

SEGREGATION IN AN ERA OF INCLUSION? THE ROLE OF SPECIAL CLASSES IN IRISH MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

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Segregation in an era of inclusion? The role of special classes in Irish mainstream schools¹

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BACKGROUND

This study assessed whether special classes operate as a form of segregation or inclusion for students with special educational needs. Ireland has a multi-track system of education where students with special educational needs can either attend mainstream school, special school or special classes in a mainstream school. In recent decades, there has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of students with special educational needs attending mainstream school and an expansion of special education resources including special needs assistants (SNAs), learning support and resource teachers and special classes. Although special classes have operated in the Irish education system since the 1970s, there has been a substantial increase in their numbers, with an almost doubling of these classes operating between 2011/2012 (548) and 2015/2016 (1,008). The type or designation of special classes has shifted from a traditional model of classes for students with Mild General Learning Disabilities (MGLD) towards more specialised units for students with more severe needs such as Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD). The majority of ASD classes have opened since 2010 and represent a shift in policy as to how these students are educated in mainstream education.

CONTEXT

The findings of this paper stem from the National Study of Special Classes, a mixed-methods longitudinal study carried out in Irish primary and second-level schools between 2011 and 2014. Using survey data from school principals, we examine their views on two aspects of inclusion: the level of day-to-day integration between special and mainstream classes, and the extent to which

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longer-term integration is taking place, i.e. transition from the special class to mainstream education.

FINDINGS

The findings suggest that whether special classes represent inclusive education depends on the designation of the class, the severity of need of students in that class and the type of leadership in the school. In particular, the data imply that special classes only operate as a unit of inclusion where students have severe needs such as autism. For students with mild needs or those with no special educational needs, special classes appear to operate as a low stream class often with no official sanction from the National Council for Special Education. This is particularly problematic at second-level where students placed in special classes can experience stigma with implications for their self-esteem and expectations going forward. The findings suggest much variation in the purpose and use of special classes across different school contexts and point to the need for clarity as to who they are intended for and how they should operate.

ARE SPECIAL CLASSES INCLUSIVE?

The paper provides valuable insights into the role and function of special classes as a model of provision in an age of inclusive education. The findings suggest that for students with mild needs and those with no special educational needs, these classes can act as a form of internal segregation that can negatively influence their school experiences. This practice raises important questions about whether there are sufficient whole-school supports available to teachers and principals to allow them to meet the needs of all students in inclusive mainstream settings. These findings suggest that future policy around special class provision should be informed by evidence on the operation and effectiveness of these classes in mainstream schools.

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