

The Special Class Model in Ireland: How is it working for pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools?

This research was recently commissioned by the NCSE (March 2011) and is being undertaken by the Economic and Social Research Institute. The research will take place over the next two years. The study will examine and evaluate the operation of the special class¹ model for students with special educational needs in mainstream education and the extent to which this model is meeting the needs of students placed in these classes, particularly in the context of the commitment to an inclusive education enshrined in the EPSEN Act. This examination will be located in the context of a review of the international literature, evidence, policies and practices.

Background and Overview

The EPSEN Act (2004) provides a commitment to inclusive education for children with special educational needs (SEN) in Ireland stating that ‘a child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs’ [section 2].

The Act specifies two exceptions to this as follows ‘...unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child [with special educational needs] is such that to do so would be inconsistent with (a) the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act, or (b) the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated’ [section 2]. The Act also states that one of the functions of the NCSE is ‘to ensure that a continuum of special educational provision is available as required in relation to each type of disability’ [section 20 (1) (g)].

There has been an increase in the use of the special class model in mainstream schools over the last decade in Ireland, in particular for children on the autistic spectrum (Parsons and Guldberg 2009). In addition, recent changes to the operation of special classes have raised a number of questions and concerns (see Ware et al, 2009; Stevens and O’Moore 2009).

Given the importance of evidence based policy making, particularly in the context of contracting resources, it is important that the ongoing evolution of the special class model for

¹ It should be noted that special classes in Ireland operate in different ways; some may be very separate and distinct from mainstream provision, while others are more integrated with the mainstream provision; others operate on a full or part-time basis. Some special classes may also be called something other than a special class, such as a special unit or centre.

children with SEN in the Irish education system is informed by robust empirical evidence about its effectiveness.

In 2009, the NCSE published its Review of Special Schools and Classes (Ware et al 2009). Part of the research for this report included a survey of schools to determine the extent and distribution of special classes for children with special educational needs in the education system and an engagement with stakeholders about their perceptions and experiences of this model. The Review found that it was difficult to access a definitive list of schools with special class provision at post primary level. The study also found that there was a perception among stakeholders that special classes were an important part of the continuum of provision for pupils with special educational needs.

Advantages identified by the research participants included, the facilitation of inclusion in a mainstream class, the provision of a 'safe haven' for some pupils, a favourable pupil/teacher ratio, enabling students to be educated near home and enabling flexibility in the organisation of teaching and curriculum provision. The study established from the schools survey that for almost half of the special classes it was reported that pupils were remaining in class for the entire day. This raised concerns that schools may not be taking full advantage of the situation of the special class to promote inclusion. In addition, concern was expressed among stakeholders about the lack of continuity between primary and post-primary schools in the provision of special classes.

Research Aims

This study was commissioned to build on the initial work undertaken for the Review of Special Schools and Classes through an empirical investigation of the operation and effectiveness of the special class model.

The study will help assess the extent to which stakeholder perceptions of the value of the special class model and/or concerns about its operation, are supported by empirical evidence. More importantly, it is intended that this study will generate further empirical evidence about the impact of the special class model on student inclusion, educational engagement, progress and outcomes, paying particular attention to the principles of inclusive education enshrined in the EPSEN Act 2004.

The first step in undertaking this study will be to conduct a comprehensive literature and policy review in order to inform the methodology for the study and to locate the study in the broader context of what is already known about special classes in Ireland and internationally.

Key Research Questions

Among the key questions which this study will address are:

- What does the international literature, evidence and policy tell us about the operation or effectiveness of the special class model for children with SEN?
- How did the system of special classes in Ireland evolve over time and what factors have driven the development and use of this model?
- How is the model currently operating in the Irish system (e.g, how many special classes are there at primary and post primary levels, and what are their designations, how are children placed in special classes, where have children progressed to from special classes, what teaching and other resources are deployed to support children in special classes, etc).
- How effective is the current model in terms of serving children's educational needs and their entitlement's under the EPSEN Act?
- What lessons can be identified to inform the use of the special class model into the future?

Key Research Tasks

The research will include a focus on a range of tasks including the following :

- (i) A review of the international literature, evidence, policy and practices on the use of the special class model and its effectiveness for children with SEN, drawing particular attention to any studies which compare the experiences of children with SEN in special classes to the experiences of children with SEN in mainstream classes.
- (ii) An outline of the development of the special class model in Ireland and a comprehensive review of existing administrative data on the extent and nature of special classes in primary and post primary schools.
- (iii) A national census of schools to establish further baseline information about the operation and key features of special classes in primary and post primary schools.

These exercises will seek to determine:

- the nature, use and distribution of special classes in the education system; the criteria and processes by which children are placed in these classes and or reintegrated into mainstream classes;

- the duration and nature (full time/ part time/graduated) of placement in special classes;
- the number of children progressing from special classes and the progression routes followed by these children;
- the teaching personnel, teaching strategies and assessment practices being deployed in special classes;
- curricular issues and certification options in special classes;
- other resources deployed in special classes;
- the role of other professionals in special classes (e.g. special needs assistants, psychologists, speech and language therapists etc);
- the designation of special classes and the needs of children being placed in these classes;
- and any other features of special classes relevant to addressing the study aims.

- (iv) A more focused longitudinal study (over two academic years) of a nationally representative selection of special classes in circa 40 post primary and 60 primary schools. This study will track the experiences, progress and outcomes for the cohort of students in these classes (following any students who move back to mainstream over the period) and evaluate the operation of these classes over the period of two years.