



Article

Supporting Autistic Pupils in Primary Schools in Ireland: Are Autism Special Classes a Model of Inclusion or Isolation?

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Abstract: Radical transformation of Ireland's special education system has occurred over the past three decades. National and international policy and legislative drivers for a more inclusive approach to education have resulted in greater levels of mainstreaming, with one exception. Provision for autistic children is increasingly provided through special classes: discrete classes attached to mainstream schools. This paper presents findings from a qualitative exploration of the benefits and challenges attributed to autism class provision in mainstream primary schools in Ireland, from the perspective of teachers and school principals. The findings reveal a role for autism special class teachers that is multi-faceted, rewarding, challenging, and directly related to the extent to which the special class is systematically included with whole school policy and practice. The significance of leadership and collaboration in promoting inclusive approaches to autism class provision features strongly in the findings and influences schools' willingness to establish special classes. Micro-exclusion emerged as a theme and is linked to school culture and ethos. Findings contribute unique perspectives of school personnel, and recommendations create awareness of the benefits and challenges associated with autism special class provision and inform future innovation at a time when inclusive policy agendas and practices relating to autism provision arguably contradict each other.

Keywords: autism; special classes; inclusive and special education; primary education; Ireland



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1. Introduction

The prevalence of autism internationally has increased significantly in recent decades, and it is estimated that one in 65 school-age children are autistic in Ireland, which represents a prevalence rate of 1.5 per cent [1–3]. More broadly, the educational landscape for children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) has radically transformed in Ireland in the past three decades [4–6]. Legislative commitments to inclusive education as a right for children with SEN are evidenced in The Education Act 1998, The Education (Welfare) Act 2000, The Equal Status Act 2000, Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 and the Disability Act 2005 [7–11] and are influenced by international declarations such as the Salamanca Statement [12], the Convention on the Rights of the Child [13], and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) [14]. Promotion of inclusive agendas has resulted in an increase in the number of students with SEN in mainstream education while also leading to an increase in the number of special schools and special classes [5]. Historically, and in common with many other European countries, a parallel system of general and special education developed in Ireland and continues today despite government commitment to a more socially responsive and inclusive education system [6,15]. Evidence of 'grafted on' special education [6] is arguably more pronounced with respect to autistic children and young people, with an increase in dedicated provision to support autistic students in mainstream schools, referred to as autism special classes, setting in tension the policy narrative and practice on the ground. For example, the number of special classes in mainstream schools increased from 548 in

2011 to 2118 for the 2021–2022 school year. A further 315 special classes have since been sanctioned, bringing the total number of classes to 2463 in the 2022–2023 school year. This represents an increase of 349% since 2011 [16].

Recognition of the unique characteristics, strengths, and needs of autistic children and young people, and, in particular, the sensory challenges experienced by autistic students is important in addressing their needs, particularly when estimates indicate that 42 per cent to 88 per cent of autistic people encounter challenges related to sensory processing that include both hyper- and hypo-responsiveness [17]. Autism special class provision in Ireland seeks to remove barriers to learning and create physical, learning, and sensory environments that are enabling and supportive of students' needs. However, empirical evidence validating the efficacy of special class provision is limited [15]. With Ireland's recent ratification of United Nations Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities [5,14] and a sustained government commitment to inclusive education, the research reported in this paper sought to explore the benefits and challenges attributed to having autism special classes in primary schools. While small scale, this research captured, through qualitative enquiry, the lived experiences of autism special class teachers, principals, and mainstream class teachers in four primary schools with autism special classes at a time when Ireland's educational reform agenda is considering the future role of special classes and special schools in an inclusive education system [5].

1.1. Ireland's Policy Response to Educational Provision for Autistic Students

The quality of educational provision for autistic children and young people has received considerable attention nationally in the past twenty years. The Report of the Task Force on Autism [18] recommended enhanced resourcing of schools and access to professional learning for all staff involved in the education of autistic students and development of a 'whole school' ethos for supporting autistic students to ensure appropriate and effective response to the needs of autistic students. Subsequently, the Evaluation of ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorders) Provision [19] recommended that social and functional inclusion be prioritised for autistic students and again emphasised the importance of autism-specific professional learning for teaching staff to effectively respond to the different needs of autistic students.

More recently, the Evaluation of Education Provision for Students with ASD in Ireland [20] identified the importance of leadership in the delivery of effective provision and recommended that targeted professional learning be developed to meet this need, alongside professional learning targeted at supporting children with complex needs, especially those accessing learning through autism special classes. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Special Classes in Irish Schools Research Report [21] identified a need for enhanced collaboration between special class teachers and mainstream teachers to support coherence and a schoolwide approach to inclusion for autistic students. Professional learning for whole staff was recommended to develop responsive approaches to education for autistic students to maximise opportunities for inclusion across the school. In 2020, an Evaluation of Educational Provision for Students with ASD in Special Classes Attached to Mainstream Schools [22] emphasised the need for teachers in special classes to avail of professional learning opportunities, rooted within schoolwide collaborative approaches as a means of ensuring consistent delivery of effective teaching supports for autistic students and establishing an inclusive culture. Recommendations for appropriate, autism-specific professional learning opportunities for teachers and whole-school communities are consistently included across reports, underlining the ongoing need in this area.

1.2. Autism Special Class Provision: An Enduring Model of Inclusion or Isolation?

Acknowledging that autistic students will demonstrate unique differences across multiple domains and will learn differently to their neurotypical peers [23] provides a rationale for autism special class provision as an enabling and appropriate educational environment. Mainstream school environments can be particularly challenging for autistic children and

young people. Challenges with social communication, sensory hypo/hypersensitivity, and additional learning needs positions autistic students at greater risk of developing mental health problems [24]. The mainstream school environment is often noisy, busy, and requires multiple social interactions and engagement with a demanding academic curriculum [25]. Creating and identifying a learning environment for autistic students—where they can feel calm, safe, secure, develop positive relationships, engage with learning in an adapted way that recognises their unique strengths and needs, and allows for sensory regulation—is considered essential to enhanced student and life outcomes [26]. Deciding on the optimum placement for autistic students is not straightforward, as autistic learner profiles are unique to the individuals, and placement decisions are often informed by multiple factors like parental considerations, localised placement options, and professional advice and support received by parents during the decision-making process [26]. However, in the context of CRPD, special classes have perhaps become the ‘crux of the inclusion debate’ [15] when children and young people with disabilities are isolated from their non-disabled peers for long periods of time.

Students accessing autism special classes in Ireland must have a diagnosis of autism but may have other co-morbid needs. While other categories of special classes exist in Ireland, for example, Speech, Language, and Communication Needs, Intellectual Disabilities, and Emotional and Behavioural needs, placement in the autism special class must be recommended in an assessment report by an external professional such as an Educational Psychologist. These classes exist as part of a continuum of provision that ranges from education in mainstream classrooms with access to additional support from a Special Education Teacher (SET) and/or Special Needs Assistant (SNA) to being educated fulltime in a special school. Autism special classes offer specialist teaching and adapted curricular options and apply a flexible structure like special schools [27]. Special class provision has the potential to offer autistic students and their families the opportunity to attend mainstream education alongside their neurotypical peers and siblings while also accommodating their unique needs [25]. However, no research on their efficacy and impact on student outcomes exists in the Irish context [15]. Furthermore, while the aim of a continuum of provision is to allow for a flexible and responsive approach to education that can assess, intervene, and review in a cycle to support students in the environment deemed most appropriate to meet the needs of the child [28–30], in practice, the continuum is fractured, with evidential ‘serious systematic shortcomings’ [31] (p. 2). A confounding feature of this fractured continuum is the discrete funding allocation model for special class provision [15]. Similar provisions for students with SEN exist across jurisdictions as reported in a recent study of seven European countries [32]. Furthermore, special classes exist across 25 out of 27 European countries and are on the increase [32].

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education’s (EASNIE’s) operational definition of inclusion considers mainstream schools to be inclusive if students are educated alongside their non-disabled peers for at least 80 per cent of the time, allowing for 20 per cent placement in specialist provision or special classes [32]. It is difficult, therefore, to identify whether special classes are inclusive in the Irish context, as no centralised data exist as to students’ access to mainstream class teaching. However, a recent report from the Inspectorate [22] found that the reluctance of some schools to open autism classes risks increased segregation. Findings from the Report are based on inspections in 85 special classes across primary and post-primary schools and point to restrictive enrolment practices where placements are prioritised for autistic children with less complex needs to the exclusion of autistic children with more complex and/or co-morbid needs. This means that some students are enrolled in special classes when they may be capable of greater inclusion in mainstream classes. If enrolment in mainstream schools is regarded as the benchmark for successful inclusion for learners in special classes, the unintended consequence is greater levels of segregation and lower levels of inclusion. Without any centralised data on the amount of time autistic students spend in mainstream classes alongside their peers, it is impossible to consider whether the existing special class model is inclusive. With increasing

demands being made for the opening of new special classes for autistic students as distinct from other types of special classes, and the reported reluctance of some school authorities to open these special classes, there is a danger that segregated educational provision could expand unintentionally [22].

In Ireland, while the NCSE provides training and professional learning to teachers and schools and has published practical and operational toolkits and resources to support teachers and schools with autism classes, limited policy guidance mapping the strategic development of autism classes within the wider education system exists despite the rapid and substantial increase in autism classes nationally [15,21]. The infrastructure within the wider ecological school system has failed to keep pace with this expansion, resulting in a sense of struggle in schools [33–35].

Against this political and empirical backdrop, research focused on the lived experiences of teachers and school leaders working in schools with autism special classes is timely in the Irish context, and this research asked the following question:

1. What are the benefits of and challenges attributed to having an autism class in mainstream primary schools?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Qualitative Research

Adopting an interpretivist stance, the study explored the perspectives of teachers and principals working in primary schools with autism special classes. The lack of previous research on the topic warranted an exploratory qualitative research approach [36,37]. Semi-structured interviews provide ‘an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project. ...in a real life context’ [37]. This study took place in four schools and aimed to capture the lived experiences of principals, autism special class teachers, and mainstream class teachers in their contexts and, as such, offered insight at a snapshot in time of the benefits of and challenges attributed to having autism special classes in their schools. It sought depth and nuance over breadth [38].

2.2. Sem-Structured Interviews

Following ethical approval from Mary Immaculate College Research Committee in January 2019 [MIC-01.09.2019], the principal investigator (E.S.) conducted 12 semi-structured interviews, as saturation was reached at this point, and there was overwhelming consistency across participants in their reported experiences. The study was not concerned with extracting data from participants but rather sought to develop a shared understanding of autism special class provision, particularly when the principal investigator (E.S.) was also an autism special class teacher. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in participants’ schools and were audio recorded with a digital voice recorder for verbatim transcription later. The interviews facilitated in-depth exploration of findings emerging from the literature review, which informed the design of the interview schedule while also providing flexibility and scope for discussion of topics emerging from the research [38]. Key themes emerging from the literature review, which influenced the design of the interview schedules included the importance of a whole-school approach to special class provision; recognition of the individual needs of autistic students and the implications for teachers’ professional learning; challenges in defining autism special class provision as a model of inclusive education; and subsequent implications for policy and practice.

To ensure the efficacy of data collection and to increase awareness of the strategy, piloting of interview schedules was undertaken [39]. Two pilot interviews with primary school principals provided useful feedback and enabled the development of a more coherent approach to questioning. Alterations were made following initial piloting, as there was a distinct lack of warm-up questions, and the interviews were too structured. Additional warm up questions were added to the interview schedule and included questions like ‘How long have you been teaching?’, ‘How long have you been teaching/working as principal in this school?’, and ‘What was your role before you became a principal?’. The

revised interview schedule was piloted again, which led to a reduction in questions and facilitated a more conversational approach to interviews, guided by overarching topics for discussion [39]. Following the second pilot interview, feedback indicated that some questions were leading. For example, a pre-pilot question asked, ‘Do you believe there was a lack of support when your school initially opened an autism special class?’. This was replaced with ‘To what extent did you feel supported when you established the autism special class?’.

To obtain a more nuanced understanding of autism special class provision in schools, the multi-perspectival approach to data collection, facilitated by semi-structured interviews with autism special class teachers, mainstream class teachers, and principals of primary schools with autism special classes captured varied experiences that enhanced the overall credibility, trustworthiness, and transferability of findings [40,41].

2.3. Sampling

Purposive sampling techniques were employed. It was important to identify participants who were experienced in teaching autistic students [42,43]. The principal investigator (E.S.) identified schools from a publicly accessible NCSE database of schools which have autism special classes. Initially, a recruitment letter was sent to principals of schools, inviting them and their teachers to partake in the study. When schools responded positively and showed interest in participating in the research, Individual Recruitment Letters, Participant Information Sheets, and Informed Consent Forms were sent to the candidates prior to arranging any meeting.

Four primary schools with autism special classes participated in the study, and pseudonyms were applied to the schools and participants to preserve anonymity [44]. None of the schools were involved in the delivering equality of opportunity in schools initiative (DEIS) (schools with disproportionality higher numbers of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds). These four schools had different profiles and comprised both urban schools and schools in more rural areas with varied numbers of students in each, as displayed in Figure 1.













Red School 	Non-Deis Urban  24 Teachers	Mixed  418 pupils
Green School 	Non-Deis Rural  18 Teachers	Mixed  264 pupils
Yellow School 	Non-Deis Urban  13 Teachers	Mixed  128 pupils
Blue School 	Non-Deis Rural  14 Teachers	Mixed  169 pupils

Figure 1. Profile of Participating Schools.

Participants included primary school principals ($n = 4$), autism class teachers ($n = 4$), and mainstream class teachers ($n = 4$) where partial inclusion of children attending the autism special class was occurring, as outlined in Table 1. In Ireland, principals in small primary schools teach, whereas those in larger schools hold administrative roles only. The

four principals in this study held administrative roles only. While the study was small-scale, the sample allowed for a variety of school contexts in the south-west of Ireland. Participants were interviewed in their schools and the conversational nature of the interviews captured insightful and personal narratives of everyday school experiences. All interviews were audio recorded using a digital voice recorder and later transcribed verbatim by the principal investigator (E.S.).

Table 1. Profile of Participants.

School Pseudonym	Teacher	Gender	School Area	School Type	Number of Teachers	Teacher Classification	Teacher Code
Red School	Principal 1	Male	Urban	Co-educational	24	Administrative	P1
Green School	Principal 2	Male	Rural	Co-educational	18	Administrative	P2
Yellow School	Principal 3	Female	Urban	Co-educational	13	Administrative	P3
Blue School	Principal 4	Female	Rural	Co-educational	14	Administrative	P4
Red School	Mainstream Teacher 1	Female	Urban	Co-educational	24	Mainstream-infants	M1
Green School	Mainstream Teacher 2	Female	Rural	Co-educational	18	Mainstream-1st and 2nd	M2
Yellow School	Mainstream Teacher 3	Female	Urban	Co-educational	13	Mainstream-infants	M3
Blue School	Mainstream Teacher 4	Female	Rural	Co-educational	14	Mainstream-3rd and 4th	M4
Red School	Autism Class Teacher 1	Female	Urban	Co-educational	24	Autism class (3–12 years)	ACT1
Green School	Autism Class Teacher 2	Female	Rural	Co-educational	18	Junior Autism Class	ACT2
Yellow School	Autism Class Teacher 3	Female	Urban	Co-educational	13	Middle Autism Class	ACT3
Blue School	Autism Class Teacher 4	Male	Rural	Co-educational	14	Senior Autism Class	ACT4

2.4. Data Analysis

Following data collection, all audio-recorded data were transcribed into a word document, which was then printed. Transcription involved a change in medium that raised issues relating to accuracy, fidelity, and interpretation of data [44]. To mitigate issues and facilitate closer engagement with data, the principal investigator (E.S.) transcribed all interviews and revisited audio recordings in concert with printed transcripts during the process of coding, categorising, thematising, and synthesising. Manual transcriptions, together with a process of thematic coding, also provided an audit trail [45].

To generate coherent, useful findings, data were analysed by the principal investigator in a structured and systematic manner [45,46] using a six-step thematic analysis framework (Figure 2) [47]. Familiarisation with the data was facilitated from the outset through conducting and transcribing the interviews verbatim, generating initial codes, grouping codes, and categorising data [47]. Following a process of data reduction, both researchers (E.S., J.F.) discussed emergent themes and sub-themes that were data driven and theory informed from the literature review. The principal investigator also kept a reflexive journal that allowed for management of potential bias and challenged favoured lines of inquiry [48]. Triangulation of data from across and within each school also added credibility and trustworthiness to the findings [46,48,49].

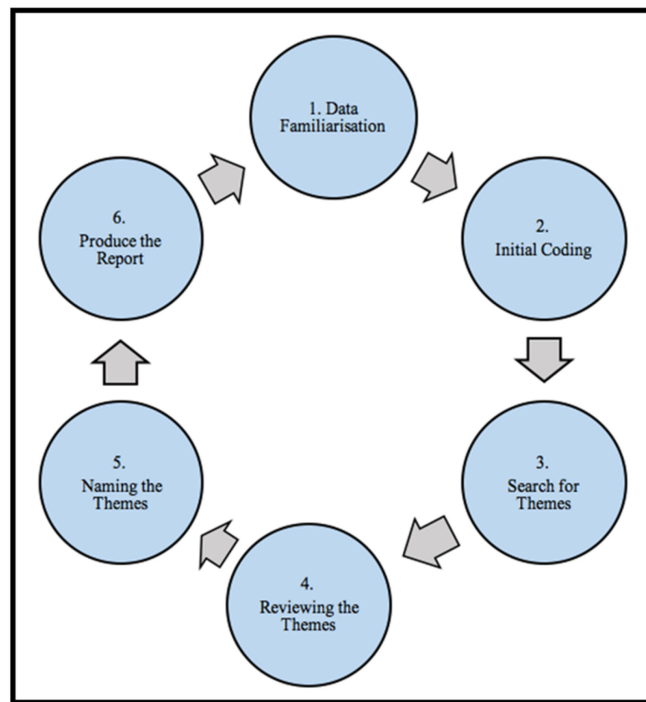


Figure 2. Braun and Clarke Phases of Thematic Analysis Framework, adapted from [47] (p. 87).

This analytical and transparent process ultimately produced the findings from this research. While the themes and subthemes derived from the initial codes varied, the underpinning feature centred on the place of the autism class in the wider school context. Most of the initial codes (Figure 3 example) depicted feelings of responsibility by the autism class teacher to ensure that their students were treated as valued member of the school community, coupled with a sense of helplessness in the face of the resistance and hesitation from colleagues in mainstream classes.

<p>I: I suppose, on the other hand, do you think that there were any challenges associated with opening ASD classes in your school.</p> <p>P: I've never been involved in opening an ASD class as I've always worked in classes that have been set up with a few years but one issue that I've seen raised in every school I've worked in has been staffing considerations. Some teachers who have worked in the school for many years would not see themselves as special class teachers. Having joined the school as a special class teacher I'm sure many see – well they see me as just that a special class teacher even though I have worked just as much in a mainstream class teacher before joining this school. It is a challenge that I see could become a contentious issue down the line in a school if and when teachers from the special classes would like a change. Another challenge that I know was an issue in both school that I worked in was creating space for an ASD class. In my first school, the ASD class was in a prefab while they waited for an extension to be built for their classroom. They were waiting at least 3 years for their new build to be completed. The same happened in this school also. Even though now, we have a fantastic building, actually probably one of the best in the country, while waiting for the build to be finished two ASD classes were in one room for the majority of a school year.</p>	<p>Emma Nic Suibhne Staffing Considerations</p> <p>Emma Nic Suibhne Staff resistance</p> <p>Emma Nic Suibhne Seen as a special class teacher</p> <p>Emma Nic Suibhne Potential issue when ASD staff want to change</p> <p>Emma Nic Suibhne Two classes in one – waiting for a new build.</p>
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Figure 3. Initial coding excerpt. Note: Emma Nic Suibhne is the name of the first author in Irish.

Codes across interviews were categorised, and emergent themes developed (Figure 4). Samples of initial codes included: isolation, language used around the classes, lack of preparation in initial teacher education, distributed leadership, micro-exclusion, managing perceptions, feeling forgotten, collaboration with staff, changing staff outlook, and separate entity and staff resistance. Then, using colour coding, codes were grouped into themes as seen below. The yellow code denotes the initial reluctance of staff to establish a class in their schools and similarly the green suggests that these classes are viewed differently. The blue highlight is suggestive of the vast amount of support and guidance necessary at the outset when establishing an autism special class.

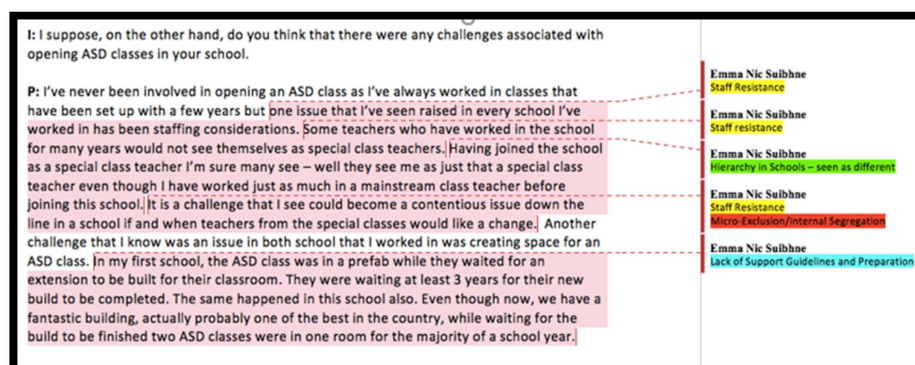


Figure 4. Emergent themes excerpt.

Codes and emergent themes were analysed and grouped into four themes outlined below.

2.5. Trustworthiness of the Findings

Data triangulation in the research was facilitated by capturing multiple perspectives of the same topic and allowed the researchers to ‘search for convergence’ in the data collected [49] (p. 126). The principal investigator, who was also an autism special class teacher at the time, engaged in reflective journaling throughout the research process. The journal served as a bias tracker to enable researcher self-awareness throughout [50].

Negative case analysis [51] was used to challenge potential favoured lines of enquiry, and both researchers looked for disconfirming evidence in the data, all of which encouraged researcher reflexivity [51] and enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Finally, an electronic database was compiled that preserved and presented data in an accessible and transparent format that provided a chain of evidence from which other researchers could review and determine for themselves if the findings are credible [52].

3. Findings

The insights and personal accounts of the teachers and principals captured in the findings provide an authentic perspective of the reality of having special classes for autistic children in mainstream primary schools. Three key themes emerged from the data, as they related to the research question:

1. What are the benefits of and challenges attributed to having an autism special class in mainstream schools?

These themes are:

- School leadership is critical to support a collaborative schoolwide approach to inclusion of the autism special class, but principals need support to lead.
- Access to high-quality, autism-specific professional learning promotes learning for autistic students.
- Autism special classes represent models of integration rather than inclusion in Irish primary schools.

3.1. School Leadership Is Critical to Support a Collaborative Schoolwide Approach to Inclusion of the Autism Special Class, but School Leaders Need Support to Lead

The data revealed that leadership was crucial to the running of the classes, and principals were influential in developing collaborative, schoolwide approaches to inclusive education, as indicated by one special class teacher when they said ‘their support makes a difference’ (ACT 4). Similarly, it was clear that principals needed to be both ‘flexible and supportive’ (ACT 1), as the special class brought unique challenges for the entire school community. Principals revealed that there were various implications for schools opening autism special classes that consumed substantial time and required new knowledge about autism and establishment and management of autism classes. Having adequate time to

address these factors impacted on their ability to lead, as it was a ‘learning curve’ (P1 and P3) and ‘everything has to be planned for’ (P4).

Despite their critical role in promoting and establishing special classes, principals unanimously shared a sense of despair about the perceived lack of support available when establishing the classes. Challenges in sourcing guidance and support about initial set up of the special class, appointing suitably qualified staff, and implementing models of good practice for children accessing the special class were reported by principals, who spent significant time sourcing the relevant support, as ‘nobody is going to come and volunteer’ (P3) the information once a school decides to establish a class. This sense of floundering permeated through the whole school community with teachers citing a ‘lack of training’ (M1) and a sense of ‘questioning if any of us had the expertise, knowledge or experience’ (M4) to respond to the needs of children in the special class. Regardless of the perceived lacuna in support for schools, all twelve participants were overwhelmingly positive about having the special classes in schools, as indicated by one of the principals:

‘if the Department [of Education] want to continue to present this model and I think that it’s a very good model, I think that they should spend much more time educating staff, giving greater guidance to management regarding specifications of rooms... and upskilling the staff as a whole on how to deal generally with children with autism because I don’t think that is being done’.

(P2)

Most participants indicated that autism special class teachers needed to be ‘knowledgeable about the brief’ (P2); however, data suggest the initial preparation is somewhat lacking, and ‘it’s certainly not, as I said, what we were trained in’ (P4). Opportunities to engage with professional learning and collaboration were also reported as pivotal factors to support the special class provision, and, for the whole staff, collective professional learning was emphasised as critical to support inclusion of the special class across the school.

While leading development of special classes can be challenging for principals, especially in the early stages, a benefit reported by all schools included the opportunity it provided to teaching principals to become administrative principals (P4), perhaps reflecting the level of administration required to manage special classes in schools. Others, especially in rural schools, detailed the importance of the special classes in maintaining enrolment numbers and securing contracts for teachers. The additional and discrete capitation grant awarded to schools with special classes was also mentioned as a benefit. In some schools, it was ‘sold as being a way of keeping jobs for teachers’ (P3), with the added benefit of the introduction of an administrative principal.

3.2. Access to High-Quality, Autism-Specific Professional Learning Promotes Learning for Autistic Students

Teacher professional learning (TPL) was identified as fundamental to positively influencing autism special class provision in schools and its role in raising whole-staff awareness and inclusion of the special class across the school. All principals identified whole-staff TPL as a means for staff to ‘equip themselves’ (P1) and ‘develop awareness around the whole area of autism’ (P2), but they were quick to identify the shortcomings in the system, with one principal contesting that expecting ‘every teacher is going to be ready to go into the ASD classes after one day is a bit crazy’ (P3).

While TPL was identified as critical to support inclusion of autistic students, data revealed a lack of awareness and knowledge of autism in some adults and teachers and a resistance or inability to learn about or enter the world of autism. The mainstream teachers explained that ‘I try my best with the lads who integrate’ (M4), it is ‘basically learn as you go’ (M2), and ‘every year I’m learning more you know?’ (M3).

All four principals had independently organised autism-specific teacher professional learning (TPL) for their staff, largely based on the ‘insufficient’ (P2) level of support available to them. Teachers reflected on the importance of principals enabling access to TPL, encouraging teachers to partake in ‘whatever courses we feel we need’ (ACT 1) and

supporting staff to the avail of autism-specific training (ACT 2). TPL as a mechanism to support positive development in an autism special class was universally endorsed by all participants in the research. However, barriers to accessing TPL were identified (P3), and, as reported by one principal, teachers ‘would avail of more courses if we had a better structure’ (P2). This systemic issue was consistent with teachers’ experiences, who expressed their desire to ‘be a little bit more prepared’ (ACT 4) and to undertake TPL in the summer months prior to teaching in the autism special class (ACT 1 and 4).

3.3. Autism Special Classes Represent a Model of Integration Rather Than Inclusion in Irish Primary Schools

This research found that having an autism special class in a school heightened awareness and understanding of autism amongst peers, teachers, and the wider school community. All participants spoke of increased positive peer understanding and awareness as the greatest achievement of having autism classes in their schools. The opportunity for all children to ‘feel accepted’ (P1) and understand that ‘people can be different to them’ (ACT 4) really opened up all ‘eyes to the world of inclusion’ (P4) was reflected by one of the teachers, who revealed that her pupils were ‘no different to anyone else which is good’ (ACT 2). Additionally, when autistic students learn with their non-autistic peers, it allows peers to look beyond the label of autism and recognise the children for the ‘enormous amounts of strength’ (P2) they have. One teacher shared her experiences from teaching in schools with and without autism classes and offered compelling insights into the differences they noted in pupils who could interact with autistic peers in special classes, stating ‘kids develop qualities that they wouldn’t be taught in school’ (M1).

Despite these benefits, all participants spoke of attitudinal barriers and reluctance from some school staff to the establishment of the classes. Resistance to special classes was perhaps driven by a fear that teachers would be placed in the class (ACT 3), which could be ‘daunting’ (M3). According to one of the mainstream teachers interviewed, some teachers may not be ‘on board’ with the special class provision or inclusion of autistic students in some of the mainstream lessons, as this could cause ‘a rift’ (M2). One principal divulged that some staff members were apprehensive about collaborating with autism class teachers and to teaching the children because ‘they see their, you know, behaviours as some kind of a sign that they’re very difficult to manage’ (P3). Both autism special class teachers and mainstream teachers referenced positive and negative experiences of collaboration in school to facilitate the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream classes, but all eight of them advocated for greater levels of collaboration in schools, as limited inclusion of students occurred.

The language used by participants when discussing autism special classes is perhaps indicative of integration rather than inclusion. Historically, special classes were referred to as ‘units’ when policy was initially developed. The language of ‘units’ persists as a reminder of a medicalised approach to understanding disability, especially with principals and mainstream teachers interviewed. The use of prepositions by the autism special class teachers was interesting and perhaps reflected a separation or disconnect from the mainstream school. Phrases like ‘going up’ to mainstream classes for inclusion or referencing the special class as ‘down there’ or ‘below’ suggests a discrete and locational form of inclusion (integration?). One principal attempted to amend his explicit language use around the special class when they said:

‘even though we shouldn’t be using the word unit [...] even though Emma if you call it another name it still comes back’.

(P1)

Other features of this language around autism special classes were subtler. Words such as ‘below’ and ‘down there’ appeared frequently throughout the interviews, which, when coupled with phrases such as ‘the rooms’ and ‘these children’, engendered ‘othering’. Terms like ‘isolated’, ‘forgotten’ ‘rift’, and ‘divide’ were used by participants, suggestive of duality in the system, whereby the special class was considered ‘separate’ (ACT 2 and 3) to

the mainstream school. Despite awareness of a need for greater levels of inclusion between the mainstream classes and the autism classes, and efforts to develop systems promoting such an approach, special class teachers' language reflected their sense of disconnect from the school with phrases like 'go up to integrate' (ACT 3) and 'send him up' (ACT 4). No schools had centralised data on the amount of time children accessing the autism special classes spent in mainstream classrooms but did indicate that some students did have scheduled, infrequent lessons in mainstream.

None of the four participating schools in this research had an operational inclusion policy at the time of interviews, and it seemed that the autism special class teacher bore the responsibility for introducing and managing this system. Principals and mainstream teachers interviewed believed that it was the autism class teacher's duty to help colleagues embrace the autism class in the school and champion greater positivity about it. According to one principal, autism class teachers need to 'give that positivity to the staff as well because you don't want people to think it's somewhere you don't want' (P1) and to 'try to get the children and teachers to look at the classes as just two extra classes in our school' (ACT 2). Another principal believed that it was the responsibility of the autism class teacher to speak about the 'heart-warming stories or the good progress stories' rather than highlighting the challenges. The autism class teachers admitted to 'struggling' (ACT 3) in school. They felt isolated and of lesser value in the staff, as illustrated by ACT2, when they said, 'I will not tell a lie, it is very difficult'.

Micro-exclusion seemed to be experienced across the four schools. Conceding that it was not 'intentional' (M2), the autism classes were 'forgotten', and the mainstream teacher cohort 'forgets' to include students at times (ACT 1, 2, 3 and 4). Consequently, autism class teachers felt that 'our children have been left out' (ACT 3), and both staff and children were left feeling 'isolated' (ACT 2). The autism classes were considered 'a separate entity to the rest of the school' (ACT 3). While the imagery of 'a little family in here' (ACT 4) is suggestive of a safe, secure and well-structured environment that is perhaps conducive to learning for autistic students, does it constitute inclusive education?

Participants considered how collaborative practice could be developed in schools, with fostering of positive relationships being 'paramount' to collaboration (P2). Notably, one mainstream teacher was of the view that positive relationships were influenced by the extent to which the special class teacher was proactive in engaging with others (M4). The importance of leadership was highlighted in facilitating collaborative practice, as there was a distinct need for 'proper systems' (M3) to enable collaboration.

In summary, despite positive attitudes towards inclusive education and the benefits to all diverse student populations, a perceived lack of support, guidance, and timely TPL for schools and autism class teachers were evident in the data. Furthermore, developing greater levels of inclusive schoolwide practice presented challenges to schools, which represented integration of autism special classes at best, and isolation in some cases. Autism class teachers admitted to struggling with the lack of a supportive infrastructure around them. Although considered the experts in their field in their own schools, they conveyed low levels of teacher self-efficacy and limited confidence in their capacity to meet all the needs of autistic students. Autism class teachers are in the minority in most schools, sometimes on their own, and data from all four autism class teachers in this study revealed that they can feel quite isolated, alone, and overwhelmed. Data identified the importance of leadership at all levels of the school to facilitate a schoolwide collaborative approach to the special class provision. Where this was lacking in schools, it emerged that teachers felt limited in their ability to fulfil their roles effectively and felt more isolated in their roles.

4. Discussion

Autism special class provision in the Irish context is evolving and expanding, despite concerns about its conceptualisation as inclusive education [21]. Developed as a model to create environments in mainstream schools capable of replicating a special school environment in many regards, with bespoke curricular options, flexible timetables, and

sensory and environmental accommodations for enabling autistic students [25,32], they have become a topic of heated debate amongst key stakeholders in Ireland [15]. In the research reported here, identified benefits of and challenges attributed to autism special class provision provide evidence of a system that is not sustainable for autism class teachers and raises concerns about the extent to which the model constitutes inclusive education.

Findings identify a lack of support, guidance, and preparation for the role of autism class teachers, principals, and mainstream teachers [21] coupled with the tensions inherent in developing autism special class provision as a model of inclusive practice across an integrated continuum of support [29]. The challenges reported by autism class teachers, and the sense of isolation conveyed, reflected experiences of teachers working in special education across jurisdictions [34,35]. Although considered the experts in their field in their schools, autism class teachers described shortcomings in their confidence levels that negatively impacted their teacher efficacy. For more than twenty years, successive government commissioned reports and research have emphasised the importance of autism-specific teachers' professional learning and development of schoolwide collaborative practices to ensure effective learning opportunities for autistic students [18–21]. Despite increased resourcing to schools from the NCSE to support the inclusion of autistic students [16], and developments in teacher education, participants reported poor access to TPL and micro-exclusion.

Autism special class teachers represent a minority in most schools, sometimes teaching on their own with SNAs, with limited opportunities for collaborative practice with mainstream teachers. If we adopt a definition of inclusive education as one where children and young people are educated alongside their non-autistic peers in mainstream classrooms [32], this research cannot define autism special class provision as a model of inclusive education, when participants were unable to quantify the time autistic students spend in mainstream classrooms. Furthermore, no centralised database exists in Ireland to track students accessing autism special classes and the time spent in mainstream.

To successfully facilitate inclusion of autism special classes within mainstream schools, there are many implications for schools [21,30,34], and effective principal leadership is vital to develop a schoolwide collaborative approach [34,35]. Sustained support and professional learning for principals is necessary to enable them to lead a systematic schoolwide approach to inclusive provision for autistic students [20–22]. Systematic and formalised approaches to collaborative practice in schools are recommended [52,53], as when it is conducted in an informal manner, the capacity to effect change is greatly reduced [20]. Increased collaboration between mainstream and autism special class teachers also reduces feelings of isolation in special classes [21] and may support retention and recruitment in special classes. Joint teaching practice, using models like co-teaching partnerships or peer observation of teaching may support situated professional learning for all teachers and build school capacity to meet diverse needs across the school [34,35]. Further consolidation of systematic collaboration is critical to promoting inclusive, schoolwide approaches to learning, teaching, and assessment for all students and may support greater levels of inclusion in schools [52] and reduce some of the isolation experienced by autism special class teachers in this study.

This research identified benefits to opening autism special classes in mainstream primary schools. In addition to enabling autistic children to attend their local schools alongside their peers and siblings [25], increased awareness and understanding of autism amongst peers, teachers, and the wider school community were identified as important benefits that enhanced learning for the entire school community and an enriched environment. Peer awareness can improve [54] and result in empathetic, aware, and considerate peers. Stories reported by participants indicated that children in schools with autism special classes possessed qualities that children in schools without these classes did not seem to display. Awareness in adults, however, was reported on more negatively. Both literature and the data identify a lack of awareness and knowledge in some adults and teachers and an unwillingness to learn or enter the world of autism [20].

Participants reported on benefits of having autism special classes to the wider school community. Moving from a teaching to administrative principal role was reported by one principal in this study as a key benefit. Others detailed the importance of the special classes for maintaining teachers and enrolment numbers. The substantial capitation grants for resourcing special classes were positively reported on. While the motivation to establish autism classes in mainstream schools is perhaps questionable, it may be symptomatic of wider systemic level challenges in relation to teaching principals struggling to balance teaching with increasingly administrative work and in their efforts to retain teachers and reduce class sizes.

The challenges identified included the lack of support, guidance, TPL, funding, policy, and an appropriate accessible curriculum. Autism special class provision aims to support flexible and inclusive provision in schools, but ‘serious systematic shortcomings’ are evident [30], which, arguably, engender greater levels of segregation and limit outcomes for students with autism [22]. Recent policy developments across initial teacher education [55] and in-service teacher professional learning to build teacher capacity for inclusive education and to also build inclusive leadership across the education system should stimulate greater cohesion and continuity of approach for all students in schools. Furthermore, imminent policy advice from the NCSE on the future development of special education in an inclusive education system could provide a framework to build the collaborative and connected whole-system response necessary to provide equitable and meaningful access and engagement to learning for students with diverse needs.

5. Limitations

This research explored the perspectives of a small sample of principals, autism class teachers, and mainstream teachers experiencing a relatively recent phenomenon in the Irish educational landscape—autism special classes in mainstream schools; therefore, generalisability of findings is limited [56]. Nonetheless, it may offer transferability to others working in similar contexts [56]. A focus on the benefits of and challenges attributed to having autism special classes within each school, from multiple perspectives, allowed for a nuanced and rich portrayal of the experiences of those involved in the delivery and leadership of autism special class provision. However, the lack of parent/caregiver input and the student voice is acknowledged as a limitation, and the experiences reported by participants in this research do not represent the views of autistic students and their families. In the limited research reported elsewhere, autistic students and their caregivers report positive experiences and opportunities to access learning alongside their peers and siblings [25,26]. Further research with autistic children, young people, and their caregivers is essential to optimise opportunities for effective learning and inclusion. Finally, since the collection of data for this research, the Department of Education (Ireland) published Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools—Supporting Children and Young People (2022) which is designed as a school resource to help support the wellbeing, learning, and participation of autistic children and young people in education. [57]. The guidance aims to assist school staff to understand the varied nature of students’ strengths and needs, as well as to identify whole-school and individualised approaches to supports for autistic students. These guidelines may mitigate some of the challenges that were identified in this research that include lack of support and guidance for teachers.

6. Conclusions

This research has implications for future policy, practice, and research relating to inclusive education for autistic children and young people.

The ‘grafted on’ approach to special education in Ireland described in the literature [4] was reported on in the current study. The conceptualisation of the autism class as a place or unit ‘down there’ reinforced the isolation felt by autism class teachers and created a barrier to inclusion with the mainstream school. It calls into question the sustainability of such an approach and the implications for teacher recruitment and retention in autism special

classes. Furthermore, no statistics exist for the time autistic students spend in the autism special classes and in mainstream classrooms. A centralised system using existing school data systems could potentially allow schools to capture this data and support analysis of national practices and trends in autism class provision. Recent policy developments relating to the future of special education, combined with developments in ITE, are timely and hold promise in responding to some of the challenges identified in this research.

While autism classes are situated in mainstream schools, it was clear at times that they felt and operated as a separate entity within the schools. Schools need direction and support to embed the special class within the school and to engage in environmental and sensory auditing across the entire school campus to enable greater levels of inclusion in mainstream classrooms for autistic students. Considerations around suitability of children to mainstream contexts could be addressed in policy so that all children attending these settings can have their individual needs met and participate meaningfully in schoolwide learning, even for limited amounts of time. If an autistic student accessing the autism special class is unable to integrate in any capacity in mainstream classrooms alongside their peers, two questions arise: Firstly, is a mainstream school the ideal setting for this child? Secondly, what can the school do to create a schoolwide environment which reduces barriers to learning for autistic students? Research with autistic and non-autistic children, young people, and their teachers to identify contextually specific approaches to creating optimum environments for autistic students as included members of the entire school community could isolate what works to promote inclusive education for all. Another factor to consider is the location of autism special classes. In all the schools in this study, the classes were immediately segregated from the rest of the school.

Schools have some autonomy to change their practices albeit on a micro-level. Leadership, identified as a powerful enabler of inclusive special class provision and support for autism class teachers, needs sustained support to promote schoolwide change. While an evaluation of autism provision in Ireland was conducted in 2014 [20], which identified the professional support needs of school leaders in establishing and leading autism special class provision, the landscape has evolved considerably since then. Further research examining the professional learning and support implications of special class provision for school leaders and teachers tasked with leading and coordinating special education and/or special class provision could ameliorate some of the challenges identified in this study in attempting to embed the special class within the school.

Language used when discussing autism special classes is a feature that can influence attitudes and practices in schools. To avoid the 'othering' of special classes, schools could apply existing, standardised class naming protocols to the special class.

Access to timely TPL in advance of opening the autism class was identified as a challenge by all participants. Autism class teachers reported feeling ill-prepared and unknowledgeable, which negatively impacted their teacher self-efficacy and confidence and thus compounded their feelings of isolation. There are implications for providers of TPL. Access to professional learning networks or cluster support groups for autism class teachers could provide a platform for shared experiences and learning and, ultimately, decrease the levels of isolation for autism class teachers [21]. Furthermore, both discrete and permeated approaches to delivery of initial teacher education (ITE) for inclusive education are essential to prepare initial teachers for teaching in diverse classrooms. The current review of initial teacher education programmes, as directed by The Teaching Council's *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* [55], where inclusive education is identified as a core element to programme revisioning, should develop, over time, an ITE approach that equips newly qualified teachers with sufficient skills, knowledge, and competencies to respond to increasing diversity in schools.

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