need is being impacted. Furthermore, greater consideration of the relationship between prevalence of different types of SEN and provision is required.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Young Person Questionnaire

About Me

1. **Are you male or female?**

   Male ☐ 1   Female ☐ 2

2. **What is your date of birth?**

   _____

3. **What year are you in now?**

   _____

4. **Some students get extra help at school in some subjects (such as English or Maths). Have you received any extra help within school since September?**

   yes ☐ 1   no ☐ 2

5. **If yes, for what subject(s) are you getting extra help for?**

   English/reading ☐ 1   Maths ☐ 2   Irish ☐ 3

   Other (what subject _____) ☐ 4

6. **Does a Special Needs Assistant (SNA) support you in school?**

   yes ☐ 1   no ☐ 2

7. **How do you feel about school in general? [Tick ONE box only]**

I like it very much	☐ 1
I like it quite a bit	☐ 2
I like it a bit	☐ 3
I don't like it very much	☐ 4
I hate it	☐ 5

8. **In the last two weeks, how often have the following things happened to you? [Please tick ONE box on each line].**

	Very often	Often	A few times	Never
You have been told by a teacher that your work is good	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
You are encouraged to ask questions in class	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
A teacher praises you for answering a question	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
You have been given out to by a teacher because your work is untidy or not done on time	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
You have been asked questions in class by the teacher	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
You have been given out to by a teacher for misbehaving in class	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4

9. **In general, thinking about all of your subjects and teachers how regularly do the following take place in your classes? [Tick ONE box on each line]**

	Very regularly	Quite regularly	Now and again	Never
We copy notes from the board	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
I can work in a group with other students	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
The teacher reads from the textbook	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
The teacher uses a CD or DVD in class	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
We use computer facilities in class	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
The teacher explains things really well	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
The teacher does most of the talking	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
I can express my opinions in class	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
We have projects to do outside class time	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
We get homework	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
We get help from the teacher if we have a difficulty	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4

Your opinion

10. My school is a place where … [Tick ONE box on each line]

	Agree	Mostly Agree	Mostly Disagree	Disagree
I really like to go each day	1	2	3	4
My teachers are generally fair to me	1	2	3	4
I learn to get along with other people	1	2	3	4
I feel I am a successful pupil	1	2	3	4
I feel unhappy	1	2	3	4
Other pupils accept me as I am	1	2	3	4
I know how to cope with the work across all of my subjects	1	2	3	4

11. The next set of questions are about how you have been feeling recently. For each question, please indicate how much you have felt or acted this way in the past two weeks. If a sentence was true about how you felt or acted most of the time, answer TRUE. If it was only sometimes answer SOMETIMES. If a sentence was not true about you, answer NOT TRUE.

	TRUE	SOMETIMES	NOT TRUE
I felt miserable or unhappy	1	2	3
I didn't enjoy anything at all	1	2	3
I felt so tired I just sat around and did nothing	1	2	3
I was very restless	1	2	3
I felt I was no good any more	1	2	3
I cried a lot	1	2	3
I found it hard to think properly or concentrate	1	2	3
I hated myself	1	2	3
I thought I could never be as good as other kids	1	2	3

Please finish the following sentences...

12. **The best thing about school is...**

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

13. **If I could change something about school it would be...**

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Thank you for taking part in this very important study

Appendix 2: Teacher-on-pupil Questionnaire

Teacher ID: Date: day   mth   year

School Roll No.

The National Study of Special Classes is a major new government study on children. The study aims to improve our understanding of all aspects of children's experiences with special educational needs. The results of the study will be used by government to develop policies and interventions to support children and their families in the future.

All information provided will be treated in the strictest confidence. No one, other than the Study Team (ESRI and TCD), will see the information you give.

Part A: Background Information on Pupil

1. **What is this pupil's date of birth?**

   day   mth   year

2. **What is the gender of this pupil?**

   Male ☐ 1   Female ☐ 2

3. (a) To your knowledge, do any of the following limit what this pupil can do at school? (Please tick yes or no to each).

	Yes	No
a. Physical disability or visual or hearing impairment	☐ 1	☐ 2
b. Speech impairment	☐ 1	☐ 2
c. Learning disability (e.g. MGLD, dyslexia)	☐ 1	☐ 2
d. Emotional or behavioural problems (e.g. ADD, ADHD)	☐ 1	☐ 2
e. Autistic spectrum disorders (e.g. Autism, Asperger's Synrome)	☐ 1	☐ 2
f. Home environment/problems at home	☐ 1	☐ 2
g. Have a limited knowledge of the main language of instruction	☐ 1	☐ 2
h. Discipline problems	☐ 1	☐ 2
i. Poor attendance	☐ 1	☐ 2
j. Other (please specify)	☐ 1	☐ 2

3. (b) Does this pupil receive other supports (e.g. speech and language therapy, psychologist etc) inside or outside school?

Yes ☐ 1   No ☐ 2   Don't know ☐ 3

4. In comparison to other children of this pupil's age, how well in general, do you think he/she is doing in the following subjects and activities?

	Poor	Below average	Above average	Excellent	Does not take part
a) Mathematics	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
b) English	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
c) Irish	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
d) Games/Physical Education	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5

5. Does this pupil have a Special Needs Assistant (SNA)?

Yes ☐ 1   No ☐ 2

6. **How often, if at all, do you have contact with this pupil's parent(s) or guardian?**

Weekly ☐ 1   Monthly ☐ 2   A few times per year ☐ 3   Never ☐ 4

7. **About how many days of school has this pupil missed since the beginning of the current school year?**

_____ days

8. **What was the single most important reason for the pupil being absent from school?**

a. Health reasons (illness or injuries) ☐ 1

b. Family holidays ☐ 2

c. Other family reasons ☐ 3

d. Truancy ☐ 4

e. Bullying ☐ 5

f. A fear of school (school phobia) ☐ 6

g. Other [please specify] ☐ 7

h. Don't know the reason ☐ 8

i. N.A. pupil not absent in current year ☐ 9

9. **Since the beginning of the academic year, in your opinion how do you think the pupil is getting on with regard to the following...**

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
a. S/he can follow and keep up with the pace of instruction and the subjects being taught	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
b. S/he participates well in class (i.e. responds to questions/is engaged with activities)	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
c. S/he interacts well with other members of his/her class	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
d. S/he likes to participate in lunchtime activities	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5

10. **How often does the pupil arrive to class with homework not completed?**

a) Never – homework always or almost always completed ☐ 1

b) Occasionally not completed ☐ 2

c) Regularly not completed ☐ 3

d) N/A – never/rarely gets homework ☐ 4

11. **Listed below, is a set of statements which could be used to describe the pupil's behaviour. For each item, please indicate whether it is Not True, Somewhat True or Certainly True. It would help us if you answered all items as best you can even if you are not absolutely certain. Please give answers on the basis of the pupil's behaviour over the last six months.**

	Not True	Somewhat True	Certainly True
A. Considerate of other people's feelings	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
B. Restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
C. Often complains of headaches, stomach aches or sickness	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
D. Shares readily with other children (treats, toys, pencils etc.)	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
E. Often has temper tantrums or hot tempers	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
F. Rather solitary, tends to play alone	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
G. Generally obedient, usually does what adults request	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
H. Many worries, often seems worried	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
I. Helpful if someone is hurt, upset or feeling ill	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
J. Constantly fidgeting or squirming	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
K. Has at least one good friend	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
L. Often fights with other children or bullies them	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
M. Often unhappy, down-hearted or tearful	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
N. Generally liked by other children	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
O. Easily distracted, concentration wanders	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
P. Nervous or clingy in new situations, easily loses confidence	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3

	Not True	Somewhat True	Certainly True
Q. Kind to younger children	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
R. Often lies or cheats	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
S. Picked on or bullied by other children	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
T. Often volunteers to help others (parents, teachers, other children)	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
U. Thinks things out before acting	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
V. Steals from home, school or elsewhere	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
W. Gets on better with adults than with other children	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
X. Many fears, easily scared	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
Y. Sees tasks through to the end, good attention span	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3

Part B: The pupil in the special class

12. Since when has this pupil been in this special class?

mth _____ year _____

13. How was it decided for this pupil to move into the special class? Please describe as fully as possible.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

14. **For how many days, or part days, a week is the pupil in this Special Class?**

Everyday – all day ☐ 1

Every day – a few hours ☐ 2

A few days a week ☐ 3

Once a week ☐ 4

15. **In your opinion, how does this pupil feel about being in a Special Class when compared to his/her peers?**

Feels very different ☐ 1   Feels a little different ☐ 2

Does not appear to notice ☐ 3   Does not notice at all ☐ 4

16. **Does this pupil have an Individual Education Plan (IEP)?**

Yes ☐ 1   No ☐ 2

17. **In two years time, do you expect this pupil will have moved from the Special Class into mainstream education?**

Yes, definitely ☐ 1   Maybe/not sure ☐ 2

Not in 2 years, but eventually ☐ 3   No, do not expect it ☐ 4

17. **(b) If yes, when do you think this will happen?**

mth _____ year _____

18. **In your opinion, do you think this pupil's educational needs are being met, in their current environment?**

Yes, definitely ☐ 1

Yes, somewhat ☐ 2

No, Not at all ☐ 3   →   If no, why not?

DK ☐ 4

This is the end of the questionnaire.
Thank you for taking the time to participate in this very important survey.