

# Special Classes in Irish Schools: A Qualitative Study

Selina McCoy, Joanne Banks

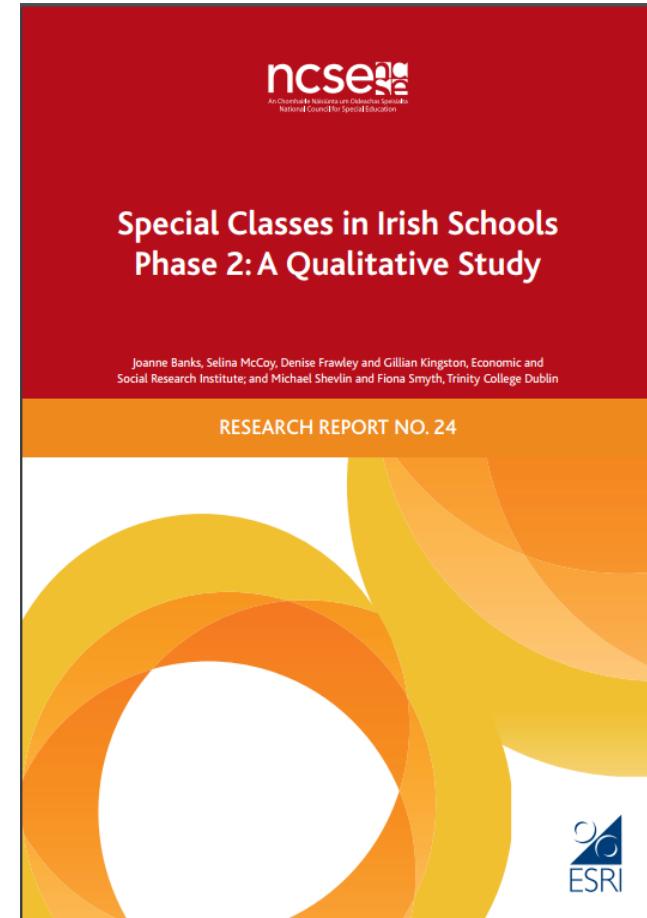
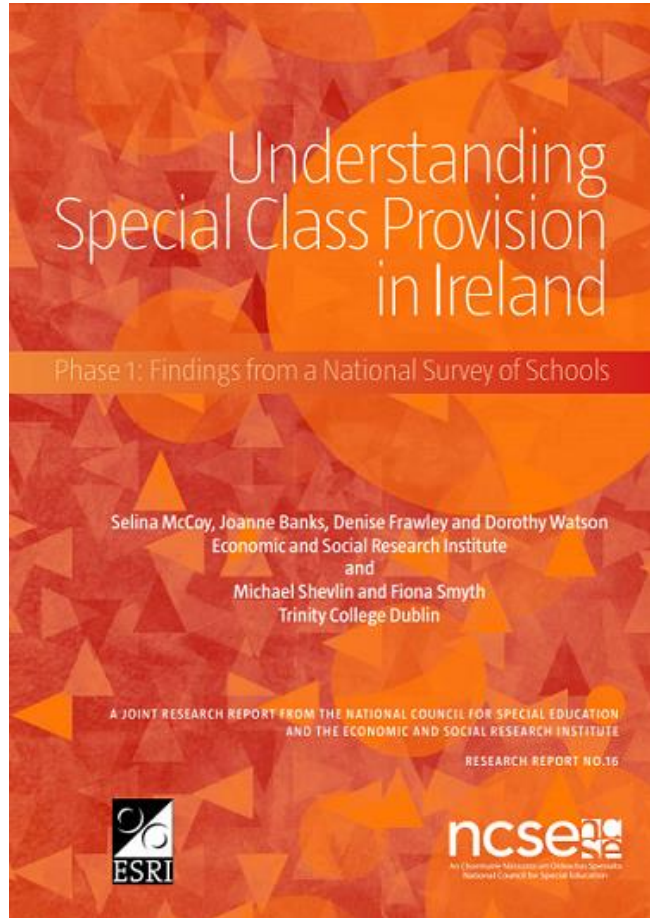
Research Team: Michael Shevlin and Fiona Smyth (TCD) Denise Frawley, Gillian Kingston and Dorothy Watson (ESRI)

NCSE Annual Research Conference, Croke Park, 16 November 2016



Informing social progress since 1966

# Broad study objectives



# Phase 2 Methodology

- 12 case study schools selected by
  - School type
  - Region
  - Designation
  - ‘Model’ of special class adopted
- Survey and interview data used
  - Predominantly with teachers and principals
  - Study raises a broader debate about qualitative research with children with different types of SEN

# Phase 2 Findings

- School admissions
- Purpose of the special class
- Variations in special class provision
- Organisation of teaching
  - Placement
  - Skills/capacity
  - Whole school support
- Types of classes – severity of need (high, medium, low)
- Models of best practice

# School admissions

- Significant issue – evidence of cream-off, dumping ground, reputation
- Particularly urban areas with socially mixed catchment area
- Huge implications for teacher and school morale, perceived adequacy of resources, expectations
- Special classes appear to play a distinct role

# Purpose

## A safe haven?

We've one kid in first year, [teacher] found him and he came to the front door and he hugged the door and he said **this is the only place I feel safe.** (PP SC teacher, Wave 1)

They are quite vulnerable, they don't always get the subtle nuances and ...banter, that might go on in the mainstream class, so it's kind of **safer down here...** (Primary SC teacher, Wave 1)

# Purpose

## A place to build self-esteem?

My main...priority here...is actually their self-esteem, that they **feel good about themselves**... above everything else. (Primary SC teacher, Wave 1)

It's like children get the **best of both worlds**, they are in a special class and they are also integrated into a mainstream class. I think for their self-esteem that would be very important from my point of view. (Primary principal, Wave 1)

# Purpose

## Place to allow access to the/a curriculum?

**One to one:** some of it is done in inclusion in the mainstream class but some of it definitely **does need to be one to one** in, in a way that you wouldn't necessarily get in the, in the mainstream class. (Primary principal, Wave 1)

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



# Variations in provision

Nature of integration:

- Structured
- Reviewed/monitored
- Tailored
- Ad hoc

# Variations in provision

Extent to which placements are permanent:

- Intervention approach, fixed period
- Permanent placements full-time (severe needs)
- Permanent placements part-integration (mild and moderate needs)

# Variations in provision

## Ways in which classes are set up

Really we had to **make it up as we went along** and there should be a resource pack\* there provided for schools that are going down that road to say okay, these are the steps that you take in terms of establishing a unit, these are the supports you need and make sure that you get all of that in place as, at the start. (Primary principal, Wave 1)

# Variations in provision

School responses to retention criteria:

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

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

# Organisation of teaching

1. Placement
2. Skills/competencies and professional development
3. Whole-school supports?

# Placement

When you go to the kind of college and you're saying and saying I'll be a primary school teacher **that's not what you are going into train for...** and you might have one child with speech and language needs in your class and you might have one child that's autistic or whatever but **its very different when you're thrown into a class.** (Primary SC teacher, Wave 1)

I am **burnt out** now... **nobody even wants to come in to the resource class**, the principal went around all the classes to ask would they like to go in to that class and they said no, and I respect that, I'm not going to force anybody to come in. (Primary SC teacher, Wave 2)

# Skills, competencies and professional development

I felt very unequipped to deal with it. Felt very inexperienced, felt I'm not going to be able to manage it (Primary SC teacher, Wave 1)

Sometimes [I] find it **frustrating** because I don't know how to teach these students the best possible way for them. I am frustrated that **I haven't got adequate training** that I feel that I'm not adequately trained to deal with their needs (Post-primary MC teacher, Wave 2)

# Whole-school supports?

## Whole-school approach to inclusion:

Teachers are really willing to learn, you know, ‘actually, I’m having a hard time’ and they can come to us and say ‘look, what do you think I should try to do’, and vice versa...we all, you know...**work together**...so there’s **monthly staff meetings** that happen every month...and we’ve Croke Park hours, one of our Croke Park hours is team teaching hour. (Primary SC teacher, Wave 1)

## SC teacher isolation:

They [mainstream teachers] do create barriers, they do and you just cannot respond to the needs of the students if you are **fixated with following a path on a time table**. (Post-primary SEN Coordinator, Wave 1)



# Types of classes – severity of need

Grouping special classes:

- Higher level of need (ASD)
- Medium level of need (Speech and language (P))
- Medium level of need (MGLD)
- Lower levels of need

## Characteristics

- Assessed placements
- Permanent with little integration

## Student experiences

- Depends on school ethos:
  - Principal supportive, proactive, knowledgeable, break rules if needed leading to teachers being highly educated/skilled, positive, long-term placements, efficiency;
  - Principal lacks support, knowledge and commitment leading to teachers reluctant to fill SC position, unskilled, high turnover, distressed at level of need and their own lack of skills.
- Strong parental role and low stigma
- Concern around transitions

# Medium levels of need - SLD (Primary)

## Characteristics

- Assessed placements
- Intervention model of provision (fixed period) with evidence of positive outcomes
- High levels of movement between wave 1 and 2
- Little integration in mainstream classes

## Student experiences

- Teachers felt positive where they were supported by outside professionals (such as SLT and OT)
- Concerns over longer school day – often long travel journeys to and from school
- Concerns over transition back to mainstream, following a prolonged period in a different school
- Typically strong parental involvement

# Medium levels of need - (MGLD)

## Characteristics

- Assessed placements
- Academic emphasis 'bringing students up to speed'
- Some integration (part-time)
- Small groups, structured teaching and learning

## Experiences

- At post-primary, evidence of stigma attached to the MGLD classes and a possible awareness among the students of 'being different'
- Diversity of student need
- Curriculum issues – reliance on JCSP/LCA
- Weak parental role

# Lower levels of need

## Characteristics

- Subjective class placements
- Little movement between waves 1 and 2
- Emphasis on life-skills, retention and student behaviour
- Fluid model with some integration for subjects

## Experiences

- Students more at risk of negative perceptions from their mainstream peers and they have a greater awareness of under-achieving academically
- Possible low stream class, evidence of lowered expectations
- Student behaviour a greater issue
- One-teacher model
- Less parental involvement in these students' education – in some cases parents not made aware of their son/daughter's placement

# Lower levels of need

Stigma:

They are **absolutely aware**. There's even I feel issues with where the classroom is located...They are all right in first year normally, in second and third year **they really know** and they are kind of, they would even wait until everybody is gone off the corridor and then come in after everybody has gone so nobody sees them coming in here. (Post-primary SC teacher, Wave 1)

It was very much like, oh **we're the thick class** so you know... I think with most of them it's self evident. (Post-primary SC teacher, Wave 2)

# Models of good practice

- Research identified two types of provision
- Key characteristics:
  - Established by individuals with a vision of what the class was to be within broader school structures
  - Classes sought to normalise special education within the school context and enhance the experiences of all students
  - Strong emphasis on flexibility in provision – place for all, responsive to student need
  - Strong emphasis on professional development and support

# Summary of findings

- Schools admissions – issues around school reputation, cream-off, social class
- Purpose of class and model of provision varies by school and levels of need of students
- Lack of knowledge on setting up a class, frustration at retaining numbers
- Teacher placement in special class, SEN expertise, feelings of support from principal and mainstream staff - influenced by school leadership
- Students in special classes: higher, medium & lower levels of need - wide variation in student experience



# Policy Implications

- The role of school leadership in developing an inclusive school and positive special class setting
- The importance of teacher capacity, expertise and willingness to work in specialised settings
- Maximising student development and meeting needs