Understanding Special Class Provision in Ireland

Phase 1: Findings from a National Survey of Schools

Selina McCoy, Joanne Banks, Denise Frawley and Dorothy Watson
Economic and Social Research Institute
and
Michael Shevlin and Fiona Smyth
Trinity College Dublin

A JOINT RESEARCH REPORT FROM THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION AND THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Foreword

The NCSE is pleased to publish this research report on special classes in mainstream schools, the first output from a two part study being conducted for us by researchers at the Economic and Social Research Institute and Trinity College Dublin. The NCSE commissioned this study following the findings of its *Review of Special Schools and Classes* published in 2009 and its policy advice paper on special schools and classes in 2011. The review found that stakeholders had positive perceptions of special classes as an important part of the continuum of provision providing for example a 'safe haven' for some pupils, a favourable pupil/teacher ratio, options for students near home and flexibility in teaching and curriculum. However, the review also identified concerns about special classes in relation to issues such as teacher qualifications, pupils remaining in special classes the entire day, a lack of continuity between primary and post primary school, and an increased use of the special class model, particularly for students with autism.

In 2011 our policy advice paper on special schools and classes noted that further research should be undertaken to explore the efficacy of special classes and that pending the outcome of this research special classes should continue to be part of the continuum of provision for pupils with particular needs.

This first report presents findings from a national survey of schools. The survey generated a high response rate. The findings show that that there has been significant growth in special class provision, particularly at post primary; that 60% of primary special classes are classes for students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, now the dominant form of special class provision; and that students tend to spend most of their week in the special class. In addition it seems that Principals vary widely in their understanding of how special classes are established.

The second part of the study will take a closer look at how students are faring in special classes following a cohort of students across a number of schools over two years and we look forward to those findings in 2015.

Teresa Griffin,
Chief Executive Officer

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Glossary

ASD	Autistic spectrum disorder
ASN	Additional support needs
CAO	Central Applications Office
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
EADSNE	European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education
EBD	Emotional and behavioural difficulties
EPPI	The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre)
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004
ERIC	Educational Resource Information Centre
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
GAM	General Allocation Model
INTO	Irish National Teachers Organisation
JCSP	Junior Certificate School Programme
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LD	Learning disability
LRE	Least Restrictive Environment
LS/RT	Learning support/resource teaching
MGLD	Mild general learning disability
Mod GLD	Moderate general learning disability
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PRU	Pupil Referral Unit
RACE	Reasonable Accommodations in Certificate Examinations
SCOTENS	Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SEN	Special educational needs
SEND	Special educational needs and disabilities

SENO	Special Educational Needs Organiser
SERC	Special Education Review Committee
SESE	Social Environmental and Scientific Education
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SPHE	Social Personal and Health Education
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
WTE	Whole Time Equivalent

Executive Summary

Special Education in Ireland

Over the past 20 years, special education has become a major component of the mainstream Irish education system, with students with special educational needs (SEN) educated in mainstream class settings, in special classes within mainstream schools and in special school settings. The publication of the report of the Special Education Review Committee (1993) first introduced the concept of the continuum of provision for these students in special and mainstream settings. Just over a decade later, the introduction of the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* in 2004 emphasised the new concept of inclusion where 'all persons, including those with special educational needs, have equal rights to participate in, benefit from and achieve outcomes from educational opportunity as the norm' (NCSE, 2006). Since then, there have been major reforms to the system of resource allocation for students with special educational needs and a gradual increase in the numbers of these students attending mainstream education. The most recent estimate suggests one in four students in mainstream schools have a special educational need (Banks & McCoy, 2011). Reflecting these changes, special education provision in mainstream education has been transformed, with significant increases in numbers of learning support and resources teaching posts (9,950 posts) and special needs assistants (10,575 whole time equivalent posts) (NCSE, 2013a, p30). The special education budget has increased correspondingly, from €605 million in 2005 to €1.3 billion in 2011. It now accounts for about 15 per cent of the entire 2011 budget of the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2011, http://www.oecd.org/ireland/49624509.pdf). Within this context of change, this report examines the operation and key features of special classes for students with special educational needs in mainstream education.

Research Aims

This report is the first output from a two-phase research study commissioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). The overall aim of this research study is to examine and evaluate the operation of special classes for students with special educational needs in mainstream education. In this context the research will also 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 Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004). The first phase of the research is presented in this report and draws primarily on a new 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 second phase of research is ongoing and will provide a more focused longitudinal study of special classes which tracks the experiences, progress and outcomes for the cohort of students in these classes and evaluates the operation of these classes over a period of two years.

This first report from phase 1 of the study provides findings from a comprehensive survey of Principals in mainstream primary and post-primary schools in Ireland which was undertaken in Autumn 2011. The key objectives of this phase were to:

- Provide a review of the international literature, evidence, policy and practices on use of the special class model and its effectiveness for students with special educational needs.
- Outline the development of the special class model in Ireland providing details of any existing data on the extent and nature of special classes in primary and post-primary schools.
- Conduct a national survey of schools to establish baseline information about the operation and key features of special classes in primary and post-primary schools.

Background

The role of class placement has been a dominant theme in education research in recent decades, particularly for students with special educational needs (Myklebust, 2009). Many arguments for and against separating these students stem from broader debates about the value of mainstream versus special school education (Feiler, 2013). To date, however, little attention has been given specifically to the role of special classes for students with special educational needs in mainstream schools within the context of inclusive education. In particular discussion has rarely focused on where and how to provide for students and ensure effective learning and inclusion (with the exception of Myklebust, 2009; Ebersold *et al*, 2011; Greenstein, 2013). International debates around special classes are further complicated by the huge diversity between (and even within) countries on the conceptualisation of special needs more generally, and the terminology and understanding of special classes and their equivalents more specifically (Vlachou *et al*, 2006; Mitchell, 2010; Henefer, 2010; McLeskey, 2012).

In Ireland, the concept of a special class is difficult to define precisely as interpretation and practice vary across schools. Broadly, special classes are intended to cater exclusively for students with special educational needs and most special classes admit only students from a specific category of need (Ware *et al*, 2009). As a form of provision, the special class has featured in many key policy documents, including the landmark report of the Special Education Review Committee (Government of Ireland, 1993) which refers to special classes as part of provision intended to meet a continuum of special educational needs. Much of the research in this area has sought to establish accurate data on the numbers and types of special classes available and monitor changes over time (Stevens and O'Moore, 2009). Recent research by Ware *et al* (2009) highlighted, however, that difficulties exist in accessing data on special class provision particularly at post-primary level. This has changed somewhat in recent years with the publication of baseline information from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the NCSE (Banks and McCoy, 2011; NCSE, 2012b). Other studies have focused on special class provision for specific disabilities such as dyslexia (Nugent, 2008), specific speech and language difficulties (DES Inspectorate, 2005) and autism (Parsons *et al*, 2009). Recent empirical studies and reports have focused on how special classes operate, the level of student

integration with mainstream classes, progression to and from special classes, teaching and learning in special classes and the curriculum covered (eg Ware *et al*, 2009; Travers, 2009). Some of this research has influenced recent policy advice on special classes submitted to the DES by the NCSE. In line with the Ware *et al* (2009) report, the NCSE policy advice on special schools and classes suggests that special classes should continue as part of a continuum of provision (NCSE, 2011). The NCSE has recently published policy advice based on a review of special educational needs resources which suggests refining where and how supports for students with special educational needs are targeted to ensure equitable distribution of these resources (NCSE, 2013a).

Despite growing interest, there is little understanding of special class provision nationally and the need to assess their effectiveness remains, particularly given the increased numbers of classes used for students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) (see Parsons *et al*, 2009). This report seeks to build on existing research on special classes, focusing on how they operate in primary and post-primary, particularly in terms of their composition, the level of student integration, progression to and from them, and the curriculum they cover. To do this we undertook a comprehensive national survey, in late 2011, with the full population of primary and post-primary schools[1] (with the exception of special schools). Detailed information was sought on numbers of students with different types of provision for these students, whether special classes are part of that provision and how these classes operate. Although information was sought from school principals, the research team made every effort to ensure questionnaires were completed by staff with the greatest expertise in the area, resource staff and students with special educational needs more generally. The authors acknowledge, however, variation in the level of information provided and the interpretation of some questions.

Key Findings

The findings highlight a range of issues surrounding the prevalence, role and operation of special classes for children and young people across Irish primary and post-primary schools. As discussed in Chapter 1, for the purposes of this survey, a special class is defined as one formed primarily for students with special educational needs which is their main learning environment. All results are weighted so they reflect the full population of primary and post-primary schools in Ireland. Among the main findings emerging are:

- **Prevalence**
  - A substantial number of special classes are provided across both primary and post-primary sectors: 357 at primary and 302 at post-primary, representing 659 special classes, 'formed primarily for students with special educational needs and serving as the main learning environment for such students'.
  - In total, 7 per cent of primary and 24 per cent of post-primary schools operate at least one special class. The National Survey of Schools (hereafter national survey) shows that 0.5 per cent of the primary school population are educated

1 Response rates of 80 and 74 per cent were achieved at primary and post-primary levels respectively.

in special classes compared to 1.2 per cent of post-primary. 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 post-primary.

- These findings reflect considerable growth in this form of educational provision in recent years, particularly at post-primary where over half of classes were established between 2009-11.
- At primary level over 90 per cent of special classes are formed on the basis of a sanction by the SENO or the DES, with the remaining share established by schools pooling resource teaching or other resources. The pattern differs at post-primary where a considerable share (51 per cent) of special classes emerged through pooling resource teaching hours and many have no specific special educational needs designation.

- **Nature of provision**
  - 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 (special educational needs classification) 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. Many post-primary special classes, and particularly those with no specific special educational needs designation, encompass the widest range of different special educational needs groups.
  - Special classes at primary level typically follow the single teacher model in line with their peers in mainstream. However, a significant two-fifths of post-primary special classes also follow this one teacher model, unlike their counterparts in mainstream classes.
  - Across special classes at both primary and post-primary, many students spend most if not all of the school week together as a group. Over half of students attending primary special classes spend most of the week together with an additional 21% spending the full week together. Similarly at post-primary, 31 per cent of students in special classes spend most of their week together and a further 24 per cent spend all their week together.
  - 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.

- **System issues**
  - School principals varied widely in their attitudes towards, and provision of, special classes. In particular, their varied responses highlight a lack of awareness

and understanding of how to set up a special class and the necessary criteria and eligibility for establishing them.

- Findings suggest the perceived application of strict thresholds for special class funding is affecting student mobility into mainstream provision.
- Post-primary special classes are concentrated in the junior cycle years and the majority of these follow the Junior Certificate or the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP).
- At senior cycle, there is a reliance on the LCA programme to meet student needs in special classes. Of the special classes taking senior cycle programmes, 47 per cent are taking the LCA programme.[2]

Policy Issues

Inclusive education

The results show that across many special class settings, students stay together for most if not all of the school day, and a considerable proportion remain together as a group across school years. Allocation to a special class appears to be a relatively permanent arrangement. Where mobility into mainstream classes does occur, teachers' own judgements are paramount, although some schools, particularly post-primary, seem responsive to student and parent preferences in this regard. External advice (such as from NEPS or SENOs) does not appear to figure highly in decision-making on moving out of special classes and findings suggest that efforts to maintain the minimum special class size can also affect student mobility into mainstream classes. This evidence points to the need for schools to be encouraged and facilitated in allowing greater flexibility in frequency and opportunity for young people to transition into and out of special class settings according to their needs. It is also important that special class sizes be allowed to fluctuate over time, allowing deviation from published pupil-teacher ratios where required.

Resource allocation

The survey provides valuable new evidence on the prevalence of different types of special educational need across the mainstream primary and post-primary sectors. This evidence shows that students with different types of special educational need are not evenly spread across schools – with Urban Band 1 DEIS schools at primary level and single sex boys' schools at both primary and post-primary levels enrolling proportionately greater numbers of students with special educational needs. Smaller primary and post-primary schools also report higher special educational needs levels, but given the pupil retention ratio requirements for special class sanctioning, students in these schools are less likely to avail of special classes. The findings provide a valuable evidence base for the more effective allocation of resources to schools – both through a refinement of the general allocation model (GAM) at primary and to guide in the design of a similar

2 This compares to just 7 per cent of senior cycle students nationally taking the LCA programme (Banks *et al*, 2010).

funding system at post-primary. These findings provide particularly important evidence for the working group established at the request of the Minister for Education and Skills, which is currently tasked with devising a proposal for a new model for allocating additional teaching supports for students with special educational needs.

Operation of special classes

The results show wide variation in provision of special classes across schools at primary and post-primary. Such variation highlights broader system differences between the two particularly in how the school day is structured. It also, however, raises questions around school decision-making processes and principals' attitudes towards inclusive versus segregated settings. The findings highlight the different understandings of a special class among primary and post-primary principals. Results suggest that non-provision of special classes in some cases may reflect misunderstandings about eligibility for a special class sanction. The findings demonstrate the need for clear information and 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.

Teaching and learning

While the primary curriculum (1999) emphasises flexibility at school and classroom level for teachers to address student needs, this research has identified some important implications of this flexibility for the teaching and learning environment for students in special classes. Highlighting a pattern of exemptions from studying Irish for special needs students more generally (*Irish Independent*, April 14th, 2012), Irish is not taught in the vast majority of primary special classes. This follows through to post-primary where those in special classes are typically not offered Irish as a subject. This has significant implications for student career and post-school options. Curricular provision at post-primary is highly reliant on the JCSP at junior cycle and the LCA programme at senior cycle level. This poses questions for schools not in a position to offer the LCA programme (often by virtue of their size or the perceived stigma surrounding the programme, see Banks *et al*, 2010).

As noted earlier, this survey is part of an ongoing longitudinal study tracking the experiences, progress and outcomes for students in special class and mainstream settings in a sub-set of primary and post-primary schools.

The study, due for completion in 2014, will provide further insights into how schools and teachers shape special class provision and will assess how students in different settings experience school.

1 Introduction

1.1 Special Education in Ireland

Irish special education policy has undergone dramatic change during the last decade. Government reports, evaluations, legal cases, in addition to changes in legislation under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) have resulted in more students with special educational needs attending mainstream schools than ever before. Students with special educational needs can be educated in mainstream classroom settings, special classes within mainstream schools and in special schools. Recent prevalence estimates suggest one in four students have a form of special need (Banks & McCoy, 2011) with administrative data from the Department of Education and Skills showing an increase over time in those identified and in receipt of supports (Banks & McCoy, 2011, p68). This increase is reflected to some extent in the special education budget which amounts to approximately 15 per cent of the entire 2011 budget of the Department of Education and Skills (€1.3bn) (DES, 2011) and is an increase on the previous year's allocation of approximately €1bn. The equivalent spends 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). Provision has increased during this time and in the year 2012-13 9,950 learning support and resource teaching posts existed in mainstream schools and 10,575[3] whole time equivalent (WTE) special needs assistants were working in schools to assist in the care needs of students with special educational needs (DES, 2010).

The changing student population has resulted in major reforms to Irish special educational needs funding models in the last decade. These changes have led to a combination of school level and individual student-based funding for students depending on the severity of their needs. The first of these began in 2005 when the process of individually resourcing primary students with special educational needs (following professional assessments), known as an input or categorical model of funding (Ferrier, 2007), was replaced with a throughput model known as the general allocation model (GAM). This meant that, for students categorised as having high incidence disabilities (including borderline-mild general learning disabilities and specific learning disabilities), special educational needs funding was provided at school level instead of individual pupil level. The criteria for GAM funding in primary is based on a number of school-level factors. Additional resources are available if the school is already receiving funding under a general education funding scheme aimed to support schools serving disadvantaged communities (called the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, or DEIS programme). At primary, DEIS schools are categorised as Urban Band 1 (the most disadvantaged), Urban Band 2 (the second most disadvantaged) and Rural DEIS (the least disadvantaged of DEIS schools). For non-DEIS primary schools, the GAM allocates resources in respect of students with high incidence disabilities based on the schools' total enrolment and gender of the student body. In 2012, a similar through-put model

3 This figure includes SNAs in both mainstream and special schools.

was introduced at post-primary. Operating alongside the throughput models at both primary and post-primary, however, there remains an input or categorical model where students with 'low incidence' or less common disabilities are individually allocated funding based on the nature and type of disability.

1.1.1 Special classes in mainstream education

In Ireland, there has been intense debate as to the most appropriate educational setting for students with special educational needs and disabilities in recent decades (Nugent, 2008; 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 2 of the EPSEN Act requires that:

> '... a child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs is such that to do so would be inconsistent with the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act or the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated'. (The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs [EPSEN] Act, 2004)

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'. These provisions highlight the need for greater discussion around the role of special classes in the education of children with special educational needs. Some argue, however, that special classes as a form of provision have been neglected in terms of reviews being heavily overshadowed by the move towards mainstream class inclusion (Stevens and O'Moore, 2009, p52). 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' (p49).

It has been argued that one of the reasons for the difficulty in defining the role of special classes may be linked to the lack of accurate information on their number, nature and distribution in Ireland (Stevens and O'Moore, 2009). There have been some changes in recent years regarding the availability of data, however. The DES has made available information about special classes based on 'annual returns' or Annual Census of Primary Schools carried out each October (see Banks and McCoy, 2011). Furthermore, the NCSE has published data on the number, distribution and designation of special classes by county to try to address this gap (http://www.ncse.ie/uploads/1/Full_List_of_Special_Classes_2012-13.pdf). Special classes have also begun to be addressed in education research in recent years, with studies focusing on how they operate in primary and post-primary (DES Inspectorate, 2005; Nugent, 2008; Ware *et al*, 2009; Travers, 2009; Parsons *et al*, 2009; NCSE, 2011). Despite this focus, existing data on special classes are limited in that they do not allow for an analysis of the level of student integration, progression to and from special classes, the forms of teaching and learning in special

classes in addition to the role of school personnel and other professionals in the special class environment.

This report seeks to address this gap in our knowledge and presents findings from a national survey of Irish primary and post-primary schools (from here on referred to as national survey). This took place in 2011 and is part of a broader study on special classes which was commissioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and carried out by researchers from the Economic and Social Research Institute and Trinity College Dublin. The overall aim of the study is to examine and evaluate the operation of special classes for students in mainstream schools in Ireland. It has two distinct parts:

- Phase 1 is a national survey of primary and post-primary schools which has collected baseline data for special class provision in Ireland. This report presents the findings from this phase. A review of literature, evidence and policy in addition to an overview of the development of special classes in Ireland provides context for the survey findings.
- Phase 2 comprises a more focused nationally representative longitudinal study of special classes. This study tracks the experiences, progress and outcomes for the cohort of students in these classes and evaluates their operation over time. This ongoing research is due to be completed in 2014.

1.2 Rationale and Research Questions

This element of the study aims to establish baseline information about the operation and key features of special classes in Irish primary and post-primary schools through a survey which addresses key research questions:

1. What is the level of need?
   The national survey provides rich data on the prevalence of special educational needs within primary and post-primary schools, offering greater insight into special educational needs prevalence in general, in addition to the data on special classes.
2. What forms of provision are available?
   This question addresses one of the main issues in any discussion about special class provision which is the lack of accurate baseline information on the number of special classes in Irish primary and post-primary schools, how they are distributed across different types of schools and whether schools with and without special classes differ in the type of provision they have for students with special educational needs.
3. How do special classes operate?
   The survey of primary and post-primary principals sought important information about teaching and learning in special class settings. In particular, it focuses on the curriculum, teaching strategies and practices, progression to and from the special class, integration with other students in addition to the role of professionals other than teachers in special class settings.
4. What types of special classes are there?
   This section examines the size of special classes, the age of students placed in them,

criteria used for such placement, the primary special educational need of these students and whether the NCSE has sanctioned the special class.[4]

1.3 Methodology

This section outlines the methodology adopted in this study and the response rate achieved from the national survey of primary and post-primary schools. Since it covered mainstream rather than special schools, when 'students with special educational needs' are referred to we are referring to students with special educational needs who attend mainstream schools. The study began with a pilot postal survey of 39 schools (19 primary; 20 post-primary), testing the questionnaire and the clarity of the questions. Valuable feedback was received in the completed questionnaires and orally, enabling fine-tuning and improvement in the wording of a number of questions. The full national survey of primary and post-primary schools was then initiated late in September 2011.

To avoid confusion the survey questionnaire provided a functional definition of a special class for the purpose of this research as: 'A class formed primarily for pupils with special educational needs which is the main learning environment for those pupils.'

This definition included classes sanctioned by the DES or by the NCSE; or any other class established primarily for students with special educational needs (eg by pooling resource teaching hours for a group of students)[5] and which is the main learning environment for those students. 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. These discussions to some extent reflected differences in focus, particularly between those coming from a conceptual perspective and those concerned with the allocation of resources to students with special educational needs. The definition also provoked considerable response from school principals, some of whom contacted the research team looking for further clarification on what the survey defined as 'special needs' and 'special classes'. Some issues centred around language and terminology and in particular the use of the term 'special', with some principals indicating that in their schools they had moved away from this type of language, opting instead for terms like 'additional need' or 'resource class or unit'.

The questionnaires were divided into three main sections: Part 1 sought background information on the school such as gender mix, proximity to other schools in the area and prevalence of special educational needs in the school. Part 2 examined the resources and arrangements for students with special educational needs at the school. It also asked principals of schools without special classes why no such provision was in place for students with special educational needs. The final section sought more detailed information on each of the special classes at the school such as the designation,

4 Previous research by Ware *et al* (2009) highlighted the existence of 'unofficial' special classes, ie those without official sanction from the DES/NCSE, operating in some schools, particularly at post-primary. This research question seeks to explore this form of provision in more detail.

5 See previous footnote regarding 'unofficial' special classes operating in some schools as highlighted by Ware *et al*, 2009.

movement between the special and mainstream classes and teaching arrangements in the special class. The full questionnaires are presented in Appendix 1.[6]

Table 1.1: Response rate primary

	Number	%
Total schools	3165	
Junior-only schools*	115	
Total schools (excl Junior) (weighted total)	3050	
Respondents	2428	
Pilot schools	19	
Non-respondents	603	
Final response rate (unweighted total)	2447	80.3%
Mode: Online 7%; Telephone 21%; Postal 72%		

* Junior schools were not explicitly excluded from the survey and a number did participate. However, for the calculation of response rates they were excluded as the survey was primarily focused on third class pupils and junior-only schools typically only run from junior infants to second class

Table 1.2: Response rate post-primary

	Number	%
Total schools	729	
PLC colleges/amalgamations	26	
Total schools (excl PLC colleges/amalgamations) (weighted total)	703	
Respondents	504	
Pilot schools	20	
Non-respondents	180	
Final response rate (unweighted total)	524	74.4%
Mode: Online 11%; Telephone 11%; Postal 78%		

Principals of all schools were contacted by letter and asked to complete the survey either online (with the PIN number supplied in the letter), by phone or by post. This stage of the survey research was carried out by Amárach Research which provided project support for data collection. As shown in Table 1.1, most primary principals opted for the postal survey (72 per cent) with just 21 per cent completing by phone and a small number (7 per cent) using the online option. Given the survey's complex nature and the amount of information requested, particularly on the numbers of students with different types of special educational needs, it became clear that online completion created difficulties for principals, particularly since they had to do this in a single sitting. Partly reflecting these difficulties, rates of completion online were relatively low (at least by comparison with other populations, such as young people), with most school principals preferring to complete the hard copy. Similar patterns arose for post-primary schools (Table 1.2). The most common mode of completion was by post (78 per cent of principals). Both phone and online accounted for 11 per cent of responses. These differential response rates by survey mode raise important implications for undertaking similar research in the future.

6 The questionnaires were translated into Irish and an Irish language version made available to all Irish medium schools.

Response rates achieved in primary and post-primary surveys were high with just over 80 per cent of primary principals and just under three-quarters of post-primary principals completing the survey. These response rates are high by comparison with similar surveys undertaken in Ireland over recent years, and are particularly impressive in the context of increasing demands being placed on schools both in completing administrative data and participation in international surveys like PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study).

As mentioned above, it may be the case that principals needed to consult other school personnel to collate the relevant data. The authors acknowledge, however, that some variation may exist in the levels of knowledge (on special educational needs prevalence, provision and special classes) between schools depending on whether information was collated from multiple staff members or whether the principals completed it.

All results are weighted to reflect the full population of primary and post-primary schools in Ireland.[7] In essence, by weighting the results we can be confident that the findings reflect the patterns for the full population of primary and post-primary schools (excluding special schools), thereby enhancing the value of the research and providing a sound evidence base for policy-making. All analysis, unless otherwise stated, is based on the weighted data, thereby allowing a more complete picture for the population of Irish primary and post-primary schools.

In analysing the results the report adopts several methodological approaches. For much of the analysis, bivariate results are presented showing the relationship between two variables. To enhance our understanding of the patterns and to unpack some of the main patterns emerging, a number of multivariate methods were also utilised. These include logistic regression, ordinary least squares regression (OLS) and multinomial regression techniques. In essence, the objective in using these approaches is to assess the relationship between predictor variables and a dependent variable of particular interest. To illustrate, in Chapter 3 a logistic regression model examines the relationship between a range of school characteristics (such as school type, size, denomination) and the probability of a school having a high level of special educational needs (>15 per cent of the student body). In this case the results show which types of schools are

7 Data from all sample surveys must be reweighted or statistically adjusted before analysis. The purpose of this adjustment is to compensate in the completed sample for any potential biases that may occur due to sampling error or differential response rates among sub-groups of the population. Weighting ensures that the completed sample is wholly representative of the target population from which it has been selected. All analysis in this report is based on weighted data to ensure the results are representative of the population. For example, the figure of 2,634 is the number of schools which reported not having a special class (Chapter 4). This is a weighted figure and refers to the total population of schools. When we examine the unweighted figures, 2,093 schools indicated they did not have a special class. In essence, the weighted total is higher as the sample of 80 per cent does not capture the full population of primary schools. The control totals used for weighting come from the best available national source, such as from the Department of Education and Science administrative data on schools. The weighting parameters used in adjusting the data from the national survey were: gender mix of the school (boys, girls or mixed); size category (under 50 pupils, 50-99, 100-149, 150-230 and 231 or over); DEIS status, whether a Gaelscoil and region (eight regions). The weighting procedure involves constructing school-level weights such that the distribution of school responses post-weighting is identical to the corresponding distributions for the population of schools. This was accomplished using a minimum distance algorithm that adjusts an initial weight so that the distribution of characteristics in the sample matches that of the set of control totals in the population as a whole. All analyses in the report are based on weighted data to ensure that the results are representative of the population. Where relevant, the unweighted number of cases is also reported, for information.

statistically more likely to have a high level of special educational needs, all other things being equal, or taking into account the other school characteristics in the model. For example, the results show that single sex boys' primary schools are more likely to fall into the high category, even when we take account of school size and DEIS status. Hence, among schools of similar size and social mix, single sex boys' schools are more likely to have high levels of special educational needs in their student body. OLS and multinomial regression approaches are similar, but they allow for different types of dependent variables, namely ordinal or linear dependent variables in the case of OLS regression and categorical dependent variables in the case of multinomial regression.

Finally, in Chapter 5 we used cluster analysis techniques. This approach involves dividing the population of primary and post-primary schools into a small number of groups according to their similarity across a range of special class characteristics. The cluster analysis method identifies the underlying dimensions of variation among schools over a large number of variables, in this case reflecting the characteristics of special classes, and uses these dimensions to classify schools into a small number of sub-groups according to similarities and differences across these dimensions. It is a well-established and widely used statistical procedure for identifying and forming sub-groups of individuals or schools across a range of variables used for classification (see Hannan *et al*, 2003; McCoy *et al*, 2012b).

1.3.1 Ethical framework

Ethical considerations were central to the national survey's design from the outset. The ESRI/TCD researchers had to submit a document to an internal/ESRI research ethics committee with the proposed procedures. Since Amárach Research was also involved in handling sensitive and confidential data, we had stringent procedures to deal with the transfer of data between Amárach Research and the ESRI, as well as procedures for data storage and checks on deletion of data once the transfer had been successfully completed. The ESRI research team was responsible for the overall study design, analysis of the survey and the preparation of the report, while the Amárach Research team was responsible for the quantitative fieldwork for the national survey of schools – including fieldwork quality control, data checking, coding, data entry and database construction. It was agreed from the outset that all identifiable participant information would be handed over by Amárach to the ESRI when the data collection and cleaning were completed. Additionally, Amárach Research was advised to consult the ESRI research team on any form of disclosure from principals. Another crucial feature of the ethical considerations was in gaining 'informed consent' from the school principals. To do this, all schools were provided with a cover letter, detailed information leaflet and a hard copy of the questionnaire. The cover letter provided information about the study and the rationale behind collecting this type of data. In the information leaflet, the principals were assured of the voluntary nature of their 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.

1.4 Report outline

The report is divided into seven chapters. This chapter provides an introduction to the report, outlines the key research questions, an overview of the methodology and a report outline. Chapter 2 situates the debate around special classes within wider discussions about inclusive education. The development of special classes in Ireland is examined in addition to an overview of existing data on special class provision. Chapter 3 examines prevalence of special educational needs in Irish primary and post-primary schools, based on national survey findings. This chapter focuses on the data gathered from part one of the questionnaire and discusses the overall prevalence rate at school level as well as findings on gender differences. Predictors of high levels of special educational needs, for example school size and type, are also analysed and discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 4 examines the provision for students with special educational needs focusing on types of support available to them and the different types of class arrangements provided across schools. It investigates the factors influencing special class provision by focusing on school type, disadvantaged status, school size and prevalence of special educational needs. In addition, we explore the reasons why some schools do not have a special class.

Chapter 5 uses cluster analysis to understand the characteristics of special classes and, unlike the other chapters, focuses on primary and post-primary schools in conjunction with one another. It highlights contrasts between the two in terms of the use and characteristics of special classes. The chapter begins by looking at the establishment of special classes, the type of special educational needs of students as well as the formal designation of these classes. The reasons given by principals for assigning students without special educational needs to special classes are then explored. Lastly, this chapter outlines a typology developed to assess three distinct clusters of special class types found in the study and examines how they vary according across a range of criteria, including the year groups included, types of special educational needs, school size and school type.

Chapter 6 outlines the nature of teaching provision offered in special classes as reported by principals, the subjects and programmes students take and the extent to which they move out of special classes over time. It opens with a focus on special classes in primary, moving on to examine those in post-primary, with the final section discussing issues emerging across the two sectors. Although the predominant focus is a descriptive one, given the richness of the national survey data, use is made of multivariate methods to explore the extent to which variation reflects key compositional characteristics of schools and classes.

Chapter 7 summarises the report's main findings, highlights policy issues raised by those findings and identifies how the next phases of this study may shed further light on some issues raised.

2 Special Classes: An Overview of Literature and Policy

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to provide a literature and policy context for the findings of the national survey. First, we address international debates on inclusive education, paying specific attention to the role of special classes or units. We then focus on relevant findings from empirical investigations into special class provision in Ireland and internationally, highlighting the themes and issues arising. The second part of this chapter examines Irish policy and practice in special classes focusing specifically on the EPSEN Act, 2004. The resources and curriculum currently available to students with special educational needs is discussed before outlining sources of information for this cohort in Ireland. The procedure used in this review of theoretical and empirical research involved online searches of relevant databases, such as ERIC and EPPI, where suitable peer reviewed journal articles on inclusion and special education were identified. Unpublished doctoral theses were not included. Several keywords (special class, special unit, inclusion, mainstream, integration) were used in different combinations. The authors also carefully examined references from a number of influential studies and journal articles (including Myklebust, 2006; Shaddock, 2009; Ware *et al*, 2009; Mitchell, 2010). All relevant publications have been included without any attempt to assess the adequacy of methodology for the studies included. The majority of studies were identified in 2012; however, any relevant material published in 2013 was also included.

2.2 Special Classes and Inclusive Education

Whether or not to provide for students in special classes or mainstream provision is a highly contested topic in any discussion about inclusive education (Freeman and Alkin, 2000; Norwich, 2008; Shaddock *et al*, 2009). Across Europe complex differences remain regarding special education policy in the area of special class provision with types of provision often the result of a country's local custom and practices (Riddell *et al*, 2006). Discussion on special classes often reflects contested views on inclusive education more generally as although they operate within mainstream settings, they are considered a form of segregated provision (Markussen, 2004 in Norway; McLeskey *et al*, 2012 in the US; Greenstein, 2013 in the UK). The propagation of the Salamanca Statement and the Framework for Action on Special Needs Education reaffirmed that all students with special educational needs should have full access to regular schools through child-centred pedagogy (UNESCO, 1994). The principle behind inclusion is founded on the broad agenda of human rights, clearly emphasising that any form of segregation is morally incorrect (Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden, 2000). After years of separate educational systems for students with special educational needs, it is increasingly accepted to reserve the term inclusion for all those educational settings where these students follow the largest part of the curriculum in the mainstream class alongside peers without any such needs (Pijl, Meijer and Hegarty, 1997; Meijer, 2003). Therefore, anything outside the mainstream, including special classes, is

considered a form of segregation with possible detrimental effects on the child's academic achievement and social experiences at school. Special classes may now, therefore, be subject to challenge as policy moves from an ethos of integration to one of inclusion where the focus is increasingly on full support in mainstream classes (Wang, 2009). Although policy emphasis is now on inclusion, research highlights that, to date, little evidence in the national or international literature supports one model of special educational provision as more effective than another (Hocutt, 1996; Ofsted, 2006, 2010; Myklebust, 2006; Parsons *et al*, 2009; Marschark and Spencer, 2009; NCSE, 2011). Some studies argue that the 'internal segregation' of a special class 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 *et al*, 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 (Hegarty, 1993; Jenkinson, 1997). 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). Described as 'resourced mainstream provision' (including team teaching, the use of non-teaching resources, such as a SNAs, as well as additional teaching hours outside the mainstream class), this model offers certain advantages to students with special educational needs over and above full-time placement in special school or class provision (Ofsted, 2006; Myklebust, 2006). Although there is no dominant form of provision, research suggests that traditional structures, particularly separate programmes and forms of provision, are increasingly being replaced by more flexible and integrated structures (such as 'blended services', cross specialist staff teams, in-class support and so on) (Dyson *et al*, 2002, p48) (See section 2.3 for a review of empirical studies on special class provision).

Within the broader sociology of education, the placement of students with special educational needs in different types of classes constitutes a kind of 'ability grouping', 'tracking' or 'streaming' and might be expected to yield outcomes consistent with those associated with tracking. Tracking research indicates that being placed in lower ability groups or tracks has a substantial influence on a student's ultimate academic success and educational attainment (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Vanfossen *et al*, 1987; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Shavit and Muller, 2000; Smyth *et al*, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2011a, 2011b; Banks *et al*, 2010). As with studies about students more generally, ability grouping is not found to benefit those with a disability (Marzano, Pickering and Pollock, 2001; Mitchell, 2005). Mitchell (2008, p46) argues that ability grouping is detrimental to low-achieving students for several reasons including:

- Being assigned to low-ability groups communicates low expectations to learners which might be self-fulfilling.
- Ability groups often parallel social class and ethnic groupings that may increase divisions along class and ethnic lines.

- Between-class ability grouping reduces learners' opportunities to move between groups.
- Low-achieving learners tend to receive less instruction when placed in ability groups than when placed in mixed-ability groups.
- Ability groups composed of low-achieving learners do not provide a stimulating learning environment and lack positive role models.

One rationale for the continued existence of special classes may be that separate classes for 'difficult to teach' children may function as a safety valve for schools rather than as a preferred place of learning for students (Sorrells *et al*, 2004, p66). In this context, segregation may be beneficial as schools can apply curricula formulated for students with special educational needs. Grouping students of a similar ability means schools can match teaching and learning to the abilities and orientations of different groups of students to foster educational development for all (Oakes, 2000). However studies indicate that students initially placed in low-ability tracks or learning groups are unlikely to regain placement in a higher group and tend to lose ground to those in higher tracks as the years progress (Rosenbaum, 1980; Hoffer, 1992). This perspective suggests that students placed in special education at an early age will face severe long-term disadvantages within stratified educational and social systems. Indeed, empirical studies of special education outcomes tend to support this theory. One study has shown that students placed in special education face a widening gap in reading ability relative to their mainstream peers between the ages of six and 12. Students with learning disabilities in particular experienced a widening gap in reading ability relative to their non-disabled peers between the ages of six and 12 (Reynolds and Wolfe, 1999).

2.3 Empirical Research on Special Class Provision

Research has shown that inclusive educational programmes have potential educational and social benefits for students with and without disabilities (Cole, Waldron & Majd, 2004; Harrower, 1999; McDonnell, 2003). Several empirical research studies have sought to evaluate the effectiveness of special classes and compare the experiences of students in special classes with those in mainstream provision. Myklebust (2006) uses longitudinal data to examine the attainments of students with special educational needs in special and ordinary classes over a six-year period. The results of this study highlight a relationship between attainment and placement in mainstream classes even when student characteristics are adjusted for (eg gender, level of functioning, family stability). This research suggests that placing students in certain types of classes appears to have a 'canalising effect' that influences the competence attainment of adolescents with special educational needs (Myklebust, 2006, p80). Similarly, an Ofsted (2006) study examined the provision and outcomes for students with learning difficulties in mainstream schools, special schools and separate classes (pupil referral units or PRUs). The survey of 76 schools and seven local authorities found PRUs were the least successful setting in terms of effective provision. Both studies highlight the benefits of mainstream schools with additionally resourced provision over and above full-time placement in special school or class provision (Myklebust, 2006; Ofsted, 2006). A similar study

in the US by Jameson and McDonnell (2007) compared one-to-one instruction in mainstream settings with students in the special education classroom. They describe how 'embedded' instruction is an effective instructional strategy for students with developmental disabilities being served in inclusive settings. This study also shows that special education teachers and paraprofessionals can, with minimal training, accurately implement embedded instructional interventions in the general education classroom. Much literature on special education and inclusion focuses, however, on the question of whether students with special educational needs 'do better' in mainstream or special settings and whether the segregated special educational arrangements used by schools have the intended effect of reducing differences (Markussen, 2004; Cooney *et al*, 2006; Hardiman *et al*, 2009).

Some studies have sought to identify the social and academic benefits of being placed in a mainstream class over special class placement. In particular, areas such as social competence or the social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural skills of an individual are gaining increased attention in recent years (Welsh and Bierman, 1998 cited in Hardiman *et al*, 2009). One example is Freeman and Alkin's (2000) systematic review of young people with intellectual disabilities. This review showed that students with intellectual disabilities placed in mainstream classrooms learn social competence skills to a greater extent than those placed in special classes. Their main conclusion is that integrated students perform better than their comparable segregated peers on measures of academic achievement and social competence. This research acknowledges the potential negative impact of being placed with much more able students on the emotional wellbeing and self-esteem of students with intellectual disabilities. It concludes, however, that full integration, spending all their time in regular classrooms, academically benefits children and adolescents with intellectual disabilities (Freeman and Alkin, 2000). Studies have also examined the longer term outcomes of students with special educational needs. Findings show that young people with special educational needs educated in mainstream classes are more likely to acquire social capital that facilitates their employment, since school gives them the chance to forge lasting bonds of friendship on which they can build social relations that will be useful in their professional and social life (Ebersold *et al*, 2011).

Despite the policy emphasis towards full inclusion, some experts continue to argue for special units and classes for students with particular disabilities, for example, students with learning disabilities, those with ASD and students with profound sensory impairment (Swanson and Hoskyn cited in Mitchell, 2010, p149). Other studies have highlighted how the special class can facilitate inclusion, particularly where students are moving from special school settings. Travers (2009) suggests that the option of part-time placement in a special class may, for some students, provide the educational crutch that ensures they remain in a mainstream school. The unit of inclusion can therefore be viewed as the school and not the mainstream class (Norwich and Kelly, 2004 cited in Travers, 2009). In Ireland, Ware *et al* (2009) surveyed principals of schools with special classes to examine the role they played for students with special educational needs in mainstream schools. Findings suggest that for some, where inclusion in the mainstream class simply does not work out in terms of meeting their learning needs, a special class can operate in a flexible format and offer the possibility of meeting the pupil's needs

and keeping them in their local or mainstream school (Ware *et al*, 2009). In Australia, a study of parents of students with special educational needs shows they continue to want more 'special units' in primary and secondary schools (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002; Nitschke and McColl, 2001). According to Shadock *et al* (2009), parents want the option to move their child to a special education setting if the regular class proves problematic, and the inclusion of some students has certainly proved problematic (Department of Education and Training Western Australia, 2001). Focusing on the child's perspective, Vlachou *et al* (2006) examined Greek children's views and preferences for special or mainstream class placement. This study found that students with learning difficulties do not unanimously prefer one service delivery mode over another. However, the majority of the students surveyed preferred the resource room over their regular classroom and, significantly, a third preferred their regular classroom. These findings were significantly influenced, however, by student views on which setting provided more academic benefits (Vlachou *et al*, 2006, p212).

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 & Hallahan, 1993). In another study, Kauffman and Hallahan (2005) further this argument stating that instruction for students with special educational needs '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' (p63). Evaluations of specific interventions and special class placements have also highlighted the positive aspects of segregated special education for fixed periods of time. Henefer (2010) carried out a mixed methods study of the effects of Behavioural Support Classes (BSCs) on Irish post-primary students. Based on findings from 36 BSCs, this research found that attendance for a period of time elevated student self-esteem and equipped them to better meet their behavioural requirements and challenges of school (Henefer, 2010, p81).

Other research has questioned the extent of true inclusion in mainstream settings. Studies have shown that regular classrooms may not always be adequately prepared to assist students with some disabilities such as autism or profound deafness (Mesibov and Shea, 1996; Handleman *et al*, 2005). Findings from a longitudinal Growing Up With Disabilities study of 668 Norwegian parents found, for example, that even where a child attends a regular school and is a member of a regular class, this does not necessarily imply participation in activities together with classroom peers (Wendelborg and Tessebro, 2008, p306). Furthermore, other research has found that students with disabilities in regular schools participate less in activities at school in comparison with peers without disabilities (Eriksson, Welander and Granlund, 2007; Nordström, 2002; Simeonsson *et al*, 2001), as well as having less access to curriculum activities (Shevlin, Kenny and McNeela, 2002 cited in Wendelborg and Tessebro, 2008, p306).

Broader reviews of international trends in the education of students with special educational needs highlight that the 'evidence for inclusive education is mixed but generally positive' with most studies reporting either positive effects or no differences for inclusion, compared with more segregated provisions' (Mitchell, 2010, p11).

Shaddock (2009) argues for greater emphasis on the findings of empirical research on separate placements for students with disabilities. He suggests that 'the development and continuation of such [separate] programmes should be based on the extent to which they improve student learning outcomes in ways valued by the students, parents and teachers' (p16). Some have contended that advocates for inclusion have placed too much emphasis on the placement of students in mainstream or special classes and not enough emphasis on the quality of instruction and educational outcomes for them (Fuchs and Fuchs, 1994; McLeskey, 2007). Central to these debates is the issue of balancing the extent to which students are educated in mainstream education, on one hand, with an emphasis on outcomes, on the other (McLeskey, 2007; Waldron and McLeskey, 2009).

2.4 Systems of Special Classes Internationally

Language and terminology surrounding special educational needs and special class provision are contentious issues, particularly when comparing national systems of special classes. Much variation exists in the language and terminology used to describe how children and young people are placed in segregated settings within mainstream schools for the majority of their week (or part of the week). Special classes in other countries often operate under different titles such as resource rooms (Greece) or special units, EBD classrooms, self-contained classrooms, least restrictive environment (LRE) and functional grouping (the US), learning support units and pupil referral units (England) (Vlachou *et al*, 2006; Mitchell, 2010; Henefer, 2010, p7; McLeskey *et al*, 2012), which are not always directly comparable with Irish special classes. Moreover, in terms of practice, some countries consider special classes in mainstream schools to be fully inclusive settings whereas others would describe them as segregated (Meijer, 2003). Furthermore, the terms segregation (Markussen, 2004; Mykelbust, 2009) and separation (McLeskey *et al*, 2012) are often used to describe a special class arrangement. For the purpose of this report, we use the terms 'segregation' and 'segregated settings' to describe special classes within mainstream schools 'which are formed primarily for pupils with special educational needs and are the main learning environment for those pupils' (see section 1.3).

The European Agency for the Development of Special Needs Education (EADSNE) highlights three main approaches adopted by different countries to school placement. The first is the one-track approach where policies and practice include almost all students in mainstream education. Examples of countries adopting this approach are Cyprus, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden (Riddell *et al*, 2006). The second is the multi-track approach whereby a multiplicity of approaches to inclusion is maintained. This is the most common approach and includes a combination of special schools/classes and mainstream provision. Examples of countries adopting this model include Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Scotland and the United Kingdom. The Netherlands and Germany are noted by Riddell *et al* (2006) to be moving from a two-track to a multi-track system. The final approach is the two-track system, where two distinct systems – of special schools / classes – are maintained, and

students with special educational needs do not follow the mainstream curriculum. This is a common approach in Belgium and Switzerland (Riddell *et al*, 2006). Additionally, Riddell *et al* (2006), in their literature review of students with additional support needs, found that countries vary considerably in the placement of students in particular sub-categories. For example, in Italy 95 per cent of blind or partially sighted students are educated in mainstream schools while nearly four-fifths of Korean students with this disability are educated in special schools. In Canada, all students with emotional behavioural difficulties are mainstreamed in regular classes, while special schools and classes are more common for such students in Belgium, Germany, Japan and the US. In Spain, students with specific learning difficulties are mainstreamed while the opposite is true in Belgium. Given the problems of countries using different terminology in special education, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2005) developed its own three-fold categorisation system:

- Category A – cross-national disabilities: includes students with disabilities or impairments viewed in medical terms as organic disorders attributable to organic pathologies (eg sensory, motor or neurological defects).
- Category B – cross-national difficulties: includes students with behavioural or emotional disorders, or specific difficulties in learning. The educational need is considered to arise primarily from problems in the interaction between the student and the educational context.
- Category C – cross-national disadvantages: includes students with disadvantages arising primarily from socio-economic, cultural, and/or linguistic factors. The educational need is to compensate for the disadvantages attributable to these factors.

The OECD data (cited in Riddell *et al*, 2006) indicate that within category A (disabilities), variation is considerable across countries between a preference for regular classes (eg New Brunswick, Canada) to a preference for special schools (eg Flemish community, Belgium). Most countries have a mix of the multi-track system: the US, Turkey, France, Slovak Republic, Japan, Hungary, Czech Republic and Korea. In terms of category B (difficulties), the OECD data once again found considerable between-country variation. New Brunswick, Canada, prefers mainstream classes while Belgium (the French community) shows a preference for special schools. For students in category C (disadvantage), the OECD found a definite preference for regular, mainstream provision. Douglas *et al* (2012) in their recent literature review of six case-study countries offered further insight into the percentage of the school population in special schools/ segregated provision. As is evident in Table 2.1, each country defines segregation differently – in an Irish context it is broken down by special school/class, whereas in the US it is broken down according to the percentage of time spent in the segregated setting (that is less than 21 per cent of time; between 21 and 60 per cent of time and more than 60 per cent of time).

Table 2.1: Summary of special educational needs terms for case study countries and percentage of school age population in special school/segregated provision

Country (and approx school age population)	Special educational needs term used	% school age pop. identified with special educational needs	% school age pop in special school/ segregated provision	Notes/sources
Ireland (0.6 million)	Special educational needs	5.2% [1]* * See notes /sources column 4	0.8% [2] 0.4% [3]	1. Based on children with formal diagnosis of special educational needs. Excludes primary school pupils with high incidence special educational needs with no formal diagnosis but who may receive support under the general allocation model (GAM). Recent prevalence data suggest that up to 25% of young people may have special educational needs as defined by the EPSEN Act (2004) – Banks & McCoy (2011). 2. Special schools. 3. Special classes in mainstream schools. Source: EADSNE (2010)
Australia (3.4 million)	Special educational needs is a broader term, which includes students with disabilities	4.6% [1]	0.4% [2]	1. Based on all students with reported disabilities in school. However, based on definition used in Australian Disability Discrimination Act, an estimated additional 10-15% of school students have disabilities. 2. Students aged five to 14 attending special schools. Source: The Students with Disability Working Group (2010)
England (8 million)	Special educational needs; special educational need and disability (SEND)	20.6% [1] 2.8% [2]	1.3% [3]	1. Based on all children with special educational needs with and without a statement of special educational needs. 2. Based on all children with a statement of special educational needs (more severe). 3. Based on placement of children with special educational needs (with and without statement). Most of the 1.3% attend special schools, but also pupil referral units. An approximate additional 0.2% attend schools with a resource base in a mainstream school. Source: DfE (2011a)
Finland (0.5 million)	special educational needs	8.3% [1] 31.4% [2]	1.2% [3] 2.7% [4]	1. Based on children with official full-time special education support. 2. Based on children with official full-time (8.3%) and part-time special education support (23.1%). 3. Special schools. 4. Special classes in mainstream schools. Source: EADSNE (2010)

Country (and approx school age population)	Special educational needs term used	% school age pop. identified with special educational needs	% school age pop in special school/ segregated provision	Notes/sources
Scotland (0.6 million)	Additional support needs (ASN), including disabled children and young people	7.0% [1] 10.0% [2]	1.0% [3]	1. Based on children with ASN. Source: EADSNE (2010) 2. Based on children with ASN. Source: Doran (2010) 3. Special schools. An approximate additional 0.2% attend schools with a resource base in a mainstream school. Source: EADSNE (2010)
US (49.1 million)	Disability	13.2% [1]	0.4% [2] 7.7% [3] 2.9% [4] 1.9% [5]	1. Based on all students with disabilities (2008). 2. Separate schools for pupils with disabilities (public and private). 3. Regular school (less than 21% of time outside general class). 4. Regular school (21-60% of time outside general class). 5. Regular school (more than 60% of time outside general class). Source: NCSE (2011b)

Source: Douglas *et al* (2012, p44) Measuring Educational Engagement, Progress and Outcomes for Children with Special Educational Needs: A Review.

While policy approaches to special educational needs follow a common trend, Irish and EU policy in particular is moving towards inclusive education, particularly the inclusion of all students in mainstream schools. Some countries are seen to adopt this model – such as Cyprus, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden (Riddell *et al*, 2006) – in the one-track approach, although most countries still operate a variety of forms of provision along the lines of the multi-track system. The international literature highlights the huge diversity between (and even within) countries regarding terminology and understanding of special classes or their equivalent. Even the issue of diagnosis for access to special education is contentious with some countries not deeming this appropriate. The huge level of diversity makes it difficult to situate Ireland's special class model within an international context as no universal system of special education provision exists.

2.5 Special Class Provision in Ireland

As outlined in section 2.3, defining a special class is not easy with different interpretations both internationally and within national contexts. Similarly in Ireland, the concept of a special class is difficult to define precisely (see also section 1.4). Special classes in mainstream schools are intended to cater exclusively for students with special educational needs, with most special classes admitting only students from a specific category (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. As far back as 1986, the Department of Education issued curriculum guidelines for students in mild general learning disability (MGLD) special classes in mainstream post-primary schools. These guidelines specifically referred to the integration of special class students into the mainstream for some subjects where possible (Department of Education, 1986). The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment published a discussion paper on the curriculum issues of teaching children with special educational needs. This also emphasised that children are provided with 'an integrated educational experience in mainstream schools' (NCCA, 1999). In the circular 9/99, the Department of Education and Science reminds principals of national schools of the importance of promoting the 'integration of children with special educational needs attending special classes into mainstream classes according to their level of needs and attainments' (DES, 1999). More recently, NCSE policy advice papers on special classes have emphasised the need to maintain flexibility between them and mainstream classes. The NCSE policy advice paper (2011) on the Education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children in Ireland states that:

> 'Special classes should be organised on a flexible basis to provide for specialist interventions and supports specific to children's needs and to facilitate an inclusive approach which allows each child to join mainstream classes to the greatest extent possible' (NCSE, 2011, p61).

In 2012 the NCSE policy advice paper on The Education of Children with Challenging Behaviour arising from severe emotional disturbance/behavioural disorders recommended that:

> '... placement in a special school or class should be viewed as a temporary intervention in the child's life. Placement decisions should be underpinned by rigorous multi-disciplinary assessment be time-bound and regularly reviewed... A place should be retained for the student in the mainstream class while he/she is placed in the special school or class' (NCSE, 2012, p63).

Furthermore the NCSE's policy advice paper on The Future Role of Special Schools and Classes in Ireland (2011) outlines the need for a continuum of special educational needs provision where a more 'fluid approach' is taken when placing students in special classes (NCSE, 2011, p88).

Until 2010 the special education section of the Department of Education and Skills was responsible for the planning and resourcing of special classes. While the DES still funds special classes, responsibility for them now lies with the NCSE. The NCSE does not enforce the establishment of special classes and there is no legislative requirement on schools to provide them (McGee, 2004). Their distinguishing characteristic are the lower pupil-teacher ratios compared to mainstream classes, which range from one teacher for six students to one teacher for 11 students (see Table 2.3 for minimum pupil-teacher ratios in special classes).

Discussions on special class provision generally fall within broader curriculum and funding frameworks for students with special educational needs educated in

mainstream settings. The following section examines special class provision within the broader context of special education in primary and post-primary schools. Here we focus initially on the historical development of special classes in Ireland. We then examine how they are established focusing on the role of school principals, parents, SENOs, the NCSE and the DES in this process. We then outline the current funding models for students with special educational needs both in special classes and in mainstream settings at primary and post-primary. This section also details the role of SNAs in special class provision. The final sections briefly examine special arrangements and support services for students with special educational needs in addition to the primary and post-primary curriculum and programmes available to this group of students.

2.5.1 Development of special classes over time

Special classes are not new to Irish education but their purpose has constantly evolved in line with policy and, more recently, legislative change. Since the early 1960s an official interest in, and support for, the educational provision of students with special educational needs has existed. Much discussion and debate at this time, however, centred on special schools and the introduction of special staffing ratios for schools for students who are blind or who are deaf or hard of hearing. Specific reference to special classes was made in the *Commission of Inquiry on Mental Handicap* (Government of Ireland, 1965). This stated there would be some advantages to the special class model in that the child with general learning difficulties would be educated with their peers. It was not until the 1970s that the policy of establishing special classes was promoted and by 1980, 157 classes catered for 2,135 students. The commission reported 31 'special classes for slow learning students' including three 'remedial' classes in mainstream primary schools (Government of Ireland, 1965). In 1978 the Department of Education issued circular guidelines for the education of the 'moderately handicapped' (Coolahan, 1981). In line with international education policies, the notion of integration began to appear in the mid-1980s with the idea that special classes could be part of mainstream schools. The government followed this trend in the *Educational Development White Paper* which proposed that integrated education for students with mild mental or physical handicaps be the first option if at all possible. In 1983 it was recognised that children with severe and profound mental handicaps should also be entitled to education (Government of Ireland, 1983). Teachers were to be trained to educate such children in special classes within mainstream education (SCOTENS, 2008).

By the time the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (Department of Education, 1993) was published, over 2,000 students were being educated in special classes. The report recommended what it called the educational integration of students with a disability, which it defined as the participation of students with disabilities in school activities with their peers to the maximum extent consistent with the broader overall interests of both the students with disabilities and other students in the class/group (Department of Education, 1993, p18-19). In 1989 two-thirds of students with mild general learning disabilities were being educated in special classes (Stevens, 2007 cited in Travers, 2009) and the number of special classes for them totalled 155, 48 of which were at post-primary level (SCOTENS, 2008). A large number of special classes also catered for students with other special educational needs. The SERC report recommended a 'network of special classes in designated ordinary primary and post-primary schools should be

expanded in accordance with identified needs' (p175). It outlined a range of options which might be included as part of a continuum of provision, some of which related to special classes. These include:

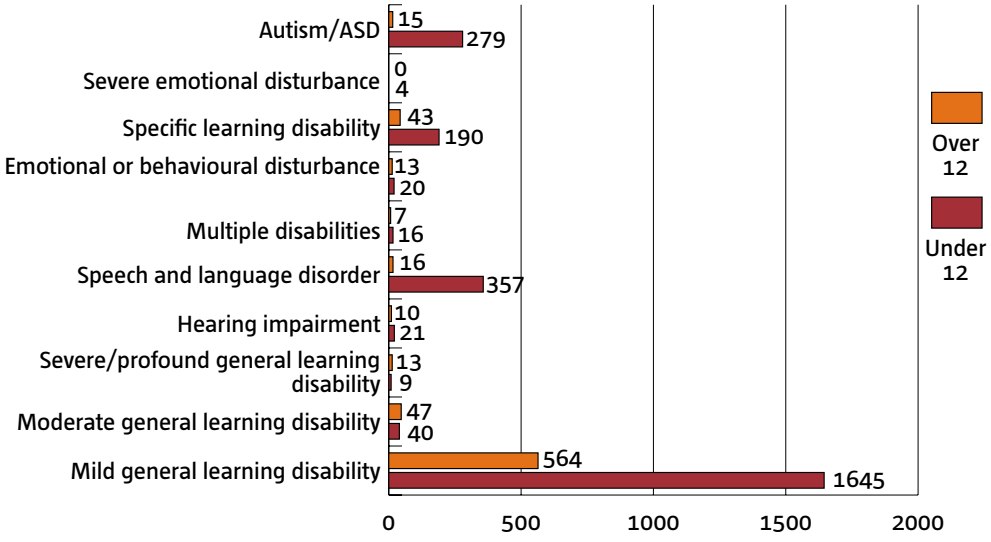
1. full-time placement in an ordinary class, without additional support
2. full-time placement in an ordinary class, with additional support in the class
3. full-time placement in an ordinary class with withdrawal for short regular tutorial sessions
4. part-time placement in a special class, spending more time in the ordinary class
5. part-time placement in a special class, spending less time in the ordinary class
6. full-time placement in a special class
7. part-time placement in a special school, spending more time in the ordinary school
8. part-time placement in a special school, spending less time in the ordinary school
9. full-time placement in a day special school
10. full-time placement in a five-day residential special school
11. full-time placement in a seven-day residential special school.

A key influence on the development of special classes during the 1990s and early 2000s was the growth in the provision of resource teachers. This development was in response to the SERC report to provide supplementary teaching to students with greater learning needs and meant that many students with mild general learning disabilities previously taught in special classes were given resource hours and supported mainly by withdrawal from mainstream classes (Travers, 2009). By 2004, 47 per cent of these students were educated in mainstream classes with resource teacher support, 40 per cent were in special classes and only 13 per cent enrolled in special schools, representing a significant change for these students since 1989 (Stevens 2007 cited in Ware *et al*, 2009).

Existing data on the number and profile of students in special classes over time sheds light on the impact of changes to resource teaching and funding for special class provision. The DES collects data on the number of students in special classes and their primary disability through its annual returns or the National School Annual Census. These data provide information on the numbers of students taught by a recognised special class teacher and provides information on the type of disability (the 'special need type code') and 'the number of pupils taught in the class'. Principals entered the special needs type code according to a list of 14 disability categories supplied by the DES: mild general learning disability (MGLD); moderate general learning disability; severe/profound general learning disability; hearing impairment; visual impairment; physical disability; specific speech and language disorder; multiple disabilities; emotional disturbance; specific learning disability; severe emotional disturbance; autism/autistic spectrum disorders (ASD); assessed syndrome; specific learning disability. As outlined in Banks and McCoy (2011) and shown in Figures 2.1 and 2.2, the number of students with special educational needs taught by special class teachers had declined from 3,309 in 2003 to 2,931 in 2008. More recent NCSE data shows, however, an increase with 3,678 students enrolled in special classes (NCSE, 2013, p119). There have also been changes in the types of special educational needs categories placed within special

classes. For example, in 2003 67 per cent of students in special classes were classified as having Mild General Learning Disabilities compared to just under half (44 per cent) in 2008, reflecting a greater emphasis on inclusion as outlined in EPSEN (2004) and the introduction of GAM in 2005, which allowed for the allocation of resources without assessment for students with high incidence disabilities (including Mild General Learning Disabilities). In both years, however, the majority of this group were under 12 (74 per cent in 2003 and 80 per cent in 2008). Another change can be seen in the number of students with ASD. In 2003 these students made up 9 per cent of students in special classes; however, this had increased to 27 per cent by 2008.[8] Other categories of need for students taught by a special class teacher included students with speech and language difficulties (11 per cent in 2003 and 15 per cent in 2008) and specific learning disabilities (7 per cent in 2003 and 6 per cent in 2008) (Banks and McCoy, 2011, p70). Since the data in Figure 2.1 were collected, however, further changes have taken place for the numbers with MGLDs being placed in this setting. In February 2009 the DES notified 119 schools to suppress 128 special classes for these students with effect from August 31st, 2009. The DES reviewed enrolment numbers in all MGLD classes and found that 128 did not have the minimum number of nine students required to retain the special class teacher (Dail Debates, 2009).

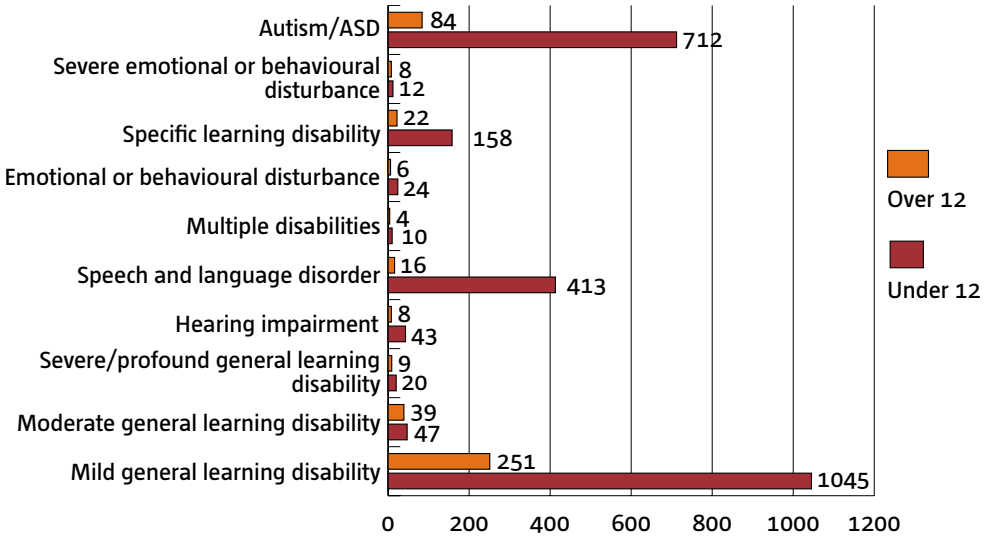
Figure 2.1: Profile of Pupils with special educational needs in special classes 2003 (primary)



Source: DES 2009 (data provided in relation to Banks and Mc Coy 2011)

8 This increase is also highlighted in a DES report which showed that children with autism made up just 12 per cent of pupils with special educational needs in ordinary national schools (O'Connor, 2007, p20). Moreover, the recent NCSE publication An International Review of the Literature of Evidence of Best Practice Provision in the Education of Persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders also highlights the particular increase in special classes for students with autism – see Parsons *et al*, 2009.

Figure 2.2: Profile of students with special educational needs in special classes 2008 (primary)



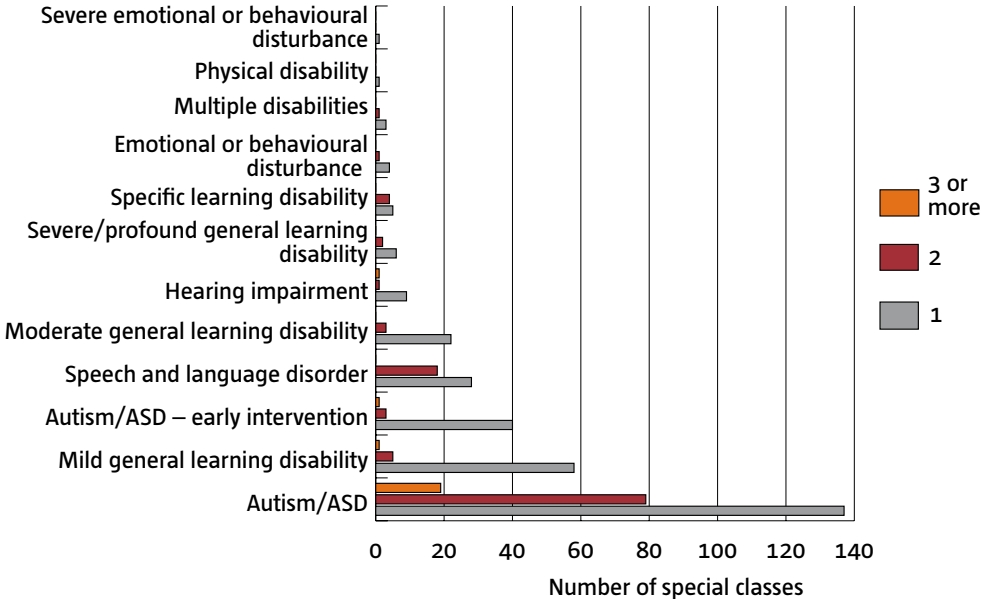
Source: Statistics received from the DES, 2009 (data provided in relation to Banks and Mc Coy 2011)

Organisations have used this information to measure patterns in the numbers of students placed in special classes over time. Using the DES data, the Irish National Teachers Organisation (2006) reported that the number in special classes in mainstream primary schools rose from 2,578 in 1984 to 9,340 in 2004, representing an increase in the percentage of enrolments in such classes from under 0.5 per cent to just over 2.1 per cent during the same period (this information was sourced from an analysis of DES statistical reports).[9]

As mentioned above, the most up-to-date special class data are now provided by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) which took over the role of special class provision in 2010 (NCSE, 2011). According to its records, there has been an increase in the numbers of students attending special classes in recent years (3,678 in 2012-13 school year) (NCSE, 2013, p119). In 2011 the NCSE opened 33 new special classes and in 2012 opened a further 91. The full list of the 453 schools, with 628 special classes sanctioned for the 2012-13 school year, is published on the NCSE website (see Table 2.2 or http://www.ncse.ie/uploads/1/Full_List_of_Special_Classes_2012-13.pdf). Just over three-quarters of all schools with special classes are at primary (349) with the remainder at post-primary (104). In September 2013 it was announced that a further 118 special classes would open in 113 mainstream primary and post-primary schools (NCSE, 2013b).

9 As outlined in Banks and McCoy, 2011 this figure however includes special classes for Traveller children – see p70-71.

Figure 2.3: Number of special classes by designation for the 2012-13 school year



Source: NCSE, 2013 website

Other sources of data include the Taskforce on Autism (2001) which provided figures on the number of special classes in mainstream primary and post-primary schools. The report identified three early intervention settings for young children with autism, 34 classes for children with autism in primary but no classes at post-primary. Data collected in 2008 highlight the dramatic changes in provision for children with autism during this period. In total, 35 early intervention settings existed, 162 classes for those with autism at primary and a further 36 at post-primary (Taskforce on Autism cited in Parsons *et al*, 2009). This represents almost a 400 per cent increase in special classes over a period of seven years for this group of students. This development is all the more significant when placed in the context of the 199 recommendations of the Task Force on Autism (DES, 2001). While the report did recommend that a 'range of suitable options be developed' (p352) and that provision be available, as appropriate, as a 'choice/combination of home-based, mainstream or specialist settings' (p354), it is interesting to note that the establishment of special classes was not explicitly recommended except for students with ASD aged five and under in mainstream and special schools (Ware *et al*, 2009). Parsons *et al* (2009) call for further research to explore 'the effectiveness of placement in autism-specific classes and units' and examine 'how these classes operate in practice regarding inclusion and the curriculum offered'. Student experiences in ASD classes will form part of the analysis for Phases 2 and 3 of this research study which tracks the experiences, progress and outcomes for the cohort of students in these classes and evaluates their operation over time. As outlined in Chapter 1, this research is on-going and will be reported on completion.

2.5.2 Setting up a special class

In 1999, the Department of Education issued a circular revising the procedures for setting up a special class. Circular 9/99 states that children in special classes are to be counted on the 'ordinary roll' in an attempt to promote the integration of children from special

to mainstream classes. It advises that arrangements must be made for 'the appropriate integration of children with special educational needs attending special classes into mainstream classes according to their level of needs and attainment' (Circular 9/99). The circular also introduced guidelines for the teacher-pupil ratio for students with different categories of special educational needs (McGee, 2004). After its establishment in 2005, the NCSE assumed responsibility for the allocation of special educational resources to schools, and in March 2006 it issued new guidance, part of which explained how applications should be made for the establishment of a primary special class (NCSE, 2006). At post-primary, special classes are referred to in a DES document, *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs – Post-Primary Guidelines*, which states that students '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). No official guidelines exist, however, about how to set up a special class. Despite this, they can be established in two ways.

- First, through SENOs working directly with schools, the local HSE personnel and the DES, can identify unmet need and/or emerging demand for special classes. The designation of the class follows the need/demand identified. (The establishment of a special class cannot, however, be enforced by the DES as it does not directly manage most schools in the State and there is no legislative requirement on schools to provide special classes [McGee, 2004].)
- 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).

Generally students in special classes at primary and post-primary have a professional diagnosis of disability, and in some cases they also have an outline of complex needs, even in the case of students with high incidence needs in special classes for these disabilities. In relation to establishing a new 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 open. According to the NCSE, this determination takes into account the likelihood that the numbers will increase to the retention ratios over a period of time (Personal communication with NCSE, November 2012).

2.5.3 Special classes and the allocation of resources for students with special educational needs

Funding for special classes falls within the wider allocation of resources for students with special educational needs and disabilities in mainstream more generally. At present the DES and the NCSE carry out such allocation.

Funding models for students with high and low incidence disabilities

Students with special educational needs are categorised using DES disability categories which can be divided into high and low incidence[10] disabilities. Primary students with these 'high incidence' disabilities receive additional teaching resources through the general allocation model (GAM) and they can access this support without formal assessment or diagnosis. The DES administers this and allocates primary schools with resource and learning support teaching for students with 'learning difficulties and SEN arising from diagnosed and undiagnosed high incidence disabilities' (Special Education Circular, Sp Ed, 02/05). Under GAM, each mainstream school is entitled to a general allocation of permanent teachers to assist them with students with learning difficulties and special educational needs arising from high incidence disabilities. The resources provided are related to the overall school enrolment numbers, gender breakdown of students (as generally a higher incidence of special educational needs is associated with boys) and status under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme. This ensures that schools can provide additional teaching support without having to make applications on behalf of individual students. Thus the model does not rely on an individual diagnosis of a special educational need (NCSE, 2011).

In February 2012 the DES announced changes to the current allocation system for high incidence disabilities at post-primary (Circular 10/12). Instead of allocating resources to students individually, a general allocation would be given to schools similar to the GAM model at primary. The new funding model was introduced with the aim of reducing 'the administrative burden on schools'. It details how 'the need for post-primary schools to submit applications and assessments for high incidence resource teaching hours is being dispensed with'. In this way 'there will not be a requirement for schools to have assessments conducted for entrants with high incidence needs' (Circular 0010/2012). Under this new funding model, principals were advised that 'post-primary schools will be given an allocation for High Incidence Resource Teaching equating to 95% of their High Incidence Resource Teaching hours allocations as at 31st December, 2011.' In this way 'there will not be a requirement for schools to have assessments conducted for entrants with high incidence needs' (Circular No. 0010/2012). The NCSE has provision, however, to meet the needs of new schools and schools that have experienced an increase in pupil numbers for the year 2013-14 (NCSE communication, 2013). In addition to the additional resource hours to support students with high incidence disabilities, post-primary schools are also provided with a general allocation of learning support (and language support) teaching hours to support eligible students (NCSE, 2013b, p117).

At primary and post-primary the NCSE allocates resources for students with low incidence disabilities through the SENO network. The NCSE allocates additional resources to schools for individual students based on an assessment and diagnostic information provided by schools to NCSE SENOs (see Banks and McCoy, 2010 for further detail).

10 The term high incidence refers to the disabilities: borderline MGLD; MGLD; specific learning disability. The term low incidence disability used by the DES includes: physical disability; hearing impairment; visual impairment; emotional disturbance; severe emotional disturbance; moderate general learning disability; severe/profound general learning disability; autism/autistic spectrum disorders; specific speech and language disorder; assessed syndrome; multiple disabilities in primary and post-primary schools (DES Circular Sp Ed 02/05).

The working group established by the NCSE at the request of the Minster for Education and Skills in May 2013 is currently tasked with devising a proposal for a new model for allocating additional resource teaching support to students with special educational needs. The establishment of the working group followed the publication of an NCSE policy advice document based on a review of special educational needs resources. As part of the recommendations outlined in this document, the NCSE highlights the need for teaching resources to be allocated equitably to schools in line with their educational profile of need without a diagnosis of disability (NCSE, 2013a).

2.5.4 Special classes and special needs assistants

Special needs assistants (SNAs) are allocated to schools to work with students in a non-teaching capacity. They support students with care needs resulting from a disability, behavioural difficulties or a significant medical issue. This might include a significant impairment of physical or sensory function or where their behaviour makes them a danger to themselves or other students. These could range from needing an assistant for a few hours each week (for example, to help feed or change the pupil[s] or bring them to the toilet) to requiring a full-time assistant (DES Circular 07/02). SNA allocations are based on individualised applications and subject to DES eligibility criteria. To qualify a pupil must have a disability and must have care needs as outlined in DES circulars 07/02 and 02/05. In schools with special classes, however, classes may be given a baseline level of SNA support, that is an allocation of SNAs per class to reflect the profile of the care needs expected. For example, a class with six students with severe/profound general learning disabilities has a teacher and two SNA posts sanctioned. Furthermore, the NCSE may also sanction additional SNA support over and above the baseline allocation where individual students have been enrolled with significant care needs over and above that generally expected in that class (NCSE, 2011, p25).

Table 2.3 outlines the pupil teacher and SNA ratios for special classes. The pupil-teacher ratio refers to the recommended appointment ratios of teachers for special classes (SERC, p167). For example, in the case of classes for students with mild general learning disabilities 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, it must maintain a certain number of students as specified by the retention ratios. The table also outlines the current recommended SNA allocations for special classes. Those with the highest allocation of two SNAs to one class group include those designated for students with severe/profound general learning disabilities and ASD.

Table 2.2: Pupil teacher ratios for special classes

	Ratio of SNA to class group	Pupil-teacher-ratio
Physical disability	1:1	10:1
Hearing impairment	1:4	7:1
Visual impairment	1:4	8:1
Emotional disturbance and/or behavioural problems	1:4	8:1
Severe emotional disturbance	1:1	6:1
Mild general learning disability	1:4	11:1
Moderate general learning disability	1:2	8:1
Severe/profound general learning disability	2:1	6:1
Autistic spectrum disorder	2:1	6:1
Specific learning disability	—	9:1
Specific speech and language disorder	1:3	7:1
Multiple disabilities	1:1	6:1

Source: DES Circular 0038/2010, p5.

2.5.5 Special arrangements and support services for students with special educational needs and disabilities

A number of additional resources can be allocated to mainstream primary and post-primary schools to facilitate the inclusion of students with special educational and other learning needs. These include grants for assistive technology, special transport, scheme of reasonable accommodations in certificate examinations (RACE) and access to the visiting teacher service. The additional resources include:

- **Assistive technology:** This refers to any item of equipment (eg computers, laptops, tape recorders, and software) used to improve the functional capability of a student. Grants are provided for those diagnosed with serious physical or communicative disabilities of a degree that makes ordinary communication through speech or writing impossible for them (Circular M14/05; Circular 0010/2013).
- **Transport:** This is for students diagnosed with a disability who are enrolled in a mainstream, special class/school setting and can include escorts to accompany students with special educational needs and disabilities to attend school (DES, 2011).
- **Special equipment:** Funding is available for the purchase of special equipment for students with special educational needs (NCSE, 2011).
- **Special classes and enhanced capitation grants:** These are payments made to schools in respect of all students attending special classes. The rates vary depending on age and level of need (see NCSE, 2013a, p123 for 2012 rates by disability category).
- **Reasonable accommodations:** The State Examinations Commission (SEC) provides the RACE scheme for candidates with certain permanent or long-term conditions, including visual and hearing difficulties and specific learning difficulties, that they

believe will significantly impair their performance in examinations. Students may apply for a reasonable accommodation to facilitate them to take the examination. Reasonable accommodations are intended to remove, as far as possible, the effect of the disability on a candidate's performance and thus enable them to demonstrate their attainment level and ensure that, while giving candidates every opportunity to demonstrate this, the special arrangements will not give them an unfair advantage over other candidates in the same examination.

- **Extended school year:** An extended school year is available for students on the autistic spectrum or those with a severe/profound general learning disability. The July Education Programme provides four extra weeks' tuition which can be school or home based. Schools agree to take part in this scheme on a voluntary basis.
- **Visiting teacher service:** For students with visual or hearing impairments, the Visiting Teacher Service plays a key role in facilitating their inclusion in mainstream settings. Visiting teachers assess and give expert knowledge and advice to parents and schools across a range of areas including specialist teaching, curricular and environmental implications including assistive technology and reasonable accommodations (NCSE, 2011, 2013a).

2.5.6 Curriculum and assessment for students with special educational needs

The international and national policy emphasis on inclusion has obvious repercussions for the education of students with special educational needs in special classes in mainstream schools (eg the Salamanca Statement on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) and in Ireland the Special Education Review Committee (Department of Education, 1993, the 1998 Education Act [Government of Ireland, 1998]). More recently, the Education for Persons with Special Needs (EPSEN) Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) stated that such students should be educated in an inclusive environment, noting specifically that they should be educated in an inclusive environment with students who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child 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 (EPSEN 2004, p7).

An inclusive curriculum must consider the different abilities and needs of all students and be adapted to be accessible and flexible so that those diverse needs are met (O'Mara *et al*, 2012). At post-primary, schools have been advised to examine their curriculum content, approaches to learning and teaching and provision of programmes so that students with special educational needs can access the curriculum within mainstream education (DES, 2007). The focus on curriculum access is driven by the recognised challenges in developing and implementing an education for these students that is strongly linked to the curriculum (NCSE, 2006). With this in mind, the following

section outlines their curricular and assessment options as they move through the Irish education system.

The primary curriculum

In Ireland a revised primary national curriculum was introduced by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in 1999. Significant efforts were made to broaden the range and content of learning experiences for all students in primary school. A key curriculum principle is to celebrate 'the uniqueness of the child' and frameworks have been developed 'to serve the diversity of children's special needs'. Its emphasis has been on 'an integrated educational experience in mainstream classes' for students with special educational needs (from McCoy & Banks, 2012 – NCCA, 1999).

The post-primary curriculum

The Irish post-primary system comprises a three-year lower secondary programme, at the end of which students take a nationally standardised examination, the Junior Certificate (see below for details of recent Junior Cycle reforms). The lower secondary phase is followed by an optional Transition Year and a two-year upper secondary programme. Upper secondary education consists of either a largely academic programme which offers direct entry to higher education (including the Leaving Certificate Established, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme) or a distinct pre-vocational programme (Leaving Certificate Applied).

Alternative programmes at post-primary

Research has shown that students with special educational needs often experience exclusion from full curricular access in post-primary schools (O'Mara *et al*, 2012). In addition to the Junior and Leaving Certificate programmes, however, alternative post-primary programmes in the past 15 years (Junior Certificate School Programme [JCSP] in junior cycle and the Leaving Certificate Applied [LCA] in senior cycle) aim to make the post-primary curriculum more accessible to students with diverse needs or at risk of early school leaving.

Junior Certificate School Programme

The JCSP was introduced by the Department of Education and Science in 1996 as an intervention within the Junior Certificate specifically aimed at potential early school leavers. Despite this primary objective, however, a DES evaluation of the programme highlighted how 'many schools consider the programme suitable for students with special educational needs in both special schools and mainstream settings'. The evaluation described how many of these students might not have attained any formal qualification were it not for their participation in the JCSP, and might indeed have left school early (DES, 2005, p58).

Junior Cycle Reforms

During 2013 the current junior cycle programme and assessment has undergone major change. For the first time, curricular reform specifically addresses for the need for a more inclusive approach for students with special educational needs in 'a range of settings: in mixed ability classes and special classes' and in special schools. The new Junior Cycle will have two national qualifications. The first, at Level 3, replaces the Junior Certificate; however, the second qualification, at Level 2, 'will be designed for students with particular special educational needs'. The report outlines how these 'qualifications will be smaller, giving schools more space and time to spend on deeper learning, literacy, numeracy and key skills' (DES, 2012). Level 2 aims to meet the needs of a 'group of students who are participating in junior cycle, but are usually unable to achieve the learning outcomes involved in subjects leading to the Junior Certificate examination'. The programme is targeted at students with mild and moderate general learning disabilities, and as such, they are small in number and represent the target group for this qualification (NCCA, 2012, p3). It is unclear at this point whether the JCSP will continue alongside the Level 2 qualification.

Leaving Certificate Applied

At senior cycle the majority of students take the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE); however, alternative programmes such as the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) have been targeted at students who struggle with their work at junior cycle, experience behavioural difficulties and/or have special needs or learning difficulties (Banks *et al*, 2010). The LCA was introduced in 1995 by the NCCA and the DES as a 'distinct self-contained programme that offers students an alternative to the established Leaving Certificate' (Banks *et al*, 2010). The programme is designed to 'meet the needs of students who are not adequately catered for by other Leaving Certificate programmes or who choose not to opt for such programmes' (DES/NCCA, 2004). Just 7 per cent of students participate in LCA, however, and it is available in fewer than half of post-primary schools (Banks *et al*, 2010). Furthermore, concerns have been raised about how students are placed, the lack of challenge for some and the limited pathways open to LCA graduates who are not eligible to apply for courses in higher education through the Central Application Office (CAO) system (Banks *et al*, 2010).

Beyond second-level

The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) is a college and university admissions scheme offering places on a reduced points basis to school leavers with disabilities who are under the age of 23.[11] DARE has been set up by a number of colleges and universities as evidence shows that disability can negatively affect student performance and whether they go on to college. DARE is for school leavers who have the ability to benefit from, and succeed in, higher education but who may not be able to meet the points for their preferred course due to the impact of their disability (DARE, 2012). An evaluation of this programme is ongoing and should provide insights into the extent to which DARE

11 An evaluation of the DARE supplementary admission routes has recently been published. See Byrne et al. (2013).

applications vary by student characteristics such as the category of disability and social profiles of the student. Given the limited higher education pathways for LCA students, the profile of students benefiting from the scheme remains unclear. This evaluation should also clarify issues around LCA students (and those with disabilities more widely) eligibility for DARE and the CAO more generally.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter addresses critical questions in any discussion on inclusive education. We highlight theoretical and empirical research on special classes and their place within an inclusive education policy environment. The literature overview shows a clear lack of consensus on the benefits of special and mainstream provision for students with special educational needs. While some studies show clear evidence that mainstream education benefits those with and those without disabilities, others question the extent of true inclusion (academic and social) in some mainstream settings. This overview of research points to the need for a more refined debate on special class provision focusing on how students with different types of disabilities progress in either special or mainstream classes. Many view the need for these debates to move beyond class placement to an emphasis on quality of instruction and student outcomes. We situate this literature within broader debates on ability grouping in education more generally.

Focusing on special class provision internationally, this chapter has highlighted the complexities in understanding provision for students with special educational needs across countries. Issues of language and terminology for special classes are highlighted in addition to the different understandings of what inclusive education means in different national contexts. Where the special class lies within the inclusion debate is the focus of much of this literature.

Chapter 2 also outlined the historical development of the special class in Ireland, highlighting turning points in special education more generally over the last 40 years. Such classes are not new to Irish education but their purpose has evolved in line with changes in policy and, more recently, in legislation.

The national survey provides detailed accurate data on special class provision in Ireland. It builds on existing data from several sources, such as the DES annual returns and more recently published NCSE data on special classes, with detailed insight into their features and characteristics at school level. The DES data provide an overview of changes in provision over time and in particular changes in the types of special class designation granted to schools.

3 Prevalence of Students with Special Educational Needs

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an estimate of the prevalence of special educational needs in mainstream primary and post-primary schools in Ireland, drawing on principal reports of students in each of the 14 DES disability categories in response to the national survey. It focuses on data gathered from part 1 of the questionnaire which sought detailed information from principals on the breakdown of the number of students per category of special educational needs in their school.[12] The purpose here was not to determine prevalence per se, but to gather important information on the special educational needs context in each school with special classes. Table 3.1 shows how this question was split into two parts: the first sought information on the number of students with special educational needs; the second, on number of students with special educational needs in a particular year. The wording varied for primary and post-primary schools, with the latter asked about assessment. The question also differed according to the target group: primary schools were asked for the numbers of third-class students; post-primary were asked for numbers of first-year students with special educational needs.

Table 3.1: Survey questions on numbers of students with special educational needs in schools

Primary Survey	Post-Primary Survey
4. Thinking now of the entire school, (a) *how many pupils have special educational needs (SEN) as defined below and* (b) *how many of these are third class pupils?*	4. Thinking now of the entire school, (a) *how many pupils have been assessed with special educational needs (SEN) as defined below and* (b) *how many of these are first-year pupils?*

This chapter will describe the overall numbers of students with special educational needs based on the DES categories of high and low incidence disabilities, as assessed by principals, rather than the wider EPSEN Act definition as used in Banks and McCoy (2011). The overall prevalence rate at school level will be discussed along with gender breakdown. Indicators of high levels of special educational needs, for example school size, type and DEIS status, will also be analysed and discussed here.[13]

3.2 Estimating Prevalence

The introduction of the general allocation model (GAM) in 2005 had a significant effect on how resources were distributed to primary schools.[14] It has meant that additional

12 The question was structured according to the DES categories of disability. These are split according to high incidence (borderline MGLD; MGLD; and specific learning disability) and low incidence (physical disability; hearing impairment; visual impairment; emotional disturbance; severe emotional disturbance; moderate general learning disability; severe profound general learning disability; specific speech and language disorder; autistic spectrum disorders, multiple disabilities; and other assessed syndrome) disabilities (Source: DES Sp ED 01/05, p6).

13 School size has been broken into five groups for primary: <50 pupils; 50-99 pupils; 100-149 pupils; 150-230 pupils, 231+ pupils, and into four groups for post-primary: <200 pupils; 200-399 pupils; 400-599 pupils; 600+ pupils.

14 With the introduction of GAM in 2005, the DES began a review after it was three years in operation. This

learning support and resource teaching is allocated on the basis of enrolment numbers and that students with high incidence disabilities (borderline MGLD, MGLD and specific learning difficulty) do not need to have psychological assessment or formal diagnosis to be deemed eligible for such support (Sp ED 02/05). The NCSE, through its SENO network, allocates additional resources to primary schools for students with low incidence disabilities. In post-primary schools the picture has been different. NCSE data on numbers of students supported in each category of need (using DES categories) in this school year is provided by the NCSE (NCSE, 2012b). The NCSE figures are based on numbers in receipt of resource teaching hours in primary schools; however, they do not include students in receipt of supports who have high incidence disabilities at primary level. Table 3.2 shows that most (76 per cent) students with supports for low incidence disabilities fall into four main categories: ASD (4,231), specific speech and language disorders (4,180), emotional/behavioural disturbance (3,904) and physical disability (3,066).

Table 3.2: Students by disability in receipt of resource teaching supports in primary schools in 2011–12 school year

Disability Category	No of Students
Assessed syndrome	201
Autistic spectrum disorder	4231
Emotional/behavioural disturbance	3904
Hearing impairment	692
Moderate general learning disability	544
Multiple disabilities	1913
Other	241
Physical disability	3066
Severe emotional/behavioural disturbance	852
Severe/profound general learning disability	30
Specific speech and language disorder	4180
Visual impairment	284
Total	**20138**

Source: NCSE Annual Report, 2012

At post-primary level the NCSE (2012b) provides details of students in receipt of supports for both high and low incidence disabilities. Not surprisingly, high incidence disabilities dominate with just over half of students being allocated resources under the disability specific learning disability (3,531), borderline MGLD (3,484) and MGLD (2,995) categories. For students with low incidence disabilities, however, the patterns differ somewhat to primary level. Students with emotional/behavioural disturbance make up the largest group with 2,613 students receiving supports under this category (28 per cent of those with low incidence disabilities compared to 19 per cent at primary). The next largest groups with low incidence disabilities include students with physical disabilities (1,945) and ASD (1,759) (Table 3.3).

has recently been published at http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Review-of-the-Primary-Schools%E2%80%99-General-Allocation-Model.pdf

Table 3.3: Students by disability in receipt of resource teaching supports in post-primary schools in 2011-12 school year

Disability Category	No of Students
Assessed syndrome	85
Autistic spectrum disorder	1759
Borderline mild general learning disability*	3484
Emotional/behavioural disturbance	2613
Hearing impairment	407
Mild general learning disability*	2995
Moderate general learning disability	247
Multiple disabilities	688
Other	70
Physical disability	1945
Severe emotional/behavioural disturbance	428
Severe/profound general learning disability	4
Specific learning disability*	3531
Specific speech and language disorder	826
Visual impairment	216
Total	**19298**

* See footnote[15]. Source: NCSE Annual Report, 2012.

Until recently the NCSE, through the SENO network, allocated resources on behalf of individual students assessed/diagnosed as having either a high or low incidence disability. Banks and McCoy (2011) raise important implications of these different mechanisms in that there may be some difficulties when students transfer from primary to post-primary, since most are not formally diagnosed with a special educational need at primary level (p22). A recent DES circular (0010/2012) outlined changes at post-primary level, with the introduction of a new, through-put allocation model for schools:

> The existing resource allocation model is now being adjusted so that supports can be put in place quickly without the need for individual applications and assessments being required in each instance and thus reducing the administrative burden on schools. (DES circular (0010/2012 p5)

A further complication of this categorisation system is related to how such categories fit into the EPSEN Act, 2004. A review by Desforges and Lindsay (2010) highlighted the various international systems of categorising disability and identified fundamental problems associated with different countries using different categories. International research signals a move away from this approach as a method to structure and

15 Children with special educational needs diagnosed in these three categories will have accessed resource teaching support at primary under the General Allocation Model. Under this model, all mainstream primary schools have a learning support/resource teaching service, which complements the work of the class teacher in supporting students with special educational needs. This cohort of pupils can access additional teaching support through this service. From September 2012, the DES advised that post-primary schools would no longer have to submit applications for additional resource teaching for pupils with a high incidence disability (reference DES Circular 10/2012).

administer resources to students with special educational needs (Topping & Maloney, 2005). In Liechtenstein, for example, disability categories are not distinguished, only support type is identified (Meijer *et al*, 2003). Sweden is also unique in its non-categorical approach to students with special educational needs. Categories adopted by the DES are a function of the resource allocation system rather than a function of the EPSEN Act. In this way, the type of language and meaning of terminology used around special needs provision needs to be understood and harmonised across government departments, government agencies and other relevant stakeholders.

In moving away from the bio-medical model of disability, a recent report by Banks and McCoy (2011) estimates that 25 per cent of nine-year olds in Ireland have a special educational need of some kind. These findings are based on a multi-dimensional approach where three important perspectives are combined: the teacher's report; the parent's report of his/her child; and lastly, the teacher's evaluation of the child's social emotional well-being. Similarly, Van der Veen *et al* (2010) carried out a cohort study (PRIMA 6) on students with special educational needs in mainstream primary schools. These data were gathered from teaching staff, but also included information from parents and the school management teams. The results show that, according to teachers, 26 per cent of students in their class had special educational needs (Van der Veen *et al*, 2010, p29). Croll and Moses (2003) also found that based on teacher estimates, UK prevalence figure ranges from 18 per cent to as high as 26 per cent. This suggests that teacher and parent perspectives are extremely important in gaining an in-depth insight into pupil difficulties. Since the national survey accounts only for the principal's perspective, we are undoubtedly missing the multi-faceted prevalence rate. As Banks and McCoy (2011) and other research (for example Croll and Moses, 2003) have shown, teachers' perspectives are crucial in understanding the educational development of a particular child. In a study of teachers in the US, Sciutto *et al* (2000) found teaching experience correlated positively with the correct identification of students with attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), as did having previous experience with the condition (McCoy *et al*, 2012a, p6). Despite the many limitations of the principals' reporting on prevalence, this study has provided us with much needed baseline information on the numbers of students with special educational needs across DES-defined categories in mainstream schools. This is especially helpful at post-primary where such detail is, according to a recent study by Ware *et al* (2009), largely absent. It is important to note, however, that this survey is concerned with principal reporting and not the wider prevalence picture, as outlined in the Prevalence Report in 2011 (Banks & McCoy, 2011).

3.3 Primary School Prevalence: Principal Reporting

As noted in Chapter 1, the research team made every effort to ensure the survey was completed by the most appropriate staff member and that the principal collated responses to assure accuracy. The authors acknowledge, however, that variation may exist in reporting special educational needs prevalence and realise there is no certainty that principals have a common understanding of the 14 categories outlined in Table 3.4. Table 3.4 illustrates the breakdown of students in each category of high and

low incidence disabilities, for all schools as well as for third-class. The focus on third class students is due to the study's longitudinal component that will seek to follow a select number of students with special educational needs to evaluate their outcomes. Additionally, research has shown that the prevalence of special educational needs peaks at nine years old (typically third-class students) (Crawford & Vignoles, 2010).

Based on national survey findings, 42,370 students are reported by principals to have a special educational need in the 2011-12 academic year. As previously noted, those students counted as having high incidence disabilities have not been assessed formally, in accordance with the GAM, at primary level. For high incidence special educational needs, we notice a total of 5,509 boys and girls with borderline MGLD and a further 4,537 with a MGLD. Children with the latter have difficulties with most areas of the curriculum and some may find it difficult to adapt to school life, showing signs of inappropriate or immature behaviour (NCSE, 2011, p28). Up to now, estimating a prevalence rate for borderline MGLD and mild general learning disabilities at primary level has been difficult given the absence of accurate data. An Implementation Report by the NCSE (2006) estimated that 1.5 per cent of the population have a mild intellectual disability (estimated as the difference between administrative and true prevalence) (p67), but this is the first time we have a real figure for MGLD at primary. The authors urge caution, however, in analysing numbers of these students as figures are not based on a formal assessment.

There are 10,462 primary school students identified with a specific learning disability. A specific learning disability is quite different to a general learning disability (NCSE, 2011). A child with a specific learning disability has difficulty in specific areas of learning such as writing, reading, spelling and arithmetical notation. Examples include dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia. Despite the absence of an assessment, a specific learning disability might be more easily noticed by a teacher or relevant school personnel, as the pupil will most often struggle in a very specific area of their learning. A specific learning disability is 'not due to other causes such as their general ability being below average' and can range from mild to severe (NCSE, 2011, p30).

In terms of low incidence disabilities, 21,860 primary students fall within these categories of need. They are defined as special educational needs that are not common in every school, and therefore individual resource applications are required (Sp Ed 02/05). The most common example is ASD (4,442 students) with slightly fewer students, 4,345, falling into the specific speech and language disorder category. Emotional disturbance is the third most common low incidence disability with 3,633 students. 3,431 primary students have a physical disability, followed by multiple disabilities (1,671 students), moderate general learning disability (1,121 students), hearing impairment (931 students), severe emotional disturbance (861 students), other assessed syndrome (794 students), visual impairment (486 students) and least common, severe profound general learning disability (145 students). Interestingly, as will be discussed further in Chapter 5, 60 per cent of special classes are designated for students with ASD despite the finding that only 10 per cent of students are reported as having ASD.

Table 3.4: Proportion of students with special educational needs by disability category (primary)

Type of special educational need	Total no of Students	%	Total no of students	%		No of third class students	%
	Boys		Girls		Total		
High Incidence							
Borderline mild general learning disability	3,171	11.21	2,338	16.61	5,509	813	10.58
Mild general learning disability	2,700	9.54	1,837	13.05	4,537	778	10.13
Specific learning difficulty	6,580	23.25	3,884	27.59	10,464	1,839	23.94
High Incidence Total	12,451		8,059		20,510	3,430	
Low Incidence							
Physical disability	2,370	8.38	1,061	7.53	3,431	616	8.02
Hearing impairment	470	1.66	461	3.27	931	230	2.99
Visual impairment	313	1.11	173	1.22	486	174	2.26
Emotional disturbance	2,859	10.10	774	5.49	3,633	618	8.04
Severe emotional disturbance	710	2.51	151	1.07	861	205	2.67
Moderate general learning disability	663	2.34	458	3.25	1,121	246	3.20
Severe profound general learning disability	95	0.34	50	0.35	145	127	1.65
Specific speech and language disorder	2,964	10.47	1,381	9.81	4,345	685	8.92
Autistic spectrum disorder	3,685	13.02	757	5.37	4,442	693	9.02
Multiple disabilities	1,202	4.25	469	3.33	1,671	343	4.46
Other assessed syndrome	514	1.82	280	1.98	794	316	4.11
Low Incidence Total	15,845		6,015		21,860	4,253	
Total	**28,296**	**100.0**	**14,074**	**100.0**	**42,370**	**7,683**	**100.0**

Note: Data are grossed to population totals. The percentage figures do not differ largely using the unweighted data given the highly representative sample.

Comparing existing NCSE data on students in receipt of supports at post-primary level can be done for high and low incidence categories. Again the disability categories are broadly comparable between the two data sets with a number of notable exceptions. The national survey provides new information on the number of students with high incidence disabilities in primary school and allows for a comparison between the two data sets in relation to low incidence categories. Across most categories of disability, the NCSE data and the data collected as part of the national survey are comparable particularly for the disability category severe emotional disturbance (861 in the national survey and 852 in the NCSE data) (see Table 3.5). For other categories differences exist between the two data sets, with overall greater numbers of students being reported in

the national survey compared to NCSE data (for physical disability, ASD, specific speech and language disorder, moderate general learning disability, hearing impairment, other assessed syndrome, visual impairment and severe/profound general learning disability). For students categorised as having an emotional disturbance and multiple disabilities, however, principals reported lower numbers compared to NCSE data. Overall, however, information from principals in the national survey shows that 21,860 students had low incidence disabilities compared to 19,897 students in the NCSE data, leaving a difference of 1,963 students. It is difficult to provide definitive explanations for this, but it could be that in the national survey principals report students with milder forms of particular categories of need who would be supported under the GAM rather than by the NCSE. For example, principals report more students with visual and hearing impairments than the NCSE, but some of the students principals are accounting for may have milder hearing or visual impairments that would be supported under the GAM rather than by the NCSE. The differences in the number of students with moderate and severe/profound general learning disability may be due to different understandings among principals of the cut off points used to distinguish these levels of learning disability. As used by the DES (and the NCSE) students are placed in these categories based on scores on standardised tests of intelligence; students with moderate general learning disability are regarded as those with a score of 35 to 49 and those with severe/profound general learning disability are regarded as those with a score less than 35. Principals may be reporting students in the national survey who they feel have moderate or severe needs from an impressionistic point of view, but who may have milder general learning disabilities on the basis of the cut off points used by the DES. Students with MGLD do not appear in the NCSE figures as they are supported under the GAM.

Table 3.5: Comparing national survey and NCSE data (low incidence) at primary level

	National Survey	NCSE	Difference
Physical disability	3,431	3066	365
ASD	4,442	4231	211
Specific speech and language disorder	4,345	4180	165
Emotional disturbance	3,633	3904	-271
Multiple disabilities	1,671	1913	-242
Moderate GLD	1,121	544	577
Hearing impairment	931	692	239
Severe emotional disturbance	861	852	9
Other assessed syndrome	794	201	593
Visual impairment	486	284	202
Severe profound GLD	145	30	115
Total	**21,860**	**19,897**	**1,963**

Source: National Survey, 2011 and NCSE Annual Report 2012.

3.4 Percentage of Special Educational Needs and the Gender Gap

The study found almost one in ten (9.8 per cent) of students are reported by principals as having a special educational need at primary level and a notable gap exists between

girls and boys. Twice as many boys as girls were identified as having special educational needs with a ratio of 67 per cent boys to 33 per cent girls. This finding is consistent with O'Connor's (2007) Irish research on gender which shows that by 2002-03, boys outnumbered girls with special educational needs by almost two to one in primary (p19). Moreover, US research shows boys are 1.9 times more likely to be referred for special education than girls (Delgado & Scott, 2006; Coutinho & Oswald, 2005).

3.5 Numbers with Special Educational Needs in Third Class

In looking at third class students in Table 3.4 we find 3,430 have high incidence disabilities, 1,839 of which have specific learning difficulties, 813 have borderline mild general learning disability and 778 have mild general learning disability. Almost 12 per cent of third-class students are considered to have special educational needs, according to Irish principals. This figure is considerably lower than a recent prevalence estimate of 25 per cent of nine-year-olds that used the broader definition in the ESPEN Act (2004). In the UK Crawford and Vignoles (2010) found just over one in five students were reported as having some form of disability. They found that this proportion peaked among nine-year olds (at over 25 per cent) and that this has been steadily increasing over time (p4). As already mentioned, it is important to acknowledge that the national survey accounts only for the principal's perspective and is therefore missing the full picture: that of the pupil's teacher and parent(s). It did not seek a breakdown of third class students according to gender and so we are unable to look further at the potential differences between boys and girls within this age category in relation to special educational needs.

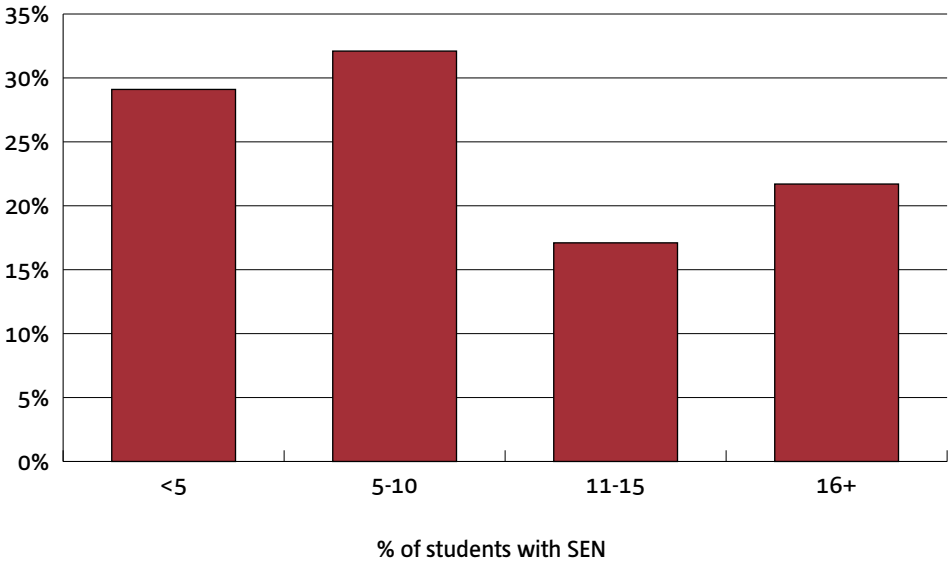
3.6 Percentage of Special Educational Needs by School Characteristics

This section will briefly describe primary school characteristics before discussing the mean percentage of students with special educational needs among the total school population by the following characteristics: school size, school type and DEIS status. At times, the breakdown of percentage categories will be illustrated in addition to the mean values.

In 2007, a DES audit examined disparities between schools in terms of newcomer students. It found each school had an average of 19 students with special educational needs (or 11 per cent of the school population had special educational needs) (DES, 2007, p42). At a general level, while this audit found no evidence of enrolment practices that gave rise for concern, it did raise wider policy questions on enrolment procedures. As a consequence, in June 2011 the Minister for Education and Skills set out a discussion paper on a regulatory framework for school enrolment. This emphasises section 15 of the Education Act which 'requires schools to make provision in their enrolment policy for students with disabilities or who have other special educational needs' (DES, 2007, p30).

As illustrated in Figure 3.1, the findings from the national survey show that almost a third of primary schools report having between 5 and 10 per cent of students with special educational needs while 29 per cent report having a prevalence of less than 5 per cent. Twenty-two per cent of primary schools have more than 15 per cent of such students and 17 per cent are in the second largest category (11-15 per cent).

Figure 3.1: Percentage of schools with different proportions of pupils with special educational needs (primary)



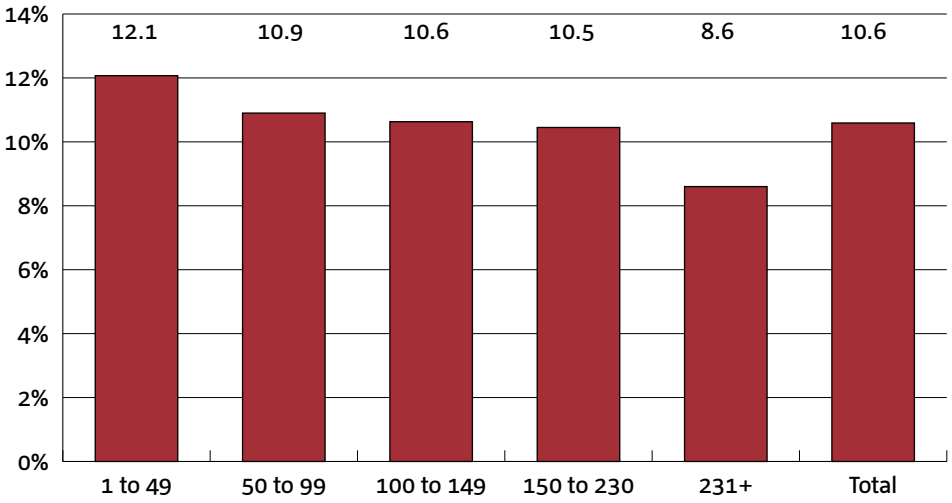
Note: Base is all primary schools (n=2989)[16]

Catholic schools are the most frequent denomination with nine in ten reporting this as their religious ethos. Almost 6 per cent of schools are Church of Ireland, while only 2 per cent are multidenominational. Only a very small number (0.9 per cent) are an 'other' religion. In terms of the denominational breakdown by average number of students with a special educational need, multidenominational schools have the highest average (18 per cent) when compared to Catholic and Church of Ireland schools (both 11 per cent). 'Other' denominational schools have a special educational needs prevalence of 8 per cent. Additionally, 4.5 per cent of schools have Gaelscoil status and there is no difference in average prevalence between Gaelscoil and non-Gaelscoil schools (both 11 per cent). Darmody *et al* (2012) in their recent study on school sector variation among primary schools found that in terms of the proportion of students with learning difficulties, differences were across individual schools rather than between school sectors, such as Catholic, minority faith and multidenominational.

When we consider special educational needs prevalence and school size in primary schools, we find higher prevalence in smaller schools than larger schools. As Figure 3.2 illustrates, the average school percentage of special educational needs declines as school size increases. In schools with one to 49 students, the mean percentage is 12 per cent and this reduced to fewer than 9 per cent in schools with more than 231 students.

16 The n used in the analysis in this section is slightly less than the weighted total of 3,050 schools described in Table 1.1. Sixty-one schools have been dropped from the analysis due to concerns about the incomplete nature of the data provided.

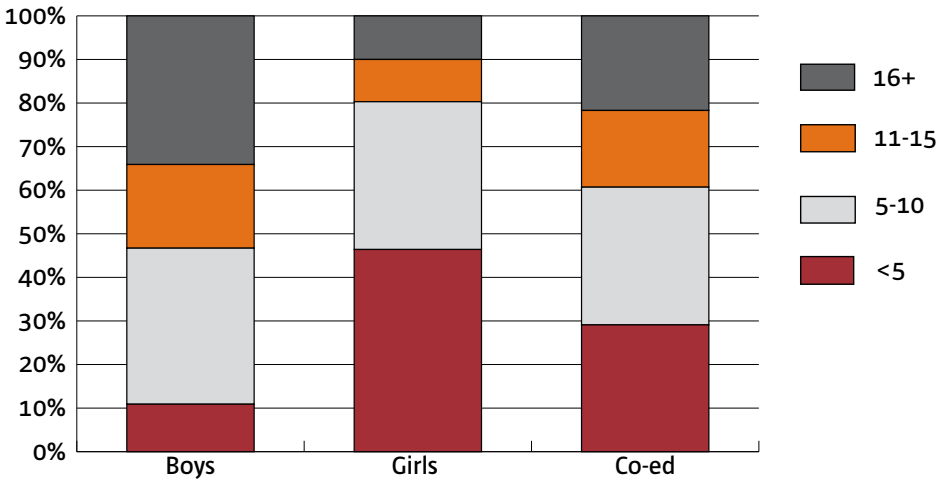
Figure 3.2: Average percentage of students with special educational needs by school size (primary)



Note: Base is all primary schools (n=2989)

Focussing now on gender and average special educational needs prevalence, higher prevalence is found in all-boys' (14 per cent) and co-educational schools (11 per cent) than all-girls' schools (7 per cent). Additionally, when the gender mix of primary schools is examined by the different levels of prevalence (less than 5 per cent, between 5-10 per cent, between 11-15 per cent and over 15 per cent), the gender differentials in school type can be clearly observed in Figure 3.3. Over a third of boys' schools in the country report a prevalence of special educational needs greater than 15 per cent, while only one in ten girls' schools have similar levels. Interestingly, almost half (46 per cent) of girls' schools have a prevalence rate of less than 5 per cent in contrast to only 11 per cent of boys' schools. It is clear that gender differentials are significant in prevalence results both in terms of special educational needs levels reported for boys and girls, but so too for special educational needs levels of schools of different gender compositions.

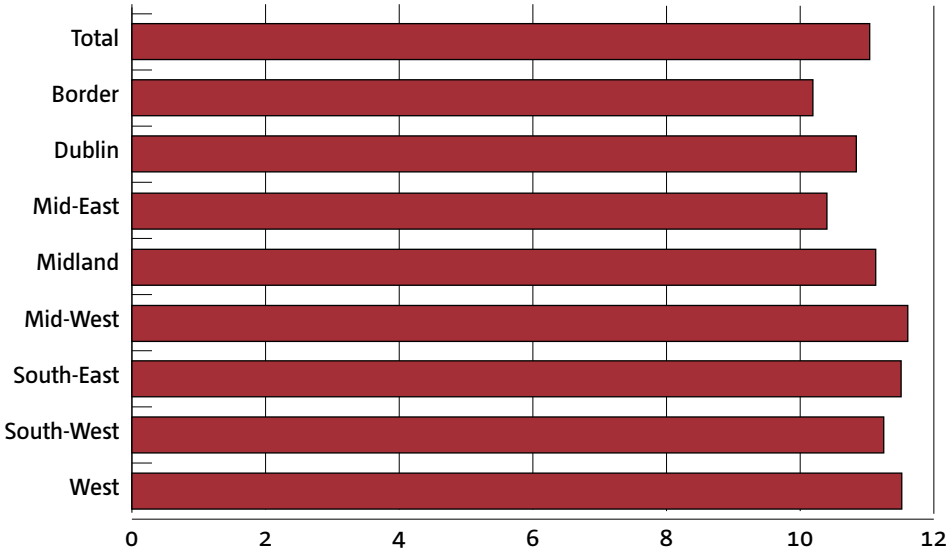
Figure 3.3: Special educational needs prevalence levels by gender mix (primary)



Note: Base is all primary schools (n=2989)

In looking at geographical location and special educational needs prevalence, there is little variation between regions. It can be seen that the mid-west counties (Limerick city and county, Clare and North Tipperary) have the highest average prevalence (almost 12 per cent) followed closely by the west and southeast counties (both 11.5 per cent). The midlands report a mean of just over 11 per cent prevalence while Dublin is just short of 11 per cent. The mid-east and border counties have an average of 10 per cent of students with special educational needs.

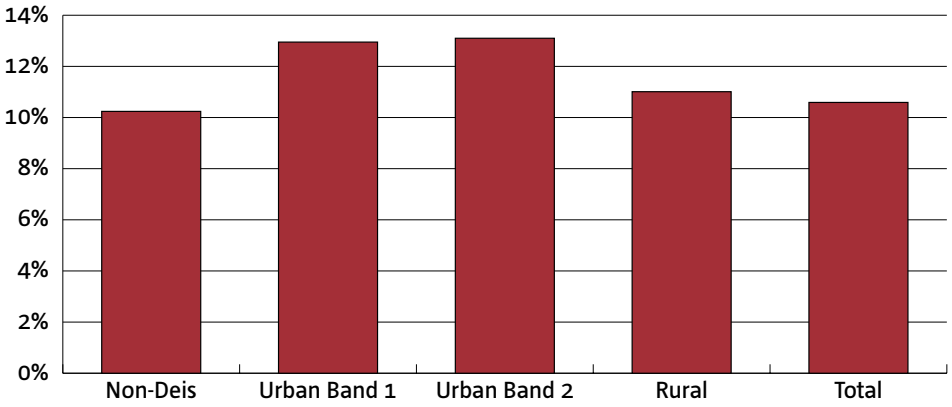
Figure 3.4: Average percentage of students with special educational needs by geographical location (primary)



Note: Base is all primary schools (n=2989)

In terms of DEIS status, there was some variation among schools who participate in the scheme and those that do not. Urban Band 1 schools (the most disadvantaged) reported a mean special educational needs prevalence of 13 per cent, as did Urban Band 2 schools. Rural DEIS schools had a lower average of students with special educational needs (11 per cent). Schools not participating in the DEIS scheme had the lowest average of these students (10 per cent).

Figure 3.5: Average percentage of students with special educational needs by DEIS status (primary)



Note: Base is all primary schools (n=2989)

The analysis so far has shown the relationship between a number of variables and prevalence of special educational needs. A number of school characteristics can occur simultaneously, however, and the influence of one factor may be occuring due to the impact of another. To understand the processes shaping special educational needs prevalence, we therefore 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 the other factors are taken into account. To see whether these findings are significant in predicting high levels of special educational needs prevalence, a logistic regression analysis was carried out. In this analysis, a high prevalence is defined as schools having more than 15 per cent of students with special educational needs. A low prevalence is defined as schools having less than 15 per cent of such students. Alternative models looked at the predictors of increasing special educational needs prevalence, using scale and ordinal measures rather than the 15 per cent cut-off and similar results were found. The results of the logistic regression models predicting special educational needs prevalence above 15 per cent are presented in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6: Logistic regression models of the association between special educational needs prevalence and school characteristics (compared to base categories: non-DEIS, fewer than 50 students and girls' primary).

	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	-1.345***	-1.974***
School characteristics		
DEIS (ref: non-DEIS)		
• Urban Band 1	.454*	.674**
• Urban Band 2	.421¬	.590*
• Rural	.171	-.046
School size (ref: <50)		
• 50-99 students		-.225¬
• 100-149 students		-.441**
• 150-230 students		-.572***
• 231+ students		-1.165***
School type (ref: girls' primary)		
• Boys' primary		1.798***
• Co-educational		1.055**
N=2428 schools (unweighted data)		

Note: ***p<001; **p<.01; *p<.05; ¬p<.10 .

Results can be interpreted as follows: positive coefficients indicate that those schools are more likely to have high special educational needs levels, while negative coefficients indicate lower likelihood, compared to the reference or base group. For example, Urban Band 1 schools are significantly more likely to have high special educational needs levels (the likelihood of getting this difference by chance would be less than 1 in 100) than non-DEIS schools. However, Rural DEIS schools do not differ from non-DEIS schools in their probability of high special educational needs levels. Single sex boys' schools are

substantially more likely to have high special educational needs levels and the likelihood of this result by chance would be less than 1 in 1000.

As is clear from Table 3.6 DEIS Urban Band 1 and Urban Band 2 schools are significantly more likely to have a higher prevalence of special educational needs. It can also be seen that increasing school size reduces the probability of higher levels of prevalence, while school type is also a significant predictor – compared to girls' primary schools, co-educational primary schools are more likely to have high levels of special educational needs while boys' primary schools are substantially more likely. Moreover the increase in DEIS coefficients with the addition of measures for school size and type suggests these variables increase the differential between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. These results have important policy implications – particularly for the dominance of high levels of special educational needs in DEIS schools, small schools and boys' schools. It raises the important question of whether these findings of high prevalence in certain schools are due to compositional factors (such as student sex and social profile, school size, disadvantaged status) or the identification processes at play in determining this pupil cohort within these schools (as highlighted in McCoy *et al*, 2012a; Banks *et al*, 2012).

3.7 Post-primary School Prevalence: Principal Reporting

Table 3.7 illustrates the breakdown of students in each category of high and low incidence disabilities for the entire school population as well as for first-years. It can be assumed, unlike at primary level, that these students have received a formal assessment in diagnosing their special educational needs. The reason for collecting data on first-year students is due to the longitudinal component of the study whereby it is intended to track a sample of first-year students with special educational needs over time.

At post-primary level, 30,052 students are reported as having a special educational need in the 2011-12 academic year. In terms of high incidence disabilities, there are 18,086 students, of which 3,976 have borderline MGLD, 3,844 have MGLD and 10,266 have specific learning difficulty. Similar to primary level, it is interesting to note that the numbers for borderline GLD and MGLD are considerably lower than those for specific learning difficulty. An important consideration relates to the transfer of students from primary to post-primary levels. As one stakeholder remarks in the recent Prevalence Report by Banks and McCoy (2011), when students with MGLD who have not been identified at primary level transfer to second level, they are not entitled to resources and 'they have to start at that point' (p32). The introduction of a new, through-put model at post-primary level may alter this transition as they will no longer need an assessment to receive supports at post-primary level (see circular DES 0010/2012).

A total of 11,966 students have a low incidence disability at post-primary level and, when it is broken down, we can see that emotional disturbance is the most common (2,643 students), followed by physical disability (2,237 students) and ASD (2,165 students). There are 1,289 students reported as having a specific speech and language disorder, 1,163 have multiple disabilities and 617 young people have hearing impairments. Severe emotional disturbance is reported among 506 students, and the same number experience moderate general learning disabilities. In terms of visual impairment, 350

students are affected while the least common disability is severe/profound general learning disability (64 students).

Table 3.7 Proportion of students with special educational needs by disability category (post-primary)

Type of special educational need	Total no of Students	%	Total no of students	%		No of first year students	%
	Boys		Girls		Total		
High Incidence							
Borderline MGLD	2,214	11.32	1,762	16.80	3,976	704	12.92
MGLD	2,206	11.28	1,638	15.61	3,844	622	11.41
Specific learning difficulty	6,596	33.72	3,670	34.99	10,266	1,883	34.56
High Incidence Total	11,016		7,070		18,086	3,209	
Low Incidence							
Physical disability	1,638	8.37	599	5.71	2,237	432	7.93
Hearing impairment	330	1.69	287	2.74	617	94	1.72
Visual impairment	196	1.00	154	1.47	350	58	1.06
Emotional disturbance	1,962	10.03	681	6.49	2,643	400	7.34
Severe emotional disturbance	392	2.00	114	1.09	506	88	1.61
Moderate GLD	298	1.52	208	1.98	506	71	1.30
Severe profound GLD	42	0.21	22	0.21	64	15	0.28
Specific speech and language disorder	794	4.06	495	4.72	1,289	297	5.45
Autism/ASD	1,805	9.23	360	3.43	2,165	466	8.55
Multiple disabilities	846	4.32	317	3.02	1,163	236	4.33
Other assessed syndrome	243	1.24	183	1.74	426	84	1.54
Low Incidence Total	8,546		3420		11,966	2,241	
Total	**19,562**	**100.0**	**10,490**	**100.0**	**30,052**	**5,450**	**100.0**

Note: N=699.

Note: Data are grossed to population totals. The percentage figures do not differ largely using the unweighted data given the highly representative sample.

Comparing national survey data on special educational needs levels in schools and existing NCSE data, Table 3.8 shows that greater numbers are reported as having disabilities across all categories in the national survey (see Table 3.8). This is particularly evident for those with a specific learning difficulty, where principals in the national survey reported 10,266 students compared to NCSE records which show that only 3,531 students are in receipt of supports under this category. A possible explanation for this may be that principals are reporting students with a milder specific learning disability who receive learning support at post-primary level, rather than resource teaching support for high and low incidence disabilities through the NCSE. Similarly principals report a much higher number of students with 'assessed syndrome' than the NCSE records show are supported by the NCSE. This may be because they are reporting on

students with Down Syndrome here, who do not receive resource teaching support via the NCSE.

Table 3.8: Comparing national survey and NCSE data (high and low incidence) at post-primary

	National Survey	NCSE	Difference
Borderline mild general learning disabilities	3,976	3,484	492
Mild general learning disabilities	3,844	2,995	849
Specific learning difficulty	10,266	3,531	6,735
High incidence total	18,086	10,010	8,076
Physical disability	2,237	1,945	292
Hearing impairment	617	407	210
Visual impairment	350	216	134
Emotional disturbance	2,643	2,613	30
Severe emotional disturbance	506	428	78
Moderate GLD	506	247	259
Severe profound GLD	64	4	60
Specific speech and language disorder	1,289	826	463
ASD	2,165	1759	406
Multiple disabilities	1,163	688	475
Other assessed syndrome	426	85	341
Low Incidence Total	11,966	9218	2,748
Total	**30,052**	**19228**	**10,824**

Source: National Survey, 2011 and NCSE Annual Report 2012.

3.8 Percentage of Special Educational Needs and the Gender Gap

Data from the national survey shows that nearly 9 per cent of the total post-primary population have been defined as having special educational needs. This supports the DES audit findings (2007) that found that at this level the average percentage is 9 per cent. As with primary schools, boys are once again more likely than girls to be identified with a special educational need. They account for 65 per cent compared to 35 per cent of girls. Boys are therefore almost 86 per cent more likely than girls to be diagnosed with any type of special educational need. More specifically, we can see there are 3,946 more boys than girls identified with high incidence disabilities as well as there being almost 5,126 more boys with a low incidence disability than girls. As highlighted by studies internationally (Delgado and Scott, 2006; Coutinho and Oswald, 2005) these findings raise many questions about the possible factors influencing this apparent gender differential in special education.

3.9 Numbers with Special Educational Needs in First Year

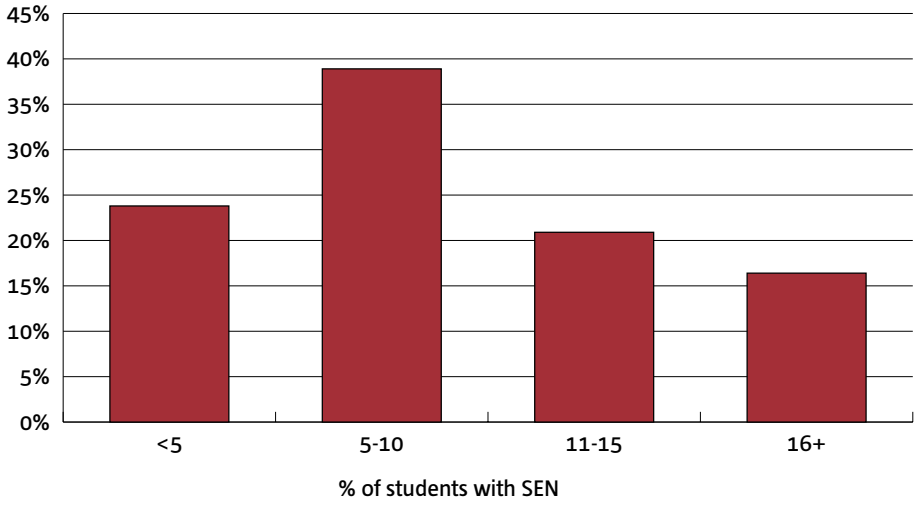
Eight per cent of first-year students in mainstream post-primary schools had been assessed with a special educational need in the 2011-12 academic year, according to the National Survey: 3,209 reported as having high incidence disabilities: 1,883 with

a specific learning difficulty; 704 with borderline MGLD and 622 with MGLD. In terms of low incidence disabilities, the most common one reported is ASD (466 students) followed very closely by physical disability (432 students) (See Table 3.7). It can be seen that 400 first-years have emotional disturbance and 297 students have a specific speech and language disorder. Two-hundred-and-thirty-six students had multiple disabilities, 94 had hearing impairment while slightly fewer, 88 students, had severe emotional disturbance. The three least common disabilities are: other assessed syndrome (84 students), moderate general learning disability (71) and severe profound general learning disability (15). As with the primary survey, information was not requested on the gender breakdown of first-year students and so we cannot delve further into the gender composition of this group.

3.10 Percentage of students with Special Educational Needs by School Characteristics

This section will mostly look at the average percentage of students with special educational needs by the following school characteristics: school size, school type, geographical region and DEIS status. At times the categorical breakdown of special educational needs percentages will be illustrated to clarify the findings. As illustrated in Figure 3.6, in this national survey almost 39 per cent of schools have prevalence levels of 5-10 per cent, followed by nearly a quarter of schools with under five per cent. Twenty per cent of schools have 11-15 per cent while just over 16 per cent of schools have more than 15 per cent of students with special educational needs.

Figure 3.6: Percentage of schools with different proportions of pupils with special educational needs (post-primary)



Note: Base is all post-primary schools (n=699)[17]

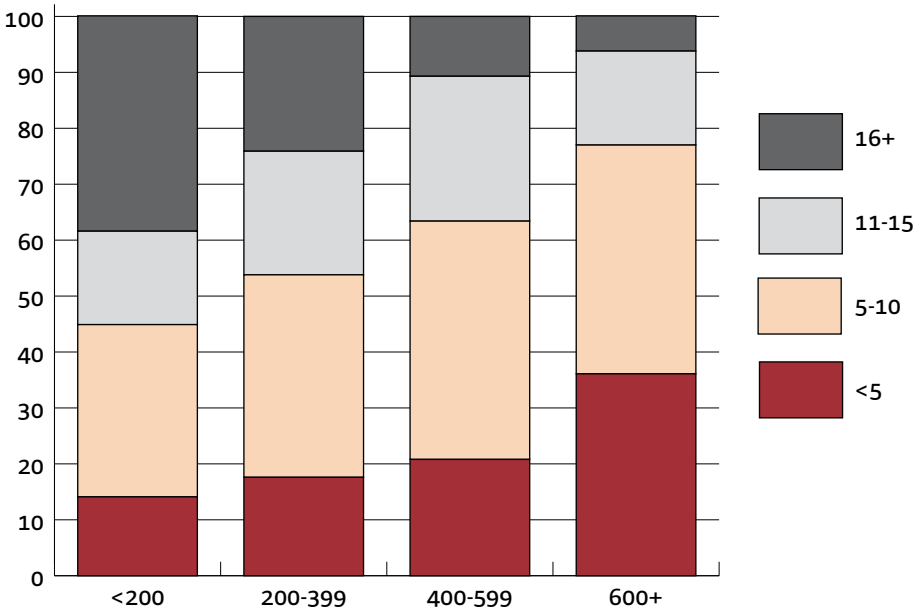
As Figure 3.7 shows, in looking at the mean percentage of students with special educational needs in post-primary schools, it is higher for smaller than larger schools (where the mean percentage is 14 per cent for those with fewer than 200 students

17 The n used in the analysis in this section is slightly less than the weighted total of 703 schools described in Table 1.2. Four schools have been dropped from the analysis due concerns about the incomplete nature of the data provided.

in comparison to seven per cent for schools with over 600). There is a paucity of research into the relationship between school size and provision for those with special educational needs. Potential reasons for this apparent disparity might be due to school type and regional distribution. The influence of these factors will be examined later in this chapter.

Given this finding, we looked at school type by a categorical breakdown of prevalence. As can be seen in Figure 3.7, of schools with fewer than 200 students, nearly four in ten have a prevalence greater than 15 per cent. This contrasts starkly with only six per cent of schools with 600 or more students. Likewise at the other extreme, 14 per cent of small schools have less than five per cent prevalence of special educational needs in comparison to 36 per cent of the largest schools. Once again, this provides important empirical evidence to warrant the examination of the system of resource allocation in post-primary schools.

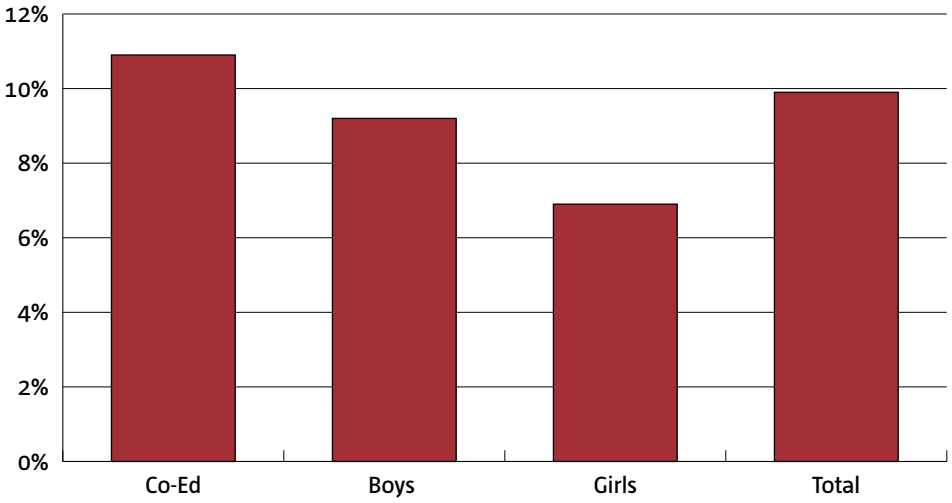
Figure 3.7: Special educational needs prevalence levels by school size (post-primary)



Note: Base is all post-primary schools (n=699)

Much of the research on the role of school social mix and special needs identification is situated within the broader context of lower educational attainment and school quality in disadvantaged areas (McCoy *et al*, forthcoming; Lupton, 2004). As described in Figure 3.8, the highest mean percentage of students with special educational needs is found in co-educational schools (11 per cent), followed closely by all-boys' secondary schools (9 per cent). All-girls' secondary schools have a mean prevalence rate of almost 7 per cent. The gender pattern is similar to primary schools, with boys' schools having higher levels than girls'.

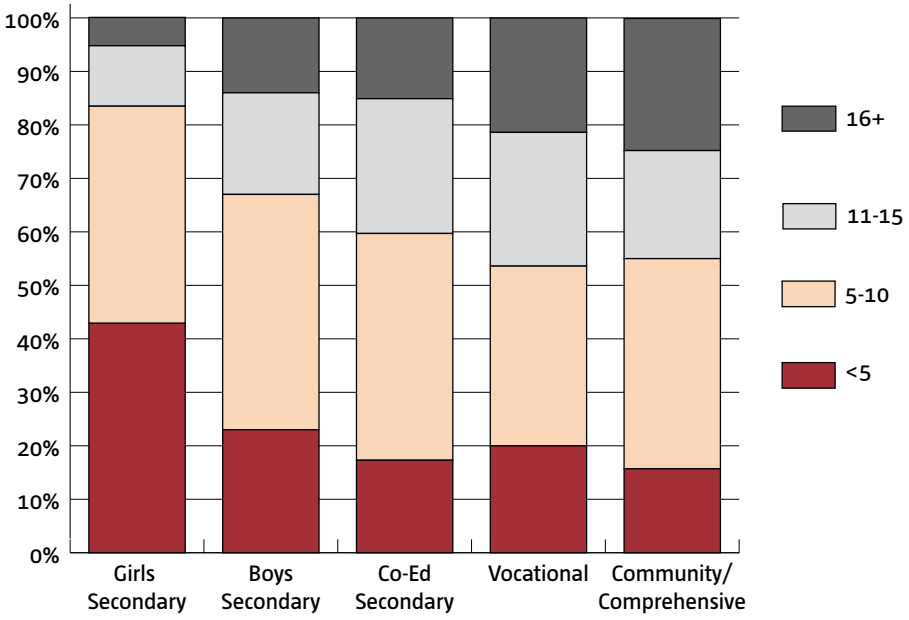
Figure 3.8: Average percentage of students with special educational needs by school type (post-primary)



Note: Base is all post-primary schools (n=699)

A more detailed breakdown of school type and special educational needs (Figure 3.9) shows that of girls' secondary schools, 43 per cent have the lowest percentage (less than 5 per cent) while only 5 per cent of girls' schools are in the highest quartile (more than 15 per cent) of prevalence. This can be contrasted with boys' secondary schools, 14 per cent of which are in the highest category. This increases further with co-educational schools (15 per cent), vocational (21 per cent) and reaches its highest among community/ comprehensive schools with nearly one quarter of these schools having a prevalence rate greater than 15 per cent.

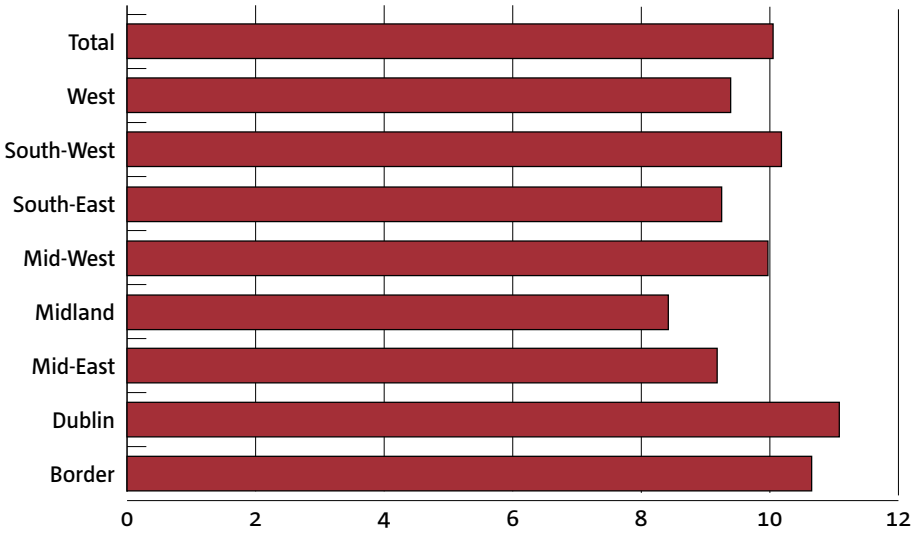
Figure 3.9: Special educational needs prevalence levels by school type (post-primary)



Note: Base is all post-primary schools (n=699)

In terms of region, Dublin has the highest mean percentage of special educational needs prevalence (11 per cent) followed closely by the border counties (10.6 per cent). The midland counties reported the lowest mean prevalence levels (8 per cent).

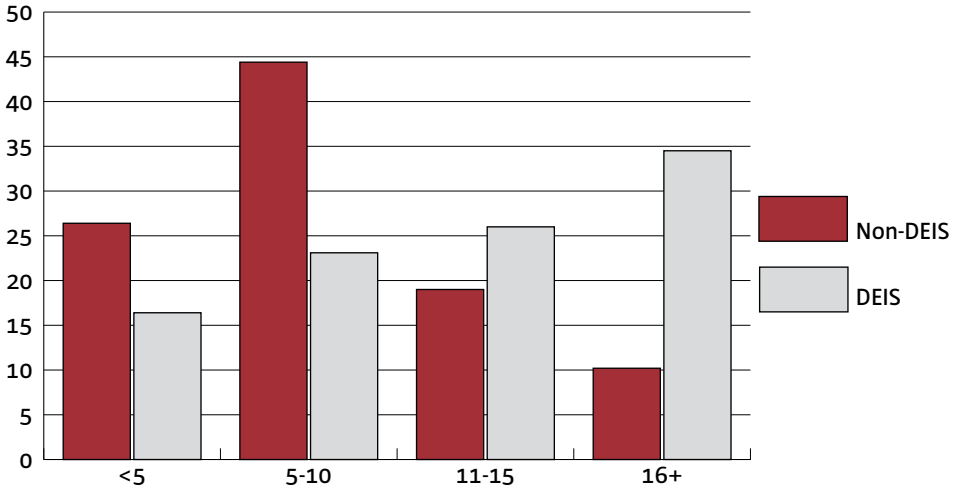
Figure 3.10: Mean percentage of special educational needs by region (post-primary)



Note: Base is all post-primary schools (n=699)

Lastly, when looking at average prevalence of special educational needs by DEIS status, it is clear that DEIS schools have higher levels of these students (14 per cent) when compared to non-DEIS schools (8.5 per cent). DEIS schools have over a third of students in the highest category of special educational needs (more than 15 per cent), followed by 26 per cent in the 11-15 per cent category. Slightly less, 23 per cent of DEIS schools, have 5-10 per cent prevalence while only 16 per cent of DEIS schools have the smallest levels (less than 5 per cent prevalence). For non-DEIS schools the pattern is different. In total, 44 per cent of non-disadvantaged schools have 5-10 per cent special educational needs prevalence, followed by over a quarter with less than 5 per cent. A further 19 per cent of non-DEIS schools have 11-15 per cent prevalence while only one in ten have the highest prevalence (over 15 per cent). These findings support the literature finding that disadvantaged schools have a higher proportion of students with special educational needs. Common features of these schools can include a range of abilities, a charged emotional environment as well as additional learning needs among the lowest attainers (Lupton, 2004; Thrupp, 1999).

Figure 3.11: Percentage of schools with different special educational needs levels by DEIS status (post-primary)



Note: Base is all post-primary schools (n=699)

To test whether these findings are significant factors in predicting special educational needs prevalence, a logistic regression analysis was carried out. In this analysis, a high prevalence is defined as schools having more than 15 per cent of students with special educational needs. A low prevalence is defined as schools having less than 15 per cent of such students. Alternative methods of specifying the relationship produced similar findings which supported the results outlined in Table 3.9.

Table 3.9: Logistic Regression models of the association between special educational needs prevalence and school characteristics.

	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	-2.923***	-1.940**
School characteristics		
School type (ref: girls' secondary)		
• Boys' secondary	1.116*	1.332***
• Co-educational secondary	1.180*	1.155*
• Vocational	1.537**	.682
• Community/comprehensive	1.749***	1.857**
School size (ref: <200)		
• 200-399 students		-.798*
• 400-599 students		-1.799***
• 600+ students		-2.135***
DEIS (ref: non-DEIS)		1.332*
N=498 (unweighted data)		

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

The models in Table 3.9 are predicting the probability of post-primary schools having a high prevalence of special educational needs. In the first model, it is clear that school type has a significant effect on increased prevalence, in particular for community/ comprehensive and vocational schools. Model 2 adds in two additional measures:

school size and DEIS status. Interestingly, when these factors are added, vocational schools lose their significant effect on prevalence. This reflects the dominance of DEIS schools in the vocational sector, in that once account is taken of DEIS status, vocational schools no longer have a greater probability of high special educational needs prevalence. So while at first glance a big difference appears across school types for prevalence, when controls are put in place for size and DEIS status the results change. It would therefore appear that DEIS status is partly underpinning the prevalence of special educational needs at post-primary level. In addition, single-sex boys' schools and community/comprehensive schools have higher prevalence rates once we take account of DEIS status and school size. Size is also significant in that smaller schools have a significantly higher prevalence of special educational needs, taking into account other school characteristics.

The analysis also tested the impact of school patronage on prevalence along with regional location. These factors did not emerge as significantly influencing prevalence levels, once school size, type and DEIS status were taken into account.

3.11 Conclusion

Chapter 3 has described the special educational needs prevalence rate for primary and post-primary schools in Ireland, as reported by principals in the national survey. Findings suggest caution is needed when analysing prevalence based on principal reporting alone and that the findings are based on DES categories of disability. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the authors acknowledge some limitations associated with relying on principal-only reports and variation may exist in interpretations of DES categories of disability. We have also urged caution when looking at the figures for high incidence disabilities, at both primary and post-primary levels, due to the absence of formalised assessments of borderline mild general learning disabilities, mild general learning disabilities and specific learning difficulty. This lack of assessment may also have a knock-on effect on post-primary schools in that such students are not being detected when they make the transition to second-level. Although the national survey relies on principal reporting and is based on predetermined DES categories of disability (therefore, arguably missing the more comprehensive understanding of prevalence in line with the EPSEN Act, 2004), the data yield a useful and comprehensive breakdown of the numbers of students per disability category within mainstream primary and post-primary schools in Ireland.

Some of the most interesting data are:

- A comprehensive breakdown of the numbers of students in each category of disability. This raises many important questions, such as the link between prevalence rate and special class designation. It can be seen at primary level, for example (Chapter 5), that the most common special class designation is for ASD, when this in fact appears to be the category of need for only one in ten students with special educational needs.
- The gender differential in both sectors is very apparent, with boys outnumbering girls in all categories of disability. At primary, boys are twice as likely to be categorised with special educational need while at post-primary level they are 86

per cent more likely than girls to be reported as having a special educational need of some description.

- For both primary and post-primary sectors, smaller schools report higher levels of students with special educational needs. When other factors (such as disadvantaged status and school type) were controlled in a multivariate model, the size effect remained, which makes it a significant finding. Since there is little research to date into the relationship between school size and special educational needs prevalence, it is difficult to know what is causing this effect. One possible reason might be the easier detection and assessment of students in smaller schools, whereby given the lower numbers of students, children and young people's difficulties can be picked up more easily. Parental choice may also be a factor and it is possible that smaller schools are more orientated towards providing for students with special educational needs, thus attracting larger numbers of these students.
- DEIS status was strongly associated with high special educational needs prevalence for primary and post-primary schools in Ireland. For post-primary schools, it appears it is a more important predictor than school type.

4 Provision for Students with Special Educational Needs

4.1 Introduction

Following on from Chapter 3, which provides an overview of the levels of need in Irish primary and post-primary schools, this chapter focuses on provision for students with special educational needs. Existing data from the NCSE and DES show that for the year 2012-13, 9,950 learning support and resource teaching posts were provided for these students in mainstream schools. Of this, the NCSE allocated 5,625 for those with low incidence disabilities and the remainder were used under the GAM for learning support, students with high incidence disabilities and those with English as an additional language (EAL) in that year (NCSE, 2013a, p55). In addition schools have 10,575[18] whole time equivalent (WTE) special needs assistant (SNA) posts to assist in the support of students with care needs (DES, 2010), almost 700 teachers in special classes attached to mainstream schools (NCSE, 2013a, p55), and 402 Home School Liaison Coordinator posts (NEWB, 2013) and 47 staff working for the visiting teacher service (NCSE, 2013a, p130).

The national survey builds on existing data by providing detailed information on the various ways in which students are supported, including the type of support staff working in schools and the different types of class arrangements available including provision of special classes. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the extent to which the scale and type of provision for students with special educational needs varies across different school contexts. Part of this analysis examines why some schools do not have special classes.

The chapter is divided into three sections: the first examines how levels of staff resources vary by school characteristics and the extent to which staff allocations vary by schools with and without special classes. The second section focuses on class arrangements offered by different schools including provision of special classes. The final section examines factors influencing special class provision. Using descriptive and multivariate statistics, we examine the factors influencing special class provision using a range of school characteristics such as DEIS status, school size, school type and gender mix, prevalence of special educational needs and proximity to other schools with special classes or special schools. This section also examines why some schools have no special classes with a view to understanding principals' opinions of special class versus mainstream provision and inclusion more generally.

4.2 Staff Resources for Students with Special Educational Needs at Primary Level

This section uses data from all primary principals on staff resources for their students with special educational needs. The number of staff working in special education in a school and the time they provide is, however, often directly related to special educational

18 This figure includes SNAs in mainstream and special schools.

needs prevalence or number of hours allocated to individual students based on their assessed needs.

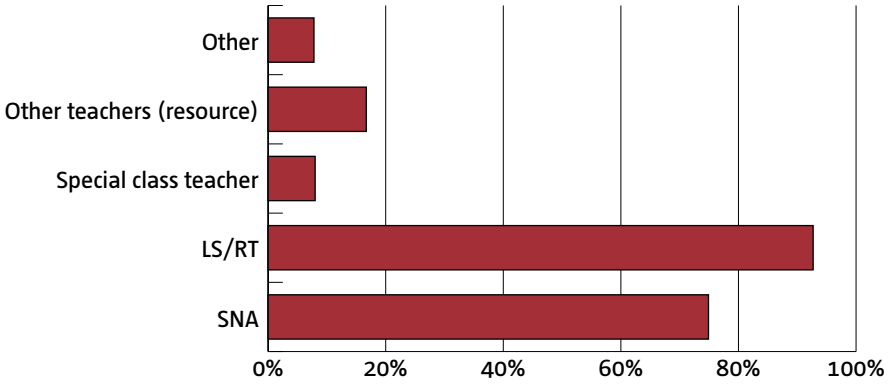
Using data from the national survey, Table 4.1 allows for a more detailed examination of resource staff by providing a breakdown of full-time and less than full-time staff. Findings show that the most common form of staff resource used for primary students with special educational needs are the learning support/resource teachers (LS/RTs) and SNAs. At the time of the national survey 6,040 SNAs worked in primary schools, the majority of which (4,449) were full-time. Primary principals reported having 7,035 LS/RTs, which was made up of 4,611 full-time staff and 2,424 staff working less than full-time. The remainder of resource staff were special class teachers (423) and other teachers delivering resource hours to students with special educational needs (349). The 'Other' category is made up primarily of other personnel with a specialist role available to assist students and includes guidance councillors and special class teachers not already accounted for in the table. Principals were also asked to provide information about other resource staff, such as the visiting teacher service and home school community liaison (HSCL) who provide supports to students but are not necessarily working as staff in the school (not included in Table 4.1). As mentioned above, there are just 47 visiting teachers (NCSE, 2013a, p130). The national survey shows that 639 principals had access to a visiting teacher of the hearing/visually impaired. Similarly, HSCL coordinators are provided on a full-time or shared basis between schools and serving teachers are deployed to undertake full-time home school liaison duties (DES, 2013 http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/DEIS-Delivering-Equality-of-Opportunity-in-Schools-/si_hscl_guidelines.pdf). Provided to all DEIS Urban Band 1, Urban Band 2 and DEIS post-primary schools, 287 principals reported having access to a HSCL coordinator. Overall, resource staff are made up of just under 60 per cent teacher resources and 41 per cent non-teacher resources (9,096 teacher resource staff and 6,326 non-teacher resource staff).

Table 4.1: Total number of staff working with students with special educational needs at primary level

	Total Full Time	Total Less Than Full Time	Total n
SNA	4,449	1,591	6,040
LS/RT	4,611	2,424	7,035
Special class teacher	381	42	423
Other teachers (resource)	201	451	652
Other	201	148	349

Figure 4.1 shows 75 per cent of schools reported having one or more SNAs and almost the full population (93 per cent) reported having one or more LS/RTs. This suggests that 7 per cent of primary schools have no LS/RT roles, a figure that is somewhat surprising given that all schools are entitled to learning support services (Circular Sp Ed 02/05, Circular 0013/2013). This finding may reflect some confusion among principals about the question and responses may vary according to whether the LS/RT post is solely based at the schools or whether principals have access to this support for periods during the school week. In addition to SNA and LS/RT provision, 17 per cent of schools reported having other teachers involved in delivering resource hours to students.

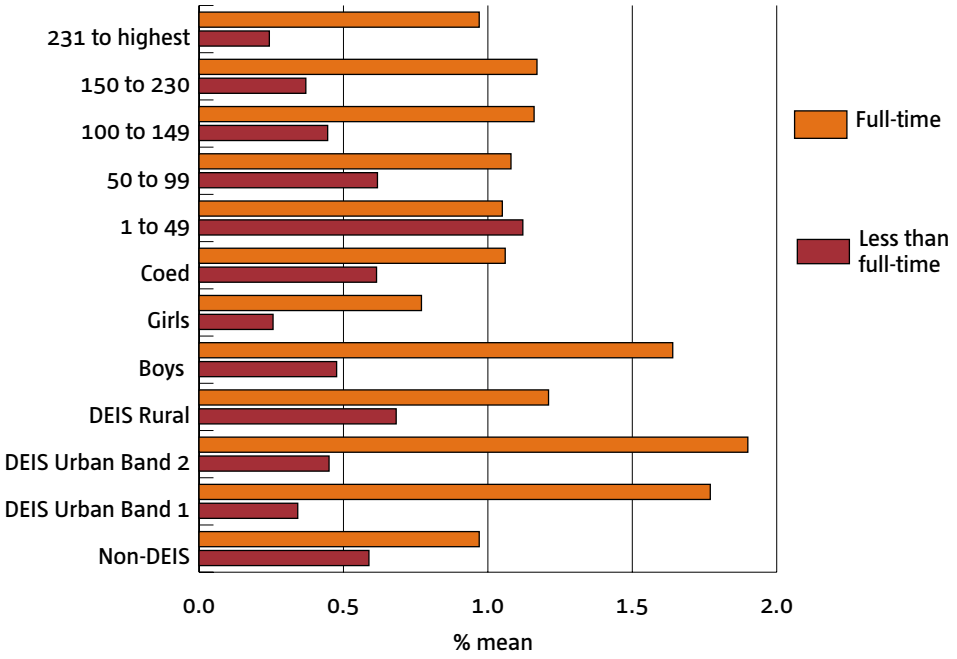
Figure 4.1: Staff resources at primary (full and part time) (full population)



Note: Base is all primary schools (n=3050).

Although information was sought about a range of staff resources (see Table 4.1 above), the next section focuses primarily on the provision of SNAs and LS/RTs. Using this data it is possible to examine differences in staff resource levels across different school types but also compare levels of provision between schools with and without special classes. Figures 4.2 and 4.3 examine the average numbers of SNA and LS/RTs as a proportion of school enrolment as per the survey. Here we examine variation in provision by focusing on school characteristics such as school size, gender mix and DEIS status. Including both full- and part-time staff, Figure 4.2 shows that Urban Band 1 and Urban Band 2 DEIS schools have higher full-time SNA allocations for students with special educational needs compared to non-DEIS schools and rural schools. There is an average of 1.9 SNAs in Urban Band 2 DEIS schools compared to an average of one SNA in non-DEIS schools. Conversely the provision of SNAs working part-time appears to be more common in non-DEIS and rural schools. Rural DEIS schools have an average of 1.21 SNAs working less than full-time compared to just 0.3 SNAs in Urban Band 1 DEIS schools. The school's gender mix also appears to influence the provision of full-time SNAs with boys' schools having greater numbers of SNAs compared to coeducational and girls' schools (mean of 1.64 full-time SNAs compared to 1.06 in coeducational and 0.77 in girls' schools). School size does not appear to influence the average number of full-time SNAs but does influence the average number of part-time SNAs with larger schools less likely to have SNAs working in a less than full time capacity compared to smaller schools (there is an average of 0.97 part-time SNAs in larger schools compared to 1.05 part-time SNAs in small schools).

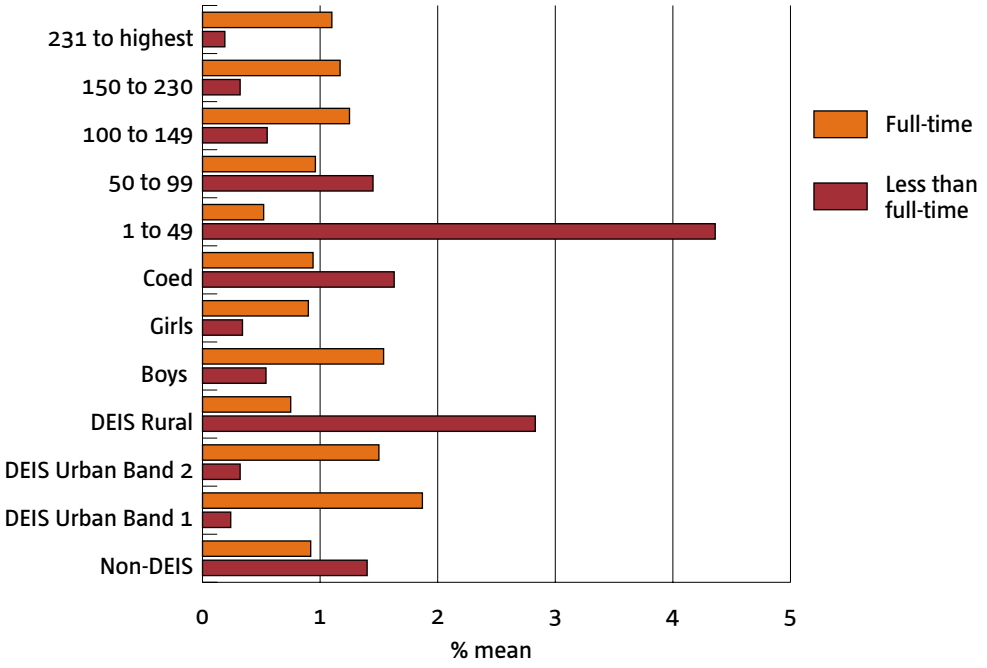
Figure 4.2: Average number of Special Needs Assistants by school characteristics (full population)



Note: Base is all primary schools (n=3050).

The provision of LS/RTs across primary schools is similar to SNA provision in that Urban Band 1 and Urban Band 2 DEIS schools are more likely to have higher average numbers of full-time LS/RTs compared to Rural DEIS and non-DEIS schools (Figure 4.3). Instead, part-time provision of LS/RTs is far more likely in Rural DEIS and non-DEIS settings (average of 2.83 part-time LS/RTs in Rural DEIS compared to 0.93 in Urban Band 1 schools). The gender-mix of the school also appears to influence staff resources with boys' and coeducational schools having higher full- and part-time LS/RT allocations than girls' schools; in particular, for part-time LS/RT staff the allocations are highest in coeducational settings. In relation to school size, smaller schools appear to have higher allocations of LS/RTs working less than full-time. Schools with between one to 49 students have an average of 4.36 part-time LS/RTs compared to an average of 0.19 in schools of over 231 students. In terms of full-time LS/RTs, school size does not appear to influence provision with the exception of the smallest size category where there is an average of 0.52 LS/RTs working full-time.

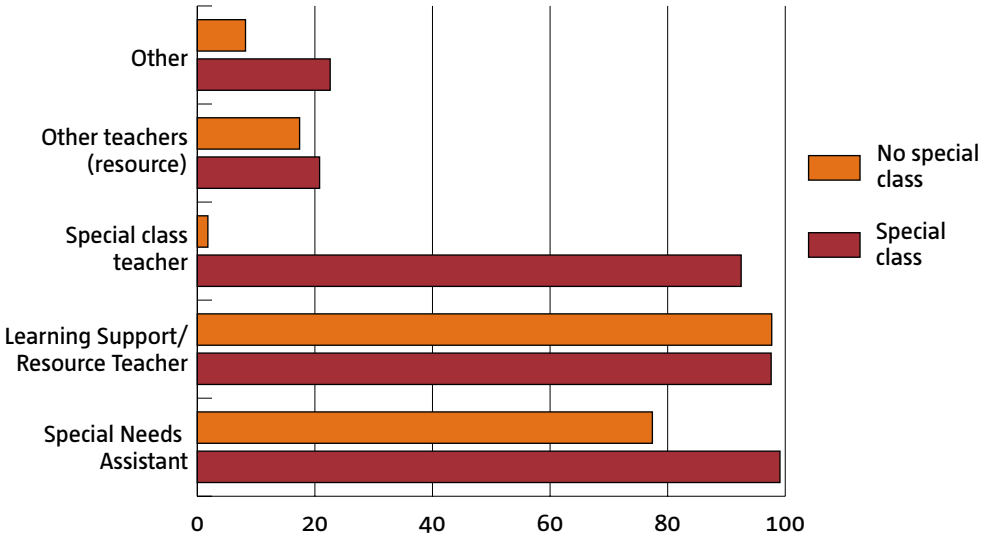
Figure 4.3: Average number of Learning Support/Resource Teachers at primary by school characteristics (full population)



Note: Base is all primary schools (n=3050).

Figure 4.4 shows differences exist in resource staff allocations between schools with and without special classes. Most special classes have a baseline level of SNA support (see Table 2.3) so it is perhaps not surprising that nearly all schools with special classes have some form of SNA resources compared to 79 per cent of schools without special classes.

Figure 4.4: Staff resources at primary for schools with and without special classes



Note: Base is all primary schools (n=3050). Multiple responses allowed. Differences are significant at p <.001.

4.3 Class Arrangements for Students with Special Educational Needs at Primary Level

In addition to staff resources for students with special educational needs, the national survey sought information on the types of class arrangements available for them. By examining the extent to which different class arrangements are adopted, it allows for a deeper understanding of the types of special needs provision in mainstream settings. Principals received a list of options which included:

A. 'Special classes for at least some pupils with special educational needs' (main learning environment);

B. 'Pupils with SEN taught in mainstream classes with additional teaching resources in the mainstream classroom (eg team teaching)';

C. 'Pupils with SEN taught in mainstream classes with additional non-teaching resources in the mainstream classroom (eg SNA)';

D. 'Pupils with SEN taught in mainstream classes and receiving additional teaching hours during periods outside the mainstream class (e.g. withdrawal support)'.

Table 4.2 shows the estimates of the percentages of schools and students with special educational needs in schools with each type of special needs provision. We see most schools (81 per cent) offer more than one form of provision for these students and over half (53 per cent) offer three or more of the forms listed.

Special Classes

Only a small proportion (7 per cent) of primary schools offer special classes. However, larger schools are more likely than smaller to have special classes. This means a higher proportion of students with special educational needs are in schools with at least one special class (15 per cent). Thus 15 per cent of these students attend schools with at least one special class, although much smaller numbers of students with special educational needs are actually enrolled in special classes. The final row in the table shows that only a very small minority of schools (less than 1 per cent) offer only special classes. Only about 0.3 per cent of students with special educational needs attend a school where the only form of provision is a special class. This indicates that in mainstream primary schools, special classes are used as one form of provision in combination with others and significantly less frequently than other forms of provision.

The most common forms of provision for students with special educational needs involve mainstream classes with additional resources including those with additional teaching resources in class (72 per cent of schools and 83 per cent of students); those with additional non-teaching resources in class (75 per cent of schools and 88 per cent of students) and those with additional teaching hours outside of class time (79 per cent of schools and 84 per cent of students). In addition to mainstream provision 7 per cent of schools have special classes; in total 15 per cent of students in the primary population who have special educational needs attend schools with special classes.

Table 4.2: School provision for students with special educational needs (primary)

	Schools %	Pupils with special educational needs %
Number of forms of provision		
None	5%	2%
1	14%	7%
2	29%	21%
3+	53%	70%
Type of provision		
Special classes	7%	15%
Mainstream and additional teaching resources in class	72%	83%
Mainstream and additional non-teaching resources in class	75%	88%
Mainstream and additional hours outside class	79%	84%
Any provision	95%	98%
Special class only	0.3%	0.3%

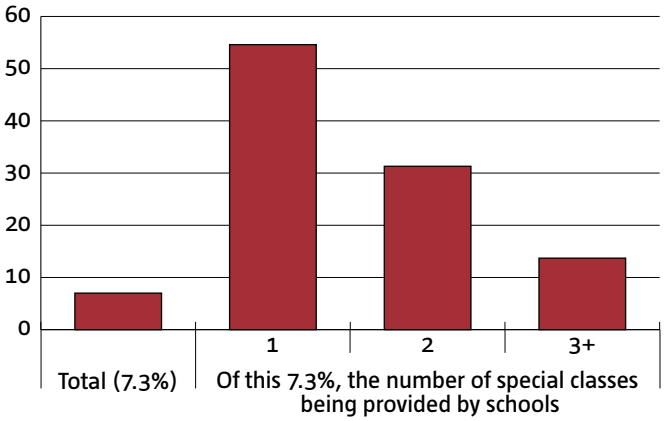
Note: Base is schools with at least one pupil with special educational needs – base for primary is 2,895.

While five per cent of schools have no special provision for students with special educational needs, these tend to be smaller primary schools so that only 2 per cent of these students attending mainstream primary schools are in a school with no special form of provision.

4.4 Special Class Provision at Primary

The following section examines how school principals responded to option A above, schools which provide special classes for at least some students with special educational needs. In addition to examining schools with special classes, we consider the reasons why some principals do not have a special class as a form of provision for students with special educational needs. Findings show 357 special classes in the population of primary schools. Out of the 3,050 primary principals surveyed, 7.3 per cent (212 primary schools) reported having one or more special classes (Figure 4.5). Out of these schools, 55 per cent (116) had one special class, 31 per cent (66) had two and 14 per cent (29) of schools had three or more such classes. Focusing on the proportion of students in special classes, the national survey shows that 0.5 per cent of the primary school population are being educated in special classes (5.1 per cent of the population of students with special educational needs).

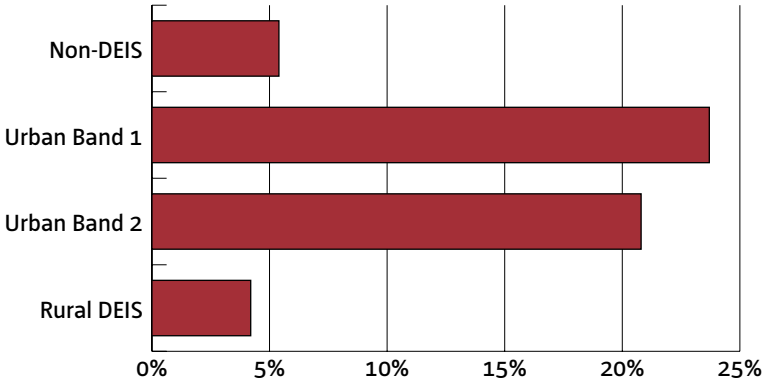
Figure 4.5: Proportion of schools providing special classes/number of special classes provided by these schools (primary)



Note: Base is primary schools with special classes (n=212).

Using the national survey it is possible to investigate which schools are more likely to have special classes based on a range of characteristics including those designated disadvantaged (DEIS), school size and the school's gender mix. Figure 4.6 shows greater levels of special class provision in the DEIS school sector. When we compare special class distribution across the different DEIS categories (Urban Band 1, Urban Band 2 and Rural),[19] it is clear that Urban Band 1 and Urban Band 2 DEIS schools are most likely to have special classes (24 per cent, 21 per cent) compared to just 5 per cent of non-DEIS schools. Of the DEIS schools, Rural DEIS have the lowest proportion with just 4 per cent of them reporting having one or more special class.

Figure 4.6: Proportion of schools with special classes by DEIS status (primary)



Note: Base is primary schools with special classes (n=212). Differences are significant at the p<.001 level.

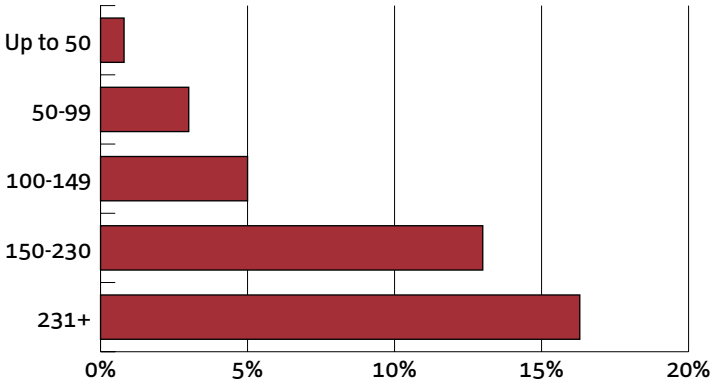
Differences also emerged when comparing schools of different sizes (Figure 4.7). Findings show that larger schools are more likely to have special classes with 17 per cent of primary schools with over 231[20] students and 13 per cent of schools with populations of 150-230 students reporting having one or more special class compared to just one per cent of primary schools with fewer than 50 students. This finding raises questions

19 At primary level DEIS schools are differentiated into two urban groups, Urban Band 1 and Urban Band 2, and Rural DEIS. In the case of Urban DEIS schools, Band 1 schools have greater proportions of socio-economically disadvantaged students and hence receive more additional supports.

20 School size at primary is outlined in Figure 3.2. Schools with over 231 pupils are in the highest quintile.

around special class demand and provision as it contrasts sharply with the findings on prevalence outlined in Chapter 3, where smaller schools appear to have higher proportions of students with special educational needs. However, in meeting criteria for special class provision (see Table 2.3 for details on recommended ratios), larger schools are more likely to have the numbers of students with particular types of needs to warrant such a class. For primary schools with fewer than 50 students, it is clear these number requirements mean they do not qualify for support.

Figure 4.7: Proportion of schools with special classes by school size (primary)

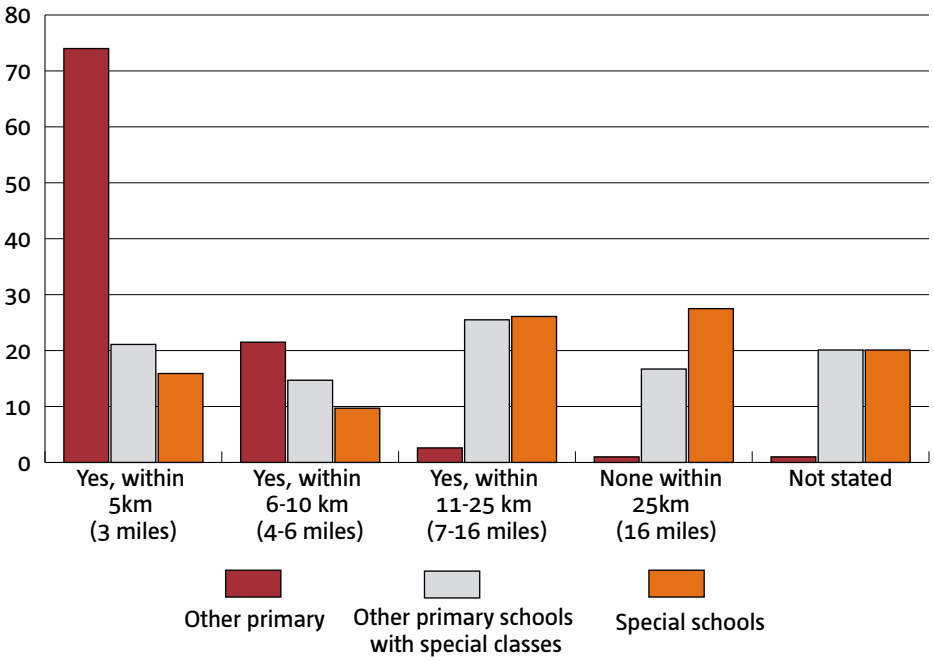


Note: Base is primary schools with special classes (n=212). Differences are significant at the p<.001 level.

A school's religious denomination also appears to influence the likelihood of having a special class. Although the majority of special classes are in Catholic schools (92 per cent), findings show that multi-denominational schools (such as Educate Together) are proportionally more likely to have special classes (7 per cent). Much of this may be explained by a recent policy which means that all new schools are encouraged to include an ASD unit when being established and the majority of new schools in recent years have been multi-denominational (personal communication with DES, August 2013). Hence the key issue may be school age rather than denominational patronage. Furthermore, Catholic schools are also more likely to be single-sex and special classes are less likely in single-sex settings.

An important aspect of special class provision is the extent to which existing special classes are serving student populations and geographical areas that are most in need. The national survey contains information about proximity to other schools (in particular, those with special classes) and the prevalence of special educational needs within each school. Principals were asked about the proximity of their school to other schools in the local area. Figure 4.8 shows most primary schools (72 per cent) had another primary school within five kilometres of their school. Far fewer, however, reported having another primary school with a special class within that distance (16 per cent). Twenty-six per cent reported having a primary school with a special class(es) within 11 kilometres and 25 kilometres and a further 17% per cent stated there were no schools with special classes within 25 kilometres of their school.

Figure 4.8: Proximity to other schools in the local area (primary)



Note: Base is all primary schools (n=3050).

Table 4.3 shows the results of a set of logistic regression models of the factors predicting provision of special classes. The variables used include information about school characteristics, proximity to other schools with special classes and the prevalence of special educational needs at the school based on the findings in Chapter 3. Model 1 shows that provision of special classes varied significantly by school type at primary level. Urban Band 1 and Band 2 DEIS schools are far more likely to have special classes than non-DEIS schools. In keeping with the descriptive analysis above, school size influences the likelihood of schools having a special class, even when DEIS status is taken into account. Similarly, the ways in which schools allocate students to base classes was examined but was not significant in predicting special class provision when DEIS status and school size were adjusted for. In line with the descriptive findings above, Catholic schools are less likely to provide special classes compared to schools of other denominations. Schools are significantly more likely to have special classes where there are no schools with special classes within 25 kilometres (Model 2). Furthermore, Model 3 highlights how special class provision is significantly more likely where schools have a high prevalence of special educational needs (greater than 15 per cent). Additional analyses were conducted to explore the influence of type of disability on special class provision. However there was no clear evidence that the levels of need (different disability categories) influence special class provision.

Table 4.3: Factors influencing the provision of special classes (primary)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	-3.357	-3.560	-4.148
School characteristics:			
DEIS Urban Band 1	0.984***	1.071***	0.910***
DEIS Urban Band 2	.769**	.784**	.641**
Rural DEIS	.501	.438	.434
(Ref: non-DEIS)			
Size 50-99	1.118*	1.209**	1.279**
Size 100-149	1.618**	1.782**	1.890**
Size 150-230	2.528***	2.742***	2.952***
Size >231	2.795***	3.035***	3.346***
(Ref size: 0-49)			
Catholic	-1.187**	-1.307***	-1.280***
(Ref: Other religion)			
Proximity to other schools with special classes		.790***	.835***
(Ref: within 25 km)			
Streaming			.222
(Ref: other)			
Special educational needs prevalence			1.080***
(Ref: <15%)			
Nagelkerke R	.170	.183	.215

Notes: From a logistic regression model. ***<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05 ¬ p<.10.

Nagelkerke r is a measure of how well the model predicts the dependent variable, that is, the likelihood of a school having a special class.

Results can be interpreted as follows: positive coefficients indicate that those schools are more likely to have special classes, while negative coefficients indicate lower likelihood, compared to the reference or base group.

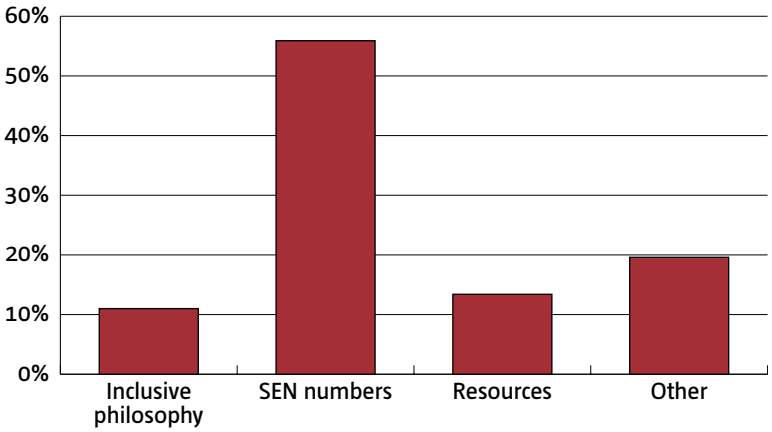
4.5 Schools with No Special Classes

Where schools reported not having any special classes (93 per cent of primary schools), the national survey asked principals why this was. This question was open-ended and respondents had the opportunity to identify the reasons why they did not have a special class. The responses (shown in Figure 4.9) were grouped by the research team along frequently occurring themes which were: attachment to an inclusive philosophy, insufficient numbers of students with special educational needs, perceived lack of resources, and 'other' representing a broad variety of reasons.

Given the small student populations in some primary schools, it is perhaps not surprising that the main reason given by over half of primary schools principals for not having a special class was insufficient numbers of students with special educational needs in their school (56 per cent) (Figure 4.9). Many of these principals were from small rural schools with just one or two such students: 'Because there would not be enough in the school to make up a class', 'Our school is a small rural school'. Nearly a fifth reporting reasons for no special class fall into the Other category. The reasons given varied widely and included a lack of information or understanding about setting up a class ('did not know this was

an option at primary') or being located close to a special school or another school with a special class ('due to facilities in nearby schools'). Other principals were in recently established schools and their applications for a special class were being processed at that time. A perceived lack of resources to create such a class was reported by a further 13 per cent of primary schools. Some principals referred to their special class being 'scrapped' in recent years by the DES; others simply state they 'don't have the resources' or note that they 'have never been given a grant by the DES' to set up such a class. In many ways, these responses highlight a lack of awareness of what is involved in setting up a special class. As outlined in Chapter 1, no official guidelines exist for this and the role of the SENO appears to influence their sanctioning. A further 11 per cent of principals reported that they had no special class as they adopted an inclusive philosophy for educating students with special educational needs. These principals reported making a conscious decision to include all students in the mainstream class and reported not having a special class for reasons such as they are 'an inclusive school ... we would prefer to bring in resources for the children' or are 'not in favour of segregation'. One principal reported having no special class because he/she had a 'belief in inclusive education'.

Figure 4.9: Reasons given by Principals for not having a special class in their school (primary)

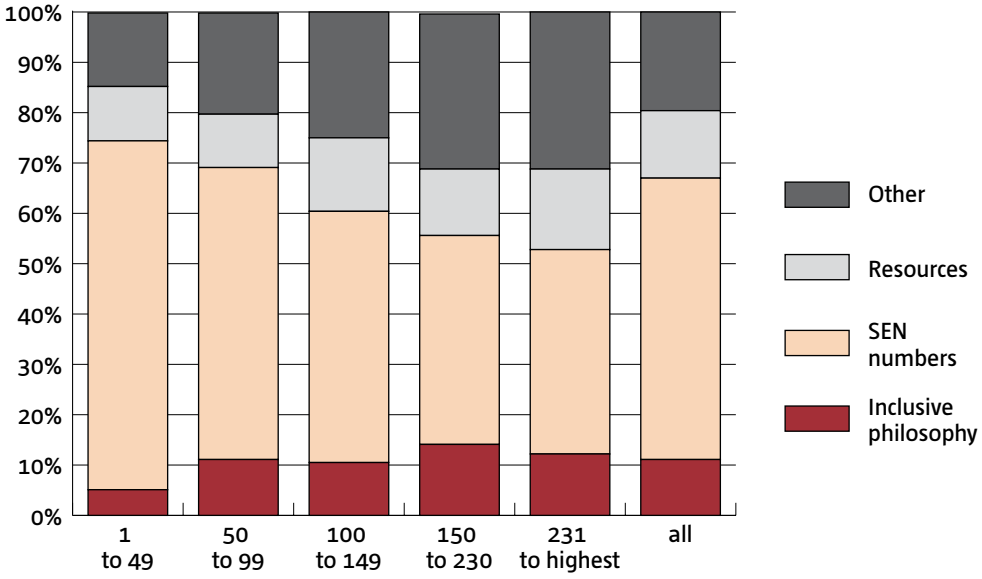


Note: Base is all primary schools reporting no special class (n=2,634).[21]

The following graphs show the main reasons principals give for not having a special class by school characteristics such as school size, DEIS status and gender mix. Figure 4.10 examines whether principals' reasons for not having a special class are associated with whether they are in a large or small school. There is some evidence that school size influences attitudes towards inclusion with principals of schools with 150-230 students more likely to report having no special class due to their 'inclusive philosophy' compared to small schools (11 per cent compared to just 5 per cent of schools with 1-50 students). Not surprisingly, these small schools do not have special classes as they do not have adequate numbers of students with special educational needs to warrant one. Sixty-nine per cent gave this as their main reason for not having a special class.

21 The total number of schools weighted to the population which stated they had no special class was 2,634, while 212 schools stated that they did. The remaining 205 schools did not respond to this question.

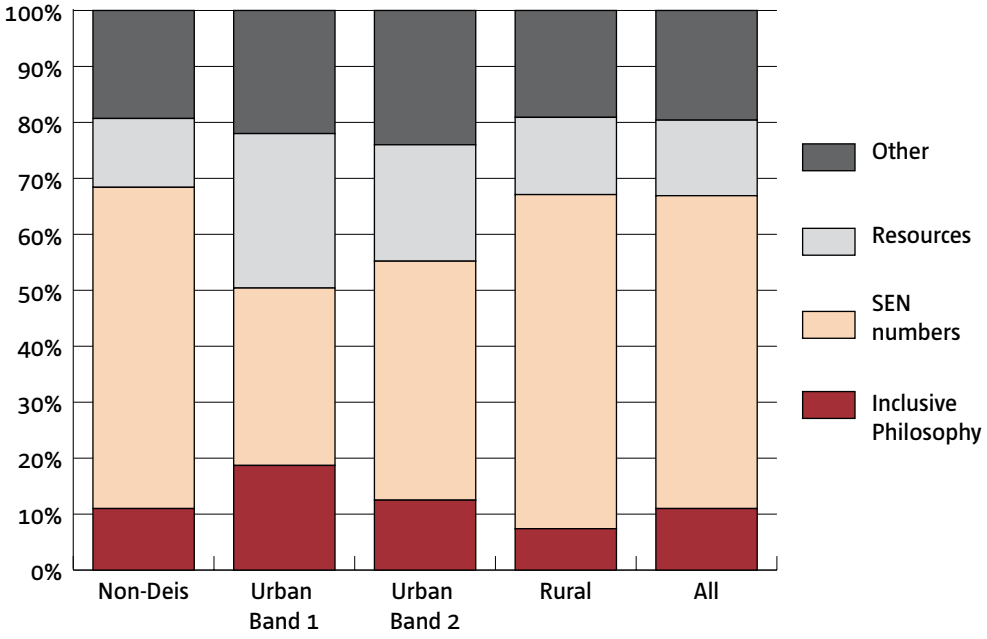
Figure 4.10: Reasons given by Principals for not having a special class in their school (primary) by school size



Note: Base is all primary schools reporting no special class (n=2,634). Differences are significant at p <.001.

Focusing on other school characteristics the picture is less clear. Figure 4.11 shows the reasons for not having a special class vary between DEIS and non-DEIS schools, with Urban Band 1 (19 per cent) most likely to report adopting an 'inclusive philosophy' and therefore not having a special class compared to non-DEIS (11 per cent) and rural DEIS schools (7 per cent). Similarly, non-DEIS and rural DEIS schools are more likely to report not having sufficient numbers of students with special educational needs compared to Urban Band 1 and Urban Band 2 DEIS schools.

Figure 4.11: Reasons given by Principals for not having a special class in their school (primary) by DEIS status



Note: Base is all primary schools reporting no special class (n=2,634). Differences are significant at p <.001.

Gender-mix also influenced special class provision. Findings show that coeducational primary schools are least likely to have a special class due to low student numbers (59 per cent) compared to boys' (40 per cent) and girls' primary schools (41 per cent). Boys' and girls' primary schools are, however, more likely to report having no special class due to an inclusive philosophy (15 per cent for boys' and girls' schools compared with 10 per cent for coeducational schools). When we examine this further, however, it appears special educational needs prevalence may influence principal attitudes to special classes. As would be expected, schools reporting less than 15 per cent special educational needs prevalence are most likely (53 per cent of principals) to report having no special class due to low numbers. However, this number does not reduce in line with increased special educational needs prevalence as nearly half (49 per cent) of principals reporting more than 15 per cent prevalence also state that the reason they have no special class is due to low student numbers.

4.6 Staff Resources for Students with Special Educational Needs at Post-Primary

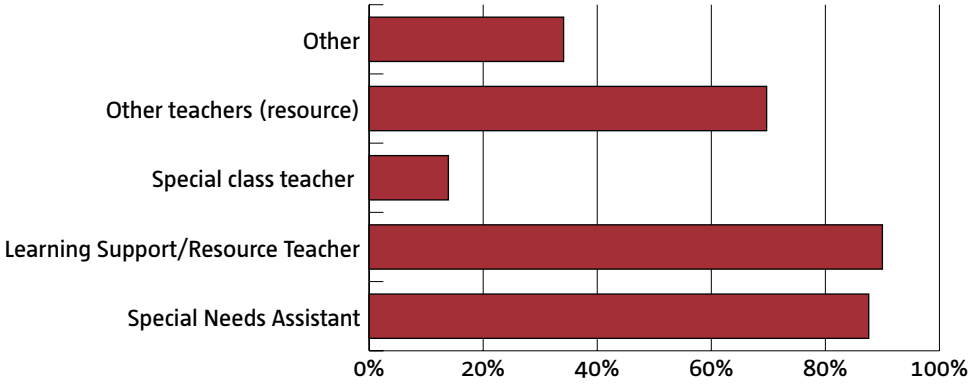
When examining types of staff resources for students with special educational needs at post-primary, a picture similar to that of primary emerges. Table 4.4 shows there were 2,100 SNAs with over three-quarters of these working full-time. A total of 1,872 LS/RTs worked at post-primary, 1,026 of these were less than full-time. It appears a far greater number of 'other teachers' are involved in delivering post-primary resource hours compared to primary (these 'other teachers' make up 41 per cent of total special education staff compared to just 4 per cent at primary). This may be due to the change in curriculum at post-primary where students may receive resource hours from specific subject teachers. Similar to the information from primary principals, the Other staff category refers to personnel involved in delivering resources to students with special educational needs. This question was open-ended and included guidance counsellors, staff working on the School Completion Programme and special class teachers not already accounted for in the table. In relation to staff such as the visiting teacher service and the HSCL coordinator who are not necessarily based at the school, 378 principals reported having access to visiting teachers and 213 reported availing of the services of the HSCL coordinator. Compared to primary, teacher resources make up a greater proportion of resource staff overall (73 per cent teacher resources compared to 59 per cent at primary). Of the 8,510 staff working with students with special educational needs, just 2,313 are non-teacher resource roles.

Table 4.4: Total number of staff working with students with special educational needs (post-primary)

	Total full time	Total less than full time	Total n
SNA	1,656	444	2,100
LS/RT	846	1,026	1,872
Special class teacher	85	90	175
Other teachers (resource)	879	2,585	3,464
Other	152	156	308

Compared to primary, Figure 4.12 shows post-primary schools have slightly fewer SNAs and LS/RTs, with just 88 per cent of schools reported having one or more SNAs and 90 per cent reported having one or more LS/RT (compared to 75 per cent and 93 per cent respectively for primary). Similar to primary, however, this suggests that 10 per cent of post-primary schools have no LS/RT even though all schools are entitled to learning support services (Circular PPT 01/05). Again, this may reflect confusion among post-primary principals on the extent to which LS/RTs are available to them (e.g. as a staff member or as a shared post with other local schools). There is greater use of other teachers in delivering resource hours at post-primary (70 per cent compared to 17 per cent of schools at primary). Similar to primary, the Other category mainly comprises other personnel with a specialist role available to assist students with special educational needs and the role of the special educational needs coordinator. Just over a third of schools report using these staff at their school at post-primary compared to just 8 per cent at primary.

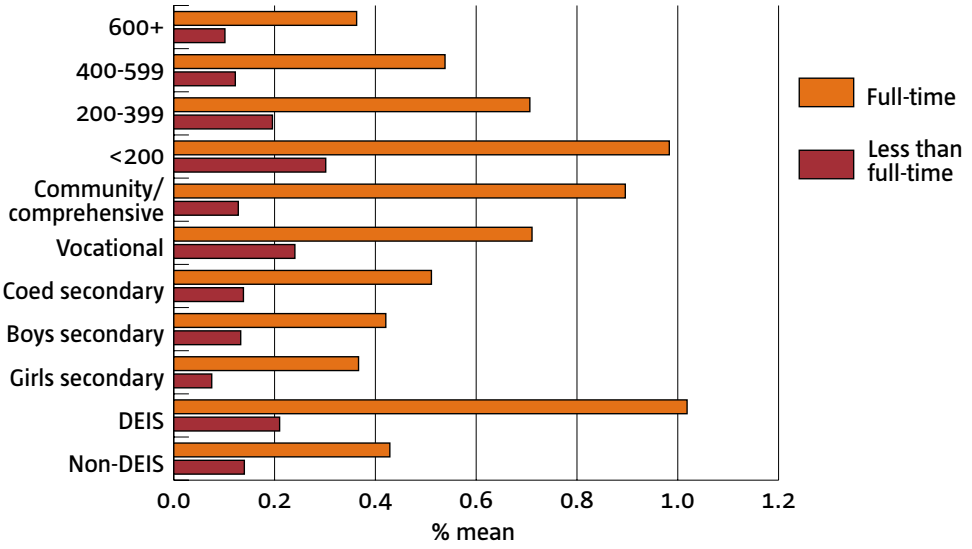
Figure 4.12: Staff resources (full and part-time) at post-primary (full population)



Note: Base is all post-primary schools (n=703).

As with the analysis at primary level, Figures 4.13 and 4.14 examine the average numbers of SNA and LS/RT's (both full and part-time) as a proportion of post-primary student population. Here we examine the extent to which staff resources differed across post-primary schools according to a number of school characteristics, including school type, size and DEIS status. Similar to the findings at primary, the data shows that DEIS schools have higher full- and part-time staff allocations for SNAs compared to non-DEIS schools (Figure 4.13). The average number of full-time SNAs, for example, is more than double in DEIS schools (average of 1.01 SNAs compared to 0.43 in non-DEIS). Focussing on school type, findings show that community/comprehensive schools and vocational schools receive higher full-time SNA allocations compared to boys' and girls' secondary schools (in line with prevalence in these schools). For part-time staff, however, this pattern differs slightly with greater numbers of SNAs in vocational schools (average of 0.24 compared to 0.08 in girls' secondary schools). Given the higher prevalence rates in smaller schools (Chapter 3), these findings also show they have higher numbers of full- and part-time SNA staff and, similar to findings at primary level, these numbers decrease with school size.

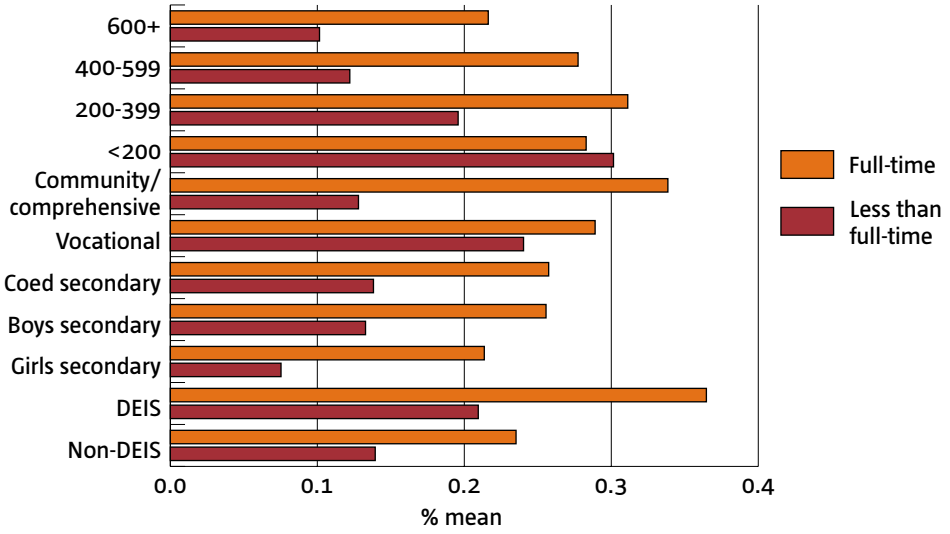
Figure 4.13: Average number of Special Needs Assistants by school characteristics (full population)



Note: Base is all post-primary schools (n=703).

Again, focussing on LS/RT provision Figure 4.14 highlights how DEIS schools receive greater full- and part-time resources compared to non-DEIS settings (average of 0.36 LS/RTs compared to 0.23 in non-DEIS). Similar to the patterns for SNA provision at post-primary, community/comprehensive schools have higher full-time LS/RTs working in them compared to other schools types. Part-time LS/RTs are however most common in vocational schools. In terms of school size, full-time provision of LS/RTs does not closely reflect school enrolment. For part-time staff, LS/RT allocations increase as school size decreases.

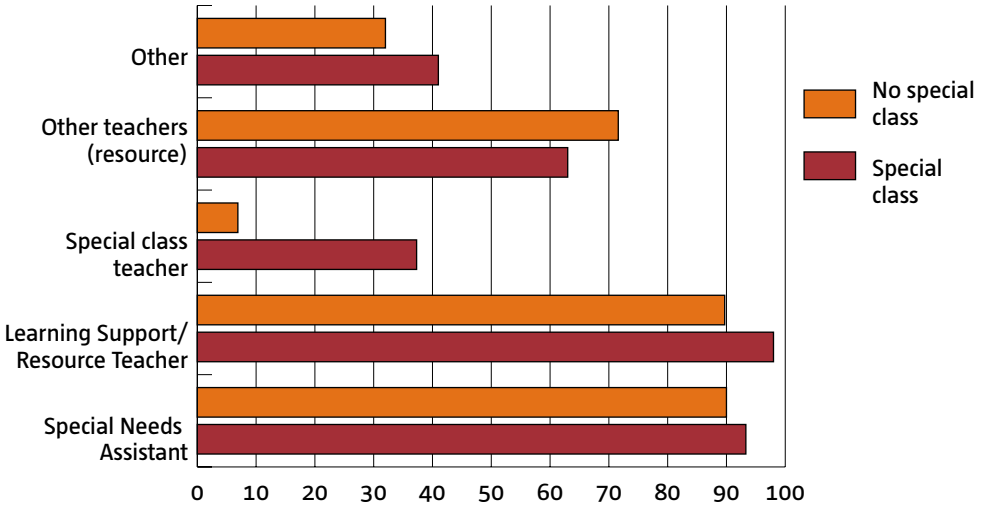
Figure 4.14: Average number of Learning Support/Resource Teachers by school characteristics (full population)



Note: Base is all post-primary schools (n=703).

Levels of staff resources also differ between schools with and without special classes (Figure 4.15). SNA support and LS/RT staff are high in schools with and without special classes, although marginally higher in schools with special classes.

Figure 4.15: Staff resources for students with special educational needs for schools with and without special classes (post-primary)



Note: Base is all post-primary schools (n=703). Note multiple responses allowed.

4.7 Class Arrangements for Students with Special Educational Needs at Post-Primary

Differences in provision for students with special educational needs between primary and post-primary can be expected given the smaller number of post-primary schools and their typically larger size. As a result, almost all second-level schools in our sample had at least one pupil with special educational needs (see Table 4.5). Only 2 per cent of second-level schools have no specific provision for these students; 9 per cent have one form; 29 per cent have two forms and 60 per cent have three or more forms of provision.

The percentage of schools with special classes, and the percentage of students with special educational needs in schools that provide special classes, are both higher at second level than at primary level. Nearly 24 per cent of post-primary schools have at least one special class (compared to 7 per cent at primary) and 27 per cent of post-primary students with special educational needs in mainstream schools are in a school that offers special classes (compared to 15 per cent at primary). Similar to the situation in primary, at second level the school rarely relies on special classes as the only form of special needs support offered. Only 1.4 per cent of post-primary schools have special classes as the sole form of provision for students with special educational needs.

Table 4.5: School provision for students with special educational needs (post-primary)

	Schools %	Students with Special Educational Needs (entire school) %
Number of forms of provision		
None	2%	2%
1	9%	7%
2	29%	27%
3+	60%	64%
Type of provision		
Special classes	24%	27%
Mainstream and additional teaching resources in class	66%	70%
Mainstream and additional non-teaching resources in class	82%	87%
Mainstream and additional hours outside class	88%	85%
Any provision	98%	98%
Special class only	1.4%	1.4%
Total (in population)	699	

Base = 699 post-primary schools with at least one pupil having special educational needs.

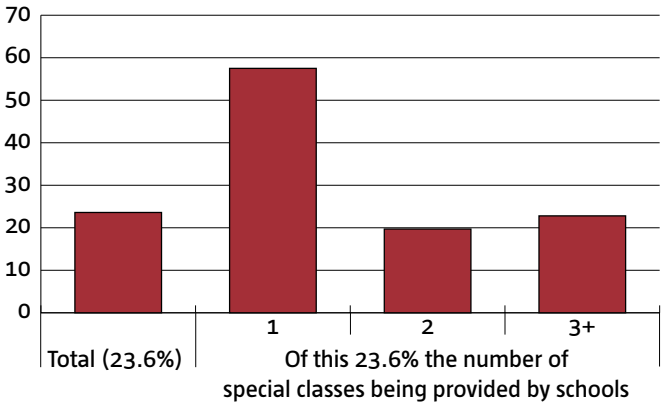
Two-thirds of post-primary schools provide for students with special educational needs in mainstream classes with additional teaching resources and 70 per cent of post-primary students are in schools with this form of provision. A higher proportion (82 per cent of schools covering 87 per cent of students) provides mainstream classes with additional non-teaching resources. The most frequent form of provision is mainstream classes plus additional teaching hours. This is provided by 88 per cent of schools covering 85 per cent of students.

In general, primary and post-primary special classes are less common than other forms of support in the mainstream class. Where special classes are present, they tend not to be the only form of provision. Instead, they form part of the menu of provisions that schools have put in place to meet the requirements of students with special educational needs.

4.8 Special Class Provision at Post-Primary

Of 703 post-primary schools, 24 per cent (166) of schools reported having any special classes. Of these, 58 per cent (96) had one special class, 20 per cent (33) had two special and 22 per cent (38) had three or more (Figure 4.16). The total number of special classes reported by post-primary school principals is 302. Again, the national survey provides details of the proportion of post-primary students in special classes. Findings show a greater proportion of them are in special classes compared to primary (1.2 per cent of the post-primary population compared to 0.5 per cent at primary). Thirteen per cent of post-primary students with special educational needs are educated in special class settings (compared to 5.1 per cent of primary students).

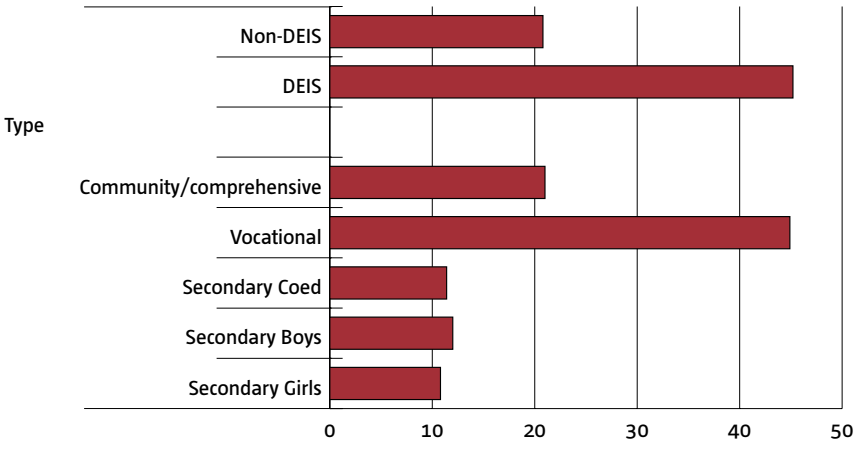
Figure 4.16: Proportion of schools providing special classes/number of special classes provided by these schools (post-primary)



Note: Base is post-primary schools with special classes (n=166).

Based on a range of characteristics, this section examines which post-primary schools are more likely to have special classes. In addition to examining DEIS status, school size and gender mix, it is also possible to examine special class provision by school type. Similar to the findings at primary, DEIS schools are more than twice as likely as non-DEIS schools to have special classes (46 per cent compared to 21 per cent in non-DEIS schools) (Figure 4.17). Interestingly, provision also varies by school type. Special classes are most likely to be in vocational schools with 45 per cent of these reporting having one or more special class. Twenty-one per cent of community and comprehensive schools also reported having special classes compared to 12 per cent of boys' secondary schools, 11 per cent of coeducational secondary schools and 10 per cent of girls' schools.

Figure 4.17: Proportion of schools with special classes by DEIS status and school type (post-primary)

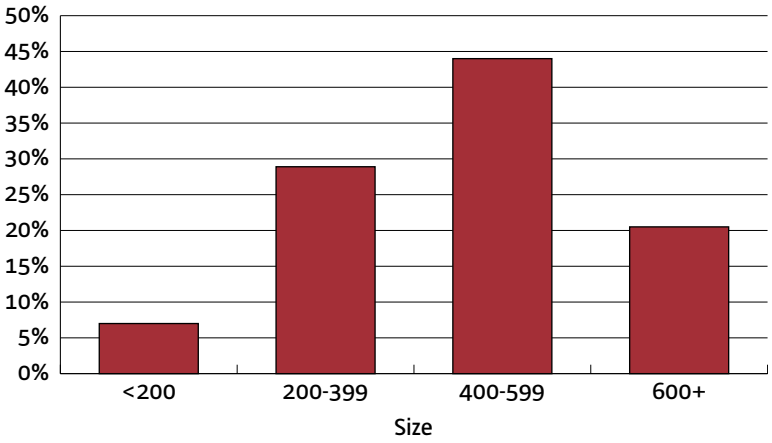


Note: Base is post-primary schools with special classes (n=166).

School population also affects the likelihood of having a special class. Findings show that medium-large schools with 400-599 students are most likely to use this form of provision (44 per cent of these schools had such classes). Figure 4.18 shows smaller schools are less likely with just 7 per cent reporting having a special class. As with provision in primary schools, this contrasts with Chapter 3's findings where special

educational needs prevalence at post-primary is higher in smaller schools. However, as noted earlier for primary, this pattern may be explained by smaller schools having too few students with a particular type of special needs to warrant a special class.

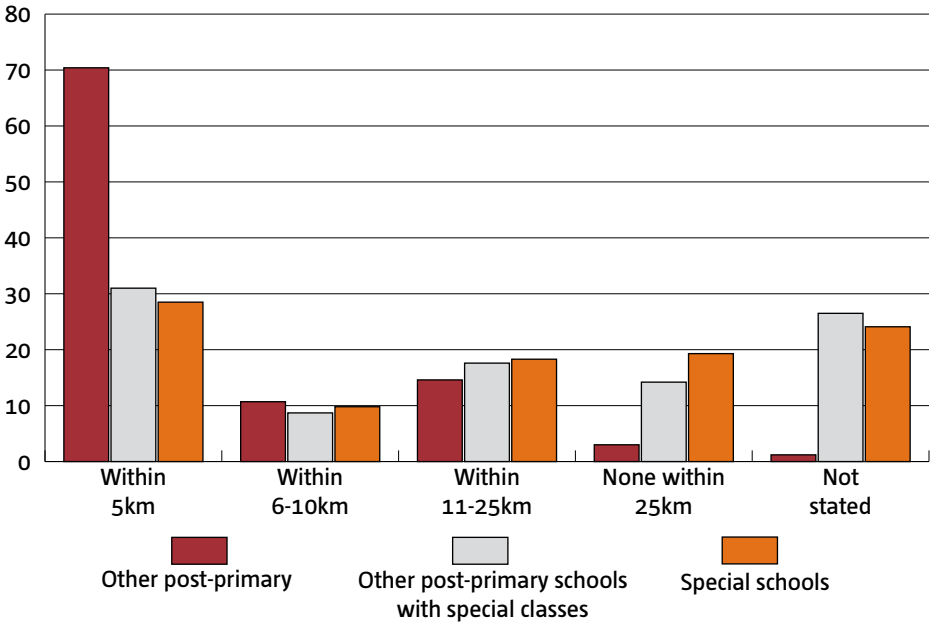
Figure 4.18: Proportion of schools with special classes by school size (post-primary)



Note: Base is post-primary schools with special classes (n=166).

Focusing on other school characteristics such as proximity to other schools (in particular those with special classes) and the prevalence of special educational needs at the school, marked differences emerge between primary and post-primary. At post-primary, 70 per cent of principals stated another post-primary school was located within five kilometres of their school (Figure 4.19). Compared with primary, however, a higher number of post-primary principals (31 per cent compared to 16 per cent in primary) reported having other schools with special classes within five kilometres.

Figure 4.19: Proximity to other schools in the local area (post-primary)



Note: Base is all post-primary schools (n=703).

Table 4.6 shows the results of a set of logistic regression models of the factors predicting special class provision at post-primary. Similar to the model used for primary provision,

the variables measure a range of school characteristics and staff resources at schools with special classes. As with the results for primary, Model 1 shows that DEIS schools are clearly more likely to have special classes compared to non-DEIS. This finding remains even when school size and type are controlled for. The impact of school size operates differently at post-primary, however. Special classes are more likely to be found in medium to large schools of 400-600 students. In contrast to the descriptive findings which show larger numbers of special classes in vocational schools, the model shows a greater probability of special class provision exists in community/comprehensive schools when DEIS status and school size are adjusted for. Prevalence does not significantly predict special class provision at post-primary, a finding that differs from primary (Model 3). This may reflect differences in the resource allocation models in operation in both sectors at the time of the survey or may reflect a broader range of approaches used to meeting the needs of post-primary students with special educational needs. The proximity of another school with a special class is not significant in predicting provision at post-primary. The model also controlled for whether schools placed students in classes by streaming or other methods; however, these findings were also not significant (Model 2). In contrast to primary where special class provision was significantly more likely in schools with high prevalence (greater than 15 per cent of students), special educational needs prevalence did not emerge as significant at post-primary.

Table 4.6: Factors influencing the provision of special classes (post-primary)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	-3.191	-3.166	-3.411
School characteristics:			
DEIS	1.181***	1.186***	1.018***
(Ref: non-DEIS)			
Size 200-399	1.331**	1.324*	1.228**
Size 400-599	1.893***	1.876**	1.850***
Size >600	.795	.777	.716
(Ref size: 0-200)			
Community/Comprehensive	1.212*	1.229*	1.086*
(Ref: Girls' secondary)			
Proximity to other schools with special classes		-.082	-.143
(Ref: within 25 km)			
Streaming			
(Ref: other)			.326
Special educational needs prevalence			
(Ref: <15%)			.024
Nagelkerke R	.202	.202	.212

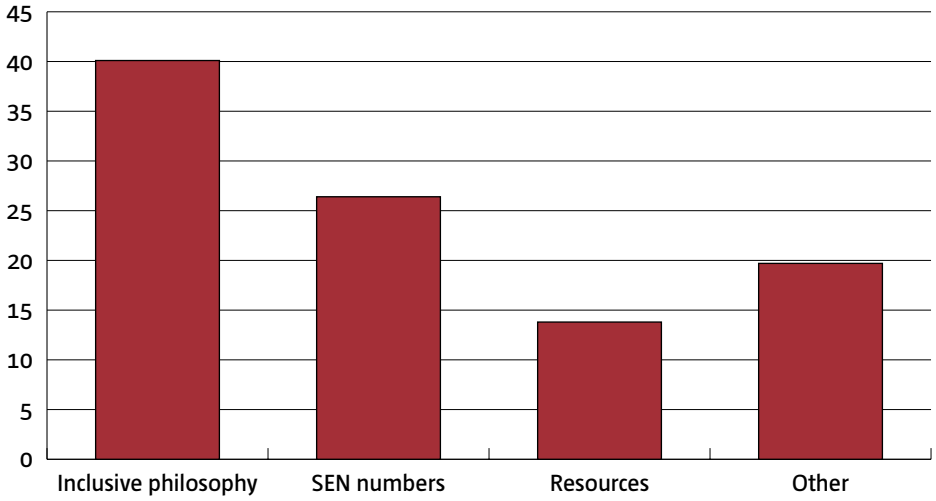
Notes: From a logistic regression model. ***<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05 ¬ p<.10.

Results can be interpreted as follows: positive coefficients indicate that those schools are more likely to have special classes, while negative coefficients indicate lower likelihood, compared to the reference or base group.

4.9 Schools with No Special Classes Post-primary

The reasons post-primary principals gave for not having a special class differed to the findings at primary. It appears post-primary schools are more polarised in their views on inclusion; while they are more likely to have special classes, they are also considerably more likely to cite an inclusive philosophy as a reason for not providing them (31 per cent of post-primary schools compared to 13 per cent at primary indicate an inclusive philosophy) (Figure 4.20). Some principals had clear views of inclusion which did not include separating or segregating students from their mainstream peers: 'We believe in inclusion, it is not educationally sound to categorise all special educational needs students in one class group'. Another principal expressed his fears around stigma and labelling for students in a special class: 'Afraid it would stigmatise students in these classes and reduce their self-esteem.' Other principals had tried a special class at their school but felt that it had become a 'dumping ground for students with behavioural problems' or had turned into a 'ghetto class'. One fifth reported having insufficient numbers of students with special educational needs to make up a special class: 'We would have a variety of special educational needs students, but not sufficient in number of similar profile to require a special class,' Similar to primary level findings, 13 per cent of principals reported having insufficient resources to establish a special class: 'We would love to have a special class, but have had difficulty accessing resources for same.'

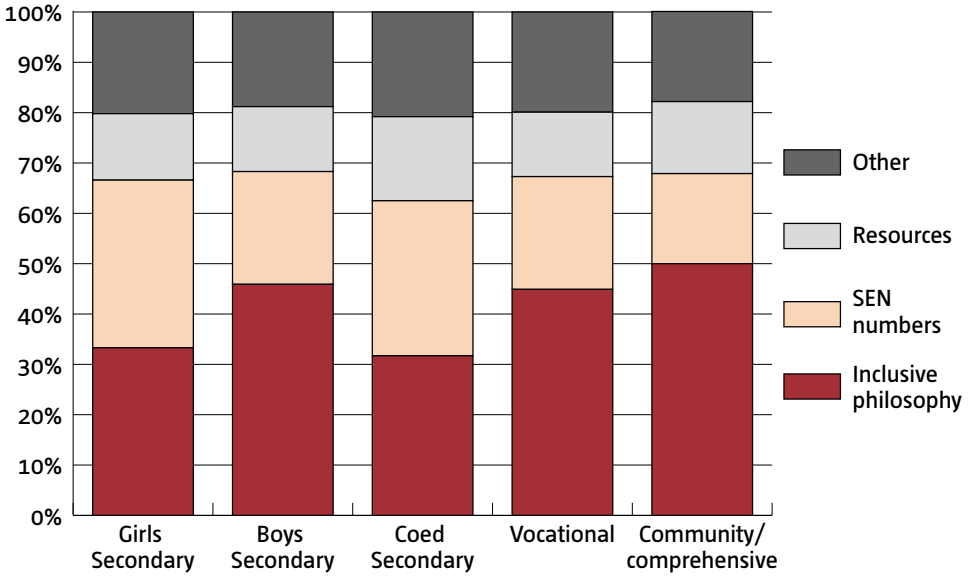
Figure 4.20: Reasons given by Principals for not having a special class in their school (post-primary)



Note: Base is all post-primary schools (n=703).

Similar to the analysis of primary data we explored why some principals had no special classes by focusing on characteristics such as school type, size, DEIS status and gender mix. Figure 4.21 highlights how principals of boys' secondary schools are most likely to report not having a special class due to their 'inclusive philosophy' at the school (37 per cent). This compares to 27 per cent of principals of coeducational schools. Girls' secondary schools are most likely to report having insufficient numbers of students with special educational needs as their reason compared to community/comprehensive schools where this reason was only offered by 11 per cent.

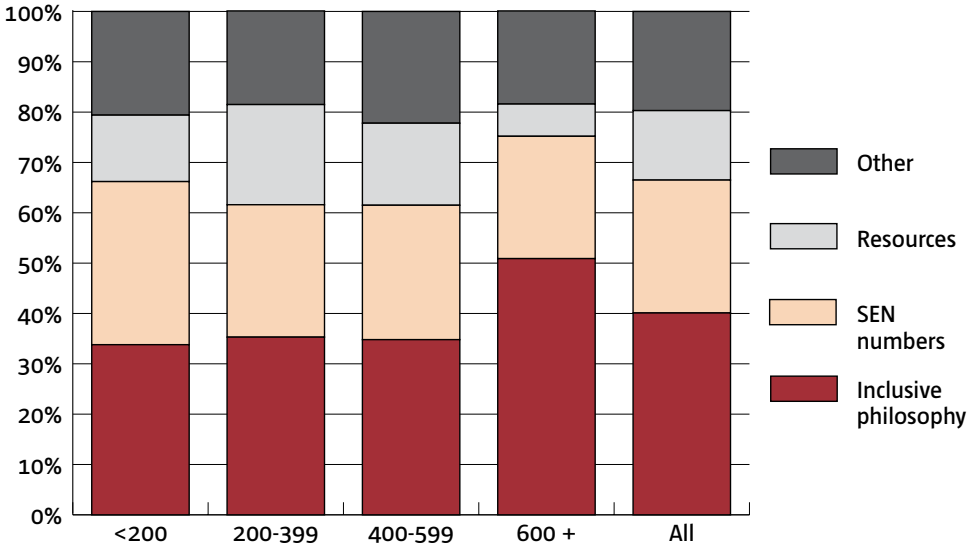
Figure 4.21: Reasons given by Principals for not having a special class in their school (post-primary) by school type



Note: Base is post-primary schools with no special classes (n=537).

Similar to primary, size also appears to influence attitudes towards inclusion with schools of over 600 students most likely to report having an inclusive educational ethos (43 per cent). As would be expected, principals reporting too few students with special educational needs are more likely to be in smaller schools with under 200 students (Figure 4.22).

Figure 4.22: Reasons given by Principals for not having a special class in their school (post-primary) by school size

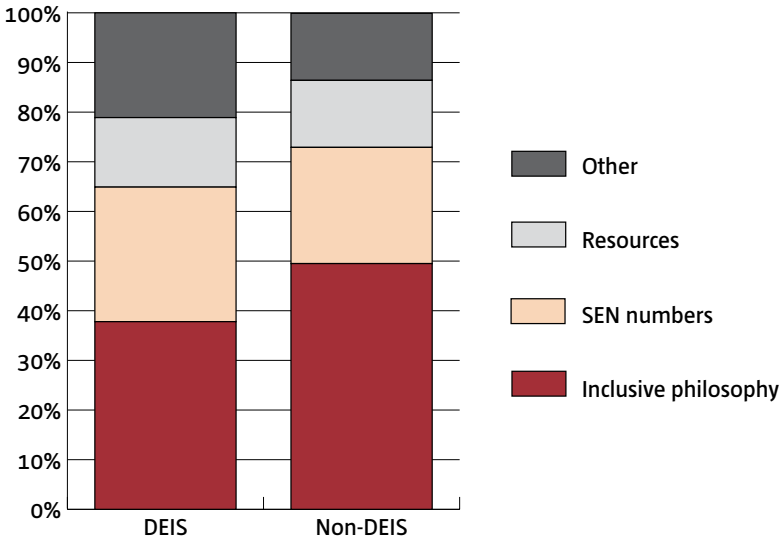


Note: Base is post-primary schools with no special classes (n=537).

Figure 4.23 shows the considerable differences in special class provision between DEIS and non-DEIS schools (40 per cent compared to 18 per cent). Non-DEIS schools are also more likely to report not having sufficient numbers of students with special educational needs to warrant establishing a special class (22 per cent in non-DEIS compared to 14 per cent in DEIS). Similar numbers of principals report having an 'inclusive philosophy',

however, as the reason for having no special class (30 per cent in DEIS and 31 per cent in non-DEIS).

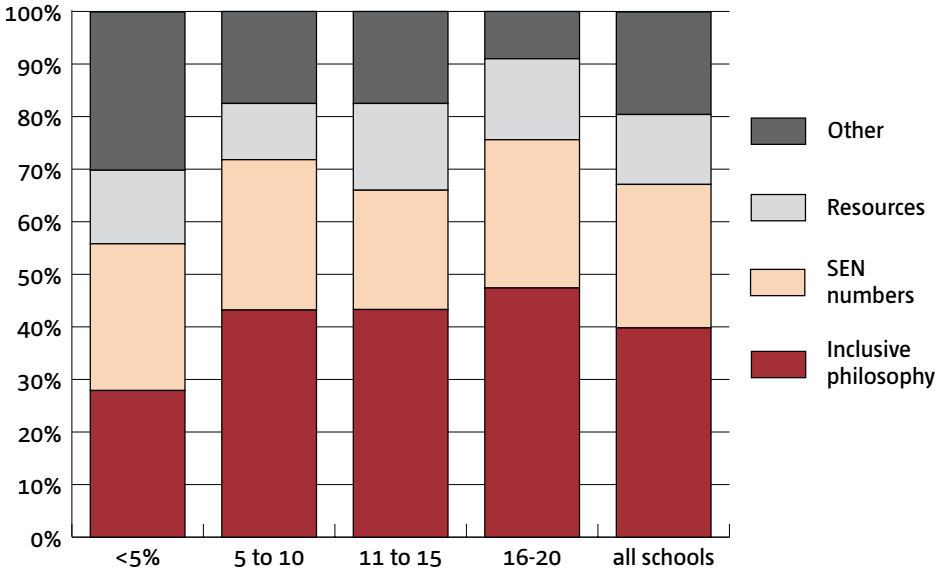
Figure 4.23: Reasons given by Principals for not having a special class in their school (post-primary) by DEIS status



Note: Base is post-primary schools with no special classes (n=537).

In addition to school characteristics, the survey data allow for analysis of the reasons principals have no special class by levels of special educational needs prevalence. Figure 4.24 shows principal attitudes towards inclusion appear to rise as prevalence levels increase. Twenty-eight per cent of principals with prevalence levels below 5 per cent reported an 'inclusive philosophy' as the reason for having no special class compared to 47 per cent of principals with over 16 per cent prevalence at their school.

Figure 4.24: Reasons given by Principals for not having a special class in their school (post-primary) by prevalence



Note: Base is post-primary schools with no special classes (n=537).

4.10 Conclusions

This chapter offers an insight into the characteristics of schools with and without special classes at primary and post-primary. We first explore principal reports of access to resource staff for students with special educational needs focusing on key special education personnel (eg SNA, LS/RT). It is clear that for both sectors SNAs and LS/RTs are the most common forms of staff resource for students with special educational needs. Staff levels, however, appear to vary according to primary school characteristics, with average SNA provision higher in DEIS schools, small schools and boys' schools, in line with prevalence levels. Similarly, LS/RT staff numbers are greater in small schools, Rural DEIS schools and coeducational primary schools. At post-primary similar patterns emerge with both SNA and LS/RT allocations higher in smaller schools, community/ comprehensive schools and DEIS schools. Furthermore, staff support for students with special educational needs is higher in schools with special classes at both primary and post-primary level. Nearly all schools with special classes have some form of SNA support at primary whereas at post-primary this applies to just 93 per cent. This is surprising given that most special classes have a baseline level of SNA support (see Table 2.3) and may reflect a more varied type of special class at post-primary (see section 5.2.2). Similarly the provision of LS/RTs is higher in primary overall compared to post-primary. More notable differences in provision between schools with and without special classes are evident in the provision of roles such as the visiting teacher services which is higher in schools with special classes. School size appears to play a role in the distribution of SNA and LS/RT staff in particular. Small and medium schools with special classes are more likely to have higher levels of staff resources compared to schools with no special class where high levels of provision are predominantly found in large schools (more than 230 at primary and 600 at post-primary).

The chapter also provided an overview of the different types of class arrangement used for students with special educational needs at primary and post-primary. Results show that both rarely rely on special classes as the only form of provision. Most schools offer more than one form of provision such as mainstream education with additional teaching/non-teaching resources or mainstream education with additional hours.

The final section of Chapter 4 examines special class provision in greater detail. The data provide important baseline information on special class provision in Ireland and show that special classes exist in 7 per cent of primary and 24 per cent of post-primary schools. Overall 357 special classes operate at primary and 302 at post-primary, totalling 659 special classes across the two sectors. Using this data it is possible, for the first time given the wealth of data collected by the national survey, to examine special class provision against the characteristics of schools with and without special classes. This allows us to identify factors which influence special class provision, and using regression analysis in some instances we have identified the independent effects of these characteristics. At primary and post-primary we focused on a range of school characteristics such as size, gender mix and DEIS status, in addition to other factors such as the proximity to other local schools with a special class or other local special schools. Findings show that;

- At primary level DEIS Urban Band 1 schools have the greatest levels of special class provision. Similarly, at post-primary DEIS schools are more likely to have special classes compared to non-DEIS.
- At primary and post-primary, large and medium to large schools are more likely to have special classes. At primary, schools with populations of over 231 students had the greatest number of special classes. At post-primary, medium to large schools (with populations of 400-600) have the most special classes.
- At primary, special classes are more likely to be in schools more than 25 kilometres from another school providing a special class. This effect is not significant at post-primary.
- Special educational needs prevalence also influences the probability of having a special class. At primary high rates significantly predict special class provision whereas at post-primary the effect on special class provision is not significant.
- Special classes are less likely to be found in Catholic schools compared to other denominations at primary. This may be the result of recent policy changes where all new schools are encouraged to include an ASD unit when being established and most new schools in recent years have been in the multi-denominational sector. At post-primary, special classes are most often located in community/comprehensive schools compared to other school types; it is possible that this may again reflect the age of schools and a greater emphasis on provision for ASD units in newer school builds.

Chapter 4 focused on the characteristics of primary and post-primary schools without special classes and highlighted the main differences between primary and post-primary. Not surprisingly and given the small populations in some primary schools, the main reason given by over half of primary schools principals for not having a special class was insufficient numbers of students with special educational needs. Post-primary schools are more likely to have higher numbers of students and multiple classes in one year and as a result principals were more likely to report not having a special class due to their inclusive ethos or a perceived lack of resources. These patterns varied by school size and DEIS status with smaller schools and non-DEIS schools at primary and post-primary more likely to report not having sufficient numbers of students with special educational needs to warrant the establishment of a special class. Primary principals of Urban Band 1 DEIS schools and medium-to-large schools were most likely to report having no special class due to the inclusive philosophy. At post-primary having an inclusive philosophy was mostly reported by principals of boys' secondary schools and large schools of over 600 students. These findings may reflect differences of opinion among principals on the role and purpose of a special class within inclusive education. The varied responses of principals highlight a lack of awareness and understanding about how to set up a special class and in particular the necessary criteria and eligibility for establishing these classes.

5 Characteristics of Special Classes

5.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the characteristics of special classes in primary and post-primary. While previous chapters discussed these separately, they are considered jointly here since interesting contrasts emerge between the two in terms of use and characteristics of special classes. Post-primary schools tend to be much larger, on average, than primary. The median enrolment of post-primary schools that form the focus of this study was just over 460 students compared to just over 100 at primary. At primary level, nearly half the schools have fewer than 100 students and fewer than one in 20 have over 500. At post-primary, only 2 per cent have fewer than 100 students and over two in five have more than 500 students.

The second important difference is the structure of funding for students with special educational needs that pertained at the time of the survey. At primary, the GAM was introduced in 2005. This provided for automatic allocation of teaching resources to allow for provision for students with high incidence disabilities (borderline GLD, MGLD and specific learning disability), students eligible for learning-support teaching and students with learning difficulties (such as mild speech and language difficulties or mild social or emotional difficulties). This meant primary schools no longer needed to obtain a psychological assessment for students with high incidence disability, while those with low incidence would continue to receive additional teaching hours following a formal assessment. The change gave greater flexibility to schools in terms of how the additional hours were to be used to support pupil learning (Ware *et al*, 2009; Department of Education, Circular 02/05).

The NCSE was established in 2005 and took over responsibility for allocating resources for special education to schools, including the issuance of guidelines for applications. At post-primary, up until 2012-13 academic year, students with high incidence disabilities received additional teaching resources from the NCSE through the special educational needs organiser (SENO) network, based on assessment and diagnostic information (see Banks & McCoy, 2011 for more detail on funding structures). However, since that time, post-primary allocations have been replaced by a through-put model similar to the GAM model at primary level in that resources are allocated to schools rather than individual students (Circular 10/12).

The analysis of special classes in this chapter is on 659 special classes in the population, 357 at primary and 302 at post-primary. We begin by examining the establishment of special classes. We then consider their formal designation and the type of special need catered for. In this context, we also ask whether special classes cater for students other than those with special educational needs. We then turn to the gender mix and age range of students in special classes along with their size. Finally, we examine how these classes are configured in terms of the number of year groups and the range of different types of special needs catered for.

5.2 Establishment of Special Classes

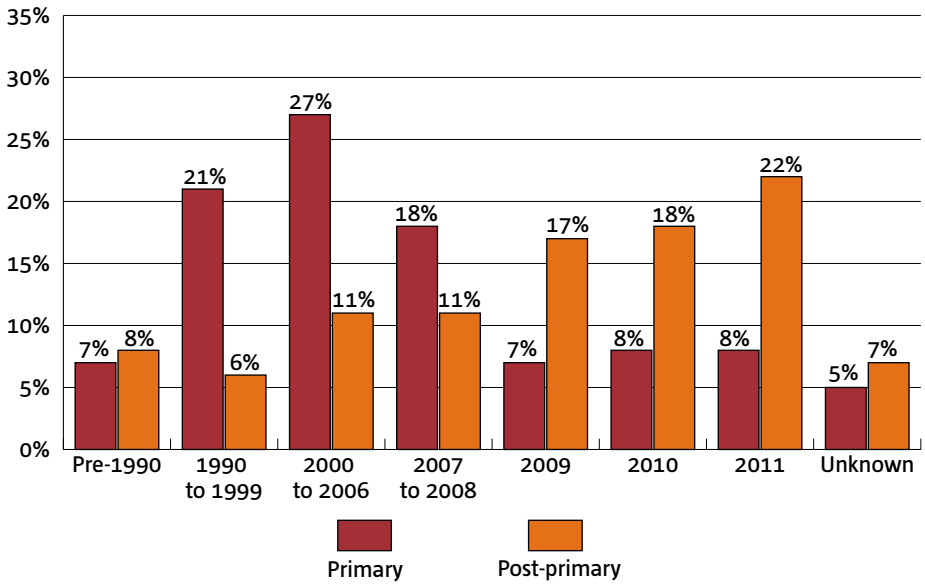
5.2.1 Year established

We might expect that policy and guideline changes in special needs provision would affect the establishment of special classes. The national survey asked principals when the special class was established. In Figure 5.1 we examine the overall number of special classes established in each time period and later examine whether there were differences in their establishment by their special needs designation. Note that the year established is based on those classes still in existence at the time of the interview, so it excludes classes established but subsequently discontinued.

Figure 5.1 shows substantial differences between primary and post-primary schools in the timing of special class establishment. At primary level, there is evidence of a dramatic increase in special class provision from 1990 onwards with just seven per cent still operating at the time of the interview established in the pre-1990 period. Most classes were set up between 1990 and 2009 with 73 per cent of primary special classes (260 classes) set up during this period. Note that the number of special classes established per year (of those still in existence at interview) has been increasing from about eight per year at primary in the 1990s to about 25-28 per year from 2009 to 2011.

There is an important contrast between primary and post-primary schools in creating special classes in the most recent years, with a large increase in their adoption at post-primary since 2009. At the post-primary level, the peak in terms of establishment of special classes came after 2007. Only a quarter of special classes still operating at the time of interview (74) were established before 2007. The years 2010 and 2011, in particular, were associated with a major increase in these classes, with 40 per cent (an estimated 121 special classes) established in this period. If we calculate the estimated number established per year (of those still in operation), the change over time is even more pronounced, with 2 per year between 1990 and 1999 and between 50 to 67 per year from 2009 to 2011.

Figure 5.1: Year special class was established in primary and post-primary



Note: the graph excludes classes that were discontinued by the time of the survey (see section 1.3 for more detail)

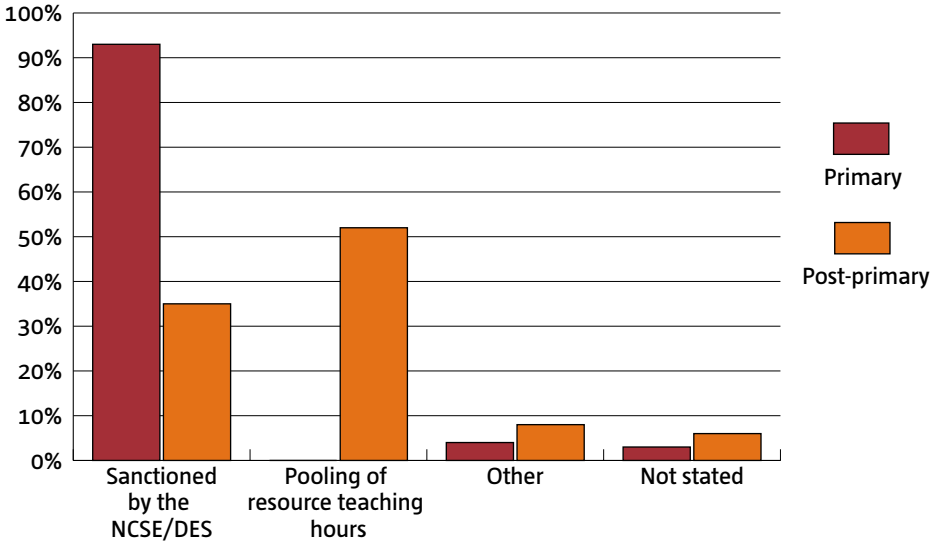
We shall see later there were also differences by time and by level (primary or post-primary) in the establishment of special classes with different designations, such as for ASD or for MGLD. We turn first to how the classes were set up and how students are assigned to them.

5.2.2 How special classes were established

Figure 5.2 shows how the primary and post-primary special classes were established. At primary, over nine out of ten were set up on the basis of sanction by the SENO or the Department of Education and Skills. The pattern for post-primary is quite different. Just over half of special classes here were established by pooling of resource teaching hours with just over one third established following sanction by the SENO or the DES. Ware *et al* (2009, p155) also note the use of resource hours to meet the needs of students whose needs cannot be met within a mainstream class. The fact that special classes allowed students to remain in their local area was cited as an advantage as compared to special schools (Ware *et al*, 2009, p154-155).

Additional analyses considered the characteristics of post-primary schools creating special classes by pooling resource hours. The results show DEIS schools are far more likely to set them up in this way, while those in non-DEIS schools were more likely to be established following official sanction.

Figure 5.2: How special classes were established in primary and post-primary



At post-primary, there was a shift over time in terms of how special classes were established (Table 5.1). Special classes established after 2009 were more likely to have been established by the pooling of resource teaching hours. Before 2006, there was a more even split between classes established by virtue of SENO or Departmental sanction and those established by pooling of resource teaching hours.

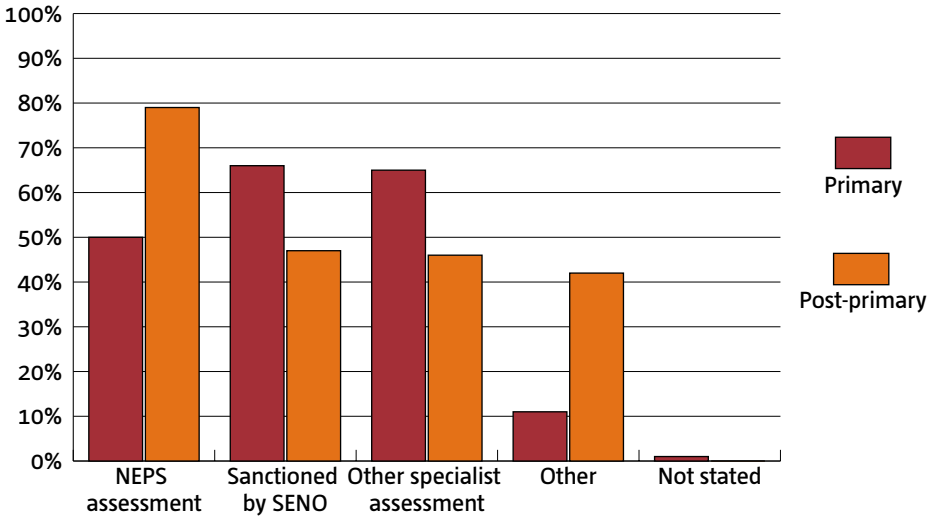
Table 5.1: How and when special classes were established (post-primary)

	Pre-2006	2007-08	2009-11
Sanctioned by the NCSE/DES	49%	50%	25%
Pooling of resource teaching hours	49%	35%	57%
Other/not stated	1%	15%	18%
Total	100%	100%	100%

5.2.3 How students are assigned to special class

Figure 5.3 examines how students are assigned to special classes at primary and post-primary. Note that students may be assigned to classes in multiple ways, so the percentages do not sum to 100. At both levels, a variety of modes of assignment are important. At primary level, students are most often assigned to special class based on SENO sanction (66 per cent), other specialist assessment (65 per cent) and NEPS assessment (50 per cent).

Figure 5.3: How students are assigned to special classes in primary and post-primary



The main distinction between primary and post-primary schools in terms of the assignment of students to special classes is the relatively greater importance of NEPS assessment at second level. At post-primary level, assignment to a special class following NEPS assessment is the dominant method (79 per cent), but SENO sanction (47 per cent), other specialist assessment (46 per cent) and other systems of assignment (42 per cent) are also important.

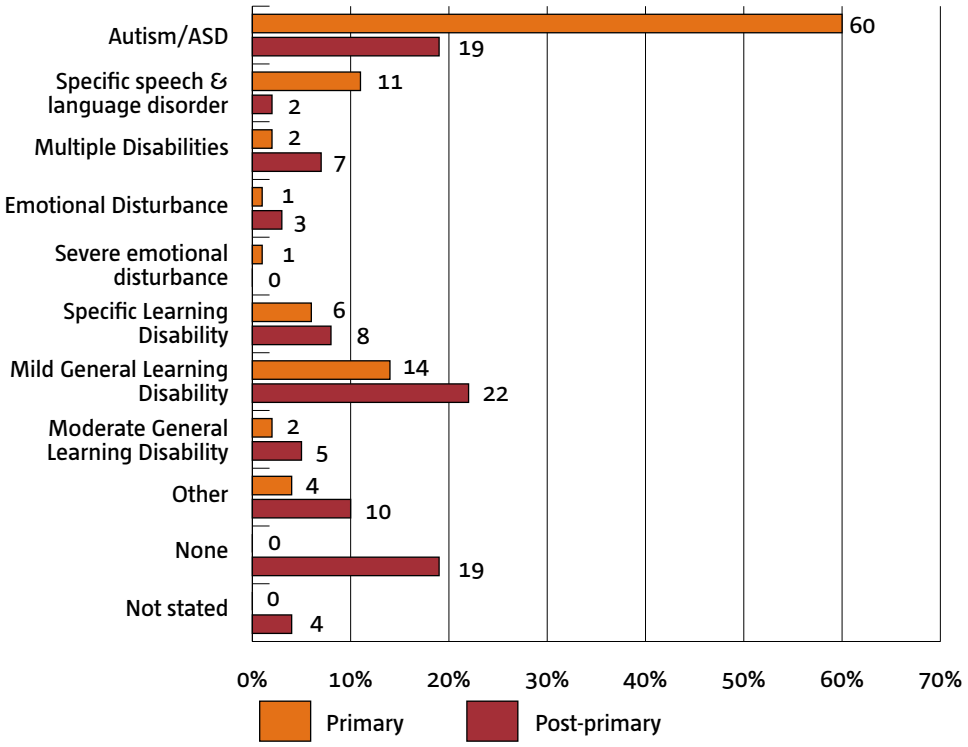
5.3 Type of Special Educational Needs of Students in Special Classes

5.3.1 Special educational needs designation of special classes

The formal designation of special classes, where applicable, is shown in Figure 5.4. 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. It is also considerably higher

than the 19 per cent of post-primary special classes designated for children with ASD. It is also interesting to note that most special classes designated for those with ASD are in non-DEIS schools (three-quarters). Conversely, classes for students with MGLD are disproportionately located in Urban Band 1 DEIS schools.

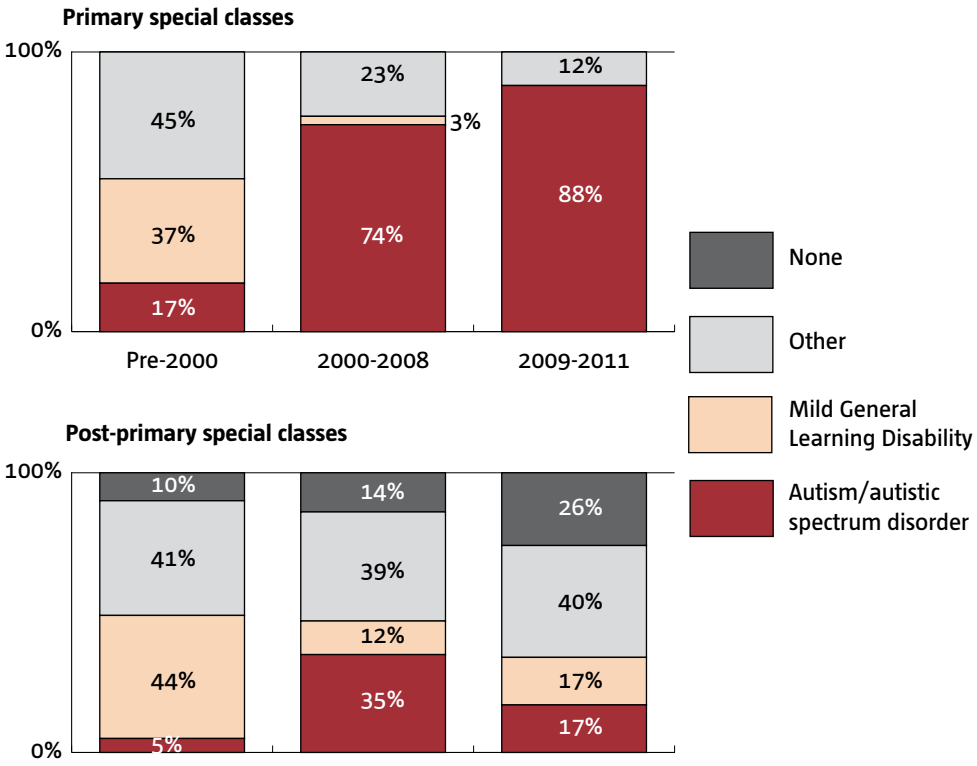
Figure 5.4: Special educational needs designation of special classes at primary and post-primary



At post-primary, a greater diversity exists in special needs designation of special classes, with none dominating in the way that ASD dominates at primary. Twenty-two per cent of second level special classes are designated for students with MGLD; 19 per cent for those with ASD and 19 per cent have no specific designation and one in ten have some other designation.

Figure 5.5 shows the special needs designation of the special class by the year it was established at primary and post-primary levels, with a particular focus on those designated for ASD and those for students with MGLD. Note that these figures refer to special classes still in operation at the time of the survey. Other special classes may have been established in the past but discontinued (See chapter 2, section 2.5.1). At primary, the high rate of setting up these classes for students with ASD is particularly apparent in recent years. Seventy-four per cent were set up between 2000-08 and 88 per cent of those established between 2009-11 were designated for ASD students, compared to 17 per cent before 2000. At the same time, there was a large drop in creating special classes for students with MGLD. These accounted for 37 per cent established pre-2000, but for less than 5 per cent established after that period.

Figure 5.5: Special educational needs designation by year established



At post-primary, the establishment of special classes for students with ASD never reached such a high level, but it did increase from 5 per cent pre-2000 to 35 per cent from 2000 to 2008 before dropping back to 17 per cent thereafter. More recently, the fall indicates that there is not a tendency for the ASD special classes to 'follow through' to post-primary. There has been a significant drop in setting up special classes for students with MGLD at post-primary level. These special classes account for 44 per cent of those established pre-2000, 12 per cent of those established from 2000 to 2008 and 17 per cent of those established post-2008. At post-primary level we see an increase in the number of special classes with no specific designation, particularly after 2000. These special classes account for 10 per cent of those established pre-2000, 14 per cent of those established from 2000 to 2008 and 26 per cent of those established after 2008.

5.3.2 Actual special educational needs of students in special classes

A special class designated for students with a particular special need may also include those with a different one. In this section, we examine the actual type of special educational needs of students in special classes. This is based on the school respondent (principal and/or special class teacher) indicating whether each special class had students with a given primary special educational need. They were asked to count each pupil only once, according to their primary need.

Figure 5.6 examines the percentage of special classes with students having each different type of disabilities. It also examines the extent to which those with a specific need are in classes for students with different types of needs. This is important because a class catering for a diverse range of learning difficulties is likely to present

different pedagogical challenges compared to a class where the nature of the students' educational needs are less diverse.

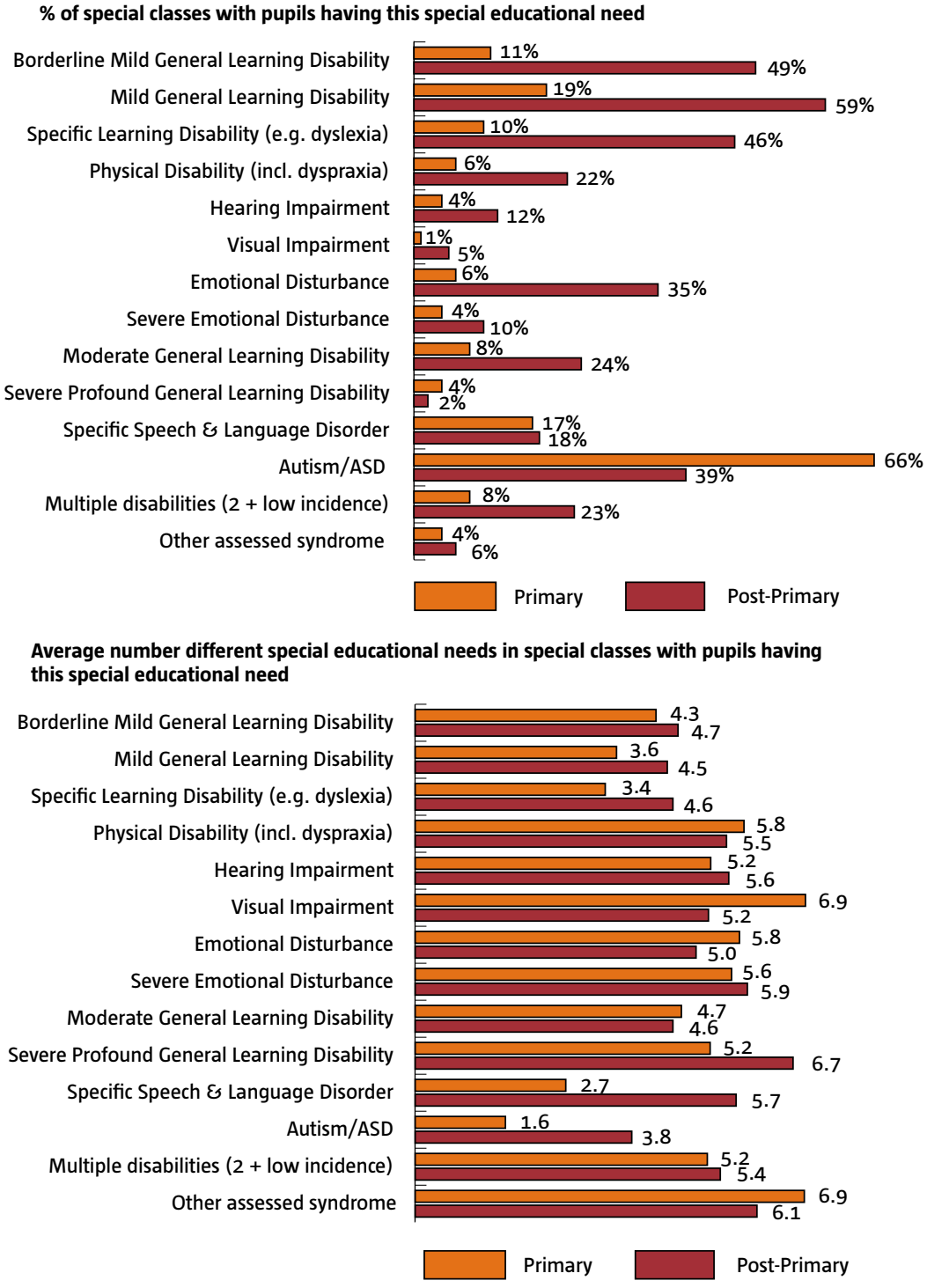
Turning first to the profile of special classes at primary, this is shown by the light coloured bar in the left-hand panel of Figure 5.6. The biggest special needs category here is ASD and about two thirds (66 per cent) of special classes at primary level have students with ASD. There are fewer special classes with each of the other types of disabilities at primary level. Just under one fifth cater for students with MGLD; 17 per cent cater for students with specific speech and language disorders; 11 per cent cater for borderline MGLD. Each of the other specific types of disability is catered for in fewer than one in ten of the special classes at primary level.

We turn now to the number of different types of special educational needs catered for in the special classes with each designation.[22] The right hand panel shows that classes catering for students with ASD are likely to be the most specialised. At primary level, the average special class which caters for these students has students with 1.6 different types of disabilities. The average number of different types of disabilities in classes containing students with specific speech and language disorders is also relatively low, at 2.7. The diversity of disabilities is greater in classes containing students with MGLD (3.6) or borderline MGLD (4.3).

At post-primary level, special classes catering for students with ASD are less dominant, but they still account for 39 per cent of all such classes. These classes are less specialised and the average class catering for these students has students with 3.8 of the different types of special educational needs shown in Figure 5.6.

22 The question wording for this item asked the school respondent to think of the primary special need of the pupils and 'multiple disabilities' was included as a category. This means the number of different types of special educational needs reflects diversity across students rather than the presence of students with multiple disabilities.

Figure 5.6: Primary special educational need of students in the class and number of different types of special educational need in classes with different designations



At post-primary, special classes are likely to have students with mild (59 per cent) or borderline mild (49 per cent) general learning disability, specific learning disability (46 per cent) and emotional disturbance (35 per cent). Students with the more common types of special educational need (mild and borderline MGLD, specific learning disability, and ASD) are likely to be in classes catering for a larger number of different types of special educational need than in primary schools.

5.3.3 Presence of students without special educational needs in special classes

The questionnaire prompted the school respondent (principal or special class teacher) with a definition of special classes as those 'formed primarily for pupils with special educational needs which is the main learning environment for those pupils.' The instructions noted that these may be 'special classes sanctioned by the DES or the NCSE' or 'any other class schools may have established primarily for these students (e.g. by pooling resource teaching hours for a group of students) and which is the main learning environment for those students.' The instructions specifically excluded learning support classes and learning support or resource teaching withdrawal groups. (See section 1.3 for more detail.)

Nevertheless, the special classes may have students without special educational needs but who have some need for additional support. As Table 5.2 shows, at primary level, special classes are unlikely to cater for any students without special educational needs. Only 1.4 per cent (or five) of special classes have any students without special educational needs. This is much more common at post-primary, however. Over a third (34 per cent) of special classes here have at least one pupil without a diagnosed special educational need (an estimated 104 special classes).

Table 5.2: Presence of students without special educational needs in special classes

	Primary	Post- primary
Students without special educational needs in special classes (% special classes)	1.4%	34.8%
Students without special educational needs in special classes (n)	5	104
Students without special educational needs in special classes (%) where ...		
• Class established by sanction of NCSE/DES	1.2%	9.4%
• Class established by pooling resource teaching hours	–	45.2%

At post-primary, fewer than 10 per cent of special classes sanctioned by the NCSE have any students without educational needs. Such classes formed by pooling resource teaching hours are much more likely to cater for some students who do not have special educational needs (45 per cent at post-primary level).

The school respondents (principal or special class teacher) were asked to identify the main reason the special class also catered for students with no special educational needs. The reasons are summarised in Table 5.3. The most common was that the pupil had literacy or other academic problems, even though no special educational need was diagnosed. This was the main reason in nearly one third of cases. We could add to this 11 per cent of special cases in which specific groups were identified with academic difficulties related to absenteeism (Travellers) or literacy (non-English speakers). We might also include the fifteen per cent of special classes where some students without special educational needs were assigned on the basis of recommendations from the primary school or on the basis of classroom performance.

Table 5.3: Reason for presence of students without special educational needs in special classes

Reason	%
Weak/borderline/literacy problems but no special educational needs diagnosis	32%
Primary recommendation, recommended class by specialist/other	15%
Irish exemption/subject or programme choice	12%
Traveller/foreign national with literacy/language difficulties	11%
Parent request	5%
Likely early leaver	4%
Required learning support	3%
Other	7%
No answer	13%

Twelve per cent of cases were in the special class because of subject or programme choice (eg choice of the Junior Cert School Programme) or an Irish exemption (which applies in cases where the student has lived abroad, does not speak English or has particular disabilities)[23]. Other reasons included the request of parents, the student being at risk of leaving school early and the pupil requiring additional learning support.

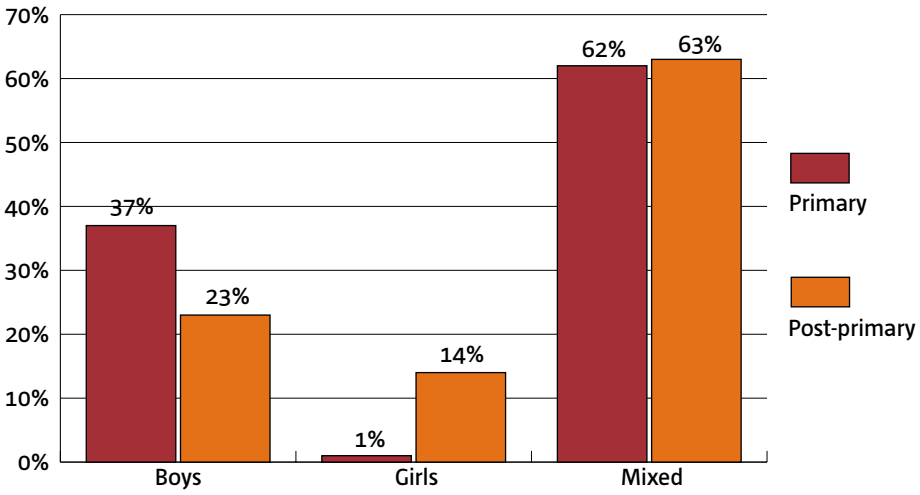
5.4 Gender Mix, Class Size and Age Range of Students in Special Classes

5.4.1 Gender mix of special classes

At this point we turn to gender mix and examine how this is associated with the size of the special class. As shown in Figure 5.7, most are mixed (62 to 63 per cent) in both sectors. Classes with boys only are more common than girls only. At primary, over a third are single sex boys' classes and virtually none are for girls only. At post-primary, 23 per cent are boys-only and 14 per cent are girls-only. In coeducational school settings, it is interesting to find that boys tend to outnumber girls in terms of the composition of the special class group. This is particularly the case at primary level where nearly 40 per cent of special classes in coeducational schools are comprised solely of boys. Across both primary and post-primary coeducational schools, very few special classes are comprised of a greater number of females.

23 Information about exemption from Irish in primary school is in Circular 12/96 Revision of Circular 18/79 on Exemption from the Study of Irish and for second-level in Circular M10/94.

Figure 5.7: Gender mix of special classes at primary and post-primary



5.4.2 Size of special classes

Table 5.4 shows the median size of primary and post-primary special classes. At post-primary they tend to be larger. At primary, they typically have six students whereas in post-primary they have nine.

Table 5.4: Median size of special class by gender mix at primary and post-primary

	Primary	Post-primary
Boys	6.0	6.3
Girls	–	9.9
Mixed	6.0	10.0
Total	**6.0**	**9.0**

Note: there are too few girls' special classes at primary level to provide reliable figures, reflecting the higher numbers of boys with many special educational need types, particularly ASD disorders which dominate special class provision at primary level.

There is also a difference in the typical size of special classes by gender mix. Boys' special classes tend to be smaller than girls': 6.3 versus 9.9, respectively, at post-primary. Mixed special classes at post-primary level tend to be the largest with a median of 9.0. There is no difference between the median size of boys' and mixed special classes at primary, however.

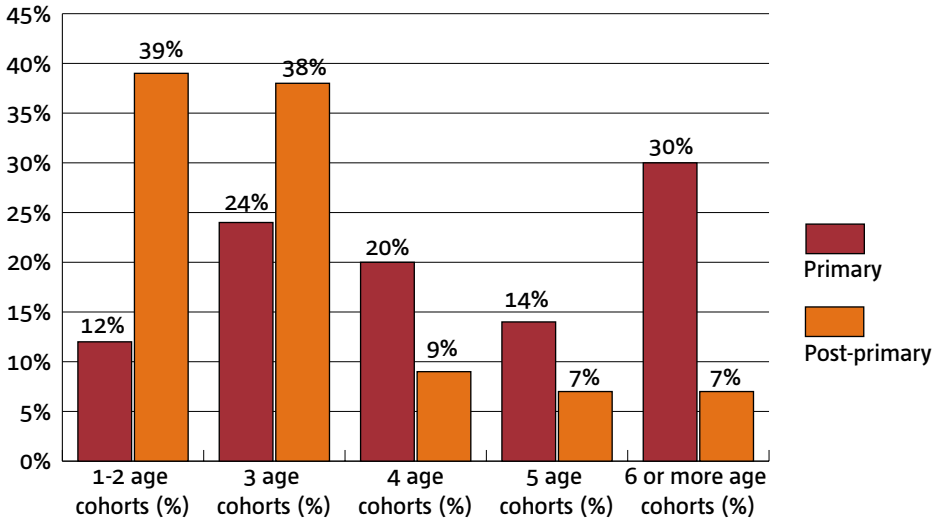
The relationship between size and gender mix at post-primary may be associated with school type, as most single-sex schools tend to be voluntary secondary rather than comprehensive or vocational. We investigate this in the last section of the chapter.

We might expect to find a broader range of age groups in each special class at primary, given the smaller school size. This is indeed the case, as can be seen from Figure 5.8. An 'age cohort' here refers to students in each single year of age.

At primary, only 12 per cent of special classes have students with one or two age cohorts and 24 per cent have students in three age cohorts (compared to 39 per cent and 38 per cent, respectively, at post-primary). In fact, 30 per cent of primary special classes have

students from six or more age cohorts, compared to only 7 per cent in post-primary. The median age range for primary students is four years, compared to three years at post-primary.

Figure 5.8: Age range of special classes in primary and post-primary

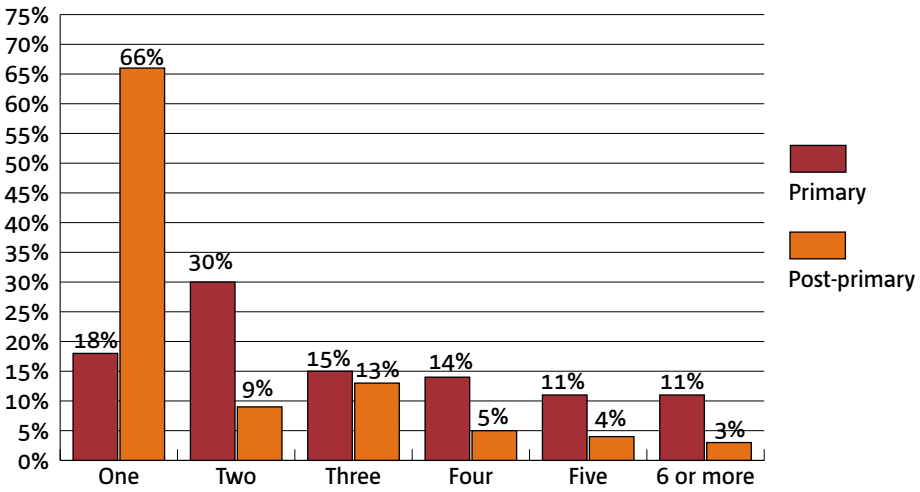


5.4.3 Number of different year groups in special classes

Given the diversity of abilities among students with special needs, the link between age and preparedness for material at each learning level is likely to vary. The wide age ranges may reflect this fact as much as reflecting constraints arising from the need to cater for a relatively small number of such students. To give an alternative perspective on the diversity within the class, Figure 5.9 looks at the number of different year groups within a special class at primary and post-primary. Students of different ages may be grouped into a single year group based on their preparedness for learning the material appropriate to that level.

Using the number of year groups rather than the number of age cohorts, we see less diversity within special classes. Nonetheless, there is still a greater spread of year groups within primary than within post-primary special classes, which is not surprising given the much greater use of multi-grade classes in mainstream classes at primary level. The contrast is most noticeable in terms of the percentage of special classes with just a single year group of students: 18 per cent at primary and 66 per cent at post-primary. Over one-third of primary special classes (36 per cent) cater for four or more year groups compared to only about one in eight of post-primary (12 per cent). Although the typical primary special class tends to be smaller in size, the challenge remains for teachers presenting material at very different levels to a single group of students.

Figure 5.9: Number of year groups in primary and post-primary special classes



5.5 Typology of Special Classes

So far we have seen that special classes differ in size, in the range of different special educational needs catered for and the range of year groups combined in a particular class. To some extent, given a certain number of students with special needs, there seems to be a trade-off between grouping students across disability categories and grouping them across year groups. The first strategy ensures a narrow range of year groups while the second ensures a narrower range of types of need.[24] We checked for differences between special classes in the configuration of year groups and number of disability types. We conducted a two-stage cluster analysis on these two characteristics. The purpose of such analysis is to check whether special classes tend to fall into groups that are distinctive in the way they combine year groups and types of disabilities.[25] The analysis identified three clusters of special classes, as shown in Table 5.5.

24 We speak of these as 'strategies' because although the type of special class may be formed in part by the specific special needs of students attending the school, it is unlikely they would vary much between schools in the long term.

25 Eight per cent of special classes had no reported range of year groups. To retain all cases in the cluster analysis, these cases were assigned a category of year group range based on the age range of the pupils in the class.

Table 5.5: Clusters of special classes by number of year groups and number of special educational need types: class size, level and school type

	Clusters of Special Classes			All special classes
	1. Narrow range of year groups and special educational need types	2. Narrow range of special educational need types, wide range of year groups	3. Narrow range of year groups, wide range of special educational need types	
Percentage of special classes	54%	25%	21%	100%
N year groups (average)	1.6	4.9	1.4	2.4
N special educational need types (average)	1.4	2.4	5.5	2.5
Number of students in class (average)	6.8	7.2	11.0	7.8
School size (average)	352.4	302.1	471.9	364.6
Number special classes in school	2.5	1.9	3.1	2.5
Primary %	61%	74%	12%	54%
Post-primary %	39%	26%	88%	46%
Of which				
• Girls' secondary	10%	12%	12%	11%
• Boys' secondary	14%	7%	8%	11%
• Co-ed secondary	7%	17%	5%	8%
• Vocational	42%	40%	56%	47%
• Community/comprehensive	27%	24%	18%	23%

The largest cluster of special classes (54 per cent) has a narrow range of year groups (1.6 on average) and few different types of special educational need (1.4 on average). This cluster is specialised both in terms of the range of year groups and the range of different types of need. These special classes tend to be small in size (average of 6.8 students) and to be found in schools with an average size of 352 students. Both primary (61 per cent) and post-primary (39 per cent) schools are found in this cluster. But primary schools are somewhat over-represented and post-primary schools are under-represented in this cluster.

About a quarter of special classes are found in the second cluster. They are distinctive in having a wide range of year groups in the same special class (average of 4.9). The number of different types of special need is fairly low at 2.4 on average, but higher than in the first cluster. The number of students in these special classes averages 7.2, which is a little higher than the first cluster. These special classes are found in smaller than average schools (average size is 302) and are much more likely to be found in primary schools. Of the special classes in this second cluster, 74 per cent are in primary schools and 26 per cent are in post-primary schools. Of the post-primary special classes in this

cluster, coeducational secondary schools are over-represented and vocational schools are underrepresented compared to all special classes.

The third cluster contains about one fifth of special classes (21 per cent). These special classes minimise the number of year groups but include a larger number of different types of disabilities in the same class. They have the largest average number of different types of disabilities in the same class (5.5) and the lowest average number of different year groups (1.4). This cluster has the largest average class size (11 students) and is found in the largest schools (average size is 472 students). In contrast to the first two clusters, this type of special class is strongly associated with post-primary schools. Nearly nine out of ten (88 per cent) special classes in this cluster are found here, compared to 46 per cent of all special classes. Vocational schools are over-represented in this cluster.

Table 5.6 examines the DEIS status, designation and gender mix of special classes in each cluster and also whether these classes have students without special educational needs. The strongest pattern by DEIS status is the overrepresentation of DEIS Urban Band 1 schools in the third cluster (narrow range of year groups, wide range of disabilities). About two-thirds of special classes in this cluster are in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools, compared to 26 per cent and 22 per cent, respectively, for clusters 1 and 2. Non-DEIS schools are slightly over-represented in the first two clusters.

About half the special classes in the first two clusters are designated ASD while fewer than one in ten of the special classes in the third cluster have this designation. The third cluster is most likely to contain special classes with no official designation (28 per cent compared to 4 per cent and 2 per cent, respectively, for clusters 1 and 2). Cluster 3 is also most likely to have some students with no official diagnosis (41 per cent, compared to 13 and 4 per cent, respectively, in clusters 1 and 2).

Finally, in terms of how the special class was established, the third cluster is again most distinctive. It is the only group of special classes where the majority were established through the pooling of resource teaching hours (69 per cent). Nearly eight in ten classes in cluster 1 and more than nine in ten from cluster 3 were established through sanction by the NCSE or DES.

Table 5.6: Characteristics of clusters of special classes – DEIS status, special educational needs designation, presence of students without special educational needs and how established

	Clusters of Special Classes			All special classes
	1. Narrow range of year groups and special educational need types	2. Narrow range of special educational need types, wide range of year groups	3. Narrow range of year groups, wide range of special educational need types	
DEIS status				
• Non-DEIS	65%	66%	30%	58%
• Urban 1 DEIS	26%	22%	67%	34%
• Urban 2 DEIS	6%	9%	3%	6%
• Rural DEIS	3%	4%	0%	3%
Special educational needs designation				
• Designated ASD	50%	50%	8%	41%
• Designated mild GLD	15%	21%	21%	18%
• No special educational needs designation	4%	2%	28%	9%
Any students without special educational needs in class	13%	4%	41%	17%
How established:				
• Sanctioned by the NCSE/DES	78%	94%	18%	69%
• Pooling resource teaching hours	17%	3%	69%	25%
• Other	5%	3%	13%	6%

Overall, the third cluster (wide range of disability types, narrow range of year groups) is most distinctive. These classes are relatively non-specific in terms of the needs of students assigned to them. This non-specificity also extends to the reduced emphasis on sharp distinctions between students with and without diagnosed special educational needs.

Table 5.7 looks in more detail at the designation of classes in the three different clusters by whether the special class is in a primary or post-primary school. The breakdown by designation is not shown at primary level for the second cluster (many disability types, few year groups) or for post-primary level for the second cluster (few disability types, many year groups) because these cluster/level combinations have only a small number of special classes.

At primary level, the ASD designated special classes dominate, both for the classes that specialise by disability type and year (67 per cent) and for the classes that specialise by

disability only (52 per cent). Special classes designated 'specific speech and language disorder' account for 13 per cent of the first cluster (specialised in terms of year groups and disability) at primary level but MGLD special classes account for only 7 per cent. At primary level, MGLD special classes are more common in the second cluster (specialised in terms of disability but combining year groups – 23 per cent).

Table 5.7: Special educational needs designation of special classes at primary and post-primary by cluster

Special educational needs designation of special class	Primary			Post-primary		
	1. Narrow range of year groups and special educational need types	2. Narrow range of special educational need types, wide range of year groups	3. Narrow range of year groups, wide range of special educational need types	1. Narrow range of year groups and special educational need types	2. Narrow range of special educational need types, wide range of year groups	3. Narrow range of year groups, wide range of special educational need types
ASD	67%	52%	–	22%	–	7%
Specific speech and language disorder	13%	7%	–	2%	–	3%
Multiple disabilities	2%	1%	–	1%	–	15%
Emotional disturbance	0%	1%	–	2%	–	6%
Severe emotional disturbance	0%	0%	–	0%	–	1%
Specific learning disability	7%	5%	–	12%	–	6%
MGLD	7%	23%	–	26%	–	18%
Moderate GLD	1%	5%	–	5%	–	3%
Other	2%	7%	–	12%	–	9%
None	0%	0%	–	11%	–	32%
Not stated	0%	0%	–	6%	–	3%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
% of all special classes (by level)	61%	35%	5%	46%	14%	40%
Number of special classes	215	123	16	140	43	120

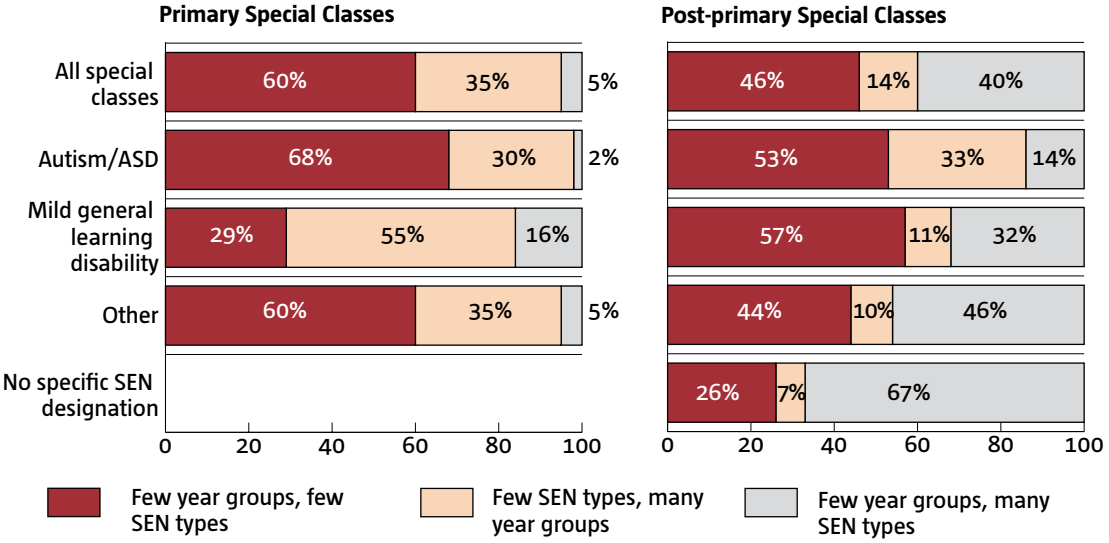
Note: – indicates that there are too few cases to provide a breakdown.

At post-primary, special classes designated ASD are less common and account for only 22 per cent of the first cluster and 7 per cent of the third cluster (specialised by year group but combining different types of disability). In contrast, special classes designated MGLD are more common but not as dominant as ASD classes are at primary level. At post-primary level, 26 per cent of classes in the first cluster (specialised in terms of both disability type and year group) are designated MGLD while 18 per cent of the special classes in the third

cluster have this designation. It is the special classes with no specific designation that are most common (32 per cent) in the third cluster at post-primary level, however.

The final figure examines the clusters from the perspective of the designation of the special classes. Instead of asking what proportion of special classes in each cluster has a particular designation, we ask what proportion of special classes with certain designations is found in each cluster. Figure 5.10 shows the proportion of all special classes and of those with each designation that are in each cluster at primary and post-primary level. At primary, most (60 per cent) are specialised in terms of year group and the type of special educational needs of students which the class serves, 35 per cent are specialised by type of need but combine more year groups, and only five per cent are specialised by year groups, combining many different types of disability. At post-primary level, specialisation by both year group and disability is less dominant (46 per cent of special classes) and a much larger proportion than at primary level are specialised by year group but cater for students with different types of disability (40 per cent).

Figure 5.10: Cluster profile of special classes of each special educational needs designation at primary and post-primary



When we compare ASD and MGLD special classes at primary level, we see that the ASD special classes are likely to be the most specialised. At primary level, 68 per cent of ASD special classes are specialised both in terms of a narrow range of year groups and a narrow range of disability types, compared to a figure of 29 per cent for MGLD special classes. MGLD special classes at primary level are more likely to be specialised in terms of type of need but to combine several year groups (55 per cent). This is different at post-primary, where ASD special classes and MGLD special classes are about equally likely to be specialised in terms of both year group and type of disability (53 per cent and 57 per cent respectively). However, among special classes not specialised in both these senses, the ASD special classes are more likely to specialise by type (have few disability types and many year groups – 33 per cent) than to specialise by year group (few year groups and many disability types – 14 per cent). The opposite is true of special classes designated MGLD where 32 per cent have a narrow range of year groups (but cater for many

different types of special needs) while only 11 per cent cater for students with a narrow range of disability types but combine across year groups.

5.6 Summary

Chapter 5 has examined characteristics of special classes in primary and post-primary side-by-side because the contrast between the two is illuminating. It points to the influence of school characteristics and funding arrangements on how schools meet the needs of students with special educational needs.

Special classes in primary schools operating at the time of the national survey were most likely to have been set up between 2000-09 (53 per cent), with 22 per cent between 2009-11. The establishment of special classes in post-primary schools was much more concentrated towards the end of the period, with 57 per cent established between 2009-11. We saw that the establishment of special classes by pooling resource teaching hours and special classes with no specific designation had both increased at post-primary in this period.

The designation of special classes also differed significantly between primary and post-primary. Sixty per cent of special classes at primary were designated as ASD classes. This designation accounted for only 19 per cent of special classes at post-primary level. In post-primary schools, there was greater diversity in the designation of special classes with no one designation dominating. Almost a fifth of post-primary classes had no specific designation.

We also see a strong relationship between the year the special class was established and its designation, especially at primary. Nearly nine out of ten special classes set up in primary between 2009-11 were designated for students with ASD, compared to fewer than one in five before 2000. Although the establishment of special classes for students with ASD also increased at post-primary (from 5 per cent pre-2000 to 35 per cent during 2000-08 and 17 per cent after 2008), it has not reached the same concentration as at primary. There is no evidence here of the ASD special classes at primary level filtering through to a similar form of provision at post-primary.

In recent years, there has been a drop in the setting up of special classes for students with MGLD in both sectors. At primary, they accounted for 37 per cent of special classes established pre-2000, but for less than 5 per cent established thereafter. At post-primary, they accounted for 44 per cent of those established pre-2000 and 17 per cent post-2008.

At primary, over nine in ten special classes were established on the basis of sanction by the NCSE or DES, compared to just over one in three at post-primary. The establishment of special classes through a pooling of resource teaching hours was common at post-primary level. Between 2010-12, sixty per cent of post-primary special classes were established in this way and were more likely to include some students with no special educational needs diagnosis.

In terms of assigning students to special classes, NEPS assessment was relatively more important at post-primary while SENO sanction and other specialist assessment were relatively more important at primary.

Looking at the special educational needs of students in special classes (rather than the class's official special needs designation) we again saw the dominance of ASD at primary. Nearly two-thirds of primary special classes have students with ASD compared to 39 per cent at second level. The next most common special educational needs at primary comes a very distant second at 19 per cent for MGLD and 17 per cent for specific speech and language disorder. At second level, there are a number of different special educational needs that are each represented in more than a third of special classes: borderline MGLD and MGLD, specific learning disability, ASD and emotional disturbance.

Considering the number of different types of disabilities represented in special classes, we saw that those with students having ASD at primary were the most specialised. These classes had students with an average of 1.6 different types of disabilities, compared to averages of 3.6 for primary students with MGLD and 3.8 for special class students with ASD at post-primary level.

We examined the size, gender mix and age range of special classes. Most special classes are mixed (over 60 per cent). At primary, nearly a third of special classes are for boys and very few are for girls only. At second level, nearly a quarter of special classes are boys only and 14 per cent are girls only. Special classes tend to be larger at post-primary with a median of nine students compared to six students at primary. Mixed special classes at post-primary tend to be the largest with a median of ten students, followed by girls' special classes (9.9) and with boys' special classes having a median of only 6.3 students.

The final section of the chapter we focused on the potential trade-off between minimising the diversity of special classes in terms of type of special educational need and minimising the diversity in terms of the range of year groups included. We found that the special classes fell into three groups in this respect. The first and largest group tended to have the smallest special classes and minimised diversity in terms of disability classification and range of year groups. These special classes are found in both sectors but are over-represented in primary. Special classes designated ASD and those in non-DEIS schools are also over-represented in this cluster. At primary level, this cluster is dominated by special classes designated ASD (67 per cent), but at post-primary special classes designated MGLD (26 per cent) as well as those designated ASD (22 per cent) are common in this first cluster.

The second cluster, accounting for about 25 per cent of special classes, has the widest average range of different year groups and a narrow range of different types of special educational need. These are more likely to be found at primary and few are found at post-primary. Like the first cluster, classes designated ASD and those in non-DEIS schools are also over-represented in this cluster. At primary level, 52 per cent of special classes in this cluster are designated ASD and 23 per cent are designated MGLD.

The third cluster is characterised by the narrowest range of year groups and the widest range of different types of need. They tend to be much larger than those in the other two clusters and nearly nine out of ten are in post-primary and about two-thirds are in

DEIS Urban Band 1 schools. They are unlikely to be designated ASD, more likely to have no specific designation and more likely than special classes in the other clusters to have students with no educational needs. At post-primary level, classes designated MGLD account for 18 per cent and those with no specific designation account for 32 per cent in this third cluster. Given the prevalence of DEIS Urban Band 1 schools in this cluster, this special class model may represent a flexible strategy in response to the challenge of meeting a wide range of educational needs, not all of which fit neatly into the disability categories.

6 Teaching and Learning in Special Classes

6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the nature of teaching provision offered in special classes, the subjects and programmes students take and the extent to which students move out of these classes over time. These issues constitute important features of special classes in Irish primary and post-primary schools and provide valuable insights into their nature and operation in schools. Given the differences in curricular context between the sectors, we examine teaching provision separately for both. We begin with a focus on special classes in primary schools moving on to post-primary special classes, with the final section discussing issues emerging across the two sectors. The predominant focus is descriptive, given the richness of the national survey data collected, although use is made of multivariate methods to explore the extent to which variation reflects key compositional characteristics of schools and classes.

6.2 Teaching Arrangements in Special Classes: Primary

Special classes in primary schools are to a large extent taught by one teacher, the special class teacher (Figure 6.1). Given that this is the predominant mode of teaching across primary, this is perhaps not surprising. Other forms of teaching, such as team teaching or other personnel in a teaching role, arise in less than 10 per cent of special classes in primary schools. While the teaching role is largely confined to a single teacher, the provision of other support in the form of SNAs is relatively prevalent across special class settings (Figure 6.2). Typically they have two SNAs providing a care and support role for students with special educational needs. While the role of the SNA is intended to be non-teaching (DES Circular SP ED 07/02), they are a sizeable presence in special classes. Just 17 per cent have no SNA in the classroom, 22 per cent have one, 46 per cent have two and 15 per cent have three or more (Figure 6.2). To a large extent these differences reflect variations across special classes in the nature of special educational needs and class designation and to a lesser extent the number of students present. The number of SNAs per class is higher among classes designated for students with ASD. Further, larger classes appear to have lower SNA provision with levels declining as class size increases. This presumably reflects the nature of need in the classroom, but more importantly the ratios for SNA and teacher supports in ASD classes (as discussed in Chapter 2 – Table 2.3). In contrast to the results on the prevalence of special needs students across school sectors (see Chapter 3), there is no significant variation in SNA provision across schools by DEIS status and gender mix, once account is taken of the designation and size of the special class.

Figure 6.1: Main teaching arrangements for special classes (primary)

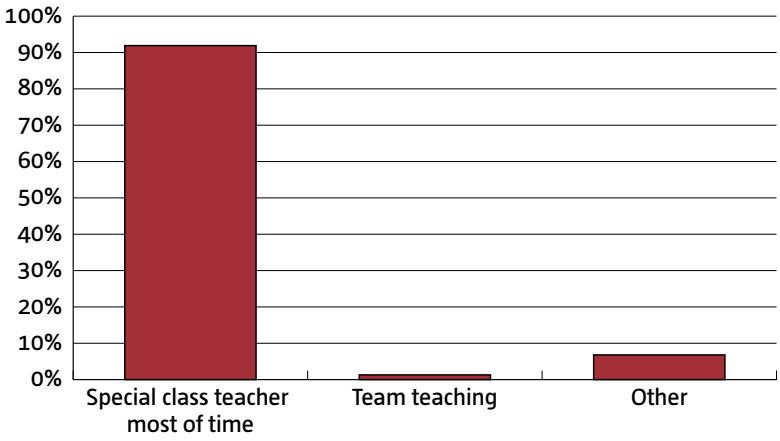
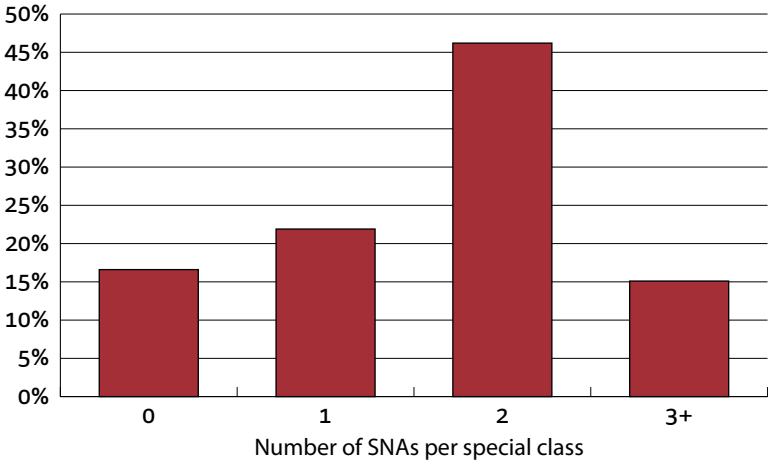
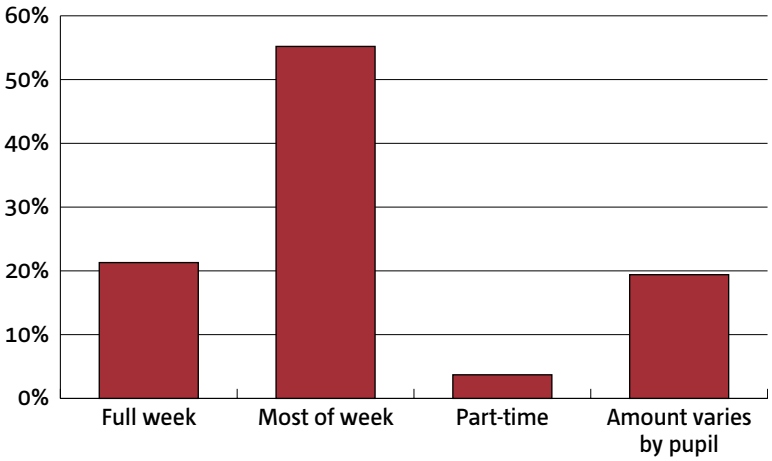


Figure 6.2: Number of Special Needs Assistants per special class (primary)



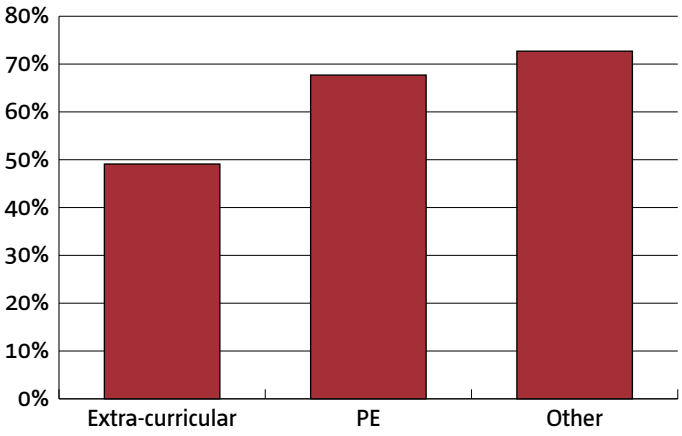
Principals were asked to record the extent to which students spend most or part of the school week in their special class setting. The dominant structure of provision entails these students spending most of the school week in their own class setting (Figure 6.3). Over half of students attending primary special classes spend most of the week together with an additional 21 per cent spending the full week together. In a small minority of special classes (less than 4 per cent), students attend the special class on a part-time basis. In a further one-fifth of special classes the level of integration and time spent in the special class setting varies across students. Additional analyses (not shown) examined the extent to which integration varied across special classes of different designations and across different school types. Students attending MGLD and Moderate GLD designated special classes were less likely to spend their full school week in this setting. Taking account of designation, students attending special classes in Urban Band 1 DEIS schools were more likely to spend the full school week in their special class.

Figure 6.3: Time students spend in special class (primary)



Where special class students spend time outside of this setting (for almost 80 per cent of special classes at least some students spend time outside it), this predominantly occurs for physical education and extracurricular activities (Figure 6.4). Nearly 70 per cent of students attending special classes where some integration occurs participate in physical education with other student groups. Further, half engage in extra-curricular activities with other students.

Figure 6.4: Activities for which integration occurs (primary)

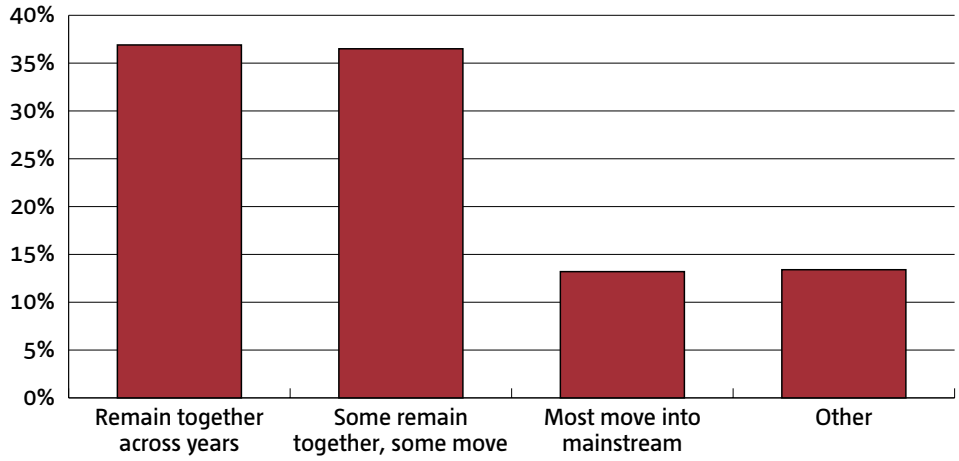


As outlined in chapter 2 recent policy advice papers by the NCSE outlined how a 'fluid approach' should be taken when placing students in special classes and that they should be viewed as a 'temporary intervention' which are 'time-bound and regularly reviewed' (NCSE, 2011, 2012).

The questionnaire also sought information on the permanence of student placement in special classes – asking to what extent students remain in a special class setting once they are allocated to that class. The dominant pattern is one of relative persistence in the special class setting. 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. Among the remaining 13 per cent of special

classes, principals indicated that it was too soon to assess mobility as the class had only been recently established. There is no evidence that mobility out of special classes is more prevalent in particular types of schools but mobility does appear to be more likely among larger special classes, perhaps partly reflecting pressures on numbers, and less likely for those attending a MGLD, Moderate GLD or ASD designated class. (See section 2.5.4 for details on retention ratios.)

Figure 6.5: Extent to which students remain in special class grouping across years (primary)



Note: 'Other' predominantly refers to special classes operating for only one to two years or (in a few cases) where students spend a fixed period of time (usually a year) in a special class setting.

Where mobility into mainstream classes does occur, principals were asked to detail how that process occurred and who was responsible for making the decision. In most cases, moving a student(s) into a mainstream class took place on a graduated basis, with once-off movement occurring in just one-in-five special classes (Figure 6.6). In terms of the decision to move a student from special into mainstream provision, the decision is typically heavily influenced by the teacher's assessment (71 per cent), although the NEPS and SENOs also play a significant role in 45 per cent of cases (Figure 6.7). It is interesting to note that schools also appear responsive to parental and student preference – in just under 40 per cent of special classes student mobility is in response to a parent's or student's request.

Figure 6.6: Where students move into mainstream, how does the move occur? (primary)

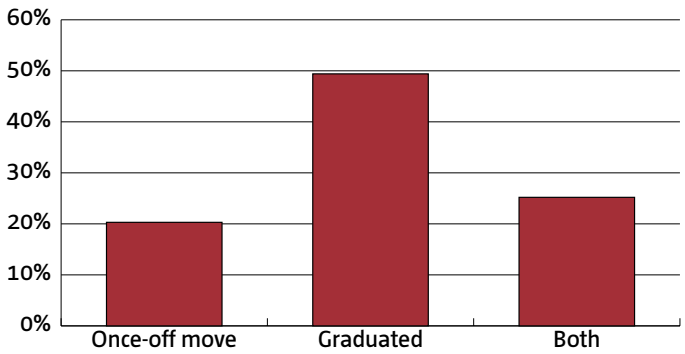
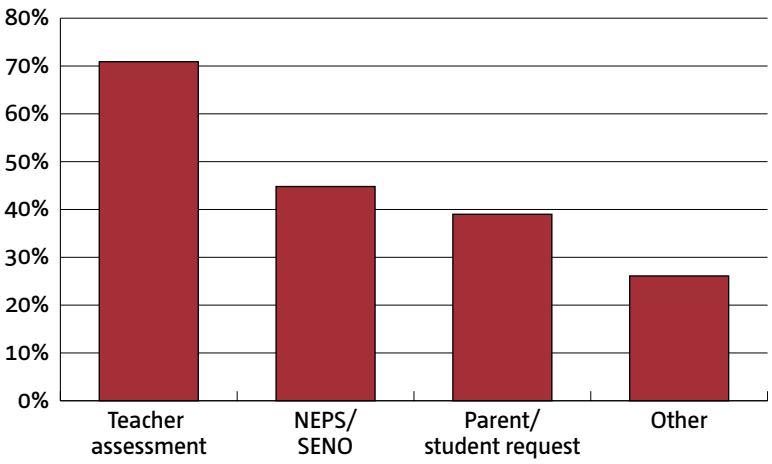


Figure 6.7: Where students move into mainstream, what criteria inform the decision? (primary)

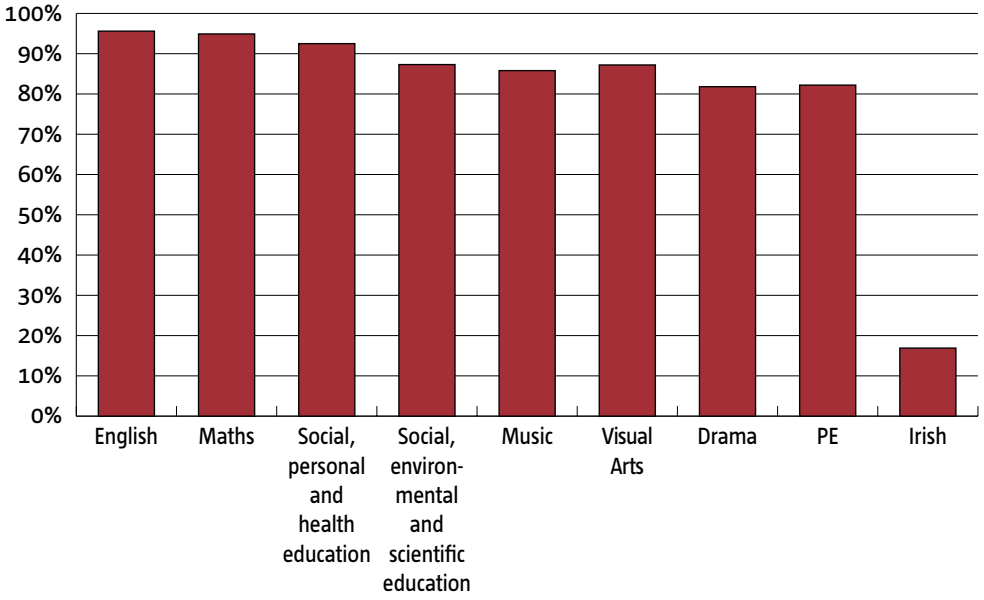


Note: Multiple response question; figures do not sum to 100%.

6.3 Curricular Provision in Special Classes: Primary

In examining subject provision in special classes, for the most part the classes are not distinct from their mainstream counterparts (McCoy *et al*, 2012c). Most offer English and maths, while large proportions also offered Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) (93 per cent), Social Environmental and Science Education (SESE) (87 per cent), visual arts (87 per cent), music (86 per cent) drama (82 per cent) and physical education (82 per cent). Their main distinction relates to Irish; just 17 per cent of primary school special classes are offered Irish as a subject (Figure 6.8). Not surprisingly, when principals were asked to note any subjects from which special class students were exempt, over three-quarters indicated exemption from Irish. This reflects the significant share of students with special educational needs more generally exempt from Irish as a subject, and is most likely not a function of being in a special class per se. The proportion of special classes exempt from Irish does not appear to vary across special classes of different designations or across schools of differing social or gender composition. However, those in the largest schools are less likely to be exempt from Irish than other special classes, even after taking account of special class and school characteristics. Despite the high level of exemption from Irish, two-thirds provide no alternative or additional subjects. Where these are provided they centre on four areas: cookery and craft; social or life skills; horse riding and speech and language therapy.

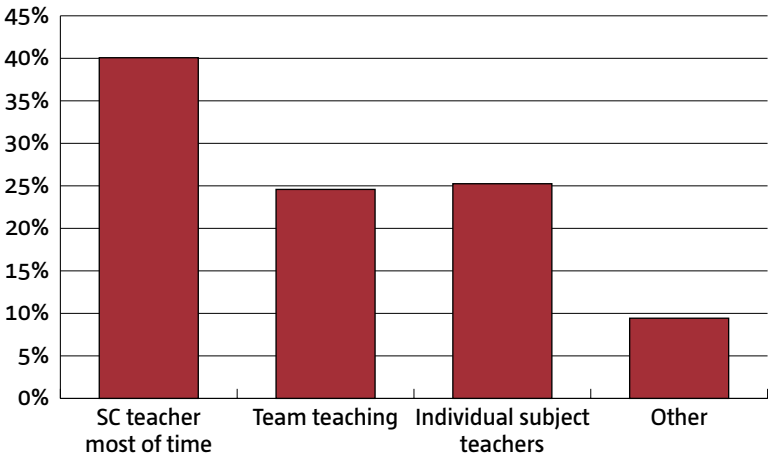
Figure 6.8: Subjects provided in special classes (primary)



6.4 Teaching Arrangements in Special Classes: Post-primary

In contrast to the picture at primary, special class teaching arrangements are much more variable at second level. One dominant pattern entails a single teacher assigned to the special class for much of the school day, which accounts for 40 per cent of special classes. Other teaching arrangements are also reported (Figure 6.9). In particular, one-quarter of special classes follow the more traditional individual subject teacher model, presumably entailing students moving classes for different subjects. As we see later in this section, these findings may also relate to the finding that some special class students are located in special class settings on a part-time basis (25 per cent) and, for some special classes, student time in that class setting varies across the class group. In addition, team teaching is reported in almost one-quarter of special classes. Additional analyses examined the extent to which the nature of teaching arrangements varied systematically across different types of special classes and across different school contexts. Prevalence of the single teacher model was not found to vary significantly across special classes of different designations (and those which are non-designated). However, some variation did emerge across different school contexts. In particular, larger schools (>600 students) were more likely to assign a single teacher to the special class, perhaps reflecting logistical constraints in the school. Interestingly, schools participating in the DEIS programme were somewhat less likely to assign a single teacher to the special class, opting instead for the traditional individual teacher approach or team teaching. This may reflect the lower pupil-teacher ratios for DEIS schools.

Figure 6.9: Main teaching arrangements for special classes (post-primary)



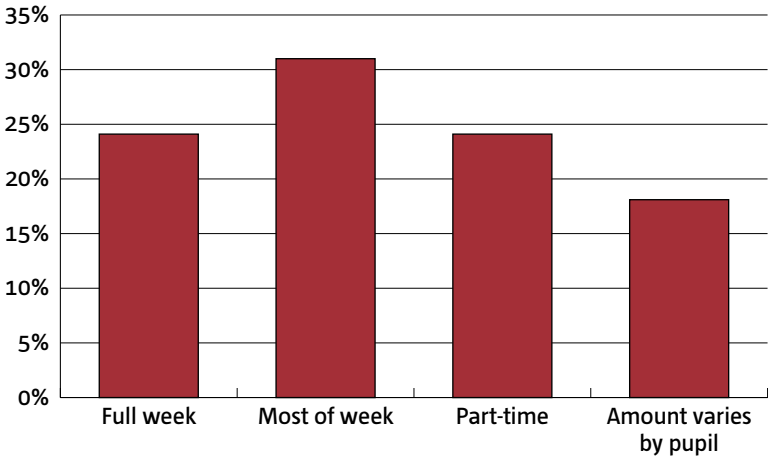
SNA support also appears somewhat lower in post-primary special classes as compared to primary level. Nearly one-third have no SNA support in the classroom (Figure 6.10). The typical pattern is for one SNA to be present in the class, with just 22 per cent of classes having two SNAs and 9 per cent with three or more. To a large extent reflecting the baseline ratios allocated to different special class designations (see Chapter 2, Table 2.3), SNA support varies significantly across special class contexts – in particular across classes of differing designations. In particular, it is higher among classes designated for students with ASD. All other designations, and those which are non-designated, have much lower SNA provision. For the most part, SNA levels do not vary across different school types, gender compositions and school size. However, DEIS schools have higher levels of SNA support than non-DEIS schools, even taking account of the special class designation. In other words, for any given special class designation, being located in a DEIS school increases the level of SNA support. Variation also exists across school types with lower SNA numbers in special classes in vocational schools and single sex girls' and boys' secondary schools.

Figure 6.10: Number of special needs assistants per special class (post-primary)

In considering the time special class students spend together, again the post-primary picture is somewhat distinct to that seen at primary level (Figure 6.11). While similar

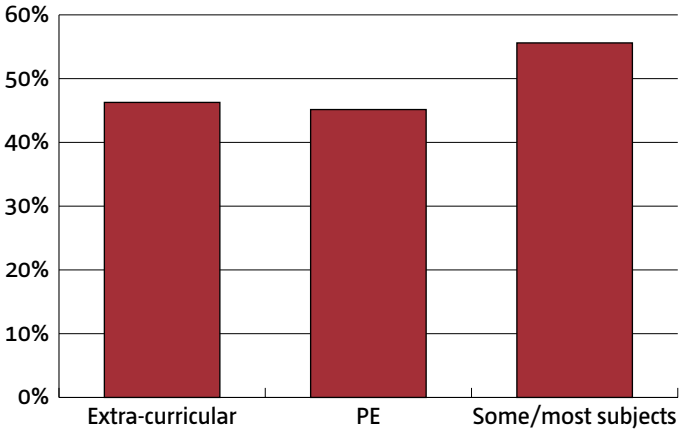
proportions spend the full school week in their special class grouping (between one-fifth and one-quarter), special class students at post-primary level are much more likely to be located in the special class setting on a part-time basis (one-quarter of special classes). Time in the special class varies across students in an additional 18 per cent of post-primary special classes. While special class designation appears to have little impact on the amount of time students spend in their special class grouping, some school characteristics do make a difference. In particular, special classes in DEIS schools are more likely to remain together for the full school week, with lower levels of student integration than across non-DEIS schools.

Figure 6.11: Time students spend in special class (post-primary)



Where students spend time outside the special class grouping, the curricular areas in which they are integrated vary considerably across schools (Figure 6.12). In just under half of cases where some integration occurs, this relates to extra-curricular activities, for 45 per cent integration occurs for PE while in 55 per cent of classes students participate in mainstream classes for some academic subjects.

Figure 6.12: Activities for which integration occurs (post-primary)

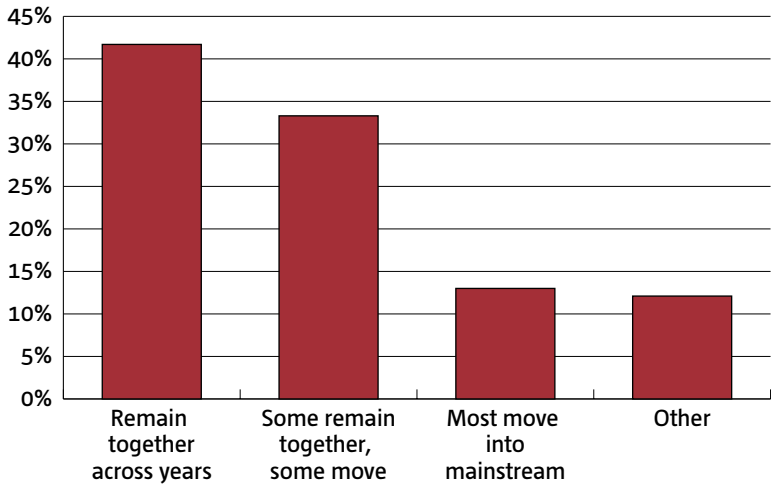


Note: Multiple response question; figures do not sum to 100%.

In terms of integration into mainstream classes, for the most part students in post-primary special classes remain together across school years (Figure 6.13) – the allocation is relatively permanent. 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, while in a further 13 per cent of classes most or all students do so. For the remaining 12 per cent of classes the principal did not specify how such movement occurred. There is some evidence that students in smaller special classes are less likely to move into mainstream, perhaps in an effort to ensure class size thresholds are reached, while students in special classes in smaller schools are more likely to transition into mainstream. There is also some evidence that practices vary across the different school types – special classes in boys' secondary schools are less likely to remain together as a group across years. There is little evidence that the level of integration is influenced by the nature of the special educational need or designation of the class.

Figure 6.13: Extent to which students remain in special class grouping across years (post-primary)



Note: 'Other' predominantly refers to special classes operating for only one to two years or where students spend a fixed period of time (usually a year) in a special class setting.

Where students move from special into mainstream classes, a multitude of approaches are adopted – for over 40 per cent of special classes some students make the move on a once-off basis while others move on a more gradual basis (Figure 6.14). For just one-in-five classes students move once-off, while for one-quarter gradual integration is the preferred approach. In deciding on integration into mainstream, teachers' assessments again assume primary importance (Figure 6.15), although parental and student requests assume much greater importance at post-primary – presumably partly reflecting student age and their greater capacity to influence decisions about their education. Interestingly, NEPS and SENO advice plays less of a role in decisions about student placement at post-primary level.

Figure 6.14: Where students move into mainstream, how does the move occur (post-primary)?

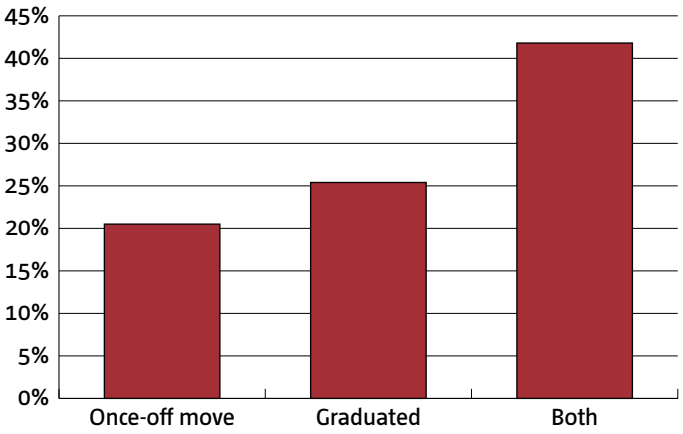
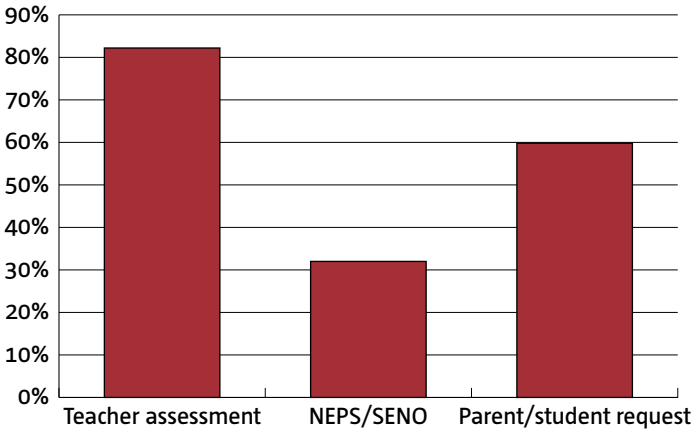


Figure 6.15: Where students move into mainstream, what criteria are used in the decision (post-primary)?



Note: Multiple response question; figures do not sum to 100%.

6.5 Curricular Provision in Special Classes: Post-primary

Given that special classes are largely provided for students in the junior cycle years (see Chapter 5), it is not surprising to find that most are following the Junior Certificate or Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP). While just over one-third of post-primary schools (240) currently provide the JCSP, those providing special classes appear to have higher levels of participation in the programme (Figure 6.16). The Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) is geared towards potential early school leavers struggling to cope with second-level schooling so may be seen as a particularly valuable form of curricular provision for those with special educational needs. Interestingly, access to the JCSP for special classes appears to vary across different school types – with DEIS, vocational and schools of mid to mid-large size (200-399; 400-599 students) most likely to provide it. Almost three-quarters of all post-primary special classes follow the Junior Certificate curriculum (includes those participating in the JCSP, who are required to enter for the Junior Certificate examination).

In providing for students in the senior cycle years, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme is prominent. While 7 per cent of schools nationally offer it, special classes have relatively high levels of participation (just under 30 per cent). Given its focus and the teaching and learning methodologies employed (Banks *et al*, 2010), it is likely it is seen as a more accessible form of provision than the traditional Leaving Certificate. In line with overall LCA provision, special classes in DEIS schools have higher levels of participation in the LCA programme, as do special classes in schools with higher prevalence rates and community and comprehensive schools. In contrast, participation in the traditional Leaving Certificate programme is more prevalent among special classes in non-DEIS schools, boys' and coeducational secondary schools and in smaller schools. A further 10 per cent of special classes include students taking FETAC qualifications.

In just over 40 per cent of special classes all students take the same curricular programme, with a similar proportion accommodating two programmes within the class – in many cases, this entails the JCSP and JC programmes. In a minority of special classes (24 per cent) three or more programmes are being followed – these classes typically comprise a broader age range and hence accommodate both junior and senior cycle programmes. To some extent these results reflect the prevalence of students with special educational needs in the school – in schools with high levels of prevalence (greater than 15 per cent of first years), special classes are more likely to be confined to students of similar age. Interestingly, special classes in DEIS schools are more likely to follow three or more programmes, perhaps reflecting the greater availability of the JCSP and LCA programmes in DEIS schools. The number of programmes followed by special class participants does not vary significantly according to special class size and designation. (Figure 6.17)

Figure 6.16: Certification/programmes taken by special class students (post-primary)

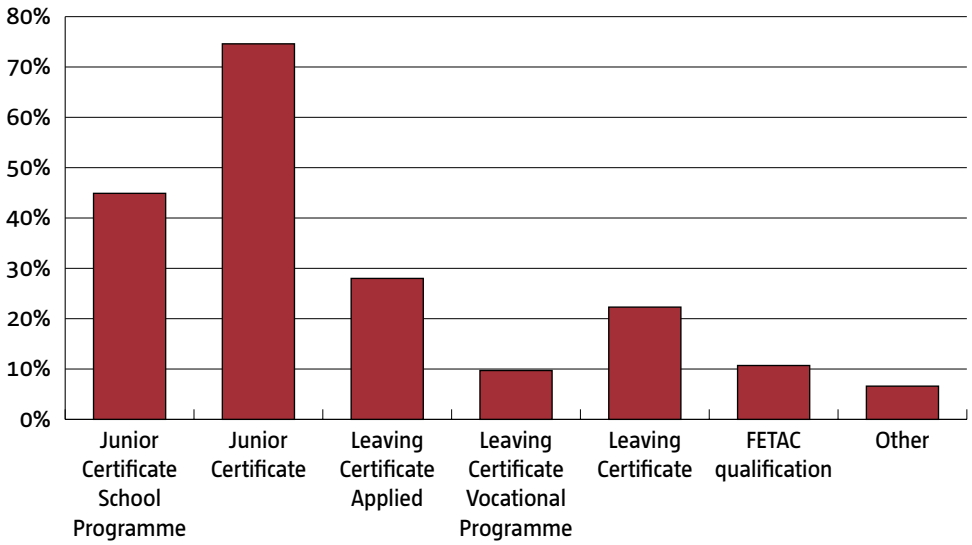
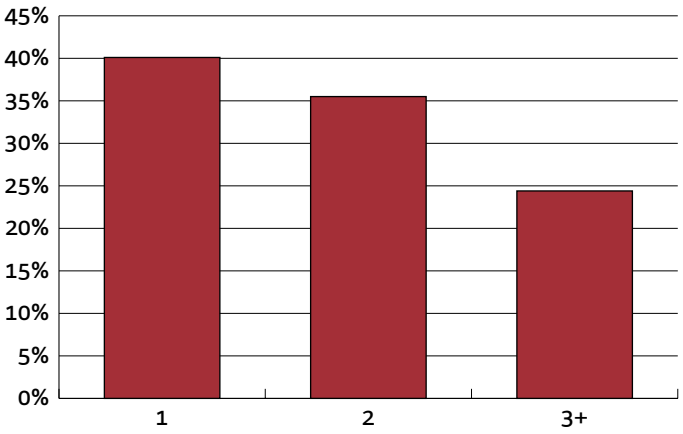
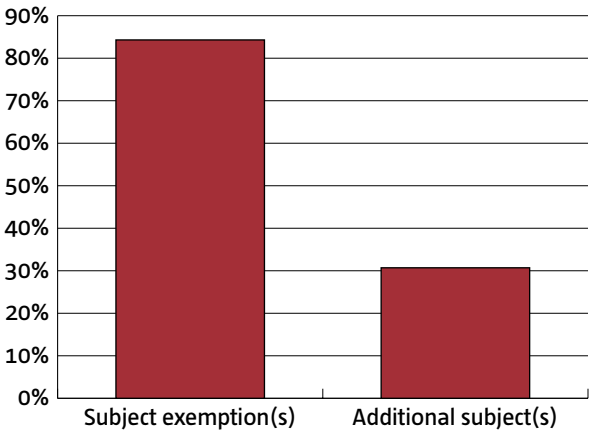


Figure 6.17: Number of programmes taken in special classes (post-primary)



Finally, the survey collected information on whether students in special classes are either exempted from particular subjects on the curriculum or are offered additional subjects or modules not offered in mainstream classes. As illustrated in Figure 6.18, in most students are exempted from one or more curriculum subjects. Further analysis reveals that for the most part these students are exempt from Irish, in line with their eligibility for exemption from Irish for students with special educational needs in general (see Irish Independent April 14th, 2012), although in a smaller number of schools special class students are exempt from Irish and other subjects, typically languages. The provision of alternative or additional subjects for special classes is somewhat less prevalent – less than a third of special classes are taught subjects or modules not offered to mainstream students. For the just over 90 special classes which were offered such additional modules, much of the focus is on life and social skills (including environmental and social studies) or the provision of FETAC modules at a range of NFQ levels.

Figure 6.18: Subject exemptions and additional subjects taken in special classes (post-primary)



6.6 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has examined principal reports of key teaching and learning arrangements for primary and post-primary special classes, important aspects of any assessment of

special class organisation and operation. The results show distinct patterns as expected given the different curricular arrangements and teaching allocations across the two levels. The dominant teaching arrangement in primary level special classes is for one teacher, with typically two SNAs providing a non-teaching support role. In line with the allocation of SNA support, there is variation in levels of SNA support, with greater numbers for ASD special classes. Post-primary special classes have a variety of teaching arrangements in place, ranging from one special class teacher to a range of teachers for different subjects. Levels of SNA support are lower than at primary (perhaps partly reflecting lower numbers of ASD classes at this level), although again ASD classes are best equipped in this regard. SNA support also appears higher in DEIS schools, all else being equal.

In primary, for one-fifth of special classes students spend the full week together, while for over half of classes students spend most of the week together. Where integration occurs, it can be for PE or extra-curricular activities, or for 'other' activities which include a range of academic subjects. Allocation to a special class is a relatively permanent situation for many students; where mobility to mainstream does occur it is more likely to be based on the teacher's assessment than external advice (SENO or NEPS). Students allocated to post-primary special classes typically spend most (31 per cent), if not all (24 per cent), of the school week together; where integration does occur there is considerable variation across schools as to whether that is for academic or non-academic subjects – there appears to be no clear model of integration operating across post-primary. Movement into mainstream occurs for a minority of special classes, with decision-making again heavily influenced by teacher assessments, although parental and student input is also apparent. Thus some schools appear to be responsive to student and parental preferences in decisions about student placement. However, while such placement is heavily influenced by formal assessment and the advice of SENOs and NEPS, such experts play less of a role in decisions about movement into mainstream, with teachers assuming primary importance. Finally, the findings suggest that, given the impact of special class size and numbers on student mobility, schools are making decisions about student integration with a view to maintaining class size thresholds and special class funding.[26]

We know from earlier work that teachers (and schools) adjust their timetable to reflect the mix of students in the school, with marked differences found between DEIS (disadvantaged) and non-DEIS schools, and between single-sex and coeducational schools, for example, in terms of time spent on different subjects (McCoy *et al*, 2012c). We now find that students attending special classes in primary school are typically exempt from taking any Irish, in line with exemptions from Irish for students with special educational needs more generally[27]. This is also the case for post-primary. This raises

26 Student mobility out of special classes is greater in larger class sizes (even taking account of special educational needs designation), but somewhat constrained where schools are struggling to maintain special class numbers.

27 The DES allows for exemptions from Irish language learning, as set out in Circulars. At primary level, for instance, exemption can be granted for those:

i. who function intellectually at average or above average level but have a Specific Learning Disability of such a degree of severity that they fail to achieve expected levels of attainment in basic language skills in the mother tongue, or

important questions about the extent to which curricular coverage in special classes (and indeed for students with special educational needs in mainstream) constrains young people's later subject choice and higher education options. In line with the age and stage profile of special class students (Chapter 5), junior cycle programmes dominate in terms of curricular provision. The question can be asked as to what form of provision is offered for these students at senior cycle level. It is clear that schools providing special classes have high levels of participation in the LCA programme, but what about schools not in a position to offer the LCA programme (for 2012-13, 282 schools offered the LCA programme)? The LCA programme itself has been found to play an important role in provision for students with special educational needs (Banks *et al*, 2010), but weaknesses have also been found. Banks *et al* (2010) highlight how students taking the LCA are often frustrated at the stigma associated with the programme in addition to the lack of challenge and inflexible nature of the curriculum.

In conclusion, these findings provide valuable insights into the nature of special class teaching and learning, and the implications this has for students allocated to special classes. The Primary Curriculum (1999) emphasises school/classroom flexibility for teachers to address the needs of their students. While such flexibility is crucial for effective teaching and learning, there is potential for differences to emerge which may negatively affect educational outcomes. In the longer term, this may translate into differences in student engagement, achievement in particular domains and longer term educational opportunities. The findings show substantially lower levels of exposure to Irish[28] for students in special classes (at both primary and post-primary) than for those in mainstream (McCoy *et al*, 2012c; Smyth *et al*, 2009), with potentially serious consequences for later subject choice and career options. Furthermore, the perceived application of strict thresholds for special class funding may have implications for student mobility into mainstream, suggesting the need to take a longer term approach in decisions on maintaining special class funding. Finally, special classes at post-primary are predominantly offered in the junior cycle years – with senior cycle provision much less prevalent. Reliance on the LCA programme to meet the needs of students with special educational needs raises concerns about schools not in the position to offer the programme and also emphasises the need to address shortcomings in LCA provision in some schools (Banks *et al*, 2010).

ii. who have been assessed as having a general learning disability due to serious intellectual impairment [ie mental handicap] and are also failing to attain adequate levels in basic language skills in the mother tongue, or

iii. who have been assessed as having a general learning disability due to serious sensory impairment, and are also failing to attain adequate levels in basic language skills in the mother tongue.

See http://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Information/Irish-Exemption/

28 The Primary Curriculum (1999) suggests a minimum weekly time of three hours and 30 minutes to be spent on Irish for primary schools. McCoy *et al* (2011) found the average classroom (for nine-year-olds) spends 3.6 hours per week on Irish (p9), although children attending Urban Band 1 DEIS schools typically spend less time on Irish (p10).

7 Conclusions and Policy Issues

7.1 Introduction

This report has provided detailed insights into the nature of supports for students with special educational needs in Irish primary and post-primary schools and, in particular, the role of special classes in that provision. The findings derive from a comprehensive national survey of schools undertaken with the full population of primary and post-primary schools (with the exception of special schools), with response rates of 80 and 74 per cent being achieved respectively. This chapter summarises the key findings arising from the analysis, followed by a discussion of some of the key policy issues arising from the findings. The final section provides an overview of the ongoing research on special classes being carried out by the research team which involves a longitudinal study exploring students' experiences, progress and outcomes in these special classes.

7.2 Summary of Main Findings

7.2.1 Special class data and terminology

Recent research has shown the difficulties in using administrative data in research on students with special educational needs (Banks and McCoy, 2011). Such data on special classes, however, has improved in recent years with the publication of data by the DES and the NCSE. There remains, however, no clear understanding of how special classes operate in Irish primary and post-primary schools. This study offers insights into special class provision in Irish schools and, in the process, highlights important issues. In particular, the research team received considerable feedback during the research from school principals seeking clarity on the language, terminology and definition of special classes and which students were to be included as having special educational needs. The lack of agreed understanding among various stakeholders points to the need for more debate on the definition of special classes in Ireland particularly within the context of wider debates around inclusive education as outlined in the EPSEN Act (2004). At a practical level, the findings suggest that school principals need more information on special class and other supports for students with special educational needs. The results also highlight the role of 'unofficial' special classes, which are not officially sanctioned by the NCSE or DES and are typically set up by school management through the pooling of resources hours or other resources,. The prevalence of such classes, particularly in post-primary level in particular raises questions over the extent to which sufficient numbers of special classes are sanctioned and whether supports for students with (different types of) special educational needs within mainstream education are adequate.

7.2.2 Prevalence of special educational needs

The report provides valuable baseline data on the prevalence of different types of special educational need across the mainstream primary and post-primary sectors in Ireland. The discussion highlights some limitations in terms of the methodology employed, in particular relying solely on principal reports (in comparison with the more

comprehensive methodology using teacher and parent reports employed by Banks and McCoy, 2011). It also points to difficulties in reporting high incidence special educational needs at primary level, which arises as there is no requirement for these students to be formally assessed under the GAM funding system. The lack of requirement for formal assessment at primary level raises issues for post-primary where, up to recently, all students with special educational needs required assessments to access supports. Despite these limitations, the analysis provides insights into the types of special educational need most prevalent among children and young people in Irish schools, and how these students are distributed across different types of schools. It is clear that gender differentials prevail – with males outnumbering females across almost all categories of need. However, earlier research has suggested that there is evidence of an over-reporting of particular types of special educational need, particularly among boys, and this may be underlying some of these results (Banks *et al*, 2012).

In line with the work of Banks and McCoy (2011), students with different types of special educational need are far from evenly spread across primary and post-primary school terrain. The results show concentrations of special educational needs in DEIS schools, particularly Urban Band 1 at primary level (where DEIS schools are more finely differentiated than at post-primary). They also show that Rural DEIS schools do not differ from their non-disadvantaged counterparts in terms of the prevalence of students with special educational needs. The findings for Urban Band 1 DEIS schools are significant. Allied with the socio-economic compositions of these settings and the additional implications attending highly disadvantaged school contexts has for student learning and achievement (McCoy *et al*, forthcoming), this has important implications for targeting resources for students in the most socio-economically disadvantaged school contexts. In particular, these results and the evidence collected allow for a more finely differentiated system of resource allocation to be developed in both sectors, where resources are allocated proportionately across school contexts according to the level and type of special needs students enrolled in schools.

Finally, the analysis shows that levels of special educational needs prevalence are also highly variable across schools of different size – with higher prevalence estimates among the smaller schools in both sectors. These findings require further interrogation but raise issues around capacity of schools to identify students in need of additional support, particularly in large school contexts. It also has implications for the nature of supports students with special educational needs receive – smaller schools are less likely to provide special classes, in some cases because they do not meet the required numbers with (particular types of) special needs.

7.2.3 Schools with and without special classes

In Chapter 4 we provided, for the first time, detailed information on staff resources for students with special educational needs in the mainstream school population. Findings show how SNAs and LS/RTs are the most common forms of staff resource used to assist this group of students directly. However, levels of provision vary by school characteristics and, at primary level, average SNA provision is higher in DEIS, small and boys' schools. Similarly, LS/RT staff numbers are greater in small, Rural DEIS and coeducational primary

schools. At post-primary level, similar patterns emerge with SNA and LS/RT allocations higher in smaller, community/comprehensive and DEIS schools. Comparing staff resources in schools with and without special classes also shows differences with higher levels of support in schools with special classes in primary and post-primary.

This chapter also provides baseline data on special class provision in Irish primary and post-primary schools. In line with the findings on the characteristics of special classes outlined in Chapter 5, the school level data shows systematic differences between primary and post-primary schools in the levels of special class provision. At both primary and post-primary, however, special classes are more prominent in disadvantaged school contexts, larger schools and schools with high prevalence rates.

The differences between primary and post-primary were all the more evident when examining the reasons why some schools do not have special classes. Low numbers of students with special educational needs was the main reason given for not having a special class by primary principals whereas post-primary principals were more likely to attribute not having a special class to negative views on segregation or an explicit philosophy of inclusion. A perceived lack of resources was given as a reason by both primary and post-primary principals. This and other responses from school principals highlighted a lack of understanding and awareness among school principals about both the process of establishing a special class and the criteria for eligibility.

7.2.4 Characteristics of special classes

The results show a surge in setting up of special classes in recent years, particularly at post-primary level. While in primary schools they are, in nearly all cases, sanctioned by the NCSE/DES, often by the SENO, the picture differs for post-primary. Just over half of special classes at post-primary were established through the pooling of resource hours (particularly in DEIS schools). In many cases, this approach often included students without a diagnosis. As noted earlier, while ASD designations dominate among primary special classes, particularly in non-DEIS schools, at post-primary level special classes comprise a wide range of different designations and serve a more diverse range of disability types. This new evidence allows, for the first time, a better understanding of level and nature of diversity in special class provision across both sectors. Special classes appear to play a more focused and specialised role in primary and serve a broader function at post-primary catering for more diverse groups of students.

While special classes in primary typically comprise boys or coeducational groupings (although coeducational groupings are predominantly comprised of boys), at post-primary some special classes are also comprised solely of girls. Given the larger scale of post-primary schools, it is not surprising to find special classes typically comprise fewer different age groups within the class setting. DEIS schools are more likely to fall into a group of schools where special classes typically comprise a narrow range of year groups but a wider range of types of special need. These are also more likely to have been established by pooling resource hours and include students without special educational needs. These classes could be seen as less specialised and perhaps reflecting schools using resources in an innovative way to meet the additional learning needs of diverse groups of students. At the other extreme is a group of special classes which are highly

specialised, comprising a narrow range of disability types and age groups, largely typified by the ASD class at primary level.

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, p88). The results show that across many special class settings, students stay together for most, if not all, of the school day, and a considerable proportion remain together as a group across school years. Allocation to a special class thus appears to be a relatively permanent arrangement, in contrast to the stated desire for a 'fluid' approach. Where mobility into mainstream classes does occur, teachers' own judgements are paramount, although some schools, particularly at post-primary level, do seem responsive to students' and parents' preferences in this regard. It is notable that external advice (such as from NEPS or SENOs) does not appear to figure highly in decision-making around mobility out of special classes. The findings also suggest that efforts to maintain the minimum special class size could affect student mobility into mainstream classes.

7.2.5 Teaching and learning in special classes

While the Primary Curriculum (1999) emphasises flexibility at the school and classroom level for teachers to address the needs of their students, this research has identified important implications of this flexibility for the teaching and learning environment for students in special classes in primary schools. Perhaps most significant, Irish is not offered as a subject in most primary special classes, although exemptions from Irish are not atypical for those with special educational needs more generally. This follows through to post-primary where students in special classes typically are not offered Irish as a subject – with implications for students' career and post-school options. Curricular provision for these post-primary students is often highly reliant on alternative programmes such as JCSP at junior cycle and the LCA programme at senior cycle level. This poses questions for schools not in a position to offer the LCA programme (often by virtue of their size or the perceived stigma surrounding the programme, see Banks *et al*, 2010). Recently initiated junior cycle reforms, as discussed in Chapter 2, include the introduction of Level 2 courses targeted at students with special educational needs. It will be important to see how participants in these courses fare, and in particular, whether these developments represent an enhancement in provision for students with special needs.

7.3 Key Policy Issues Emerging From the Findings

7.3.1 Defining special classes

In Ireland, as well as internationally, collecting data on students with special educational needs presents many difficulties in terms of how special classes are conceptualised, the language and terminology used to describe them, the disability classification systems adopted and the type of data sources used. Ongoing debates around inclusive education highlight the need for governments to re-examine existing definitions of special educational needs and the types of provision offered to these students in school.

As highlighted by Banks and McCoy (2011), special educational needs as defined under the EPSEN Act (2004) should be debated within the context of inclusion as should the types of provision available (including special classes). In particular, greater attention needs to be given to the current system of resource allocation and the continued use of the DES resource allocation categories which predate the EPSEN Act and have not been adjusted since its introduction. Definitions of special educational needs and disability have varied widely and have resulted in different prevalence estimates based on data such as governmental administrative data, census data and cohort studies. There are a number of sources of data on special classes, however, and differences exist between government departments and organisations on the exact number of classes being provided. The reason for this may be due to the difficulties in defining a special class (in light of the EPSEN Act) and in particular the differences between special classes which have been formally established and designated by the Department of Education and Skills or the National Council for Special Education and other more informal special class arrangements in individual schools. The data collected for this report sought to provide baseline information on the operational features of special classes, information not currently available from another source.

Feedback during the survey phase of the research in addition to the research findings suggest that conceptual differences exist in understanding the role and operation of special classes generally. Feedback from principals participating in this study suggests some confusion on the exact definition of special classes and this study highlights difficulties in the use of the term 'special class' to describe separate provision for students with special educational needs.

7.3.2 New evidence base

Using the national survey it is possible to examine the prevalence of special educational needs (using DES resource allocation categories) by school characteristics such as school size and disadvantaged status and in different school contexts. These findings provide a valuable evidence base for the allocation of resources to schools. In line with previous research (Banks and McCoy, 2011), findings show that special educational needs prevalence is greater in DEIS schools at both primary and post-primary, with Urban Band 1 DEIS schools at primary level particularly high. It can also be noted that higher prevalence is more common in smaller schools, across both sectors. Furthermore single-sex boys' schools are substantially more likely to have higher prevalence levels. In sum, we now have the evidence base with which to examine the current systems of resource allocation for students with special educational needs at primary and post-primary, with a view to evaluating whether resources are being targeted effectively to the school contexts most in need. This will be of particular value to the NCSE Working Group established recently[29] at the request of the Minister for Education and Skills and will allow for the development of a more finely differentiated system of resource allocation across both sectors.

29 Established in the summer of 2013 and due to report to the Minister for Education and Skills in 2014.

7.3.3 Information and guidelines

When we focus on the factors predicting the provision of special classes in schools, the findings show wide variation in the provision of special classes across schools at primary and post-primary level. This raises questions around school decision-making processes and principals' attitudes towards inclusive versus segregated settings. The evidence shows the different meanings of a special class among primary and post-primary principals. Furthermore, the reasons why some principals have no special class shows misunderstandings about eligibility for a special class sanction. The findings highlight the need for clear information and guidelines for schools: in terms of criteria for eligibility, the process of setting up a special class, pupil-teacher and retention ratios, and the role and function of special classes. In light of the definition of special educational needs outlined in the EPSEN Act (2004), these guidelines would also provide the opportunity to define special classes. Perhaps this examination of special class provision could be set within the context of streaming and allocating students to base classes more generally. While the national survey highlights important features of special classes across primary and post-primary schools and the extent to which this form of provision serves as a fluid, flexible resource in schools, the longitudinal research in the case-study schools conducted as part of this ongoing study will provide much greater insights into potential models of best practice.

7.3.4 Structures

The findings of this report indicate rigidity in the current system of special classes – the results clearly show the dominant model of provision is one of 'special class' organisation, with little evidence of the flexibly resourced mainstream provision (including team teaching, the use of non-teaching resources, such as a special needs assistant, as well as additional teaching hours outside the mainstream class) highlighted in the international literature (Ofsted, 2006, Myklebust, 2006). The report also raises concerns about schools possibly attempting to maintain special class numbers in order to retain funding or special class designation. Perhaps allowing greater school level flexibility in terms of the type of special educational need, official designation and the numbers of students in the class would allow for a more inclusive educational policy to be adopted by individual schools. Furthermore, the findings raise questions about the curriculum studied by students in special classes, in particular the danger that in not being offered Irish as a subject at primary and post-primary levels, these students could in some way be penalised in terms of later educational and course choice options. Further attention could be given to the role of post-primary junior and senior cycle programmes such as the JCSP and the LCA which play a central role in curricular provision for special classes and may even act as de facto special classes where there is no such provision. Finally, it will be important to assess the implications of the new junior cycle curriculum, and particularly the new Level 2 qualifications, for students with special educational needs.

7.3.5 Special classes serving particular groups

This report highlights changes in the patterns of special class designation over time and in particular the emphasis on special classes for students with one type of disability, namely ASD, in recent years. Despite the overall move towards mainstream education for students with special educational needs, these findings raise questions about how we decide the most appropriate setting for students with different types of special educational need (such as ASD, EBD etc.). The results also raise issues over whether there should be greater alignment of special class provision with demand, particularly across different categories of disability. In this context, additional attention might consider the role of interest groups in promoting provision, for example, interest groups working on behalf of students with ASD. Finally, the results point to the wide diversity in special class composition and severity of need, raising important questions over the extent to which teachers have the appropriate skills and qualifications to meet the needs of these students.

7.4 Ongoing Research on Special Classes: A Longitudinal Study

As stated in Chapter 1, the national survey is part of a broader study on special classes. This report presents baseline information on the operation of special classes in Irish primary and post-primary schools. Phases 2 and 3 of this study provide a more focused longitudinal study of teachers and students in special classes at primary and post-primary over a two-year period. This research is ongoing and involves a survey of special class teachers to elicit information on student experience, progress and outcomes within their classes. This phase involves holistic case study research in schools with and without special classes. We are undertaking in-depth focus group interviews with students in special classes at two time points in a sub-group of schools. These interviews will facilitate more detailed analysis of the experiences, progress and outcomes for this group of students and will allow us to raise key policy issues for special classes in Ireland. In conclusion, this longitudinal phase will provide valuable insights into the role and effectiveness of special classes in primary and post-primary schools. The study will provide further insights into how schools and teachers shape special class provision for students and crucially will assess how students in different school settings experience school.

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Appendix 1: Primary Survey

The Economic and Social Research Institute

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National Study of Special Classes in Mainstream Primary Schools

About this Research

This survey on special classes for pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools is being carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute and Amárach Research.

The survey is part of a wider study of special classes commissioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) which aims to explore how special classes are working for pupils with special educational needs. The purpose of the survey is to collect baseline information about the operation of special classes across schools.

What do we mean by Special Class?

By special class we mean *a class formed primarily for pupils with special educational needs which is the main learning environment for those pupils.*

This includes

- special classes sanctioned by the DES or the NCSE; or
- any other class schools may have established primarily for pupils with special educational needs (eg by pooling resource teaching hours for a group of students) and which is the main learning environment for those students.

It does not include

- resource teaching/learning support withdrawal groups.

Confidentiality

The information provided by you in response to the questionnaire will be treated as confidential by the ESRI and Amárach research. The identity of the responding schools will not be revealed to any person or organisation outside these independent research organisations. The data will be stored and managed by the ESRI. Reports or analyses resulting from this research will present information in an anonymous form and will not contain any identifying information that could be linked to individual schools, school personnel or pupils.

Filling out the Questionnaire

We would be very grateful if you could complete the questionnaire as fully as possible. Your response will help us form an overall picture of special class provision.

- If you have no special classes just fill out **Parts I and II**. These sections focus on background information about your school and the school population.
- If you have special classes please complete all **Parts I, II and III**. Part III provides a single page for information on each special class in your school.

Part I: Background Information

1. **Please think about the pupils in THIRD-CLASS. How many THIRD-CLASS pupils are there currently in the school?** _____ boys _____ girls (If none, please write 'NONE')

2. **On what basis are THIRD CLASS pupils in the school allocated to their core classes?** Please tick (✔) all that apply.

Randomly/alphabetically	☐ 1	Performance on standardized tests (eg Drumcondra, WRAT)	☐ 4
Teacher report on each pupil	☐ 2	Other [please specify]	☐ 5
Performance on exam	☐ 3	Not applicable, only 1 third-class group	☐ 6

3. **Please indicate whether there are other schools in the area**

	Yes, within 5km (3 mi.)	Yes, within 6-10 km (4-6 mi.)	Yes, within 11-25 km (7-16 mi.)	None within 25km (16 mi.)
a. Other primary school(s)	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
b. Other primary school(s) with special classes	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
c. Special school(s)	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4

4. **Thinking now of the entire school, (a) how many pupils have special educational needs (SEN) as defined below and (b) how many of these are THIRD-CLASS pupils?** For each pupil with SEN, please use the category that best captures their primary special educational need. Please do not include pupils with learning support needs outside of those with high or low incidence SEN

TYPE OF Special Educational Need Please do not leave any category blank. If your school has no pupils in a given category, please write NONE	**A. Total number of pupils with special educational needs in school**		**B. Number of THIRD CLASS or 9-year old pupils with special educational needs**
	Boys	Girls	
High Incidence Disabilities			
1. Borderline MGLD			
2. MGLD			
3. Specific Learning Difficulty (eg Dyslexia; Dyscalculia; Dysgraphia)			
Low Incidence Disabilities			
4. Physical disability (including dyspraxia)			
5. Hearing Impairme nt			
6. Visual Impairment			
7. Emotional Disturbance			
8. Severe Emotional Disturbance			

TYPE OF Special Educational Need Please do not leave any category blank. If your school has no pupils in a given category, please write NONE	**A. Total number of pupils with special educational needs in school**		**B. Number of THIRD CLASS or 9-year old pupils with special educational needs**
9. Moderate General Learning Disability			
10. Severe Profound General Learning Disability			
11. Specific Speech and Language Disorder			
12. Autistic spectrum disorders (eg Autism, Asperger's syndrome)			
13. Multiple disabilities (2 or more low incidence disabilities)			
14. Other assessed syndrome not included above			
15. TOTAL number of pupils with ANY of the above issues			

If you have no pupils with special needs in your school, please put the questionnaire in the enclosed reply paid envelope and post.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this important survey.

If you have any pupils with special needs currently enrolled in your school, please continue to part 2.

Part 2: Resources and Arrangements for Pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

5. **Please indicate the number of staff available (Full-time, half-time or less than half-time) to the school to assist pupils with special educational needs.** If none, please write 'none'.

STAFF RESOURCES Please count each person only once, under their main role.	**Number available to the school to assist pupils with special educational needs**			
	Full-time	Between full and half time	Half-time	Less than half-time
Special Needs Assistant				
Learning Support /Resource Teacher(s)				
Special class teacher(s) *not already covered above*				
Other teachers involved in delivering resource hours				
Visiting teacher(s) of the Hearing Impaired				
Visiting teacher(s) of the Visually Impaired				
Home School Liaison Scheme Co-ordinator(s)				
Special Needs co-ordinator *not already covered above*				
Other personnel with specialist role. Please specify:				

6. **Apart from these staff, are any of the following involved in providing support to pupils with special educational needs?** Please tick (✔) all that apply.

Psychologist(s) . . . . . ☐ 1 Psychiatrist(s) . . . . . ☐ 2
Physiotherapist(s) . . . . . ☐ 3 Occupational therapist(s) . . . . . ☐ 4
Speech and language therapist(s) . . . . ☐ 5
Other specialists (please specify) . . . . . ☐ 6

7. **Does your school have any of the following arrangements for pupils with special educational needs (SEN)?** Please tick (✔) 'Yes' or 'No' for each arrangement.

	Yes	No	If yes, how many?
A. Special classes for at least some pupils with special educational needs? By special classes we mean any special class established primarily for pupils with special educational needs which is their main learning environment.	☐ 1	☐ 2	... classes
B. Pupils with special educational needs taught in mainstream classes with additional teaching resources in the mainstream classroom (eg team teaching with class teacher and resource teacher)	☐ 1	☐ 2	

	Yes	No	If yes, how many?
C. Pupils with special educational needs taught in mainstream classes with additional non-teaching resources in the mainstream classroom (eg Special Needs Assistant)	☐ 1	☐ 2	
D. Pupils with special educational needs taught in mainstream classes and receiving additional teaching hours during periods outside the mainstream class	☐ 1	☐ 2	

If you have **no special classes** of any kind at your school ('no' ticked for A at Q. 7):

8. What is the main reason you do not have special classes for pupils with special educational needs?.....
.....

Please return the questionnaire in the enclosed reply-paid envelope.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this important survey.

If you have any **special classes for pupils with special educational needs** ('Yes' ticked for A Q. 7): Please continue to the next section.

Please complete one page for each separate special class in your school.

A. **Year first established:**.....

B. **Number of pupils in this special class:** Boys .....
(If none, write 'none') .....
Girls .....

C. **Age range of the pupils in this class:** Youngest: .....
(Enter ages, in years)
Oldest:.....

D. **Year group of the pupils:** .....
(eg 1st class; 1st to 3rd class)

E. **What criteria are used to place pupils in this special class? (please tick all that apply)**
NEPS assessment..... ☐ 1
Sanctioned by SENO..... ☐ 2
Other specialist/clinical assessment ..... ☐ 3
Other (please specify) ..... ☐ 4

F. **Please indicate the primary special need of pupils in this class. (Please tick all that apply.)**
Borderline Mild Gen. Learning Disability ..... ☐ 1
Mild General Learning Disability..... ☐ 2
Specific Learning Disability (eg dyslexia) ..... ☐ 3
Physical disability (incl. dyspraxia)..... ☐ 4
Hearing Impairment ..... ☐ 5
Visual Impairment ..... ☐ 6

Emotional Disturbance ..... ☐ 7
Severe Emotional Disturbance ..... ☐ 8
Moderate Gen. Learning Disability..... ☐ 9
Severe Profound Gen. Learning Disability ..... ☐ 10
Specific Speech & Language Disorder ..... ☐ 11
Autistic spectrum disorders ..... ☐ 12
Multiple disabilities (2 or more low incidence)..... ☐ 13
Other assessed syndrome not included above ..... ☐ 14

G. **Are there any pupils without special educational needs in this class?**
Yes, ... ☐ 1
No ..... ☐ 2
G1. If yes, how many .....
and why? .....

H. **What are the teaching arrangements in this special class (please tick one box)**
Special class teacher – same teacher most of the time..... ☐ 1
Team teaching with special class teacher & learning support /resource teacher ..... ☐ 2
Other (please specify) ..... ☐ 3

I. **How many Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) are assigned to this class?**
.....

J. **How much of their school time do pupils typically spend in the special class? (Please tick one box)**
Full school week ..... ☐ 1
Most of school week (some integration with mainstream class) ..... ☐ 2
Part-time (half or less of school week) ..... ☐ 3
Amount of school week in special class varies by pupil..... ☐ 4

K. **If pupils in this special class are integrated part-time in mainstream class, for which activities is this typically done? (Please tick all that apply)**
Extra-curricular activities ..... ☐ 1
Physical education ..... ☐ 2
Particular academic subjects (please specify) ..... ☐ 3

L. **Are individual education plans (IEPs) prepared for students in this special class?**
Yes..... ☐ 1
No ..... ☐ 2

M. **Do pupils generally remain in this special class grouping across school years, or is there typically a transition into mainstream classes? (please tick one box)**
Pupils usually remain together in this special class grouping across years of school..... ☐ 1 Go to P
Some pupils remain together in this special class grouping, some move into mainstream class..... ☐ 2 Go to N
Most or all move into mainstream classes ..... ☐ 3 Go to N
Other (please specify) ..... ☐ 4 Go to N

N. **If pupils are moved to mainstream class, how does this move occur?**
Once-off move to full-time in mainstream ..... ☐ 1
Usually graduated..... ☐ 2
Both occur, depends on pupil ..... ☐ 3

O. **If there is movement between this class and mainstream classes, what criteria are used to decide when and how pupils move into mainstream classes? (Please tick all that apply)**
Teacher(s) assessment ..... ☐ 1
Assessment by NEPS/recommendation by SENO..... ☐ 2
Parent/student request ..... ☐ 3
Other (please specify) ..... ☐ 4

P. **Which of the following subjects are taught in this special class? (Please tick all that apply)**
Irish ..... ☐ 1
English..... ☐ 2
Maths ..... ☐ 3
SPHE ..... ☐ 4
SESE ..... ☐ 5
Music..... ☐ 6
Visual Arts ..... ☐ 7
Drama ..... ☐ 8
PE..... ☐ 9
Other (specify)..... ☐ 10

Q. **Are pupils in this special class exempted from particular subjects on the curriculum?**
Yes..... ☐ 1
No ..... ☐ 2
Q1. If yes, Which subjects?
.....

R. **Do pupils in this class take additional subjects/modules that are not taught in mainstream classes?**
Yes..... ☐ 1
No ..... ☐ 2
R1. If yes, Which additional subjects?
.....

S. **What is the Special Educational Needs designation of this special class? (Please tick ONE box).**
Autism/autistic spectrum disorder..... ☐ 1
Specific speech & language disorder ..... ☐ 4
Multiple Disabilities ..... ☐ 3
Emotional Disturbance ..... ☐ 4
Severe emotional disturbance..... ☐ 5
Specific Learning Disability..... ☐ 6
Mild General Learning Disability ..... ☐ 7
Moderate General Learning Disability ..... ☐ 8

Other (please specify) ..... ☐ 9
None ..... ☐ 10

T. **How was this special class established?**
Sanctioned by the NCSE /DES ..... ☐ 1
Pooling of resource teaching hours ..... ☐ 2
Other (please describe) ..... ☐ 3

Thank you. If the school has any other special classes, please continue to the next page.

Appendix 2: Post-Primary Survey

The Economic and Social Research Institute

Whitaker Square,
Sir John Rogerson's Quay,
Dublin 2, Ireland
Tel (353-1) 863 2000
Fax (353-1) 863 2100

National Study of Special Classes in Mainstream Post-Primary Schools

About this research

This survey on special classes for pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools is being carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute and Amárach Research.

The survey is part of a wider study of special classes commissioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) which aims to explore how special classes are working for pupils with special educational needs. The purpose of the survey is to collect baseline information about the operation of special classes across schools.

What do we mean by special class?

By special class we mean *a class formed primarily for pupils with special educational needs which is the main learning environment for those pupils.*

This includes

- special classes sanctioned by the DES or the NCSE; or
- any other class schools may have established primarily for pupils with special educational needs (eg by pooling resource teaching hours for a group of students) and which is the main learning environment for those students.

It does not include

- resource teaching/learning support withdrawal groups.

Confidentiality

The information provided by you in response to the questionnaire will be treated as confidential by the ESRI and Amárach research. The identity of the responding schools will not be revealed to any person or organisation outside these independent research organisations. The data will be stored and managed by the ESRI. Reports or analyses resulting from this research will present information in an anonymous form and will not contain any identifying information that could be linked to individual schools, school personnel or pupils.

Filling out the questionnaire

We would be very grateful if you could complete the questionnaire as fully as possible. Your response will help us form an overall picture of special class provision.

- If you have no special classes just fill out **Parts I and II**. These sections focus on background information about your school and the school population.
- If you have special classes please complete all **Parts I, II and III**. Part III provides a single page for information on each special class in your school.

Part I: Background Information

1. **Please think about the pupils in FIRST YEAR. How many FIRST YEAR pupils are there currently in the school?** _____ boys _____ girls (If none, please write 'NONE')

2. **On what basis are FIRST YEAR pupils in the school allocated to their core classes?** Please tick (✔) all that apply.

Randomly/alphabetically	☐ 1	Performance on standardized tests (eg Drumcondra, WRAT)	☐ 4
Teacher report on each pupil	☐ 2	Other [please specify]	☐ 5
Performance on exam	☐ 3	Not applicable, only 1 first year group	☐ 6

3. **Please indicate whether there are other schools in the area**

	Yes, within 5km (3 mi.)	Yes, within 6-10 km (4-6 mi.)	Yes, within 11-25 km (7-16 mi.)	None within 25km (16 mi.)
a. Other post-primary school(s)	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
b. Other post-primary school(s) with special classes	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
c. Special school(s)	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4

4. **Thinking now of the entire school, (a) how many pupils have special educational needs (SEN) as defined below and (b) how many of these are FIRST YEAR pupils?** For each pupil with SEN, please use the category that best captures their primary special educational need. Please do not include pupils with learning support needs outside of those with high or low incidence SEN

TYPE OF Special Educational Need Please do not leave any category blank. If your school has no pupils in a given category, please write NONE	**A. Total number of pupils with special educational needs in school**		**Number of FIRST YEAR or 13-year old pupils with special educational needs**
	Boys	Girls	
High Incidence Disabilities			
1. Borderline Mild General Learning Disability			
2. Mild General Learning Disability			
3. Specific Learning Difficulty (eg Dyslexia; Dyscalculia; Dysgraphia)			
Low Incidence Disabilities			
4. Physical disability (including dyspraxia)			
5. Hearing Impairment			
6. Visual Impairment			
7. Emotional Disturbance			
8. Severe Emotional Disturbance			

TYPE OF Special Educational Need Please do not leave any category blank. If your school has no pupils in a given category, please write NONE	**A. Total number of pupils with special educational needs in school**		**Number of FIRST YEAR or 13-year old pupils with special educational needs**
9. Moderate General Learning Disability			
10. Severe Profound General Learning Disability			
11. Specific Speech and Language Disorder			
12. Autistic spectrum disorders (eg Autism, Asperger's syndrome)			
13. Multiple disabilities (2 or more low incidence disabilities)			
14. Other assessed syndrome not included above			
15. TOTAL number of pupils with ANY of the above issues			

If you have no pupils with special needs in your school, please put the questionnaire in the enclosed reply paid envelope and post.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this important survey.

If you have any pupils with special needs currently enrolled in your school, please continue to part 2.

Part 2: Resources and Arrangements for Pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

5. **Please indicate the number of staff available (Full-time, half-time or less than half-time) to the school to assist pupils with special educational needs.** If none, please write 'none'.

STAFF RESOURCES Please count each person only once, under their main role.	**Number available to the school to assist pupils with special educational needs**			
	Full-time	Between full and half time	Half-time	Less than half-time
Special Needs Assistant				
Learning Support /Resource Teacher(s)				
Special class teacher(s) *not already covered above*				
Other teachers involved in delivering resource hours				
Visiting teacher(s) of the Hearing Impaired				
Visiting teacher(s) of the Visually Impaired				
Home School Liaison Scheme Co-ordinator(s)				
Special Needs co-ordinator *not already covered above*				
Other personnel with specialist role. Please specify:				

6. **Apart from these staff, are any of the following involved in providing support to pupils with special educational needs?** Please tick (✔) all that apply.

Psychologist(s) . . . . . ☐ 1 Psychiatrist(s) . . . . . ☐ 2
Physiotherapist(s). . . . . ☐ 3 Occupational therapist(s) . . . . . ☐ 4
Speech and language therapist(s) . . . . ☐ 5
Other specialists (please specify) . . . . . ☐ 6

7. **Does your school have any of the following arrangements for pupils with special educational needs (SEN)?** Please tick (✔) 'Yes' or 'No' for each arrangement.

	Yes	No	If yes, how many?
A. Special classes for at least some pupils with special educational needs? By special classes we mean any special class established primarily for pupils with special educational needs which is their main learning environment.	☐ 1	☐ 2	... classes
B. Pupils with special educational needs taught in mainstream classes with additional teaching resources in the mainstream classroom (eg team teaching with class teacher and resource teacher)	☐ 1	☐ 2	

	Yes	No	If yes, how many?
C. Pupils with special educational needs taught in mainstream classes with additional non-teaching resources in the mainstream classroom (eg Special Needs Assistant)	☐ 1	☐ 2	
D. Pupils with special educational needs taught in mainstream classes and receiving additional teaching hours during periods outside the mainstream class	☐ 1	☐ 2	

If you have **no special classes** of any kind at your school ('no' ticked for A at Q. 7):

8. What is the main reason you do not have special classes for pupils with special educational needs?.....
.....

Please return the questionnaire in the enclosed reply-paid envelope.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this important survey.

If you have any **special classes for pupils with special educational needs** ('Yes' ticked for A Q. 7): Please continue to the next section.

Please complete one page for each separate special class in your school.

A. **Year first established:**.....

B. **Number of pupils in this special class:** Boys .....
(If none, write 'none') .....
Girls .....

C. **Age range of the pupils in this class:** Youngest: .....
(Enter ages, in years)
Oldest:.....

D. **Year group of the pupils:** .....
(eg 1st year; 1st to 3rd years)

E. **What criteria are used to place pupils in this special class? (please tick all that apply)**
NEPS assessment..... ☐ 1
Sanctioned by SENO..... ☐ 2
Other specialist/clinical assessment ..... ☐ 3
Other (please specify) ..... ☐ 4

F. **Please indicate the primary special need of pupils in this class. (Please tick all that apply.)**
Borderline Mild Gen. Learning Disability ..... ☐ 1
Mild General Learning Disability..... ☐ 2
Specific Learning Disability (eg dyslexia) ..... ☐ 3
Physical disability (incl. dyspraxia)..... ☐ 4
Hearing Impairment ..... ☐ 5
Visual Impairment ..... ☐ 6

Emotional Disturbance ..... ☐ 7
Severe Emotional Disturbance ..... ☐ 8
Moderate Gen. Learning Disability..... ☐ 9
Severe Profound Gen. Learning Disability ..... ☐ 10
Specific Speech & Language Disorder ..... ☐ 11
Autistic spectrum disorders ..... ☐ 12
Multiple disabilities (2 or more low incidence)..... ☐ 13
Other assessed syndrome not included above ..... ☐ 14

G. **Are there any pupils without special educational needs in this class?**
Yes, ... ☐ 1
No ..... ☐ 2
G1. If yes, how many .....
and why? .....

H. **What are the teaching arrangements in this special class (please tick one box)**
Special class teacher – same teacher most of the time..... ☐ 1
Team teaching with special class teacher & learning support /resource teacher ..... ☐ 2
Other (please specify) ..... ☐ 3

I. **How many Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) are assigned to this class?**
.....

J. **How much of their school time do pupils typically spend in the special class? (Please tick one box)**
Full school week ..... ☐ 1
Most of school week (some integration with mainstream class) ..... ☐ 2
Part-time (half or less of school week) ..... ☐ 3
Amount of school week in special class varies by pupil..... ☐ 4

K. **If pupils in this special class are integrated part-time in mainstream class, for which activities is this typically done? (Please tick all that apply)**
Extra-curricular activities ..... ☐ 1
Physical education ..... ☐ 2
Particular academic subjects (please specify) ..... ☐ 3

L. **Are individual education plans (IEPs) prepared for students in this special class?**
Yes..... ☐ 1
No ..... ☐ 2

M. **Do pupils generally remain in this special class grouping across school years, or is there typically a transition into mainstream classes?**
Pupils usually remain together in this special class grouping across years of school..... ☐ 1 Go to P
Some pupils remain together in this special class grouping, some move into mainstream class..... ☐ 2 Go to N
Most or all move into mainstream classes ..... ☐ 3 Go to N
Other (please specify) ..... ☐ 4 Go to N

N. **If pupils are moved to mainstream class, how does this move occur?**
Once-off move to full-time in mainstream ..... ☐ 1
Usually graduated..... ☐ 2
Both occur, depends on pupil ..... ☐ 3

O. **If there is movement between this class and mainstream classes, what criteria are used to decide when and how pupils move into mainstream classes? (Please tick all that apply)**
Teacher(s) assessment ..... ☐ 1
Assessment by NEPS/recommendation by SENO..... ☐ 2
Parent/student request ..... ☐ 3
Other (please specify) ..... ☐ 4

P. **For which of the following certification options are students being prepared? (please tick all that apply)**
Junior Cert. School Programme ..... ☐ 1
Junior Cert. ..... ☐ 2
Leaving Cert. Applied ..... ☐ 3
Leaving Cert. Vocational Programme ..... ☐ 4
Leaving Cert. ..... ☐ 5
FETAC Qualification ..... ☐ 6
Other (please specify) ..... ☐ 7

Q. **Are pupils in this special class exempted from particular subjects on the curriculum?**
Yes..... ☐ 1
No ..... ☐ 2
Q1. If yes, Which subjects?
.....

R. **Do pupils in this class take additional subjects/modules that are not taught in mainstream classes?**
Yes..... ☐ 1
No ..... ☐ 2
R1. If yes, Which additional subjects?
.....

S. **What is the Special Educational Needs designation of this special class? (Please tick ONE box).**
Autism/autistic spectrum disorder..... ☐ 1
Specific speech & language disorder ..... ☐ 4
Multiple Disabilities ..... ☐ 3
Emotional Disturbance..... ☐ 4
Severe emotional disturbance..... ☐ 5
Specific Learning Disability..... ☐ 6
Mild General Learning Disability..... ☐ 7
Moderate General Learning Disability ..... ☐ 8
Other (please specify) ..... ☐ 9
None ..... ☐ 10

T. **How was this special class established?**

Sanctioned by the NCSE /DES ..... ☐ 1
Pooling of resource teaching hours ..... ☐ 2
Other (please describe) ..... ☐ 3

Thank you. If the school has any other special classes, please continue to the next page.


ESRI