

An Irish Solution...? Questioning the Expansion of Special Classes in an Era of Inclusive Education

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Abstract: With the major policy shift towards inclusive education internationally, this paper examines the ongoing expansion of special classes in Irish primary and second-level schools. Using data from a mixed-methods longitudinal study on special classes, we examine if special classes are operating as a form of segregation or inclusion for children with special educational needs. The findings suggest that special classes only operate as a unit of inclusion where children have severe needs. For children with moderate or mild needs, the findings are less clear with some classes operating as a segregated setting or low stream class with no official sanction resulting in issues around teacher competency and stigma among students.

I INTRODUCTION

This paper questions the continued use and promotion of special classes in Irish mainstream primary and second-level schools. Within the current policy context of inclusive education, we examine a growing disconnect between recent policies which emphasise the importance of special class provision (NCSE, 2013; 2016; 2011a), and new evidence highlighting concerns about the appropriateness of special classes for some students with special educational needs (McCoy *et al.*, 2014; Banks *et al.*, 2016; Ware *et al.*, 2009). The inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream education is relatively new in Ireland with

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legislation lagging behind other countries. In the last 15 years however, there has been a major policy shift with an increasing commitment to inclusive education (Government of Ireland, 2004; NCSE, 2011b).

Since the 1970s, Ireland has operated a multi-track system of education (EADSNE, 2003) providing education for children in mainstream schools, special schools and special classes in mainstream schools. However it was not until 2004 when the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) made a specific reference to inclusion, and that children with special educational needs should, where possible, be educated “in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs” (Government of Ireland, 2004). One of the main implications of EPSNE was that the number of children with special educational needs attending mainstream schools increased dramatically and is now estimated to be between 25 and 28 per cent (McCoy *et al.*, 2016; Banks and McCoy, 2011; Cosgrove *et al.*, 2014). Increases in prevalence have resulted in a major expansion of the provision of special needs assistants, learning support and resource teachers and special classes. This has been mirrored by increases in expenditure from €605 million in 2005 to €1.5 billion in 2015, making up 17 per cent of the overall education budget. In the context of inclusive education policy, this paper focuses on one aspect of this investment and in particular the recent expansion of special classes as a form of provision for children with special educational needs in Irish mainstream schools.

Findings stem from a large study of special classes carried out in Irish primary and second-level schools between 2011 and 2014. This study found that there were 650 special classes operating in Irish schools (there are currently over 1,000) with 7 per cent of primary and 24 per cent of second-level schools operating at least one of these classes. These classes serve 0.5 per cent of the primary school population compared to 1.2 per cent of second-level. Focusing on the population of students with special educational needs, 5.1 per cent are educated in special classes at primary compared to 13 per cent of this group of students at second-level (McCoy *et al.*, 2014). The type of special classes has changed over time however by moving from a traditional model of classes for children with Mild General Learning Disabilities (MGLD) to more specialised units for children with more severe needs such as Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) (McCoy *et al.*, 2014). Provision varies between primary and second-level with 60 per cent of primary special classes designated as ASD classes, compared to less than one-fifth of special classes at second-level. As a result there is much greater diversity in special class designation at second-level than at primary.

Despite this change in policy and in particular the emphasis on provision for students with ASD, there has been little discussion about where special classes fit into the broader discussion about inclusive education in Ireland nor is there an understanding of whether placement in a special class is the optimum setting for students with special educational needs. The purpose of this paper is to examine

the nature and structure of special classes to understand whether they facilitate educational inclusion in Irish schools. Using qualitative interview data and survey data from school principals and special class teachers, we focus on the factors influencing how children in special classes are integrated with mainstream classes.

II INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The concept of inclusion was first introduced in response to criticisms of integration theory where children with special educational needs were first assimilated into mainstream education. The criticisms centred around the assumption that these children should “fit in” with the class they were placed in (Meegan and MacPhail, 2006) and follow the mainstream curriculum as far as possible (MacGiolla Phadraig, 2007). The inclusion, instead of the integration, of these children sought to shift the emphasis from the individual to the environment reflecting the growing discourse on rights-based education in the 1980s and 1990s (Clark *et al.*, 1998; Thomas and Loxley, 2001). To some, inclusion has become something of a buzzword with the terms “inclusive education”, “inclusive frameworks” and “school inclusion” now prominent in education policies internationally. While most countries have adopted inclusive education policy objectives, differences exist across national contexts in how such policy is defined and implemented in schools. Special education systems are often the result of individual countries’ historical customs and practices (Riddell *et al.*, 2006) and there is huge diversity between (and even within) countries on how special educational need is conceptualised, and how separate settings such as special schools and classes are understood (Mitchell, 2010; EADSNE, 2003). As with integration, educational inclusion still includes the movement of students with special educational needs from special to mainstream schools, but now the school is expected to change to meet the needs of the child. The distinction between integration and inclusion is important in that integration generally requires little radical reform on the part of schools compared to inclusion which implies changes to the existing system and rethinking the entire curriculum in order to meet the needs of all children (Mittler, 1995). Special classes are interesting in that depending on how they operate, i.e. the extent to which the special class is integrated with the rest of the school, they can be considered a form of integration or inclusion.

2.1 Are Special Classes Inclusive?

Does the global policy shift towards inclusive education mean that anything outside the mainstream, including special classes or units, can be considered a form of segregation? (Markussen, 2004; McLeskey *et al.*, 2012). The literature is divided. A number of studies describe special classes as a form of “internal segregation” which can undermine students’ self-esteem by being negatively viewed by their

peers as being unable to participate in a normal mainstream classroom (Dyson, 2007; Crockett *et al.*, 2007). Others have examined the academic outcomes of being in a special class and found that students in special classes did not achieve better results than students with special educational needs attending mainstream classes (Jenkinson, 1997; Hegarty, 1993). Special classes could also be considered a kind of “ability grouping” or tracking and therefore might yield similar outcomes to a low stream class for example (Avramidis, 2010; Pijl *et al.*, 2010). The “tracking” literature consistently shows how being placed in lower ability groups or tracks has a negative influence on a student’s ultimate academic success and educational attainment (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Oakes, 2000). Research on the outcomes of students in special classes is limited, however one study shows how such classes have a “canalising effect” on students and negatively influence their cognitive attainment attainment in adolescence (Myklebust, 2006).

The counter argument to full inclusion in mainstream classes is that the “internal segregation” of a special class may actually facilitate inclusion, particularly where students are moving from special to mainstream schools. Some studies argue that segregated education can offer unique advantages, including small class sizes, specially trained teachers, emphasis on functional skills and individualised instruction (Kauffman and Hallinan, 2005; Kauffman and Hallahan, 1993; Fuchs and Fuchs, 1994; Warnock, 2005). The advantages can be both academic and social in that students are provided with a more tailored curriculum alongside peers with similar needs which can enhance their confidence and self-esteem (Jenkinson, 1997). For some students, participation in mainstream classes is not viable, with students – particularly those with more severe needs – failing to make progress in mainstream schools (Zigmond and Baker, 1995). Without the specialised instruction of a special class, opponents of the inclusive education agenda argue that students with special educational needs do not learn and their futures are negatively affected (Ferguson, 2008 p.110). The option of part-time placement in a special class may, for some students, provide an “educational crutch” that ensures they remain in a mainstream school (Travers, 2009). The unit of inclusion can therefore be viewed as the school and not the mainstream class (Norwich and Kelly, 2004 cited in Travers, 2009).

Beyond our conceptual understanding of special classes, others have pointed to the practicalities of inclusion as the reason it cannot work. In particular, lack of resources and teacher training can mean that mainstream classrooms are not adequately prepared to assist students with some disabilities such as autism or profound deafness (Mesibov and Shea, 1996; Handleman *et al.*, 2005). A student with severe disabilities

sometimes requires a special place, simply because no teacher is capable of offering all kinds of instruction in the same place and at the same time and that some students need to be taught things that others don't need
(Kauffman and Hallinan, 2005, p.63).

Special classes may therefore be acting as a safety valve for schools looking to manage additional demands rather than as a preferred place of learning for children (Sorrells *et al.*, 2004).

This paper positions special classes within these broader education debates. The findings stem from a major mixed methods longitudinal study on the operation and effectiveness of special classes in Ireland (McCoy *et al.*, 2014; Banks *et al.*, 2016). For the first time, we can offer important insights into the role of special classes in the era of educational inclusion (Swan, 2000).

III METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data

The data for this paper come from National Study of Special Classes, a mixed methods study of special classes in Irish primary and second-level schools. In 2013, a total of 2,447 primary school and 524 second-level school principals participated in the national survey, with a response rate of 80 per cent and 75 per cent (of all schools) respectively. The study had two main components, a survey phase which aimed to understand the operation and key features of special classes in Irish mainstream primary and second-level schools, and qualitative phase which sought to examine the experiences of students in special classes in 12 case study schools over time (McCoy *et al.*, 2014; Banks *et al.*, 2016).

Broadly, special classes are intended to cater exclusively for students with special educational needs, the majority are given a specific designation or sanction by the Department of Education or the body responsible for special educational needs resources in Ireland, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), and are supposed to admit only students from a specific category of need (Ware *et al.*, 2009). The survey used a functional definition of a special class for ease of understanding among principals: “A class formed primarily for pupils with special educational needs which is the main learning environment for those pupils”. This definition was used so that any sanctioned classes would be included. However the authors also wished to include special classes with no official sanction but were established primarily for students with special educational needs (e.g. by pooling special educational needs funding to have one teacher for a small group of students) and which was their main learning environment.

3.2 Variables

The survey data provide a number of ways in which to examine the extent to which special classes are aligned with the ideals of inclusive education. The variables are selected within the context of the above research literature. The dependent variables for the two sets of models include:

- Firstly, the level of “integration exposure” or measures of day-to-day integration between the special class and mainstream classes in the school;
- Secondly, the “permanence effect” or the extent to which longer term integration with mainstream classes is taking place.

3.2.1 Integration Exposure

We firstly examine the association between students in special classes spending the full or most of the week together compared to those who are integrated in mainstream classrooms more frequently. In the survey principals were asked to record the extent to which students spend most or part of the school week in their special class setting to which they could respond: “full week”; “most of the week”; “part-time” or “depends on pupil”.

3.2.2. Permanence Effect

The survey also sought information on the permanence of student placement in special classes by asking to what extent students remain in a special class setting once they are allocated to that class. The second set of models is based on principals’ responses to the extent students remain in special class grouping across years, to which they could respond “remain together across years”; “some remain together, some move”; “most move” and “other”.

Our main objective was to consider the extent to which characteristics of special classes influenced the integration exposure or permanence effect of special class placements. The analysis examines the characteristics of schools and classrooms with lower integration exposure and relatively permanent special class placements.

At the school level, the analysis considers the influence of being in a designated disadvantaged school on whether integration occurs for students in special classes. Previous research has shown that contextual effects operate in Irish schools, with children attending disadvantaged schools (known as DEIS schools) more likely to be identified with special educational needs; more likely have greater proportions of students with literacy and numeracy difficulties (Banks and McCoy, 2011); and more likely to have children with lower reading and maths than non-DEIS schools, all else being equal (McCoy and Banks, 2012). At primary level, DEIS schools are categorised as Urban Band 1 schools with the most disadvantaged intake, Urban Band 2 schools and Rural DEIS schools. At second-level, however schools are designated as either DEIS or non-DEIS. We also examine school characteristics predicted to influence the level of integration including: school size; disadvantaged status, school type (e.g. girls’ school, boys’ school, co-educational) and the language medium of the school (i.e. English or Irish). The analysis also considers gender mix (boys’, girls’, co-educational); school size; and school type (at girls’ secondary, boys’ secondary, co-educational and vocational).

3.3 Mixed Methods

This study uses a mixed methods approach combining the survey results with in-depth interviews with principals and special class teachers. This method of analysis allows for an in-depth examination of school life by increasing the amount and range of evidence (Gorard and Taylor, 2004). By combining the results from quantitative surveys of school principals – which provide a national overview of the operation and structure of special classes – with individual experiences of principals and special class teachers working directly with special classes, we can provide a rich insight into this form of provision. The schools were selected from the national survey of schools to reflect a number of key dimensions, including school type, size, disadvantaged (DEIS) status and special class designation. Four largest special class types were included in the theoretical sampling frame:

- Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) classes – higher levels of need;
- Speech and Language classes – medium levels of need;
- Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD) classes – medium levels of need;
- 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 special education funding and without official sanction by the NCSE/DES.

The qualitative interviews with principals and teachers sought opinions about the special class within the broader school structure; the ways in which students in special classes were integrated with the mainstream classes; the expertise of teachers allocated to these settings; and the experiences of students in special classes.

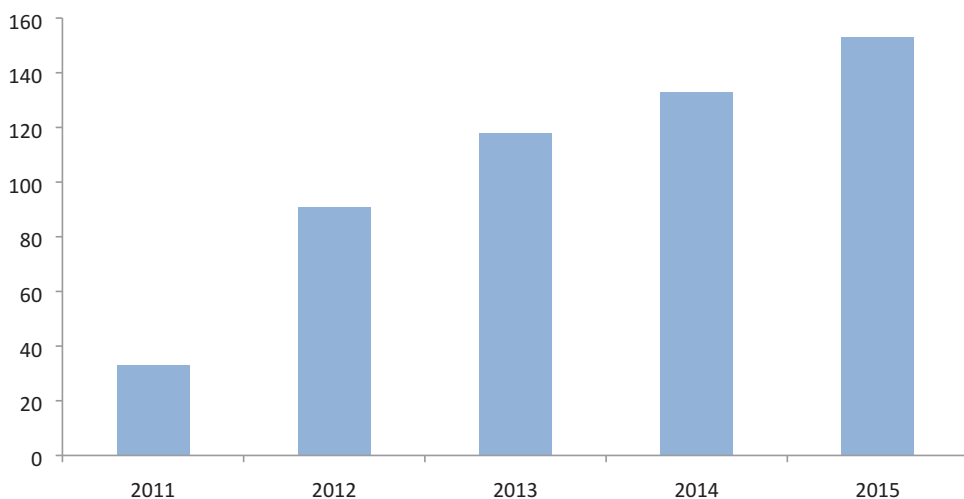
The analysis of both sets of findings (quantitative and qualitative) initially took place separately. Interviews with principals and teachers were transcribed and coded using NVivo software. The quotes presented are intended to illustrate the key issues raised by principals and teachers working with special classes. The quantitative data from the national survey are used to explore the factors influencing the levels of integration in schools with special classes. By integrating the quantitative and qualitative findings this paper provides an interpretation of the results where we note the convergence of the two methodological approaches but also seek to explain any lack of convergence.

IV FINDINGS

There has been a dramatic increase in the number of special classes opening over the past five years with the number almost doubling from 548 special classes in 2011/2012 to 1,008 in 2015/2016 (IGEES, 2016) (Figure 1). As mentioned, the designation of special classes has also changed over time reflecting a recent

emphasis on the provision of ASD units. The majority of these classes have opened in the last decade and represent a shift in policy in how students with ASD are educated in mainstream schools. Recent policy in the Department of Education and Skills (DES) notes for example that all new school builds are to include an ASD unit when being established (personal communication with DES, 2013; McCoy *et al.*, 2014).

Figure 1: Number of Special Classes Opening Annually - 2011-2015

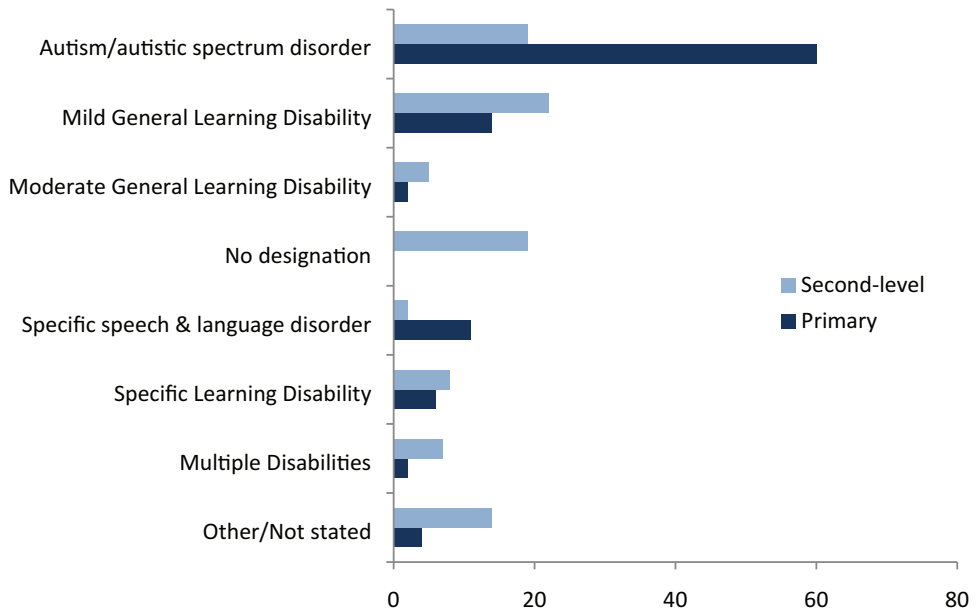


Source: NCSE, 2016.

Our survey data show that the majority (60 per cent) of special classes have ASD designation (Figure 2). There are far more ASD classes than classes for children with MGLD (14 per cent of special classes) and Speech and Language Difficulties (SLD) (11 per cent of special classes). At second-level schools, there is greater diversity in the types of special classes with 22 per cent with MGLD designation compared to just under a fifth of classes with ASD designation. In line with previous research (Ware *et al.*, 2009) the survey identified special classes with no designation at second-level where 19 per cent of special classes had not been officially sanctioned by the NCSE.

4.1 Purpose of the Special Class

The qualitative interviews with school principals and special class teachers provided a more in-depth understanding of perceptions of special classes and how they are structured within a broader school setting. The definition of the special class appears to vary according to the designation of the special class or the categories of need outlined above. For example, in classes with ASD designation or where students

Figure 2: Designation of Special Classes

Source: McCoy *et al.*, 2014.

had severe levels of need, the special class was seen to offer a “safe haven” away from the mainstream environment with small class size and a more flexible curriculum. Principals and teachers described how these classes offered students a “safe” place in which to make friends and build self-esteem. One primary school special class teacher described the positive impact of the special class environment on one student with ASD who had been attending a mainstream class and was moved to a special class (in this instance an ASD unit):

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. (ASD class, teacher, primary)

This is perhaps a greater reflection on deficits in the mainstream class environment than on the benefits of a special class, but highlights how this teacher perceived the class and what it could offer students. The idea of a safe haven for students was often connected to the social advantages of students being in a special class over a larger mainstream class. One teacher in a Speech and Language Unit felt that the students were always going to struggle with the work but the class offered them a social outlet where they could develop in a supportive environment:

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. (SLU, teacher, primary)

4.2 Integration Exposure in Special Classes

The extent to which students were integrated in mainstream classes varied across different case study schools. School leadership and attitudes towards inclusion seemed to influence the frequency and nature of integration of students from the special class in mainstream classes. For students with severe levels of need, particularly those attending ASD units, day-to-day inclusion in mainstream activities was key where school leadership was strong. One second-level principal felt the special class should not be an exclusive setting and stressed the importance of integration with mainstream for the social development of students:

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. (ASD Unit, principal, second-level)

Integration for these students was tailored to their needs and ability to cope in mainstream classes. The longer term goal of the Unit for these students did not appear to be full mainstream participation however. One primary school principal spoke about how their long term aspirations for students in the ASD unit had changed with experience and time. They initially assumed that mainstreaming was the goal of the Unit but soon realised that it was an unrealistic expectation. Instead, the goal of the class was to integrate day-to-day as much as possible and ensure that the individual social and academic goals of each child in the class were being achieved:

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. (ASD class, principal, primary)

For students with moderate levels of need, such as those with Speech and Language Difficulties and students with Mild General Learning Difficulties, the frequency and nature of integration with mainstream classes varies far more. Special classes for students with MGLD generally operate on a part-time basis where students would attend in the morning and return to their classes in the afternoon, therefore integration is daily and normalised. Students attending a Speech and Language Unit

are different in that the Unit is often in a different school where they attend for a specific time period (one or two years) before returning back to their mainstream school. Integration with mainstream classes is rare for these students although long-term they return to their original mainstream class. As a result of this type of intervention model of provision, students appear to progress both socially and academically. One teacher in an SLU also spoke about seeing “the progress that they make during the year” and how students “make big kind of jumps” (SLU, teacher, primary).

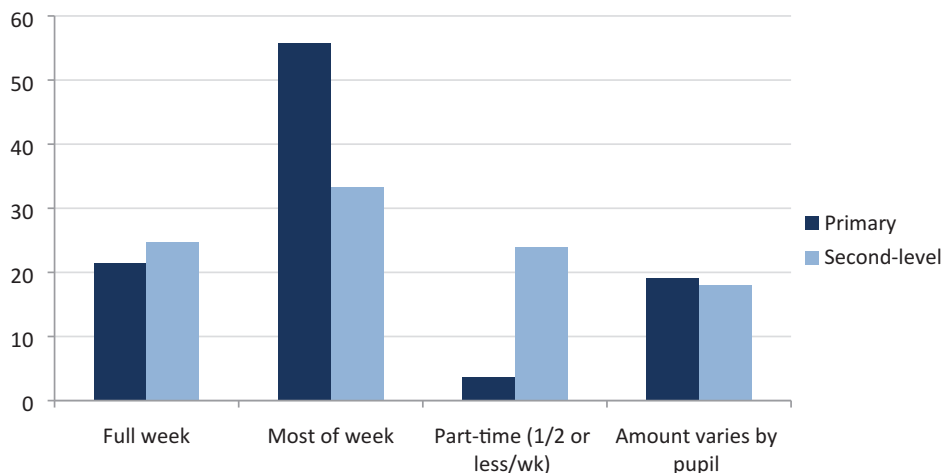
For students with low levels of need and particularly those attending special classes with no official sanction by the NCSE, integration with mainstream classes is far more complex. Negative perception, stigma and student dissatisfaction at being in a special class were evident only in second-level schools where students were older and had greater levels of awareness. Integration appears to depend on the academic progress of individual students which adds to the negative association with the class. One teacher spoke of a student who struggled to keep up academically in mainstream but wished to be there for social reasons:

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. (Non-designated, teacher, second-level)

In another 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. She felt that the physical location of the class was 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]. (Non-designated, teacher, second-level)

Using survey data, we examined the extent to which special classes integrate students, using data on the amount of time students spend in the class in a school week. Descriptive analysis shows that between one-fifth and one-quarter of primary and second-level special class students spend the full week together as a class grouping, with no integration arising with mainstream classes. While similar proportions of primary and second-level school students spend the full school week in their special class grouping (between one-fifth and one-quarter), special class students at second-level schools are much more likely to be located in the special class setting on a part-time basis (one-quarter of special classes).

Figure 3: Time Spent in Special Class in Primary and Second-level Schools

Source: McCoy *et al.*, 2014.

4.3 Factors Predicting Low Levels of “Integration Exposure”

Using a logistic regression model we examine the extent to which the amount of time spent in a special class varied across schools and class contexts at primary and second-level. Table 1 examines the simultaneous impact of characteristics such as school size, DEIS status, gender-mix and language medium on the probability of a special class grouping spending the full week together. A positive coefficient indicates that the variable is associated with children spending a full week together while a negative coefficient indicates that the variable is associated with spending less than a full week together. The results show little difference across school contexts however the designation of the special class appears to influence the amount of time students spend in a special class. In line with the qualitative research findings, students in a MGLD designated special class at primary level are significantly less likely to spend the full week together in that class compared to classes with other designations. A school’s disadvantaged status appears to influence the flexibility in a special class however. Primary school students in special classes in Urban Band 1 DEIS schools are more likely to spend the full week together compared to those in non-DEIS schools, even after taking account of the designation and school size. At second-level, class designation influences the level of integration exposure, with students in non-designated special classes more likely to spend the full/most of the school week together compared to those in ASD classes. These findings suggest these classes, which often include students without a special educational need, operate a rigid system and may explain the qualitative findings around stigma and more negative school perceptions among students.

Table 1: Logistic Regression Model of the Association Between Students Spending the Full Week Together and School and Class Characteristics (Primary Level)

<i>Constant</i>	-0.786
<i>Special Class Characteristics</i>	
Class designation (ref: other)	
MGLD	-2.128**
ASD	-0.359
Special class size	-0.097
<i>School characteristics</i>	
School size (ref: 100-149)	
1-49 students	1.301
50-99 students	-0.410
150-230 students	0.070
231+ students	-0.500
<i>DEIS (ref: non-DEIS)</i>	
Urban Band 1	1.352***
Urban Band 2	-0.089
Rural	-0.346
<i>School type (ref: boys' school)</i>	
Girls' primary	0.426
Co-educational primary	0.571
<i>Language Medium (ref: English medium)</i>	
Irish medium	-20.410

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Source: Banks *et al.*, 2016.

The findings of these models indicate rigidity in the organisation and operation of special classes in Ireland. The dominant model of provision is one of “special class” organisation with little evidence of flexibility or resourced mainstream provision.

4.4 The Permanence Effect in Special Classes

Recent policy advice papers by the NCSE outline how a “fluid approach” should be taken when placing students in special classes and that they should be viewed as a “temporary intervention” which are “time-bound and regularly reviewed” (NCSE, 2012; 2011a). Using the survey data, we examined the extent to which

Table 2: Logistic Regression Model of the Association between Special Class Students Spending the Full/Most Week Together and School and Class Characteristics (Second-Level)

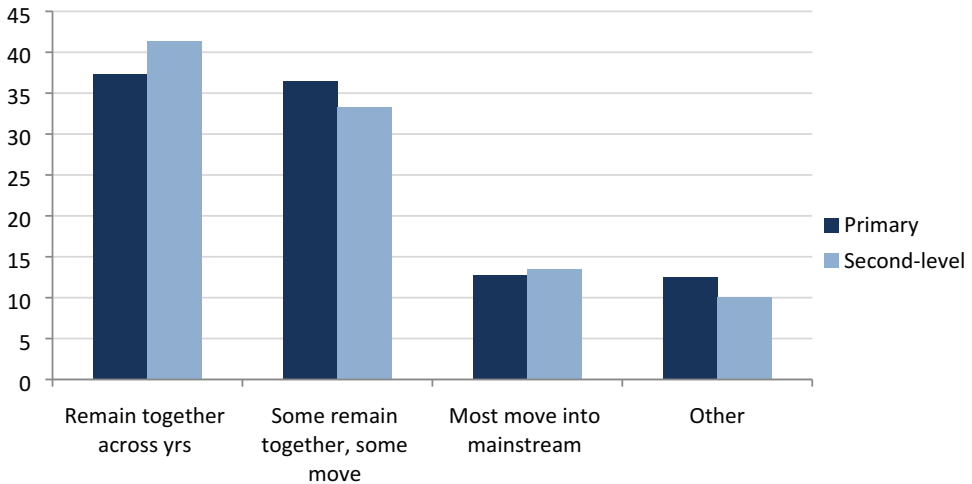
<i>Constant</i>	-0.892
<i>Special class characteristics</i>	
Class designation (ref: ASD)	
MGLD	0.680
Other	-0.637
Non-designated	2.015*
Special Class Size	0.025
Sanctioned class (versus non)	0.619
<i>School characteristics</i>	
High SEN school (>15%)	0.724
<i>School size (ref: 400-599)</i>	
<200 students	-0.827
200-399 students	-1.062*
600+ students	0.520
<i>DEIS (ref: non-DEIS)</i>	
DEIS	0.956
<i>School type (ref: community/comprehensive)</i>	
Girls' secondary	-0.046
Boys' secondary	0.250
Co-educational secondary	1.451
Vocational	0.325

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

Source: Banks *et al.*, 2016.

children graduate from special classes into mainstream settings over time. Findings show that once students are placed in special classes they tend to stay in that class over the years of a child's school career (Figure 4). In 37 per cent of primary schools, special class students remain together across school years, with an additional one-third recording that while some students remained in the special class setting, others moved into a mainstream class. For just 13 per cent of special classes, principals indicated that most or all students moved into mainstream at some point.

Figure 4: Extent to Which Students Remain in Special Class Grouping Across Years



Source: McCoy *et al.*, 2014.

Similarly, students in special classes at second level tend to remain together across school years (Figure 4) meaning that the allocation is a relatively permanent one. For over 40 per cent of special classes, students generally remain together across school years. For one-third of classes some students move into mainstream classes, while in a further 13 per cent of classes most or all students move into mainstream.

4.5 Factors Predicting the Special Class “Permanence Effect”

To understand the processes shaping the permanence of special class placements we ran a logistic regression model to examine the association between special class students remaining together across school years and a range of school and special class characteristics (Tables 3 and 4). At primary level (Table 3), there is some evidence that the designation of the special class influences the relative permanence of students in that class. 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) where increasing class size appears to reduce 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 needs being more likely to have students moving into and out of the special class. As with the findings on day-to-day integration, classes with an MGLD designation are distinct and do not follow this pattern, and the placement is much

Table 3: Logistic Regression Model of the Association between Special Class Students Remaining Together Across Schools Years and School and Special Class Characteristics (Primary Level)

<i>Constant</i>	-0.474
<i>Special Class Characteristics</i>	
Class designation (ref: other)	
MGLD	2.759***
ASD	-0.037
Special class size	-0.329***
<i>School characteristics</i>	
School size (ref: 100-149)	0.484*
1-49 students	1.514**
50-99 students	1.457*
150-230 students	1.386*
231+ students	
<i>DEIS (ref: non-DEIS)</i>	
Urban Band 1	-0.368
Urban Band 2	-0.231
Rural	-0.113
<i>School type (ref: boys' school)</i>	
Girls' primary	0.267
Co-educational primary	-361
<i>Language Medium (ref: English medium)</i>	
Irish medium	20.883

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Source: Banks *et al.*, 2016.

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 although it could be to retain staffing. At second level (Table 4), there is no significant variation across classes of different size and designation in the probability of the class grouping being a permanent arrangement. However, classes that are sanctioned by the DES/NCSE are more likely to adopt this more permanent type, while those established by school

Table 4: Logistic Regression Model of the Association between Special Class Students Remaining Together Across School Years and School Characteristics (Second-Level)

<i>Constant</i>	-2.127*
Special class characteristics	
Class designation (ref: ASD)	
MGLD	0.866
Other	0.730
Non-designated	0.594
Special Class Size	-0.004
Sanctioned class (versus non)	1.545***
School characteristics	
High SEN school (>15%)	
	0.676
School size (ref: 400-599)	
<200 students	0.262
200-399 students	-0.186
600+ students	-0.615
DEIS (ref: non-DEIS)	
DEIS	-0.935
School type (ref: community/comprehensive)	
Girls' secondary	0.059
Boys' secondary	-0.912
Co-educational secondary	1.134
Vocational	1.500*

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Source: Banks *et al.*, 2016.

principals through the pooling of resource hours are more likely to adopt a more flexible approach to special class placement. In these more informal class settings, movement out of the special class would seem to be down to the subjective judgement of special class teachers rather than a formal assessment of the young person's capacity to manage in a mainstream class full-time. It is interesting to note that vocational schools are significantly more likely to have more permanent special class settings, something which may be related to the greater use of streaming in this sector (Smyth *et al.*, 2004).

V CONCLUSION

Research on special classes is limited and divided. Some believe their existence goes against the principle of inclusive education by segregating children from their peers, and others argue that it offers students, who would otherwise have been educated in special schools, the opportunity to attend mainstream schools in a specialised setting. This paper seeks to apply these differing research perspectives to the Irish system of special classes in mainstream primary and second-level schools to understand if these classes represent inclusive education or if they are simply “an Irish solution” which have the appearance of inclusion but are in fact side stepping the issue. We sought to better understand the nature and structure of special classes in order to assess whether they facilitate educational inclusion in Irish schools. Focusing on day-to-day “integration exposure” for students in special classes and the longer term “permanence effect” of being in a special class, we find that although students in special classes are physically located in mainstream schools the extent to which inclusion is taking place is questionable.

The model findings show that for special classes to represent inclusive education depends on a number of factors including the designation of the class, or the severity of need of the children in that class, and the level of leadership in the school. It is clear from the findings that inclusion varies 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 second-level, where what Graham and Slee (2008) describe as the “objectivisation of individual difference” (p.280) continues as students experience stigma and are negatively perceived by their peers in mainstream classes. The findings suggests wide variation in the purpose and use of special classes across schools and point to the need for debate about the role these classes are playing and could play in any future model of inclusive education.

By their nature, special classes should perhaps now be open to challenge as the focus of inclusive education moves towards a “desegregative” model of resourced mainstream provision (Wang, 2009; Thomas, 2013). The use of the term inclusive education appears to act as a more acceptable way for us to talk about special education, special educational needs, special needs resources and special classes. The reconstruction of these supports under the guise of inclusive education implies progress, but appears to mask a “deep structure” of special education traditionally based on practices of segregation and discrimination (Thomas, 2013). The common discourse around inclusion means that governments can guarantee inclusion without necessarily being inclusive (Graham and Slee, 2008). In Ireland this has meant the

continued use, and (recent) expansion, of special classes as a model of provision, with students identified with disabilities and placed in separate education settings with varying degrees of integration with mainstream. Instead of inclusion, some of these classes are operating a model of exclusion which could be avoided with whole-school inclusive education policies and more effective resourced mainstream provision. It is time to look critically at these structures, within the context of Ireland's commitment to inclusive education. Instead of focussing on special classes in isolation perhaps it is time to talk about what inclusive education actually means in our schools.

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