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**The Effect Newly Established Special Classes Have On
The Whole School Approach And Attitudes Towards
Inclusivity: A Comparison Of Urban And Rural Schools.**

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**The Effect Newly Established Special Classes Have On The
Whole School Approach And Attitudes Towards Inclusivity: A
Comparison Of Urban And Rural Schools.**

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Special Education.**

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Abstract

The Irish primary education system is in the process of immense change in terms of inclusive education. The model in which inclusive education is being rolled out requires ongoing investigation to determine whether inclusive education is being promoted or hindered in the process. In 2023 alone, 253 special classes were granted to be established in primary schools across Ireland. However, this does not necessarily mean that 253 schools can be deemed fully inclusive due to the addition of another classroom. This case study provides findings from a mixed-method exploration of the perceived inclusive changes schools journeyed through when they were granted their special class. The research also investigates if these changes varied for different socio-economic contexts: urban and rural schools, from the perspective of all school staff. The current research presented that the special class model heightened feelings of isolation and exclusion. The findings indicated that principals and special class teachers were unprepared to manage, lead or teach in these classes. From interviews and questionnaires, there was an unwavering opinion of 'fear of the unknown' among the case study participants. The unknown of what was expected of them in their various roles throughout the school as they knew a special class was supposed to promote inclusion but they did not know what this should look like. Recommendations based on the findings included incentivising staff through an automatic post-holder position in schools, having a designated Department of Education personnel to assist in the building works application, updating teacher training colleges curriculum to include mandatory placements in special classes and providing clear training on inclusive education to all staff within the school.

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Glossary of terms and abbreviations

NCSE – National Council for Special Education.

UNCRC – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

UNICEF – United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund.

UNCRPD – United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

EPSEN – Education For Persons with Special Educational Needs Act.

IEP – Individual Education Plan.

SCT – Special Class Teacher.

SET – Special Education Teacher.

NQT – Newly Qualified Teacher.

CPD – Continual Professional Development.

RO – Research Objective.

BERA - British Educational Research Association.

SNA – Special Need Assistants

ANA – Additional Needs Assistants

Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This research study explores the research question posed by the thesis title. The question will explore the effect of special classes on whole school approaches and attitudes to inclusive education. The provision of special classes in Ireland has increased at an exponential rate, however, this does not mean that the establishment of an extra class brings an automatic inclusive atmosphere to the whole school. Often management and staff are learning by trial and error, with little guidance or training. There is a stark difference between rural and urban schools in Ireland, each context brings different challenges, this thesis will investigate if these challenges differ or are similar concerning urban and rural special classes. This thesis will also explore the idea of managing special classes from principal perspectives and how principals navigate a major yet unknown topic that is their special class. This chapter will outline the rationale for this research, the research objectives, aims and questions. This chapter will also define key terms used throughout this study, the context of policy, legislation and theory surrounding this thesis topic.

1.2 Rationale for the research

The core ideas for this thesis arose from the researcher's professional experience working in schools with various relationships with special classes. Some schools had well-established special classes, others were establishing a special class and others felt their school was not ready. However, a consistent observation throughout these experiences was the sense of apprehension towards the changes a special class would bring to the whole school and where these dispositions fit in terms of inclusive schools. This thesis explores what the changes are to a school and how the special class shapes the attitudes towards inclusivity.

1.3 Research aims and objectives

This research aims to uncover and identify the changes, from a whole school perspective, that a special class has on a school as one identity. Ultimately aims to expose the positive factors and/or the negative factors a special class has for a school. The research objectives are as follows;

1. To identify positive and/or negative factors of opening a special class in a mainstream school from a teacher's perspective.
2. To investigate teacher's opinions on their understanding of inclusion as a result of the establishment of a special class.
3. To investigate if the factors differ between the context of an urban or rural school.

1.4 Research Questions

This thesis addresses the following research questions;

1. What are the main changes the whole school makes to establish a special class?
2. Do these changes differ between urban and rural contexts?
3. Has the establishment of a special class assisted in understanding, implementing and managing inclusion in the mainstream setting?

1.5 Defining Key Terms

This section defines the key terms in this research to contextualise the study and its findings.

The key terms within this section are; 'inclusive education', 'inclusion', 'integration', 'special class', 'mainstream class', 'whole school approach' and 'school culture'.

UNICEF (2024) defines inclusive education as all children being accepted in the same classrooms and schools, providing real learning opportunities for groups who would have traditionally been excluded. Therefore, inclusion means giving the children what they need to learn, forcing the environment to change for the child (Keles et al., 2024). Contrary, Francisco et al. (2020) define integration as the child conforming to the social norms already set in place, all children regardless of their needs are given the same treatment, and the environment does not change for the child.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2011) outlines that a special class within a mainstream primary school is a class formed primarily for children with special educational needs which is the main learning environment for those students. Meanwhile, the Department of Education (2019) defines a mainstream class as the general environment in primary education that occurs in Ireland.

The European Commission (2020) explains that a whole school approach is a process where each stakeholder acknowledges their role to play in an issue that affects the whole school, which ultimately has an influence on the educational outcomes of the children within the school. Meanwhile, school culture can be defined as the guiding beliefs and values evident in the way a school operates. 'School culture' can be used to encompass all the attitudes, expected behaviours and values that impact how the school operates (Xia et al., 2023).

This thesis will use the terms ‘inclusion’ and ‘inclusivity’ interchangeably throughout. This thesis will use the term ‘special class’ when referring to a class for children with additional needs attached to a mainstream school. The terms ‘whole school approach’, ‘whole school perspective’ and ‘school culture’ will be used interchangeably also.

1.6 Policy, Legislation and Relevant Statutory Documents.

When examining legislation and policy surrounding the area of inclusion, it is important to look at the international documents that are the foundations of policy development in Ireland. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) sets out in Article 28 that every child has a right to education, followed by Article 29 ‘The goals of education’, bounding each country to develop an education system where the child is encouraged to grow their personality and strengths (UNICEF, 2024). Similarly, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) Article 24, explains that children with disabilities have a right to education that state parties should;

Not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or secondary education, on the basis of disability (United Nations, 2024).

These two documents set a standard for countries to have an international benchmark when organising education for children with additional needs, but also provide governments blueprint when adapting international standards to national and local environments.

Looking at the Irish landscape, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (2004) was introduced, which stated that children were to be educated alongside children who did not have an educational need where possible. However, many aspects of the EPSEN act have yet to be implemented, even twenty years later, for example, the proposal of having an individual education plan (IEP) compulsory is still not imposed. Similarly, at the time of this thesis, the NCSE is currently reviewing their strategy statement in response to the wide changes in inclusive education that have happened since 2022.

Nonetheless, in January 2024, a policy recommendations paper was published by the NCSE, as requested by Minister for Education Norma Foley in October 2018, to advise on future policy development for inclusive educational provision for all. From this paper, seven areas for development were noted;

1. The process of student placement in special schools and special classes needs to be constantly reviewed.

2. To improve transition planning between primary and secondary school special class children.
3. Increase in external support, for example, speech and language access for mainstream schools.
4. Additional continual professional development for principals, special class teachers and all staff in mainstream schools with a special class.
5. A curriculum change for students in a special class.
6. To open more inclusive classes to stop children travelling long distances, away from the local area to access special classes.
7. To improve school infrastructure and make school buildings fit for purpose (NCSE, 2024).

1.7 Theoretical Framework

This thesis is situated within the constructivist realm. Constructivism signifies that people build their knowledge from their experiences and reflect on those understandings to come to a new viewpoint on the topic, thus people ‘construct’ their knowledge (Almulla, 2023).

Vygotsky’s social learning theory discusses that people learn from each other through their interactions (Zaretskii, 2016). Vygotsky details that there is a ‘more knowledgeable other’ (MKO), who can be any person with additional knowledge or a different viewpoint that can help a person during the ‘zone of proximal development’ (ZPD). The ZPD refers to new learning that is not yet independently known and cannot be acquired without the assistance of the MKO. When the MKO supports a person during the ZPD, it is said that they are ‘scaffolding’ learning (Bodrova and Leong, 2024). For this thesis, this may be teachers deliberating their opinions on special classes or conferring with other professionals about children with additional needs, all of which are considered necessary for being a prerequisite for inclusive education, creating a ‘community of practice’ (Al-Shammari et al., 2019).

1.8 Local Research Context

This case study research was conducted in two schools where the researcher was employed at the time of this research. The context surrounding this research study involves two schools in the south of Ireland. Both schools have similar profiles. Both schools have eight mainstream class teachers, one special class and four special education teachers. Both schools have been granted a second special class to be opened however, both schools are waiting on the Department of Education to finalise building works to facilitate the second special class as of November 2024. The main difference between both schools is that one is located in a rural

setting (Rural School) and the other is in an urban setting (Urban School). In terms of staffing, the special class teacher (SCT) in both schools was appointed internally. Rural School SCT previously worked as an infant teacher. Urban School SCT worked as a special education teacher.

1.9 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter one provides background and contextual information, including legislation, policy, theoretical framework and the research objectives and questions. Chapter two investigates the current literature, drawing comparisons and common themes of the current research topic landscape. Chapter three outlines the methodology used to complete this research. Chapter four details the results from the research instruments leading to the discussion of the findings and recommendations for future practice in chapter five.

1.10 Conclusion

This chapter provided an introduction to this thesis, presenting the research aims, objectives and questions, grounding the pathway for this thesis. The context surrounding this thesis was also outlined including the theoretical, policy and legislation background.

Chapter 2
Literature Review

2.1 Introduction:

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the existing research based on the effect newly established special classes have on the whole school approach and attitudes towards inclusivity, comparing urban and rural schools to distinguish if approaches and attitudes vary between two different contexts. This literature review will examine the following themes;

1. Barriers to Inclusion and Current Inclusive Practices.
2. Staff and Inclusive Practice.
3. School Management of Inclusion.

2.2 Barrier to Inclusion and Current Inclusive Practices:

The NCSE states that children with special educational needs should be educated in mainstream classes along with their peers, by giving additional support to make this possible (NCSE, 2016). However, current research expresses a discrepancy between the ideal and reality, showing that there are existing barriers to inclusion in Irish schools. In ten years, the establishment of special classes has grown by 60% (Travers, 2023). Nonetheless, schools are attempting to implement and create an inclusive environment but are not entirely certain of the core purpose of a special class.

Rice et al. (2023) describe in their study of staff attitudes towards special classes in Ireland, that autism classes fulfil a significant role on the continuum of educational support as outlined by section 20 of the EPSEN act, remembering that inclusion is a process for every child, addressing needs of all pupils regardless of ability. Similarly, Travers's (2023) paper, on the development of special class provision in Ireland, outlines that special classes enable children with additional needs to be educated in their school but within a smaller setting, providing an opportunity for a tailored curriculum, calling the special class a 'safe-haven' thus, allowing the mainstream to continue to serve the needs of all children in the school. Again, Sweeney and Fitzgerald's (2023) research on special classes as inclusionary or isolation facilities, found that having a special class within a mainstream school brought a heightened awareness and understanding of autism among all school stakeholders. It is clear from these papers that special classes are a stepping stone towards inclusive practice within the Irish education system and seem to have a generally positive impact.

However, Banks and McCoy (2018), in their Irish research bulletin paper on special class segregation, talk about the need for clarity on the purpose of the special class and who it is

intended for, to combat a form of internal segregation. In their research on the needs of special class staff in Ireland, Finlay et al. (2019) speak of the lack of official guidance as a source of confusion for management and staff. Flanagan (2022) agrees with this view in their research paper on the whole school approach to inclusion, showing that the Department of Education (DES) (2019) found that the current system of special classes has limited success for children in special classes and notes the expansion of unintentional segregation. Sweeny and Fitzgerald (2023) uncovered that autism special classes represent integration rather than inclusion. These findings suggest an inconsistency in how schools use special classes and provide a contradiction to the findings on the positive impact of special classes presented above.

Travers (2023) demonstrates that there has been a reduction in the various types of special classes, favouring 'autism classes', baring the question of how inclusive special classes are in nature if they favour one diagnosis over another, while others may need the specialised teaching that a special class can provide. Agreeing with this outlook, Banks and McCoy (2018) argue that special classes only represent inclusive education based on the designation of the class, for example, an autism class is inclusive for the autistic pupils within the whole school. Travers (2023) uncovered that establishing a special class acted as a disincentive to other schools within the area to make provisions for children with additional needs and represented an administrative inconvenience to avoid the issue of whole-school inclusion.

However, Rice et al. (2023) found that schools did not always correlate their use of the special class and the school's inclusive policy. Similarly, Egan and Kenny (2022) uncovered in their research on special class teachers' self-efficacy, that the school's autonomy in how they operate special classes impacted the perception of isolation among special class teachers. Again, Finlay et al. (2019) revealed that the teacher's lack of autism awareness impacted the likelihood of exclusion on a whole school level. This reflects the feelings of uncertainty around the core ideals of a special class and how interpretations of their use may not be inclusionary at the foundations.

The Autism Task Force (2011) suggested the idea of an 'inclusion class'. This inclusion class would have a maximum of fifteen students, including three with more complex needs, taught by two teachers, one with specific special education training. Correlating to the recommendation in Banks and McCoy (2018) paper, which discusses the idea of having a 'low stream' class to target mild additional needs. However, Sweeney and Fitzgerald's (2023)

findings suggest that there is a lack of support, guidance and preparation for the whole school staff on inclusion. McMaster (2014) carried out a process of inclusionary change in a New Zealand school and found that special class teachers felt 'out of sync' with the whole school inclusion vision, as they felt the inclusionary policy did not encapsulate what they needed for their students to be meaningfully included in the school.

Historically, the marginalisation of children with additional needs was accepted as the norm, described as a 'blind spot' in schools (McMaster, 2014). The significance of the introduction of the special class model targeted inclusive practice, however, there are still 'serious systemic shortcomings' which still unintentionally promote segregation. 74% of children from 230 schools with special classes, stayed within the special class classroom for the day (Travers, 2023). Contrary, some school staff believe that the presence of a special class in a school promotes a 'full inclusion' approach because of the close proximities to mainstream classrooms (Rice et al., 2023). It is clear from the arguments presented above that the presence of special classes has mixed views on their use and ideals, given the confusion and the differences of shared cultures in each school.

2.3 Staff and Inclusive Practice

The key to an inclusive education system is the staff that have an innate inclusionary vision for their everyday practice. Staff who encourage an inclusive vision that every child belongs and can learn is paramount in establishing an inclusive culture (Flanagan, 2022). A special class teacher is generally described as a staff member who has a few years of mainstream teaching experience in teaching a child with autism within their previous mainstream class and has some experience in a special education teacher (SET) role (Finlay et al., 2019).

There are many arguments for the necessity of having a specialised special education teaching qualification when teaching children with additional needs. The NCSE promotes teachers in special classes to have previous experience with children with additional needs and who have the appropriate qualifications (NCSE, 2016). There is a direct link between teacher expertise and the academic and social outcomes of children in the special class (Travers, 2023). In America, Kuehn (2013) uncovered that there was a correlation between highly qualified teachers and the creation of a special education-specific curriculum.

However, on many occasions, special class staff do not have a special education qualification, but instead use their initial teacher qualification, which contained little instruction on special education teaching strategies. Rice et al. (2023) study uncovered that

teachers felt that their initial teaching degree did not help them when they were appointed a special class teaching role. Egan and Kenny (2022) spoke about newly qualified teacher's (NQT) feelings of inadequacy when they took a role in a special class, thinking they should know specific teaching strategies for additional needs, as they had just received the most up-to-date teaching degree. This corresponds with Traver's (2023) findings of special classes being staffed with 'inexperienced and ill-equipped' teachers with no additional qualifications or knowledge of specialised teaching approaches. These findings suggest a discrepancy between the requirements to teach a special class and the reality of the staffing of special classes.

There is no doubt that given the inconsistency between qualifications and expectations, there is a feeling of reluctance among staff, noting a fear that teachers have that they would be assigned to teach in the special class (Sweeny and Fitzgerald, 2023). Special class teachers experience high levels of isolation in their roles (Travers, 2023). Similarly, Finlay et al. (2019) found two-thirds of special class teachers stated they were also isolated in their role. The continuous professional development (CPD) of special class teachers has been noted as 'inadequate'. The NCSE (2016) details that schools planning to establish a special class should be 'proactive' in meeting the CPD needs of their staff. However, these NCSE CPD visits are usually a one-day visit, as a participant in Sweeny and Fitzgerald's (2023) research noted that the idea of teachers being ready to teach a special class after one day is labelled as 'crazy'. If the CPD needs are met for the whole school, it would allow for a three-year inclusion development plan with manageable targets to be created (Flanagan, 2022). On a practical note, this plan would include the fair rotation of teachers to spread knowledge and inclusive practice throughout the school (Ryan and Mathew, 2022). It is evident that when staff are given ample support and feel that support, they can implement real change not just within the special class.

There is a notion of 'learning as you go' when assigned as a special class teacher. McMaster (2014) described the negative effects of learning by doing, giving participants attitudes that may not always be a true reflection of teaching children with additional needs but rather the teacher's struggle to find a solution or suitable approach for one particular child. Supported by Egan and Kenny (2022), acknowledging the process of learning by doing, provides feelings of isolation, self-questioning and doubt, ultimately leading to emotional exhaustion.

One suggestion by many papers was staff collaboration to elevate any preconceptions or worries among the whole school staff. Collaborating not only on teaching ideas but any stressors or issues teachers are facing in their classes can change the attitude and approach to the original problem (McMaster, 2014). A common misconception noted is the responsibility of special class teachers to educate the whole staff on inclusion in practice, however, this is a school management responsibility (Sweeny and Fitzgerald, 2023). This process of social learning among professionals provides a greater capacity for accountability for inclusion throughout the whole staff, however, staff must be given time and space to collaborate, for example, the special class teacher and the mainstream class teacher working together on topics that all students are accessing (Flanagan, 2022). Ryan and Mathews (2022) suggest the idea of having a core team within each school for inclusion, allowing all staff to bring ideas or concerns and accepting various inputs to reach an inclusive solution in the best interests of all the children involved.

2.4 School Management and Inclusion

Throughout all the difficulties in navigating the meaningful inclusion of all children throughout the whole school, the principals are making the decisions and are the driving force behind the daily running of the school. Ryan and Mathews (2022) show in their research that principals are acutely aware of the significance of allocating qualified and experienced teachers to work in their special classes. However, principals have noted the difficulties in finding these requirements in staff who have the innate desire to work in the special class, with principals noting that ‘nobody will come and volunteer’ (Sweeney and Fitzgerald, 2023). Half of the Ryan and Mathews (2022) study participants were assigned to their special class based on their experience while the other half were NQTs. Kuehn (2013) notes the teacher shortage for special classes due to qualifications and teacher confidence and remedies this issue by taking teachers from the SET allocation from the mainstream.

Research has shown that when staff feel supported by management, their quality of teaching and job satisfaction increases (McMaster, 2014; Sweeney and Fitzgerald, 2023). Therefore, principals must provide support in many forms to the whole school staff. Egan and Kenny (2022) demonstrate when CPD opportunities are provided by principals, the whole school approach to inclusion becomes proactive. Amid the upskilling opportunities, the most meaningful CPD provided by principals are those based on challenging behaviour due to the correlation of feelings of dejection created by challenging behaviour in the special classes

(Finlay et al., 2022). From these findings, principals need to be in tune with the needs and strengths of their whole school staff in terms of inclusion.

Principals need to lead with honesty, establishing clear roles and responsibilities for all staff in promoting inclusion (NCSE, 2016). McMaster (2014) tested this hypothesis and found that when principals held daily morning staff briefings to update all staff on substitutes, other staff members unconsciously made an effort to demonstrate inclusionary procedures to new staff. Similarly, Kuehn (2013) found that principals are fearful when recruiting substitute teachers as they perceive a 'greater risk' when staffing a special class. Perhaps this is due to the fact the allocated teachers may not have presented with the qualifications and recruiting a substitute with the qualifications may be far less common.

Principals are acting as the middling ground between the policy and reality, as they are interpreting guidance documents but implementing them with limited resources while guiding the fears of their staff simultaneously. Principals need support themselves to reciprocate support to their staff, therefore sustained support and CPD for principals is essential to enable them to lead the schoolwide approach for inclusion (Sweeney and Fitzgerald, 2023).

Principals are operating on limited direction and guidance on how to maximise the inclusive potential of having their special class within their school and there is a clear need for specific criteria for principals to operate the special class to their full potential (Rice et al., 2019).

Principals note the frustration of feeling like 'hypocrites' as it is difficult for management to direct and support teachers when they have not been trained themselves (Egan and Kenny, 2022). There is a clear relationship between the tangible inclusive culture in a school and the experience of principals with special classes (Ryan and Mathew, 2022). There is a grey area in terms of guidance documents published by government agencies and how principals are supported to implement these guidelines.

There is an additional workload for principals when their school establishes a special class. Travers (2023) revealed that small schools were incentivised to open two special classes to be appointed an administrative principal post. This pressure doesn't take into account if the school is ready for a special class in terms of physical building and staff readiness.

Nonetheless, it is the final decision of the board of management to open the special class (NCSE, 2016). Principals state there is a substantial amount of administrative time required for the maintenance of a special class (Sweeney and Fitzgerald, 2023). For example, principals are expected to know building and architecture to inform the school capital

appraisal section of the Department of Education planning and building unit as there is an onus on schools to have the special class centrally positioned in the school (NCSE, 2016). These extra formalities are difficult to harmonise given the standard paperwork required for the running of mainstream schools continues (Wisudariani, 2023).

School management plays a critical role in culture. Culture is the underlying heartbeat of schools' everyday interactions with children. Culture is a vision and should be established with every staff member no matter their role in the school (Flanagan, 2022). McMaster (2014) describes the principal's role in culture as a 'broker' and 'advocate' to make statements on paper a reality. Principals need to ensure that there is an ongoing dialogue of inclusion daily in their schools. These dialogues ensure the coherent transition and collaboration between special class teachers and mainstream class teachers to maintain the upkeep of inclusive practice (Rice et al., 2023). It is important to ensure that it is the whole school is being treated inclusively.

Banks and McCoy (2018) argue that schools need to constantly question the whole school support available to all teachers. As an inclusive approach requires whole school strategies on additional needs to support children in the mainstream classes also, this attitude ensures that the special class is not an afterthought rather it is given the same thought as mainstream classes (Rice et al., 2023). Principals must take on the role of a 'transformational leader', to lead staff beyond their self-interests to a land of change. A transformational leader brings tools of audits, influence, and reflection and starts tough conversations which tackle inclusivity issues but do not place blame on any one person (Flanagan, 2022). However, it can be difficult to enforce these elements of leadership when principals are not adequately supported by higher educational figures, leaving a unanimously shared sense of despair among principals because of the perceived lack of support (Sweeney and Fitzgerald, 2023).

2.5 Research Question and Objectives

Reflecting on the current literature, it is important to consider the contribution this research will have to provide extra knowledge on the topic. The research questions are as follows;

1. What are the main changes the whole school makes to establish a special class?
2. Do these changes differ between urban and rural contexts?
3. Has the establishment of a special class assisted in understanding, implementing and managing inclusion in the mainstream setting?

The research objectives are the following:

1. To identify positive and/or negative factors of opening a special class in a mainstream school from a teacher's perspective.
2. To investigate teacher's opinions on their understanding of inclusion as a result of the establishment of a special class.
3. To investigate if the factors differ between the context of an urban or rural school.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a presentation on the current research available on the topic of the effect of special classes on the whole school approach to inclusion. It is clear that there is confusion on the topic of inclusion at three levels; inclusion as a whole, staff confusion and management confusion. There are significant cultural barriers to inclusion and what the special classes' role is in inclusion and the evidence of segregation is still predominant in school practice today. Staff are being allocated special classes and given inadequate training which ultimately has an overall effect on how they view themselves as teachers. Principals then have the difficult task of navigating teachers' personal emotions and department guidance with little support themselves. However, inclusivity requires a strong accepting culture to seep into daily practice in schools.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This case study endeavours to investigate the effect newly established special classes have on the whole school approach and attitudes towards inclusivity, evaluating if there is a contrast between urban and rural schools. The purpose of this chapter is to detail the research methodology adopted for this thesis. Research methodology sets out the actions to investigate a set of research questions to achieve established objectives (Pandey and Pandey, 2021). This particular research topic explores the same issue by comparing two different contexts, the comparison intends to provide a correlation or differentiation between urban and rural backgrounds. Therefore, a case study methodology is the most appropriate to have the most accurate comparison possible. This chapter will discuss the method employed to conduct this research, the research paradigm, data collection, data processing and ethical considerations concerning this thesis.

3.2 Research Paradigm and Methodology Approach

Bonga et al. (2020) describe a research paradigm as a set of agreed perspectives by researchers based on values, concepts and practices. Situating research in a paradigm gives credibility and academic credentials to the research study and processes it adopts.

This research study is within the constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm investigates how people interpret their experiences and perspectives and uses these interpretations to develop a deeper understanding of the topic under study (MacLeod et al. 2022). Positioning this research in the constructivist paradigm there are four main characteristics;

1. Knowledge is constructed through interactions between individuals and their environment.
2. Learning is a process of actively constructing one's understanding of the world.
3. Learners are motivated by their interests and curiosity.
4. Learners use problem-solving and critical thinking to construct new knowledge (Damyranov, 2023).

3.3 Research Design

This research implements a mixed-method approach, using questionnaires and interviews to retrieve data on individual interactions with the research topic. The mixed method approach assists the researcher in exploring the effect special classes have on the whole school approach to inclusivity. Exercising a mixed method approach allows the collection of both

qualitative and quantitative data, and using results from both contributes to gaining simultaneous insights into the topic as a unit, rather than a snippet (Harrison et al. 2020). Although a mixed-method approach can be time-consuming, the quality and quantity of the data retrieved from this method provide a clear portrait of the current landscape (Creswell, 2021).

Qualitative data offers a broader lens on a topic, offering participants an opportunity to share their interactions with the research topic. In contrast, quantitative research collects data of a factual and statistical nature, normally presented in numerical format (Schoonenboom, 2023). To achieve the research objectives established for this thesis, it was necessary to provide a mixture of data; RO 1 identifying and investigating factors of change in schools requires participants to be allowed to voice their experiences of change. Whereas, RO 3 comparing rural and urban factors requires statistical information to derive clear contrasts or comparisons.

Questionnaires (appendix 3.1) and semi-structured interviews (appendix 3.2) act as the mixed method data collection instruments for this research. Questionnaires provide an opportunity for quantitative data to be collected, essential to address the contextual comparison element of this research. However, it must be noted that questionnaires offer limited and precise data, leaving no room for elaboration. In contrast, semi-structured interviews provide the opportunity for the expansion of thoughts and an in-depth discussion on the research topic (McCrudden and Rapp, 2024). To emphasise this difference, a closed question from the questionnaire posed;

'How long has your school's special class(es) been established?'

– participants are to provide a numerical answer.

The same question in the principal semi-structured interview is altered to allow for experiences to be shared.

'How long have you had a special class in your school? What was the deciding factor in establishing the special class, i.e. was it allocated to you, did you apply etc?'

The open-ended questions led to gateways for participants to contribute their experiences or various perspectives that may not have been identified by the researcher. However, it is important that the researcher allows the participants to share their views but also not allow the focus to be drawn away from the research topic (Bhangu et al., 2023). There are two

different sets of questions for principals and special class teachers, allowing for a complete view of the research topic from two closely related professionals working on the same topic.

3.4 Triangulation, Validity, Reliability:

Stamenkov (2023) defines triangulation as the comparison and combination of different forms or different sources of information to reach a clear comprehension of perspectives or processes. Santos et al. (2020) discuss the use of participant triangulation as a tool for validity in research. Participant triangulation is the input of two or more different sets of participants directly affected or related to the same topic. This research uses triangulation from principals, special class teachers and mainstream teaching staff. Each of these participants encourages and has a professional duty towards inclusivity in their respective schools. These comparisons of different viewpoints on inclusive education can validate the research objectives and questions.

Cohen et al. (2017) define validity as the instrument which measures how truthful the research outcomes are. From adopting the triangulation approach, three comparisons could be made, these included;

1. Interviews with principals.
2. Interview with special class teachers.
3. Questionnaires from mainstream staff.

Although time-consuming, combining these three perspectives provides a comprehensive and clear representation, which is necessary to achieve the research aims.

Babu and Kohli (2023) define reliability as the confidence that if the study was replicated under the given methodology, the study would produce the same results each time. The researcher asked the same questionnaire to both schools.

3.5 Research Participants and Sampling

Research sampling refers to the selection of people from the general population who partake in a study, usually, this snippet of the population has an element of their lives in common (Kumar, 2019). For this research topic, the participants have the following in common;

- Holds a teaching qualification or qualification to work with children.
- Works in a school with a special class.

The researcher felt given the timeframe the most realistic recruitment method ought to be chosen, therefore purposive sampling was chosen. Palinkas et al (2016) define purposive sampling as a technique used for the identification and selection of participants that is the most cost-effective use of limited resources available to a researcher. The sample is made up of people who have a particular set of expertise and experience on the phenomenon being studied.

The researcher made contact with the gatekeepers, which in this research are the principals of both schools selected, to seek permission to research their schools (appendix 3.3). Once permission was granted, the researcher sent an email to all staff members inviting them to participate in the questionnaire. Accompanying the email was a participant information sheet and informed consent. Similarly, direct contact was made with two special class teachers and two principals for their interest in participating in a semi-structured interview, participant information and an informed consent form were also provided to interview participants.

3.6 Data Collection Method

Considering the mixed method nature of this thesis, the data collection method presents a two-system in line with the two different data collection methods employed; questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Once permission was granted by the gatekeepers, questionnaires were distributed to two primary schools through the use of a Google Forms link. The questionnaire permitted the researcher to address the statistical research objectives.

The semi-structured interviews required the sampling method to be a success, as the targeted participants were holding the only positions in their schools, for example, there is only one principal per school. The researcher found difficulty in making appointments that suited both the participants and the researcher given the short length of time the researcher had opened the data collection period.

The participant's questionnaires, aimed at the general and mainstream staff, created the background and the general settings of the schools. For example, providing statistical data on qualifications, inclusive language used and attitudes towards special classes. Meanwhile, the semi-structured interviews provided an outlet for special class teachers and principals to offer valuable insights into their experience with the research topic (Desai and Reimers, 2018).

Merging both data collection results gives an extensive view of the topic.

3.7 Data Analytics.

Due to the mixed-method nature of this study, the data processing required two types of processing. The researcher adopted a thematic and descriptive analysis to process the qualitative data deriving from the semi-structured interviews. Ibrahim (2012) defines thematic analysis as the classification and identification of patterns within the data collection, illustrating the data in precise detail through interpretations of the data by the researcher. Although thematic analysis is a time-consuming approach, it was the most viable style to adopt to gain a true reflection of the results.

The data collection method of coding was used to process the results of the quantitative questionnaire data. Denscombe (2010) explains that coding involves thoroughly reading and understanding the responses of the data and then converting them into numbers, statistics and images. This research suited the coding method because the structure of the questions allowed for the data to be clear in communicating the results. For example, answer options such as the likert scale provide the participants with ease and convenience when answering, making it more likely for participants to engage and answer the questions. However, the outcome of the use of such scales is that participants may quickly choose an option, not giving a true reflection of the research topic (Alabi and Jelili, 2023).

3.8 Ethical Consideration

Ethical consideration is an exceptionally important part of conducting research. Any research studies that involve human participants must be evaluated to clarify any ethical issues that could potentially occur during the research (Pietilä et al., 2020). The term ethics guides the moral principles and conduct, held by a group of researchers or professionals (Hickey, 2018). A research concern is present when any of the interactions with participant causes undue harm in their ordinary lives. The researcher for this thesis adhered to the ethical principles set out by The British Educational Research Association (BERA) which Hibernia College uses to guide their research (BERA, 2017).

Under the BERA guidelines, the researcher is obligated to remain objective when accumulating data from all participants to gain an accurate picture of the research topic. Adhering to the BERA guidelines, there are seven responsibilities to participants that researchers must adhere to. The first guideline is consent. The researcher certified that each participant's involvement is entirely voluntary and consent would be obtained before the participant contributes. The researcher must remain sensitive and accept that participants may

wish not to consent to participate. A consent form was provided for this research (appendix 3.1) before both interviews and questionnaires. Next is transparency, the researcher aims to be honest with participants at all times, being open to any questions participants may have. The participants of this study were provided with the contact details of the researcher so they could clarify any of their concerns.

The Right to Withdraw, the researcher has to recognise the right of all participants to withdraw for any or no reason at any time during the research. The researcher communicated this right within the research information sheet (appendix 3.2). The next guideline is incentives. The use of incentives is discouraged for research, as it may skew the research outcome. The researcher offered no incentive for this thesis only through the participant information sheet explained the benefits of parting in a case study on their school. Following this is Harm Arising, it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure the participants know any potential risks to their participation in the study. The participants were informed that this study would involve looking at opinions of special classes, the risk would be if participants have their children in a special class, and there may be some questions based on recent research that some participants may find upsetting.

The penultimate guideline is Privacy and Data Storage. There is a research norm that participant data is treated with anonymity throughout the research including the storage and treatment of the data. The participant's right to anonymity is outlined in the research information sheet, and the details of how the data will be kept are also communicated to the participants. The only people who have access to the data are; the researcher and the research supervisor. The final guideline is Disclosure. The researcher has a responsibility to keep data anonymous but in doing so, if a disclosure of illegal activity is made, the researcher will contact the relevant authorities and report any such disclosure.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodological approach to conducting this research, including details on participant sampling, selection, ethical considerations and the distribution, handling and processing of data. This chapter will provide the backdrop to the upcoming chapter four where the results of the above-mentioned methodology will be presented.

Chapter 4

Findings

4.1 Introduction:

This chapter displays the primary findings from this mixed-method case study. The purpose-built questionnaire and interviewee responses will highlight the common themes deriving from the data. A Google Forms link was provided to 36 participants between the two schools. 18 participants completed the survey. There were four interviewees from the purposive sampling method. Any direct interviewee responses will be included in italics. The four interviewees will be referred to as; Rural SCT, Urban SCT, Rural principal and Urban principal.

4.2.1 Profile of Research Participants

A profile of participants who engaged with this research is provided below. The profile contains the type of school setting, length of teaching or school experience and the participant's role within their school setting.

Table 4.2.1 Participant School Setting.

This pie chart shows the participant breakdown between urban and rural school settings. This question contributes to the comparison between the changes in urban and rural schools when a special class is established.

What is the context of your school?
18 responses

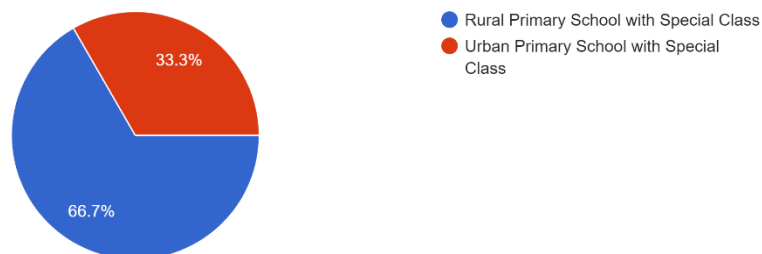


Table 4.2.1 displays that 66.7% (n=12) of survey participants work in a rural school. While 33.3% (n=6) of survey participants are employed in an urban school setting.

Table 4.2.2 Participant Teaching Experience

This table shows the breakdown of the participant's teaching experience or in the case of Special Needs Assistants (SNA) their school experience in their role.

How long have you been teaching?

18 responses

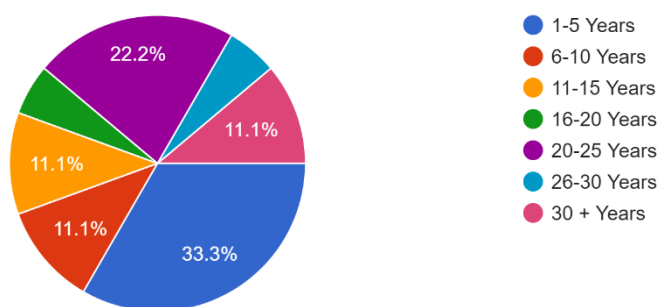


Table 4.2.2 shows the years of experience obtained by the participants between both urban and rural schools used in this research. 33.3% (n=6) have one to five years of school experience. 22.2% (n=4) had twenty to twenty-five years of school experience. Whereas 11.1% (n=2) had six to ten years of experience, 11.1% (n=2) had eleven to fifteen years of experience and 11.1% (n=2) had thirty-plus years of experience. 5.6% (n=1) had sixteen to twenty years' experience, similarly 5.6 (n=1) had twenty-six to thirty years' experience.

Table 4.2.3 Participants' Role in their School.

This table demonstrates the breakdown of roles among the participants of this research.

What is your role within your school?

18 responses

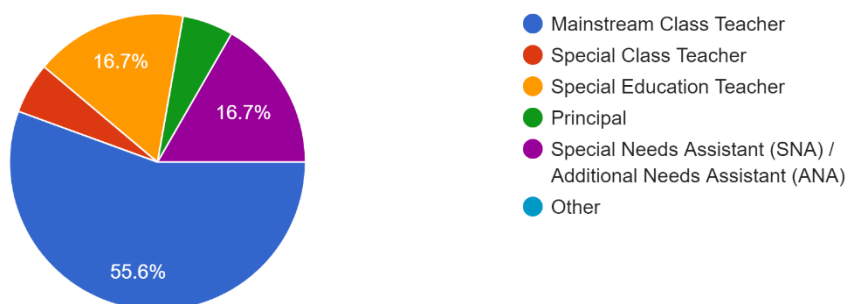


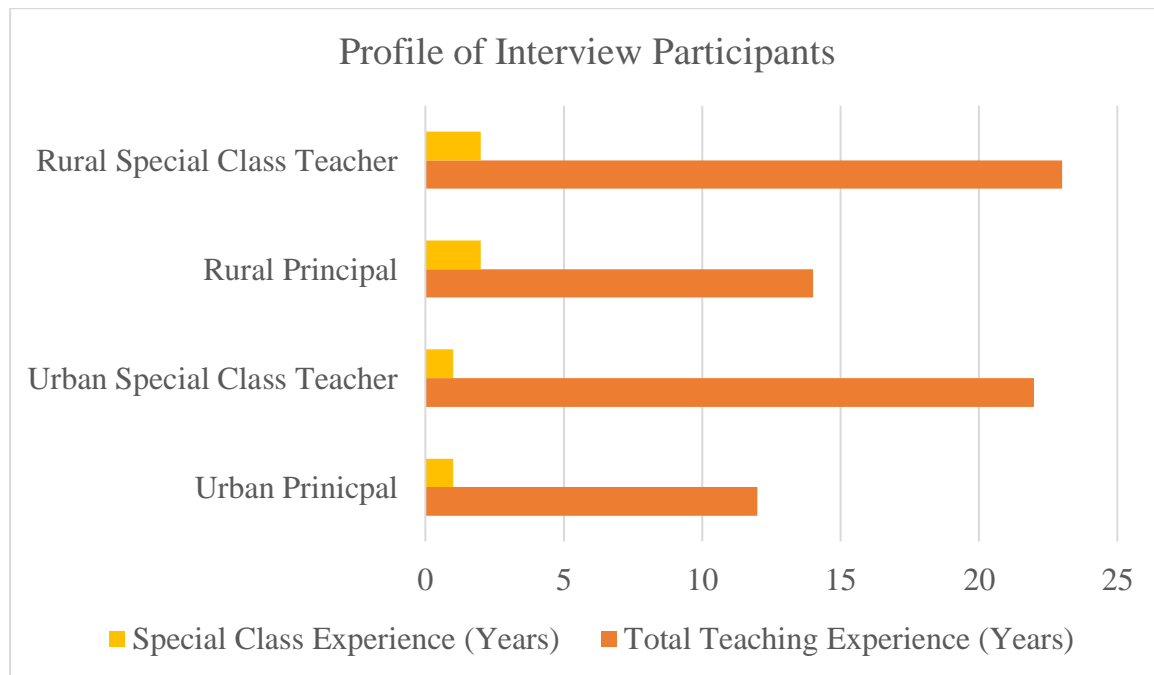
Table 4.2.3 displays the majority of survey participants stated their role in their school was a 'mainstream class teacher' (55.6% n=10). 16.7% (n=3) were Special Needs Assistants (SNA)/Additional Needs Assistants (ANA). 16.7% (n=3) of participants roles were Special Education Teachers (SET). 5.6% (n=1) of research participants stated they were a special class teacher. Similarly, 5.6% (n=1) declared are a principal in their school.

4.2.4 Profile of Interview Participants.

This section details the profile of interview participants for the case study.

Table 4.2.4 Profile of Interview Participants.

Table 4.2.4 displays the interviewee participants' total teaching experience and their experience in teaching or leading a special class.



Interviewee one is a principal in an urban school with seven years of experience in their principal’s role. This participant will be referred to as ‘Urban Principal’ when interpreting data for this research.

Interviewee two is a special class teacher (SCT) in an urban primary school with one year of experience in the SCT role. Previous to this, this participant had twelve years of SET experience. This participant will be referred to as “Urban SCT”.

Both Urban SCT and Urban Principal are working in the same school.

Interviewee three has been a principal in a rural school for the past ten years. This participant will be referred to as “Rural Principal” for the duration of this research.

Interviewee four has been a SCT in their role for the past two years. They will be referred to as “Rural SCT”.

Both Rural Principal and Rural SCT are working in the same school.

4.3 Research Settings.

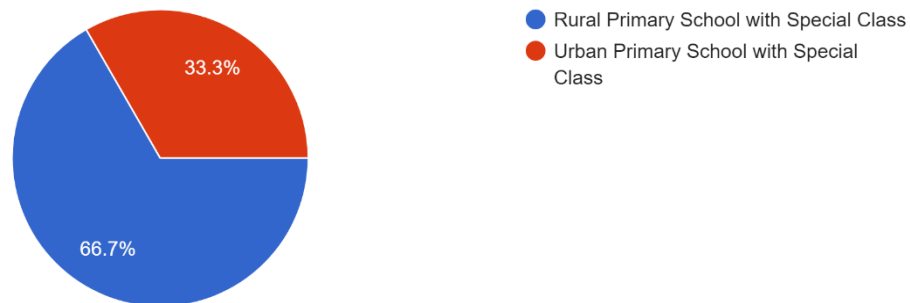
This section will outline the settings of the schools in which this research was used for the case study.

Table 4.3.1 Urban and Rural participant breakdown.

Table 4.3.1 displays the context of the schools' participants work in.

What is the context of your school?

18 responses



66.7% (n=12) of participants work in a rural primary school setting, while 33.3% (n=6) work in an urban primary school setting.

Table 4.3.2 Special Class existence in participant school.

Table 4.3.2 shows the length of time a special class has been in operation in the case study schools.

How long has your school's special class(es) been established?

18 responses

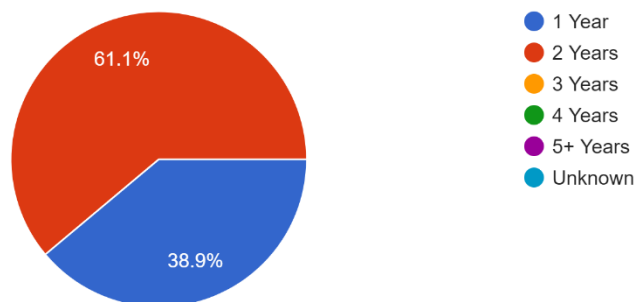


Table 4.3.2 shows that the schools in this study have very recently opened their special class. The red section of the pie chart shows that the rural school in this research (61.1% n=11) has operated a special class for two years. Meanwhile, the blue section represents the urban school (38.9 n=7), which has just opened its special class one year.

4.3.2 How were special classes opened in both schools?

Urban Principal detailed that their school applied to open a special class for three consecutive years as they felt their school required a special class for inclusivity purposes. The patronage of the Urban school is of a Church of Ireland ethos. The urban school was sanctioned a

special class to be opened in the Summer of 2023 to be in operation for the 2023/2024 academic year. This has been closely followed by a second special class to be opened and in operation for the 2024/2025 academic year.

“We were applying for about three years to the department for inclusivity purposes. So, children in the school could benefit from an ASD class. They wanted to be educated in a church of Ireland school, but there was no Church of Ireland school with an ASD class attached in the community or surrounding areas”

Rural Principal outlined that there was no single deciding factor in opening their special class. Rural Principal stated that they were approached by the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) three times first was to open a special class and at the time the school was not ready for it. The second time the SENO asked for an early intervention class to be opened, this was also rejected as the Rural Principal felt it was a special class for all ages or nothing. The third time the invite was accepted by the Rural School. The Special Class opened for teaching in the 2022/2023 academic year.

“We were approached by the SENO probably two years previous and at that time, I don't know what reason, I didn't really know as much about it as I did. The second time I was approached, it was to open an early intervention class. I said that I wouldn't open an early intervention class but a primary class.”

4.4 School Readiness for a Special Class.

This section discusses the views of interview and survey participants on their school's readiness to open a special class.

Table 4.4.1 Staff Reluctance.

This table shows the survey participants' views on whether there was a feeling of reluctance from their staff members when the school opened their special class.

Do you think there was a feeling of 'reluctance' from staff and colleagues when your school was granted a special class?

18 responses

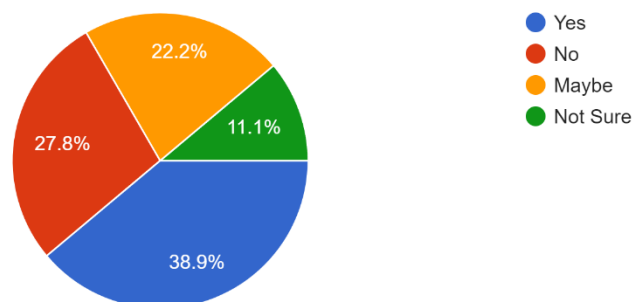


Table 4.4.1 shows that between both schools 38.9% (n=7) stated there was a feeling of reluctance from staff. 27.8% (n=5) disagreed and stated there was no reluctance. 22.2% (n=4) voted maybe and 11.1% (n=2) were not sure if there was reluctance.

Interviewees were asked the same question regarding staff reluctance.

Urban Principal “I don't think so. I think there was maybe a fear of lack of knowledge. Not a fear of the children or the additional needs more a fear that we were inadequate.”

Rural SCT “In the beginning, yes. I think we all felt What will this mean for us?”

Urban SCT “Yes, it's the fear of the unknown. Last summer I didn't have a relaxing summer. I was constantly thinking of what my children were going to be like, how am I going to do this, is the room going to be ready. I wanted to set it up but it wasn't ready.”

4.4.2 Physical School Readiness

This section outlines the data concerning the physical school resources and whether these were fit for purpose when opening a special class.

Both Rural Principal and Rural SCT detail that the physical school building is not fit for purpose, both providing details of how an unused classroom was retrofitted for a special class, yet still the sensory room is the other side of the school's general-purpose room making it difficult for the children to access when they may become overwhelmed as they are required to walk through a large busy hall.

Urban Principal and Urban SCT also spoke about the spare room retrofit, which they were happy with as a sensory room was attached to the classroom. However, it has left a difficult to accommodate mainstream classrooms in temporary accommodation until building works are complete.

Both principals spoke about the grants available to complete minor works. However, both principals spoke about the need for streamlining and assistance when applying and managing building applications as there have been many delays which slows the opening of special classes and provides the physical environment for the success of the special class.

4.5 Current Inclusion Practices

This section will outline the data concerning the current understanding of inclusion in the case study schools.

Table 4.5.1 Understanding Inclusion

Table 4.5.1 shows the data about participants' opinions on their understanding of inclusion.

Do you feel that you fully understand the term 'inclusion'?

18 responses

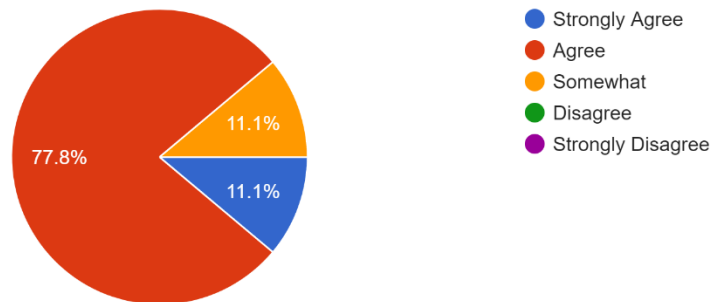


Table 4.5.1 shows the data trends in participants' understanding of inclusion. 77.8% (n=14) voted that they 'agree' that they fully understand the term inclusion. 11.1% (n=2) stated that somewhat understood the term and 11.1% (n=2) strongly agreed that they understood the term inclusion.

Table 4.5.2 Training for Inclusion

Table 4.5.2 shows data for participants receiving formal training on inclusion.

Have you ever received training in the area of inclusion? (in school or individually)

18 responses

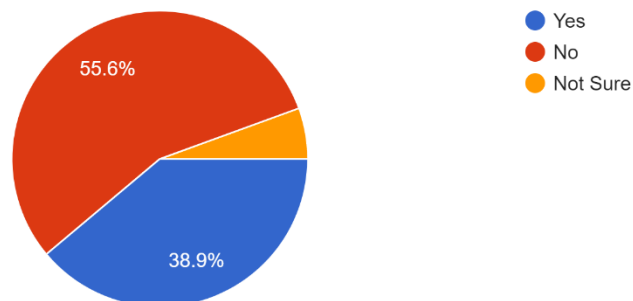


Table 4.5.2 shows that 55.6% (n=10) had received no formal training on inclusion. 38.9% (n=7) had received formal training. 5.6% (n=1) were not sure if they received formal training.

From interview data, Rural SCT spoke about the four-day training provided by the NCSE before opening their special class. There were positives as the SCT could discuss with other like-minded people, but also negatives. Rural SCT discussed the difficulty in applying some of the training pointers to her class as they had not met their students yet.

"I got four days of training and I did my online courses. CPDs, webinars. Four days of training at the start, two weeks into the class so the middle of September. So, you not might even have met the kids. I think that they wanted you to have an idea, but a lot of stuff was over my head because they were talking about things that I hadn't encountered yet. You have

to speak to people who are in the same situation as you. I won't even say we have to pool resources. Because we didn't. But it was just that okay, I'm not on my own in this."

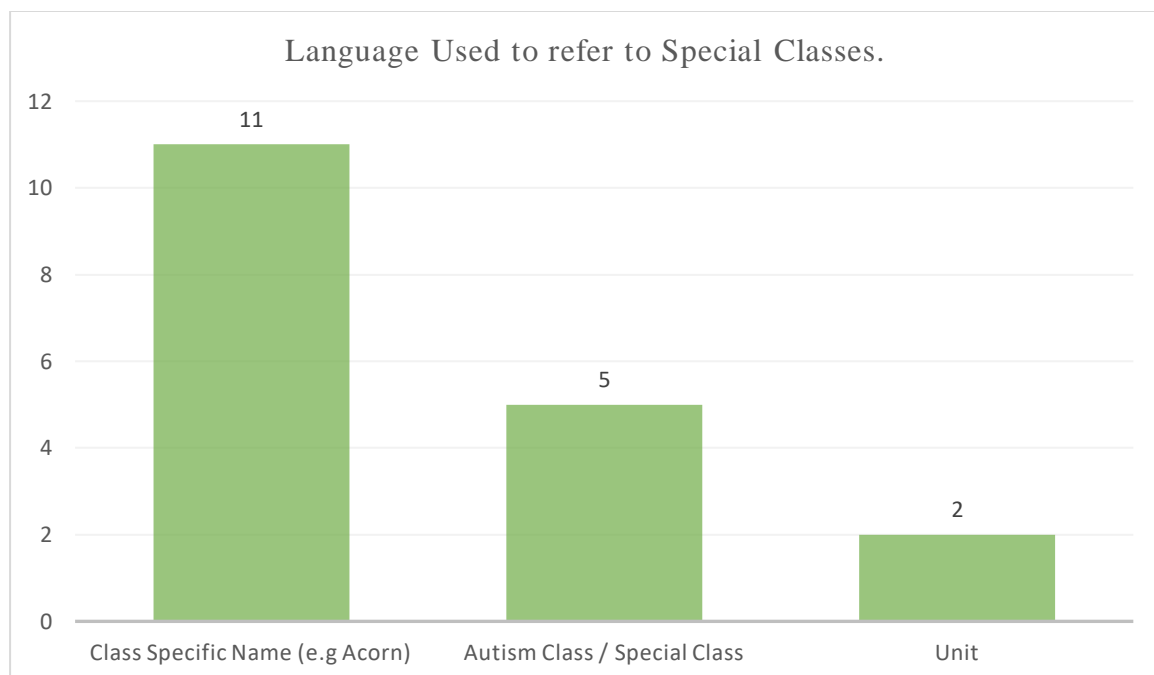
Urban SCT and Urban Principal spoke about the fact that their special class had been established eight months at the time of the interview and they had not been invited to the NCSE training.

Urban SCT "I only had the professional CPD that I have done when I found out that I might be coming in here. There wasn't a full day at the start, but I have since done the formal training just last week eight months after the original opening. It used to be four days, but it was condensed to two days. But in all honesty, it just confirmed what we do in here."

Urban Principal "We didn't receive our training before the class. I had to push quite hard for the training to be granted and it was only given in April eight months after the opening of the class. And whilst they were NCSE tickets, we could have availed of, I don't think we were supported by the training because we never received it."

Table 4.5.3 Current Language of Inclusion

Table 4.5.3 displays the current language which is used in both schools when speaking about the special class.



From the chart above, 11 of the 18 participants stated they used the class name when referring to the Special class – these names were given to every class in the school to promote inclusion. 5 of 18 participants said they would use the term ‘autism class’ or ‘special class’ when speaking about their schools’ special class. 2 participants stated they call the special class a ‘unit’.

4.5.4 Feelings of Inclusion from Special Class Teachers

This section details the thoughts of SCT on the inclusionary nature of the special class in the backdrop of the mainstream school. Urban teachers expressed a sense of exclusion working in a special class. For instance, Urban SCT stated;

“I feel very disconnected from the whole school. I feel that if we were in another building nobody would knock on the door. . . I would have to revise rules before they go out to play time, then I'm getting less time to go to the staff room . . . if I have a lot of paperwork I do it during their playtime sometimes for my headspace.”

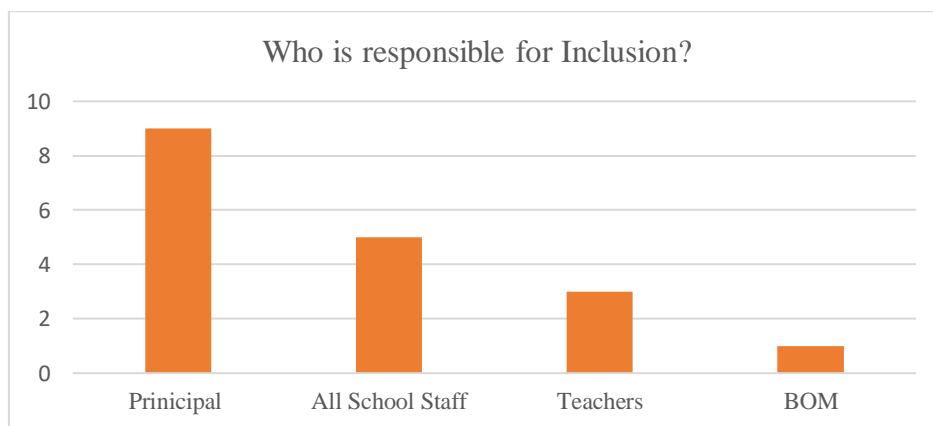
This view was concurred by Rural SCT where they highlighted; *“There's nobody else doing what I'm doing. Even if there were two classes, I would have somebody to bounce things off. Nobody understands it . . . I just feel that you're just left to your own devices like sink or swim.”*

4.6 Leading Inclusion

This section will outline the data from the research related to leading, managing and responsibility for inclusion in schools.

Table 4.6.1 Who is responsible for leading inclusion in schools?

Table 4.6.1 displays the answers provided by survey participants as to whom is responsible for leading and managing inclusion schools.



The bar chart above shows that 50% of participants (n=9) named the principal as the leader of inclusion. 5 of 18 participants think it is all school staff that should lead inclusion, while 3 participants answer teachers and 1 participant answered the Board of Management is responsible for leading inclusion.

The interviewees were asked the same question regarding the responsibility of inclusion in schools. Urban Principal pointed to the role of responsibility principals have in inclusion and creating a culture;

“It starts from me. I have to embrace every difference in the school. I have to have the policies and procedures in place to make sure that we are supportive of differences whether it be race and personal needs. . . I have to be the foundation of that culture. Sometimes that's difficult because you're addressing people's fears and ignorance because they may not be located in the area. And for me to do that I have to tackle them head on. So, I have to have difficult conversations.”

Rural Principal reiterated this responsibility in more practical examples of their everyday leading of inclusion and how inclusion needs to be normalised for inclusion to be present;

“You'd have to keep bringing repeated messages and repeated forms of communication, whether it's assemblies or staff meetings you're trying to be inclusive. . . I have to normalise behaviour, so that's all-inclusive. I'd always try and mention the special class in public. So, if there's a school event, I purposely would get a photograph with the kids from the special class. . . like marketing inclusion for the community to buy into it.”

Urban SCT talks about questioning practices in their school as a method of promoting inclusion by highlighting barriers;

“I would have to correct them [staff] about the use of like autism unit, that would be like a continual thing. But I think our school is quite good at accepting. . . I feel I'm constantly thinking how inclusive are we? and bringing these concerns to conversations with staff.”

Rural SCT agreed with Urban Principal with the idea of establishing an inclusive culture but contradicts Urban SCT in the idea of questioning practices;

“I think everyone is pretty good. Staff are constantly talking and having conversations about inclusion whether that's ‘what time is good for reverse integration etc.’ We had the culture change last year when the class initially opened and even from mid-September staff went with it and got on board very naturally which made my job easy as I felt I didn't need to ‘educate’ as such.”

4.6.2 Difficulties in Leading a Special Class

From interview data, participants provided some difficulties that are barriers to leading a special class.

Staffing resources was named as a barrier to inclusive education;

Rural Principal “Resources, we don't have enough people to do it. There are loads of programs we could run. We don't have the manpower.”

Specific training for special classes was identified by the Urban Principal;

Urban Principal “Training I think was a barrier. I think my staff were undertrained in the area. They had years of experience in special education, and they had years of experience dealing with children with autism, but not specifically for teaching in the special class”

4.7 Changes to a school when a special class is established

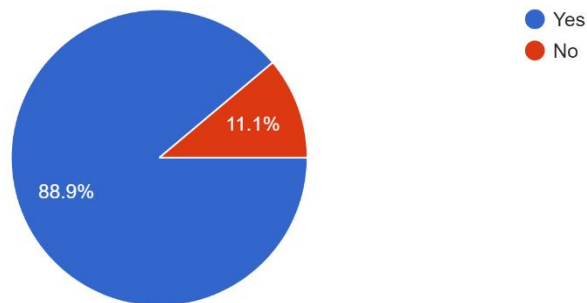
This section will detail the participant responses on the changes that a school transitions through when a special class is established.

Table 4.7.1 Does Change Happen when a Special Class is Established?

The table shows the participant's thoughts on changes to their school.

Do you believe the school has changed as a result of the special class?

18 responses



88.9% (n=16) stated their school has changed as a result of opening the special class. In contrast, 11.1% (n=2) stated their school has not changed.

Table 4.7.2 How has the School Changed?

Table 4.7.2 categories survey participants' responses to what changes have happened in their school since the opening of their special class.

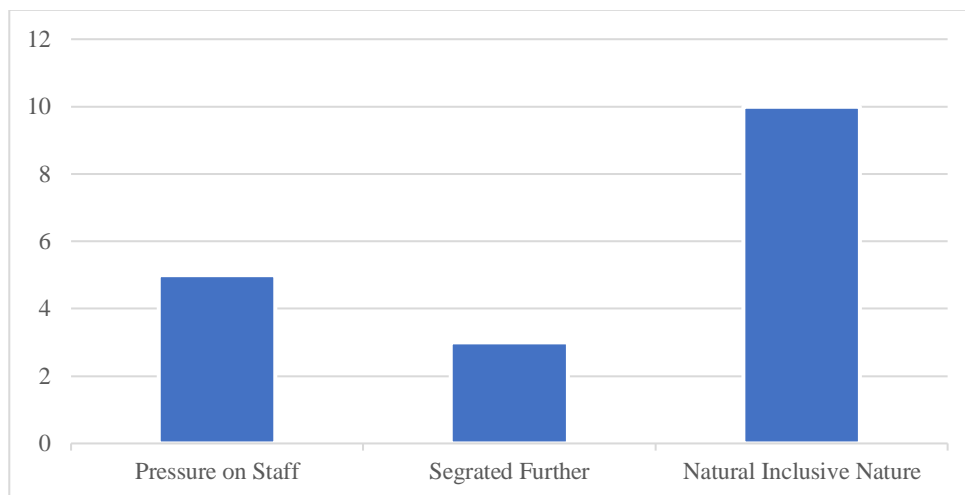


Table 4.7.2 shows that 10 of 18 survey participants stated that the special class provided the school with an opportunity to embrace neurodiversity and develop a natural inclusive nature in the school. 4 participants stated that the special class added additional pressure on teachers, SNA/ANA and principals. 2 participants believed the special class added to segregation rather than inclusion.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter presented the main findings from the data collection period for this research. These findings will be used in the next chapter to analyse themes and trends based on the research question.

Chapter 5
Discussion and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This thesis aimed to evaluate the changes that schools undergo when a special class is established in their school. Chapter four presented several interesting points from the research responses retrieved from the data collection. For example, Special Class Teachers (SCT) have tangible feelings of isolation within their schools and details of support from the NCSE for schools appear inadequate from the data collected in this research. This chapter discusses the findings of this research in the context of the literature explored in chapter two and legislation explored in chapter one.

Below is a reminder of the three research questions proposed in chapter one;

1. What are the main changes the whole school makes to establish a special class?
2. Do these changes differ between urban and rural contexts?
3. Has the establishment of a special class assisted in understanding, implementing and managing inclusion in the mainstream setting?

This discussion is separated under the same themes as explored in Chapter Two. These themes are as follows;

1. Barriers to Inclusion and Current Inclusive Practices.
2. Staff and Inclusive Practice.
3. School Management of Inclusion.

5.2 Barrier to Inclusion and Current Inclusive Practices

This research explored many staff opinions from both case study schools on the barriers to inclusion and the current inclusive practices within their school.

5.2.1 Meaning of Inclusion

Research question three queries if the special class has assisted in understanding, implementing and managing inclusion. The findings presented in section 4.5 on current inclusion practices show that only 11.1% of participants strongly agree that they know what inclusion means. This is a significant finding as the literature presents that the intention of establishing a special class takes for granted that all staff have a solid understanding of what inclusion looks like and how to implement inclusion in their teaching (Flanagan, 2022). Building a culture of inclusion can be difficult to develop when staff do not know the culture's true values, bringing difficulties for school management in establishing an inclusive culture within the school. This finding demonstrates that the special class acts as a starting

point for discussing and managing inclusion but does not act as a 'quick fix' for schools to deem themselves as inclusive by merely the existence of the special class.

5.2.2 Reluctance

Sweeny and Fitzgerald (2023) discovered that staff reluctance is a real and tangible barrier to implementing inclusion in schools. This research agreed with this statement and found that most participants (38.9%) stated there were feelings of reluctance among their colleagues when the special class was established, it is important to note that the reluctance was evenly split between urban and rural schools. The interviewees explained the reluctance as a personal burden and fear rather than about the children with additional needs; *"fear that we were inadequate / fear of the unknown / what will this mean for us?"* This finding matches Ryan and Mathew's (2022) finding of principals stating that 'nobody will come and volunteer' when referring to staff relationships with the special class. Reluctance then brings change, as staff allocations may cause unrest due to reluctance. The findings on reluctance address all three research questions. Reluctance naturally brings change, sometimes unwanted adjustments initially but positive differences in the long term, reluctance does not differ among urban and rural contexts and reluctance provides a topic for open inclusionary conversation within schools.

5.2.3 Isolation

Another barrier to inclusion is the isolation and segregation of SCT and children in special classes. This thesis agrees with Finlay et al. (2019) figures of two-thirds of SCTs feeling isolated in their role, as both SCTs in this research state they too feel isolated; *"disconnected / you are left to your own devices"*. This brings change to schools in many formats, for example, collaborative planning may not include the special class. Rural Principal detailed managing isolation in a broader perspective; *"We would always encourage Acorn to try things before discontinuing, for example, swimming, not many schools would encourage their special class to go swimming or give the manpower to make it possible"*. This finding would suggest that Sweeny and Fitzgerald's (2023) argument that the inclusionary nature of special classes is at the discretion of the school to manage, but can be difficult when inclusion is not entirely understood by those implementing it.

These findings correlate to the unintentional segregation described by the Department of Education (2019), also contributing to the change question. Combatting unintentional segregation these schools altered every class's name to types of tree names for example some

classes were referred to as Holly, Alder and Acorn. This was an attempt to put the special class on a level playing field as every other class. However, Table 4.5.3, shows that some staff still refer to their special class as 'unit' or 'autism class' even given the changes for inclusion schools made. These small changes are not big undertakings for staff to get accustomed to but are still taking time to embed these inclusionary practices, this demonstrates that staff need to be educated and completely understand what it means to be inclusionary. Therefore, research question three shows that the mere existence of a special class does not necessarily mean the school is entirely inclusive, also addressing research question one as one minor change is the class names but may not be adopted by every member of the school community. The language used to describe the special class presented similar situations in both schools, some using their tree names and others sticking to rigid labelling.

5.2.4 Guidance for Inclusion

This thesis demonstrated that a significant barrier to inclusion is how inclusion is managed and guided in schools. Sweeny and Fitzgerald (2023) spoke about how principals are the middle ground between inclusive policies and inclusion in reality, however, they are working off no guidance on these policies. The research agrees with the aforementioned, as Rural Principal spoke about the uncertainty of which type of special class was the best fit for their school, a decision which took years to make due to the analysis of options and the lack of principal training on how to choose was a factor in the length of time, which corresponds with Egan and Kenny (2022) and Rice et al (2019) who found similar in their studies. It is paramount that principals comprehend special class and inclusive policies so that they can successfully implement them in reality. Addressing research question three the establishment of the special class has ultimately forced management into implementing inclusion in their mainstream schools but with no guidance on how to do so.

5.3 Staff and Inclusion

Staff are pivotal for the success of inclusion in a school. It is important to note inclusion is the responsibility of every member of staff, hence the inclusion criteria for this research include principals, teachers and special/additional needs assistants. From the research, many issues have arisen concerning staff and inclusion.

5.3.1 Staff Opinions on Inclusion

A common theme in this research was staff training in inclusion and the success of a special class. Staff are the key to inclusive practice, this research unveiled that 50% of participants felt they were

not equipped to teach in a special class, correlating to the 55.6% of participants who said they had never received training in the area of inclusion, with the majority of the most experienced teachers (10+ years' experience) across both urban and rural schools stating they did not feel prepared. This disagrees with the finding of NCSE, which states that to work in a special class teachers need experience with additional needs and 'appropriate qualifications' yet does not specifically state which qualifications are appropriate. Also correlates to Ryan and Mathew's (2022) findings that teachers with the most experience should be assigned to the special class. Training is a necessity for all staff in inclusion, as suggested by McMaster (2014). This addresses the research question of changes, as the whole staff need to be trained for inclusion and everyone must take a proactive role in implementing inclusive practice.

5.3.2 Value of NCSE training

As outlined in the literature the NCSE provides on-site training to special class staff, with Sweeney and Fitzgerald (2023) branding one-day training for inclusion as 'crazy', this opinion was reciprocated by both Urban and Rural interviewees, with the Urban school advocating for their right to access the training eight months after the opening of their special class, in which was condensed form of the full training. Rice et al. (2023) discovered that initial teacher training for the majority of SCT did not assist teachers when they started teaching in a special class, deeming the NCSE training a necessity for newly appointed SCT. This thesis confirms the research of Sweeney and Fitzgerald (2023) which state that there is a lack of support, guidance and preparation for the whole school, as the NCSE is not providing training in sufficient time for SCT and therefore support for the whole school will ultimately take a back seat as a result of the delay. These findings address research question three, as NCSE training should impact how schools implement inclusion if they receive the training, however, it is necessary that NCSE training is proactive, timely and targeted at the whole staff.

5.4 Management and Inclusion

This research intended to uncover if the special class leads to changes in managing inclusion in schools, the content from both the literature review and the data collection confirms that there is a lack of support for principals and official guidance (Finlay et al. 2019). It is a principal's responsibility to oversee every aspect of inclusion in the school in conjunction with the inclusive practice of all teachers. This research showed that staff were not certain about who guides inclusion, with 50% of participants sharing their responses across all staff, teachers and boards of management. Contradicting Sweeney and Fitzgerald's (2023) finding that a common misconception is it is the special class teachers' responsibility to manage inclusive practices within the school. However, principals are acutely aware of their responsibilities to embed an inclusive culture. McMaster (2014) finding on promoting and 'normalising' inclusion is also evident in this research, as Rural Principal discussed the idea of 'marketing' inclusion to normalise inclusion not just in the school but the wider community.

To manage inclusion, the principal needs to understand, embed and believe in inclusion on a personal note. The literature showed that principals were being incentivised from a financial perspective to open special classes with the promise of becoming administrative principals, boasting greater levels of additional pay for principals. This research rebuts this perspective as both principals felt it was 'the right thing to do' culturally and morally for their school and staff, however, the data shows that it has brought additional and significant workload to already busy principals. These workloads include building a knowledge base on topics outside education, for example, building work, which is beyond their training as principals. Management undertakes many changes when a special class is established, notably, the additional workload and this workload seems to be similar for urban and rural contexts.

5.5 Changes to a school

The ultimate goal of this research was to uncover the changes a school goes through when a special class is established. The research from table 4.7.1 showed that the majority believed the school had undergone major changes since the opening of the special class and table 4.7.2 details how staff suggested these changes presented. The majority of the suggestions across both the survey and interviewee participants were minor changes but important for example, yard changes so children in the special class could play with their peers from their mainstream class, class names for every class in the school and timetable changes to match activities for integration. Other changes were more obvious to the eye such as the physical retrofits to the school, which some were not inclusive. For example, Rural SCT spoke about how the sensory room is located on the other side of a busy general-purpose room, meaning that children in the special class must walk through an over-stimulating area to the calm room, which can be difficult if the child is in distress, which further highlights difference rather than inclusion. The literature presented that funding was given for physical retrofits by the Department of Education, both principals showed that funding was received by their schools however, some of the funding was subject to Department sanctioning of what the funding was to be spent on, but sometimes the sanctioning may not be what is best for inclusion. The changes to a school can be visible and invisible, some changes are necessary and inclusionary whereas others may not be in the best interests of inclusion. It is essential that inclusion cannot be restrained due to financial factors.

5.6 Conclusions

From the literature review, it was clear that changes to a school when a special class was established and whether there was a difference between urban and rural settings was a knowledge gap. This research has addressed this gap and various changes and comparisons have been concluded. The data noted that staff knowledge and reluctance towards the special class was concerning from both schools, all motivated by fear of the unknown as guidance for inclusion is also lacking, concluding that these feelings of reluctance start at the higher governmental leadership level. As a result of these feelings,

some special classes are unintentionally segregated, this is felt by the special class teachers, agreeing with the statement of ‘teaching on an island’.

At a management level, principals need support to understand circulars and be given training in leadership for inclusion. This research has shown that ‘learning by doing’ is common among teaching staff and principals, however, this research also concluded that for the special class to be successful in adding to the inclusive nature of a school, an inclusive culture needs to exist in the school. It was apparent that inclusion needs to be a culture within a school rather than a set of activities during the day, requiring ‘marketing’ from principals to normalise inclusion for the school staff and the wider community.

Finally, this research found that there were no significant differences between the inclusionary practices of schools with special classes in urban and rural contexts. Both schools faced similar issues and reaped similar rewards from the establishment of their special class. Both schools also provided similar recommendations based on their needs, for example, additional assistance in guiding physical retrofit works in their schools.

5.7 Recommendations

This thesis has presented many recommendations based on the research question. These recommendations are represented under three headings; policy and legislation, training and further research.

5.7.1 Policy and Legislation Recommendations

From the discussion above it is clear that for inclusion to be successful and an accepted culture in schools, there is a need for inclusion to be incentivised. For example, reintroducing the qualification allowance for teacher salary scales for teachers who obtain a Master’s degree in areas of Special and Inclusive education.

Another suggestion may be that the Special Class Teacher would become an automatic Assistant Principal Post, be financially compensated and have an official leadership role in inclusion practices in their school.

One recommendation by Rural Principal discussed the idea of appointing a ‘regional clerk’ to act as a middle person between schools, boards of management and the Department of Education building section with the idea of taking that building workload off the principals, especially principals who may not know that area of managing special classes.

5.7.2 Training

This research has presented training needs at various levels. Teacher training colleges need to alter their modules, either adding or lengthening modules based on inclusive practice allowing newly

qualified teachers (NQTs) time to address preconceptions, and worries and allow time to brainstorm ways they can improve their practice to be increasingly inclusive.

The next level of training necessary is the training of principals in what is expected of them in terms of leading and managing a special class. When new guidance is published by NCSE a face-to-face explanation seminar that each principal should attend needs to be established.

Training SCT and the whole staff needs to be an ongoing programme throughout the year. There needs to be more emphasis on training the whole staff to be able to teach a special class, just as training colleges prepare teachers to teach any class level.

5.8 Further Research

There is a clear need for an Irish case study research to be conducted on the before and afters of providing training for inclusion for teachers, special needs assistants and principals.

This research could also be conducted again using a larger sample to include various types of schools such as DEIS schools, Educate Together or Gaelscoileanna.

Another research opportunity could be the trial of appointing a liaison between a cluster of schools and the Department of Education building section, to evaluate if it would be a sustainable solution for the sake of inclusion and financial means.

5.9 Research Limitations

Research limitations are the elements of research that could have been improved or completed with a different method (Bell, 2014). As this research was a case study, the researcher had a close connection to both schools, giving an innate risk of bias for the study. Perhaps completing this case study research on two schools where the researcher does not have employment or connection may generate varying results. Reflecting on the design of the research instrument, some questions may not have needed to be included, for example, it was already established before conducting research that both schools have recently established a special class in the past two years, therefore the question on the questionnaire asking how long has your special class been established may have been unnecessary.

5.10 Summary of Research Work

This research followed the steps set out in Chapter Three methodology. Firstly, the researcher engaged in the pre-research content and webinars, leading to the observation of the researcher's current practice to notice an area of interest or an area of need in the school to be evaluated further. After giving topics of interest some thought, the research topic was decided and a research proposal was submitted to the research supervisor. The researcher then interacted with the current literature on the topic and recorded the main findings in the form of the first draft of chapters one and two. Then the researcher evaluated the various data collection methodologies and chose the most suitable for the

topic. The researcher made the research collection instruments and distributed them within the two chosen schools and conducted the four interviews. The researcher then analysed the data, coded them and presented them in chapter four, then drew comparisons and conclusions in chapter 5.

5.11 Research Journey Reflection

The primary focus of conducting research is to attempt to increase knowledge, understanding and critique of certain topics (Roberts-Holmes, 2018). As with every research, there were many challenges encountered while simultaneously acquiring and honing research skills. The most important skill of research is time management, I dedicated time each week to engage with the research, whether this was reading literature on the research topic, analysing primary data or writing drafts of chapters. I devised a research timeline following my commitments and what was realistic for my work patterns.

From the chosen methodologies, my interpersonal skills were ultimately improved as I had to conduct and lead professional conversations with colleagues and senior members of staff and leadership in the schools. I believe this is transferable to improving inclusive practice as inclusivity requires professional and sometimes tough conversations. However, the quantitative aspect of the research was difficult to have completed and returned.

I like the structure of writing a thesis as it is very prescriptive by nature. As this is my third research in a short time, I believe this research process has further enhanced my skills to be a confident academic researcher. It has taught me to rely on other people, for example, my research supervisor and colleagues who have read my work and provided critique on my writing or data as the more perspectives I receive on my work the better researcher I will become.

Concluding the above, by conducting research into a topic I am passionate about but also very relevant in the current Irish educational landscape I have gained many skills to apply to my everyday practice. It has provided me with the confidence to continue research into this area and apply the findings from this research to my practice and professional development.

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Appendices

Appendix 3.1 Sample Online Participant Questionnaire

2. How long have you been teaching? *

Mark only one oval.

- 1-5 Years
- 6-10 Years
- 11-15 Years
- 16-20 Years
- 20-25 Years
- 26-30 Years
- 30 + Years

3. What is the context of your school? *

Mark only one oval.

- Rural Primary School with Special Class
- Urban Primary School with Special Class

4. What is your role within your school? *

Mark only one oval.

- Mainstream Class Teacher
- Special Class Teacher
- Special Education Teacher
- Principal
- Special Needs Assistant (SNA) / Additional Needs Assistant (ANA)
- Other

5. How long has your school's special class(es) been established? *

Mark only one oval.

- 1 Year
- 2 Years
- 3 Years
- 4 Years
- 5+ Years
- Unknown

6. Do you feel that you fully understand the term 'inclusion'? *

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly Agree
 Agree
 Somewhat
 Disagree
 Strongly Disagree

7. Do you think there was a feeling of 'reluctance' from staff and colleagues when your school was granted a special class? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No
 Maybe
 Not Sure

8. Have you ever received training in the area of inclusion? (in school or individually) *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No
 Not Sure

9. Do you believe you would be equipped and/or confident in supporting children with SEN in a special class context? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No
 Maybe

10. In your opinion, who is responsible for leading inclusion within your school community? *

11. What language / words do you use when you are referring to your special class? *

12. How do the mainstream pupils refer to the special class? What type of descriptions do they give when referring to your special class? *

Appendix 3.2 Sample Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Principal Semi Structured Interview

1. Do you consent to complete and have this interview recorded for research purposes?
2. How long have you been principal of this school?
3. What is the population of this school?
4. How long have you had a special class in this school?
5. How many special classes are in the school? Have you been granted to open another special class that is not currently in operation?
6. Were you an administrative principal before the special class was established?
7. What was the deciding factor in establishing the special class, i.e. was it allocated to you, did you apply etc?
8. Do you think your school was ready for a special class in terms of physical building, staff readiness, pupil readiness, mainstream SEN pressure etc?
9. Do you feel that you are supported adequately by NCSE & Department of Education to meet the needs of the children in the special class?
10. If no, what is the main area your school is struggling with in terms of supporting those in the special class?
11. In your role as principal, you are the leader of inclusion in your school, could you outline the role of the principal in establishing an inclusive culture from a management perspective.
12. What do you feel is the main barrier to inclusive education in your school setting?
13. If you can share, what grants did your school apply for when opening the special class?
14. What would be your main piece of advice to a school principal when establishing a special class?

Special Class Teacher Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a special class teacher?
2. What was your previous teaching role before becoming a special class teacher?
3. What do you think is the major difference between your previous and current role?
4. Did you receive any training before commencing in the special class? Can you give details and your opinion on the training, was it worthwhile what could have been better about it etc.
5. Some recent Irish research has shown that some special class teachers feel they are teaching in what they call an 'island'. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?
6. Do you feel that the staff as a whole are adequately trained in understanding your students and your class?
7. Do you, as the special class teacher, feel 'pressure' to correctly inform and educate your colleagues on inclusion matters?
8. Do you feel you are in a leadership role in terms of overseeing inclusive practices in your school?
9. Do you feel the school was ready for a special class in terms of practicalities for example your special class classroom being fit for purpose etc.
10. What would be your recommendations for your school to improve on in terms of inclusion for the future.
11. What would be your main piece of advice to a school establishing a special class?

Appendix 3.3 Gatekeeper Letter



HIBERNIA
COLLEGE
DUBLIN

Dear Principal,

I am a student of Hibernia College Dublin pursuing a Master of Arts in Inclusive and Special Education. As part of my studies, I am required to conduct a small-scale action research project focusing on inclusion within our schools and the impact of special classes on the whole-school approach to inclusion.

To carry out this study, I would like to request your permission to access certain resources within the school. The research activities involved will include administering a questionnaire to the staff and interviewing your special class teacher(s) and you, in your role as principal.

I assure you that all participants involved in the study will be treated with strict confidentiality and their identities will be protected. The information collected will be used solely for this study and will be securely stored during the research process. No identifying information about the school, teachers, or students will be included in the thesis or any subsequent publications.

Confidentiality and anonymity are of utmost importance, and pseudonyms will be used to ensure the privacy of all participants. The collected data will be securely stored, accessible only to myself and my supervisor (Dr. Ke Ren). Data analysis will be conducted to complete my Master's thesis, and any potential findings may be shared in relevant academic journals.

Thank you for your interest and support in this research. If you have any concerns or require further clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Éimear Byrne - Master of Arts in Inclusive and Special Education Student, Hibernia College Dublin.

Éimear Byrne.

Appendix 3.4 Participant Consent



HIBERNIA
COLLEGE
DUBLIN

Strictly Confidential - Informed Consent Form Interview

Title of Research Study: The effect newly established special classes have on the whole school approach and attitudes towards inclusivity: a comparison of urban and rural schools.

- I have read and understood the accompanying research information sheet for the study: *"The effect newly established special classes have on the whole school approach and attitudes towards inclusivity: a comparison of urban and rural schools"*.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers regarding the study procedures, potential risks and benefits, and data handling.
- I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary.
- I have been informed that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason.
- I consent and understand that my participation in an interview will be recorded by the researcher.
- I understand that my decision to participate or withdraw will not have any negative consequences for my current or future relationships with the researchers or the educational institution.
- I understand that all information collected during the study will be kept confidential.
- I give my consent for the researchers to collect and use my data for research purposes only.
- I understand that my personal information will not be disclosed or identifiable in any publications or reports resulting from this study.
- I acknowledge that all data collected will be stored securely and accessible only to the research team.
- I understand the nature of the study, including the purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits.
- I have been given ample opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers.

By signing this consent form, I confirm that I willingly agree to participate in the study:

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 3.5 Participant Information Sheet



HIBERNIA
COLLEGE
DUBLIN

Research Information Sheet - Survey Participants.

Title of Research Study:

The effect newly established special classes have on the whole school approach and attitudes towards inclusivity: a comparison of urban and rural schools.

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study on the effect newly established special classes have on the whole school approach and attitudes towards inclusivity: a comparison of urban and rural schools. This information sheet will provide essential details about the study to help you make an informed decision about participating. Please read the information carefully and feel free to ask any questions before deciding.

Purpose of the study

This study will research the effect special classes have on the whole approach to inclusion and the changes the school travels through when establishing a special class. There are three main elements;

1. To identify positive and negative factors of opening a special class in a mainstream school from teachers and principals perspective.
2. To investigate teacher's opinions on their understanding of inclusion as a result of the establishment of a special class.
3. To investigate if factors differ between the urban and rural contexts.

Study procedures

If you choose to participate, the study will involve the following procedures:

- Read the participant information sheet to ensure you are informed of what the research entails.
- Complete consent form attached to the survey.
- Complete an anonymous online questionnaire.

Risks and benefits

While participating in this study, there are minimal risks involved. However, some potential benefits include:

- Providing insights into changes schools make to facilitate special classes to assist other schools in opening special classes in the future.
- Provide ideas and reflect on your school's inclusive practice to give ideas and highlight areas of improvement.
- Show if there is a discrepancy in providing inclusive practice through the school's urban or rural setting.
- Analyse if the government support for schools opening special classes is adequate in preparing the whole staff.

Confidentiality and Data Handling

Your participation in this study will be strictly confidential. All data collected will be anonymised and stored securely, accessible only to the researcher. Data will be used for research purposes only. Your personal information will not be disclosed or identifiable in any publications or reports resulting from this study.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason. Your decision to participate or withdraw will not affect any current or future relationships with the researchers or the educational institution.

Contact Information

If you have any questions, or concerns, or would like further information about the study, please contact:

17/03/2024