

# **Special Classes in Irish Schools: A Qualitative Study**

**Selina McCoy and Joanne Banks**

## **Abstract**

Special classes have been part of the Irish system of education since the early 1970s. It is only in recent years however that there is an increased focus on them due to the increasing number of classes opening each year. This study, with a longitudinal mixed-method design, seeks to assess the extent to which these classes are meeting the needs of students placed in them. The research highlights a number of key issues relating to the organisation of teaching in special classes across primary and post-primary schools. Findings also highlight the importance of school leadership in influencing the role and purpose of special classes. Overall, the findings indicate that the experiences of students in special classes vary widely by the type of school and designation of the special class. In particular, teacher interviews highlight the significance of having a whole-school approach to inclusion and where teachers have expertise in SEN education to achieve positive outcomes.

## **Biographical Notes**

Selina McCoy is an Associate Research Professor at the Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin and Adjunct Professor at Trinity College Dublin. Her research interests focus on social inequality in educational participation and outcomes, including a particular focus on the wellbeing and development of young people with disabilities. She has published widely in peer-reviewed journals, most recently *Child Indicators Research*, *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, *The Economic and Social Review* and *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. She is the Irish national expert at the European Commission Independent Experts on Education and Training.

Joanne Banks is a Research Officer at the Economic and Social Research Institute. Her research interests include special educational needs, inclusion and student engagement. She has published work on special educational needs prevalence and identification, special class provision and the everyday school experiences for students with different types of needs. Her work has been published in *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, *Child Indicators Research*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *Journal of Youth Studies*, *International Journal of Inclusive Education* and the *European Journal of Special Needs Education*.