Article

Exploring the Attitudes of School Staff towards the Role of Autism Classes in Inclusive Education for Autistic Students: A Qualitative Study in Irish Primary Schools

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Abstract: The use of the designated special class model for autistic pupils in mainstream schools within the Irish education system has dramatically increased in recent years, as has the scrutiny regarding its alignment with increased policy focus on inclusive education. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to explore the views of twelve staff members, four special class teachers, four mainstream class teachers, and four principals of primary schools with special classes regarding the role of the special class model in supporting educational inclusion for autistic pupils. Results showed that participants felt specialist provision was an important aspect of appropriate provision for autistic pupils in Irish mainstream primary schools. Findings highlight the need for a tailored, child-centred approach to inclusion, given the challenges of mainstream class environments, with participants advocating for the safe space and support system of the special class for autistic pupils. Participants also identified challenges to inclusion, such as a lack of specialist training or CPD for teachers regarding inclusive practices and the tensions surrounding the inclusion of autistic children in mainstream settings. Principals have a critical role in developing inclusive school environments and supporting the special class. However, there is a need for greater support, training, and resources to help principals effectively fulfil their responsibilities. This underscores the need for departmental consideration of specific training, criteria, and continuous professional development to ensure effective support and inclusion of autistic students within the mainstream school environment.

Keywords: autism; inclusive education; teacher education; school leadership; policy

1. Introduction

The education of autistic pupils in Ireland has undergone significant changes in recent years, with increased use of the designated special class within the mainstream school environment. In 2019, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) released policy advice aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) emphasising inclusive and quality education for all children. The policy review has been heavily influenced by the ratification by the Irish government of the UNCRPD [1] in 2018. Article 24 of the UNCRPD, specifically, '...obliges States, inter alia, to ensure that children can access an inclusive, quality and free education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live' [2] (p. 3). However, debates persist regarding whether special class provision for autistic pupils aligns with inclusive education or functions as segregated education within schools.

This article presents findings from a qualitative study that explores the perspectives of school staff in mainstream primary schools in Ireland. The study aims to capture the views of those directly involved in educating autistic pupils and addresses important questions

about potential changes to current educational provision. Specifically, the study seeks to address the following questions:

1. How do staff believe a special class can support inclusion for autistic children within the mainstream school?
2. What role do staff believe leadership plays in supporting the inclusion of autistic children in mainstream primary schools?
3. What supports do staff believe are needed to effectively facilitate the inclusion of autistic children in mainstream schools more generally?

1.1. Autism

Autism is a complex neurodevelopmental condition that is present from birth and persists across the developmental lifespan of the autistic individual [3]. Autism presents with 'persistent deficits in the ability to initiate and to sustain reciprocal social interaction and social communication, and by a range of restricted, repetitive, and inflexible patterns of behaviour, interests or activities that are clearly atypical or excessive for the individual's age and sociocultural context' [4]. It should be noted, however, that there is significant diversity in presentation across autistic individuals, with recent research showing that 70% of autistic people were also diagnosed with at least one comorbid condition, while 41% were diagnosed with two or more [5]. In addition, differences in how autism is assessed or how prevalence rates are reported across jurisdictions also emphasises differing understandings of its presentation, with prevalence in the Republic of Ireland reported to be 1.5% [6], while autism's prevalence in Northern Ireland is stated as being 5% [7]. That such wide divergence in assessed prevalence of autism can exist in neighbouring jurisdictions on the island of Ireland indicates the complexity in how autism is understood, assessed, and planned for within educational policy.

Recent decades have seen an exponential increase in the numbers of these autistic students enrolled in mainstream schools, with the number of children receiving an autism diagnosis increasing by 83% in five years between 2011 and 2016 [8]. However, as recently as 2014, the National Council for Special Education reported that 65% of autistic pupils were, at that time, enrolled in mainstream classes while only 21% attended dedicated autism classes. This is important, as research shows that mainstream school settings can prove to be challenging environments for autistic pupils [9,10]. These pupils have been shown to experience higher levels of social exclusion and bullying, challenging sensory experiences, and elevated levels of anxiety [10]. Such evidence indicates the challenges for schools in facilitating appropriate inclusive education for their autistic pupils.

1.2. Inclusive Education and Autistic Pupils

'Ireland has a distinct, and complex, history regarding the education of persons with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and in its approach to inclusion' [11] (p. 2). In common with many other European countries, provision for pupils with SEN (inclusive of autistic pupils) developed in an ad-hoc manner as a parallel system alongside general education across much of the 20th century [12]. In 2004, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act was published, which 'enshrined in Irish law the right to access education in mainstream school settings' [11] (p. 3) so long as it is carried out in the best interests of the child and their peers [13]. While this Act was signed into law some 17 years ago, it is acknowledged that full implementation of the Act is yet to be achieved [11]. The Irish education system operates under a hybrid definition of inclusion which combines the definition provided by the EPSEN Act [13] and the Post-Primary Guidelines for Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs:

'Inclusion is defined as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners through enabling participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and removing barriers to education through the accommodation and provision of appropriate structures and arrangements, to enable each learner to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her attendance at school' [2] (p. 39). This has had real impacts on provision and funding

models during this period, with the total expenditure on special education allocated by the Department of Education and Skills growing from EUR 468 million to EUR 1.5 billion between 2004 and 2016 [2]. According to the NCSE annual reports, between 2011 and 2014, the number of students in receipt of support for 'low incidence' special needs in mainstream schools increased from 38,000 to 45,700.

Given the steady legislative movements in Ireland towards the provision of inclusive education for autistic pupils within mainstream schools in recent decades, there has also been an understandable increase in the number of autistic pupils accessing education in these settings [12]. In this context, it is important to appreciate the extent to which this approach to education provision differs from that for nearly every other demographic of learner enrolled in schools across the state. The number of specialist classes in the Irish education system increased by 400% in the 10 years between 2011 and 2021, with 2184 special classes currently operating in Ireland. Over 85% of these are designated for autistic students (who number over 13,000 [12]). In other words, the education of autistic pupils has rapidly moved towards an expanded focus on dedicated class provision in a small number of years. However, the rationale for using this approach specifically to provide education for autistic pupils relative to nearly any other category of students in the education system remains unclear. Consistent research into the effectiveness of educational provision for children enrolled in special classes attached to mainstream schools is limited [14], often due to the contextual nature of inclusion itself [15].

Given this exponential increase in funding for special class provision attached to the mainstream schools almost exclusively for autistic pupils, there has been a notable contrast in policy focus during the same time period [11,12]. The revised allocation model from the [16] reconceptualised special needs assistants (SNAs) as a whole-school resource that can be allocated across multiple sites within the school and may act as a support for multiple students with disparate needs [2]. The change moved away from the previous system, whereby SNA staff were allocated to particular pupils, to one in which whole-school resources were allocated based on profiles of the needs of the particular school. Also controversial was the NCSE policy advice entitled 'Progress Report-Policy Advice on Special Schools and Classes' [2] which proposed a vision for 'Total Inclusion' for students with special needs within mainstream education. This perspective is influenced by the New Brunswick model for inclusion and contrasts with the simultaneously occurring special class model of provision being rolled out within schools across the Irish education system [12]. This policy advice was met with significant criticism and resistance, from both parents and education stakeholders. Of particular concern has been the dislocated and incoherent nature of some government responses to addressing this contested and extensively funded aspect of the Irish education system. A recent Irish government decision introduced legislation to compel schools to open dedicated autism classes where deemed necessary.

Concerningly, there remain scant guidelines for schools regarding how special classes within mainstream schools should operate nor how these can function to effectively support inclusive practice within schools more generally. A recent report from the DES inspectorate [17] found widespread misuse of special class provisions across schools and warned that the current model risked the unintended consequence of the reintroduction of educational segregation for autistic pupils within the state. Both of these responses underline the importance of a coherent policy strategy to make clear its approach to educational provision and to underpin working collaboratively *with schools.*

1.3. Attitudes towards Inclusion within Schools

A key factor that also needs to be considered when exploring 'Domestication' is a process in which schools adapt educational reforms to suit their own understanding of what is appropriate for their students. The chosen approaches were noted to align with pre-existing roles or cultures within the school system, as described by Jeffers [18]. The process of domestication can be seen in the different educational experiences for autistic pupils, noted in the most recent DES report, as without concrete guidelines or criteria within

which to operate the special class, schools are adopting their own versions of educational policy. A major factor in supporting reform and change in school practices is the leadership and organisation of school principals, according to Jeffers [18]. School staff and the wider school community often take attitudinal cues from school leaders [19].

Teacher attitudes have significant impacts on inclusive practices, encompassing cognitive beliefs, affective feelings, and behaviours that encourage participation. However, teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education can be complex, with positive support for the concept but concerns about implementation in their own classrooms. Factors such as national policy, academic support, and understanding of inclusive education influence teacher attitudes and practises [19]. For example, in some previous studies (see [20,21]), teachers have expressed positive attitudes towards inclusive education as a general concept, but they have expressed serious concerns about how inclusive education will be implemented in their own classrooms (see van Steen and Wilson [22] for a recent meta-analysis). While inclusion, as a concept, has widespread support, it is also true that teachers sometimes associate disability with negative features and express attitudes accordingly [19]. A holistic perspective that considers a range of factors, such as national educational policy [23,24], academic or professional support [25], or the understanding of inclusive education policy among educators [20], will have impacts on teacher attitudes, and, therefore, on practices within schools themselves.

This study aims to explore the attitudes and views of school staff in Irish primary schools regarding the role of special classes in promoting educational inclusion for autistic pupils. It fills a gap in the existing literature by examining staff perspectives on proposed changes in special education policy and practice in Ireland.

2. Materials and Methods

Children in special classes do not share the same educational experience [17]. As such, one can assume that the role of the special class in supporting inclusion for autistic pupils in mainstream primary schools is not a shared experience. Thus, in trying to understand rather than merely document experiences [26], the research is both qualitative and strongly interpretivist in nature.

2.1. Participants

In investigating the role of the special class in supporting inclusion, it is important that those professionals most closely involved in the planning and implementation of inclusion within that context would be included as participants. As such, a cohort of 12 participants were recruited through a purposive, voluntary, stratified sampling approach. The sampling approach is purposive as participants were selected because they have characteristics that met the inclusion criteria for the sample in this study [27]—specifically, that participants must fit the following inclusion criteria for participation:

- Current special class teachers in classes for autistic pupils attached to mainstream primary schools (furthermore referred to as SCTs);
- Mainstream class teachers with current or recent (within the last five years) involvement with inclusion of children from the special class (hereafter referred to as MCTs) and;
- Principals of mainstream primary schools with special classes for autistic pupils (furthermore referred to as Ps).

These specific inclusion criteria were devised in order to keep the research as relevant to the current educational climate as possible [28]. The sample was voluntary, as participants self-selected to take part in the study, and their participation was voluntary. Finally, the sampling approach was stratified as participants were selected from a range of groups based on a shared strata or group with a specific characteristic [27]. In this case, participants were recruited based on their roles within their school settings, either as a mainstream class teacher, special class teacher, and school principal.

The literature guiding an appropriate sample size for conducting qualitative research is somewhat lacking in agreement. As the aim of qualitative research is to identify different patterns and themes within the data rather than to apply a numerical value to the findings [29], using a percentage representative sample size is unnecessary. Some suggest that up to 10 interviews are sufficient for conducting qualitative interviews [30] while others suggest 12–20 participants [31]. Braun and Clarke [32] suggest that, for smaller scale studies involving thematic analysis, 6 to 10 participants would be sufficient. Based on these conflicting opinions regarding sample size, a sample size of 12 was chosen, with participants including primary school principals (n = 4), autism class teachers (n = 4), and mainstream class teachers (n = 4) where their class included autistic pupils or there were autistic pupils undergoing partial inclusion from the autism special class within their mainstream class. This was deemed appropriate in order to explore the perspective of self-selecting participants from across the three participants' groupings. Twelve participants were recruited through a purposive, voluntary, stratified sampling approach [27] based on their position within mainstream primary schools with special classes for autistic pupils, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants.

Participant Group	Number in Group (n)
Special class teacher in a mainstream primary school (SCT)	4
Mainstream class teacher with recent inclusion experience of autistic pupils from the special class (MCT)	4
Principals of mainstream primary schools with special classes for autistic pupils (Ps)	4

2.2. Participant Recruitment Procedures

Twenty schools from the NCSE List of Special Classes (2020) were manually chosen at random and a recruitment email was sent to the school's principal. A further 10 schools were contacted at random when the desired sample size was not reached, leading to a total of 30 schools being contacted in the study. Participants from across the three participant cohort groups self-selected to take part in the study from across this range of schools.

The recruitment email detailed the purpose of the study, the participant cohorts sought and what participation in the study would involve. It included a request for the principal to circulate the email among the relevant members of their staff to invite them to participate by contacting the researcher directly or having their details forwarded by their principal. When participants responded positively regarding participating in the research, Individual Participant Information Sheets and Informed Consent Forms were sent to the candidates prior to arranging any meeting for an interview, with signed consent forms being returned to the researcher. Interview questions were also shared with participants in advance of an interview taking place.

2.3. Data Collection Methods and Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most appropriate means of data collection in exploring perspectives on the role of the special class in supporting inclusion for autistic pupils in the mainstream primary school. These interviews acknowledge the individual, personal lived experiences of participants and allows the researcher to elicit information from a participant's distinct perspective. All interviews were conducted via online platforms, with an encrypted, password-protected institutional Zoom account being used to host all interviews by author one. All interviews were recorded with prior participant consent using the encrypted Zoom account before the audio recordings of the interviews were saved on the password-protected, encrypted, institutional Google Drive account of author one. The interviews took place between January and March 2021 at times that suited the individual participants.

Three pilot interviews were conducted as the first stage of data collection for this research [27] with colleagues from the researcher's school who fit the inclusion criteria for each participant group [33]. Following the pilot interviews, changes were made to address evident potential bias in wording of certain questions [34] and researcher neutrality in order of questions and expansion prompts [30]. Time was given at the end of the pilot interviews for peer debriefing [28] to discuss altering questions to enhance neutrality and remove the researcher bias. Once reworded, participants were asked to re-answer the question. In all cases, the reworded questions resulted in more open responses that better reflected the research questions. Other questions, which were deemed irrelevant, were removed. Changes made were noted in the research audit trail.

An interview schedule was used as a topic guide, with a different schedule for each participant group, including questions relating to the following topics: inclusive education, the role of the class for autistic pupils in a mainstream primary school, teacher education, leadership, and future roles and areas of development for the special class. Exemplars of these interview frameworks are available in the manuscript Appendices A–C. Each participant was forwarded the questions to be asked in advance of the interview such that they were familiar with the topics to be discussed. All interviews followed the appropriate interview framework according to the group membership of each participant and were between 45 and 60 min in duration.

2.4. Data Analysis

Following data collection, audio-recorded data files were downloaded from Zoom and were stored on an encrypted institutional Google Drive account, in line with ethical approval requirements. These files were then transcribed onto a Word document, which was then saved onto the same encrypted institutional Google Drive account. Given that transcription has been noted to raise issues relating to accuracy, fidelity, and interpretation of data due to the change in data medium [30,35], author one personally transcribed all audio files to support a deeper connection with the data. During transcription, all audio recordings were reviewed alongside printed transcripts during the stages of coding, categorization, thematic analysis, and synthesis. The manual transcriptions, coupled with a process of thematic coding, also served as an evidence trail [32,36].

To ensure the development of coherent and insightful outcomes, the principal investigator employed a structured and methodical approach to analyse the data drawn from the Braun and Clarke [32] six-phase framework for thematic analysis. The interviews were transcribed, read, and reread, with preliminary ideas noted (Phase 1). Codes were then generated based on information that was of interest (Phase 2), with an example of this code generation process observable in Figures 1 and 2. In Figure 1, nodes of meaning and codes are noted next to the data.

R8	Okay. And have you would you say your understanding of inclusion has always been that facilitating the access in mainstream or do you think it's changed over time?	
MCT4 – 8	Em, well, when I first joined our school, and the autism unit was new, and it was very separate. And I remember like that, that trip, we went to the bowling alley, and the boys and girls from the autistic class or unit em joined my fifth class and the other fifth class, em and it was actually brilliant. But I don't think there was any integrate, there was no like, that was the only integrate integration that they joined us on that trip. And we we were older, though, my kids were older, my class. And we kind of were like their chaperones, and we helped them get to the bowling alley and play and get back. And then they were, those children from the class, the unit I don't even know if it was called the unit then. I don't know what it was called. but	Separation of class Changing understanding of inclusion Best of both worlds Just another class Impact of inclusive practices ASD

Figure 1. Example of initial coding of transcript from interview with mainstream class teacher participant.

Theme 1: One Size doesn't fit All: Including Children with Autism in Mainstream Settings		
Subthemes: The Impact of Mainstream Needs on Teacher Attitudes to Inclusion		
- Inclusion is individual	- Point of inclusion	- whole school approaches
- Inclusion understanding	- We need to learn to adapt	- inclusive classroom ms
- Whole school approaches to inclusion	- Impact of inclusive practises ASD	- not everyone benefits from ms
- Impact of leadership	- Every class is unique	- Mct supporting inclusion
- Whole school benefits of inclusion	- Child centred	- Lack of ASD understanding
- Teaching about inclusion/difference	- Problems in m/s	- Full inclusion model
- What the special class offers	- M/S already overwhelmed	- m/s may not suit all
	- lack of support in ms	- disadvantages of inclusion
	- addressing individual needs	- integration/operation
	- sc v ms	

Figure 2. Example of initial development of themes and subthemes from initial coding of transcripts.

These generated codes are then combined to identify potential themes within the data (Phase 3), as can be seen in Figure 2 below. These emergent themes are then reviewed in the context of their relevance to the research questions, the relevant literature, and other emerging codes and themes (Phase 4). Codes from various interviews were categorised, leading to the development of emergent themes (as shown in Figure 2). Data from across the different interviews were merged to develop themes and subthemes for each cohort group, special class teachers, mainstream teachers, and principals.

Through a process of data triangulation [37,38], data from interviews across all three groups of participants were then merged into a holistic thematic framework for the whole participant cohort in this study. Triangulation entails observations or opinions shared by two or more of the interview participants [39]. After a process of data reduction, all three researchers collaboratively deliberated on emerging themes and subthemes, driven by the data and informed by the existing literature using a peer debriefing process [28]. These themes were then more clearly and consistently defined and given a final thematic name (Phase 5) before the analysis of key findings within those themes was written up (Phase 6). This rigorous and transparent analytical process ultimately culminated in the research findings, with three themes that emerged displayed in Table 1.

2.5. Data Trustworthiness and Credibility

This research addresses a topic that is 'relevant, timely, significant, interesting or evocative' [28] (p. 840). The role of the special class in supporting inclusion for autistic pupils in mainstream primary schools is of huge relevance at present, given not only the contents of the most recent DES [17] report, but also its lack of stakeholder opinions about the current and future models of SEN provision in Ireland.

Rich rigour [28] is also necessary in qualitative research. It is for this reason that the participant cohort was expanded from just special class teachers to include mainstream class teachers and principals too. This would allow for opinions on the role of the special class to be brought together [27] and analysed in the context of school staff views.

The use of thick and rich description, [28] further contributes to the credibility of the research. Conclusions drawn or statements made are supported with in-depth descriptions and 'rich quotes from the participants that depict each emerging theme… exemplifying that the findings were derived directly from the data" (p. 89). This was supported by author one manually transcribing all interviews to ensure deep familiarity with the data

and participant accounts. A detailed analysis process which comprised collaborative peer debriefing, together with a process of collaborative thematic coding, supported a critical engagement with the data. A detailed audit trail was kept of all coding and meeting notes to support reflexivity and rigor in this process [28,40]. Data triangulation, that is, observations or opinions shared by two or more of the interview participants [39], was used not only in the identification of themes but in providing this rich description, as much as is realistic to include, for the reader. This also addresses the idea of resonance within qualitative research [28]. It is hoped that this research will constitute a significant contribution [28] to the understanding of the role of the special class in supporting inclusion within the mainstream primary school environment.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

This research was reviewed and considered by the ethics application review committee of the authors' higher education institution, and the authors received formal ethical approval to undertake the research. Questions within the interview schedules were constantly reviewed to reduce the likelihood of causing anxiety or stress for the participants [41]. Participants were also provided a detailed description of the study ahead of time, including the relevant interview questions, to ensure they were adequately informed about the nature of the study and to minimise any unanticipated harm or distress to participants. They were then provided a sample of their transcript to review when it was completed to ensure they were not misrepresented in their opinions.

Several steps were taken to maintain participant confidentiality. All identifying features were removed in transcription. Participants were referred to by their cohort (SCT, MCT, P) and a number (one to four). These numbers were assigned at random and not in the order in which the interviews were conducted.

3. Findings

The findings will be presented across four themes which are presented below in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes.

Number	Themes
4.1	One size does not fit all: including autistic children in mainstream schools
4.2	The special class: different teaching in a safe space
4.3	Leading by example, learning on your feet: the role of the principal

3.1. One Size Does Not Fit All: Including Autism Pupils in Mainstream Schools

The findings in this thematic section present participant views regarding the need for an individualised approach to inclusion for autistic pupils in mainstream settings, due to the realities of life within the mainstream class environment that may not best serve the educational needs of all autistic pupils. The pressure of addressing all student needs at the same time, coupled with a feeling of inadequate preparedness, resulted in participants reporting a struggle to meet the needs of all pupils within this mainstream environment.

The findings from participants reflected the view that working with autistic pupils can often lead to teachers adopting a 'bespoke approach' that acknowledges the individual needs of each child (SCT 4–11). The realisation that '..one size doesn't fit all..' (SCT 3–12) led to participants advocating for a child-centred way to maximise the inclusive dividend for each student within the mainstream school environment (SCT 4–11).

> 'The first thing would be inclusion differs from child to child, it depends on the child with ASD...you can't get the same level of inclusion for every child. It depends on the child themselves' (MCT 2–9/16)

A major factor influencing this shared view across all cohorts of participants related to how they perceived the environment within mainstream classes. Participants expressed concerns regarding inadequacies or challenges within common mainstream classes as appropriate inclusive settings for the education of autistic pupils. Large class sizes were the main concern, with MCTs routinely assigned classes of over 30 children (SCT 1). These classes can often be noisy, which may present sensory difficulties for autistic children, many of whom present with sensory sensitivities around noise. This auditory sensitivity, combined with and compacted by a lack of space in classes with large numbers, can lead to stressful and overwhelming experiences for children on the spectrum, which can cause challenges in self-regulation. While teachers are aware of this sensory difficulty, they also perceived it as conflicting with the learning needs of the full class groups which can often entail significant levels of noise. For example, one mainstream teacher suggested that 'if there's not a bit of noise, they're [the pupils] not learning' (MCT 2–36).

From the perspective of participants, increased class sizes lead to increased student needs, and it becomes difficult for teachers to meet the individual needs of students in their class. One SCT, who had previously been a mainstream class teacher, spoke of her inability to support a pupil with a complex profile from the special class in her classroom due to the existing levels of need among her students. She stated that '*there was no way that I was able to support him adequately*' (SCT 1–36) while attempting to meet the needs of her other pupils in the mainstream class too. Other participants also report similar challenges in balancing the levels of need in their classes and also reported experiencing emotions such as guilt for feeling they were unable to support all their pupils. However, this commitment to including diverse pupils within mainstream settings was not universal. For example, one principal noted that some staff viewed the children in the special class as extra rather than part of their class, stating that if the child is not on their mainstream class roll, '*why should I have to take them into my room*' (P2–7). This view of the child from the special class as an addition rather than an included class member was shared by some of the MCT participants as well:

> 'That child from the special class is adding to the workload... people are under pressure, they already have so many needs within their own class. And then they're saying, oh, take this child from another class, which only has like five kids in it and one teacher and two SNAs' (MCT 4–43)

Participants pointedly named their lack of specialist training, or '*zero preparation*' (SCT 4–44), as a major deficit when it comes to both supporting the inclusion of autistic children and teaching in specialised environments such as the special class. This has led to many teachers becoming self-taught, often 'self-taught by mistakes' (SCT 4). Principal participants were particularly concerned about how the lack of training impacted the children within the special class and their inclusion into the school.

'A teacher will always spend their first year just trying to get your feet... and that's time lost, it's not good enough for the children because if you have a teacher inside who doesn't know what they're doing, it's not necessary. It's not fair to the children' (P3).

These perspectives query the degree to which teachers feel prepared to work with autistic pupils, either in mainstream classes or, particularly, within specialist class settings. SCT 1 stated that, when she took up her role as SCT, '*My qualifications and my training to support children on the autism spectrum was zero. None*'.

Participants pointedly discussed this phenomenon with reference to the perceived tension between supporting nonautistic pupils, '*managing*' their class generally, and supporting their autistic pupil joining the group. Teachers commented on their concern that the '*challenging behaviour*' of autistic pupils may prove '*detrimental*' to the nonautistic children in the mainstream class, in that '*they can be very disruptive and they can take away from teaching time, which isn't fair*' (MCT 2–35). This highlights deeper systemic issues around the role of the special class, the SCT, and a lack of shared responsibility for autistic students in the special class. This also suggests that the overwhelming workload currently placed on

teachers in the mainstream class setting has a knock-on impact on the inclusion of autistic children from the special class within the school more generally.

This situation may also have an impact on the autistic children and their experiences of inclusion in mainstream class settings. However, when students are given time away from the overwhelming mainstream classes and are supported in their regulation, MCTs reported that their autistic students coped much better with the mainstream environment (MCT 1, MCT 3).

3.2. The Special Class: Different Teaching in a Safe Space

This thematic section discusses the views of participants regarding the positive support that the special class provides for the inclusion of autistic pupils within the mainstream school environment. However, it was highlighted by some participants that where training, teacher efficacy, and staff support were not present, both the students and staff within the special class environment may struggle with a sense of belonging within the mainstream school setting.

Given the challenges outlined by participants for autistic children within the mainstream class environment, presented within the first theme, some participants viewed the special class as providing certain benefits for the children enrolled there.

> 'I'd really think that they need their, their ASD class their safe space. . .like it's almost a sense of relief in the face when they're leaving the (mainstream) class again, it's very intense.' (P3–11)

Some participants felt that without the special class, their students would be excluded from any mainstream school (P4, SCT 3). While a place in a special class within a mainstream school provides children with, as one SCT described it, '*ready access to the chaos of life*' (SCT 4–26), in the mainstream environment, we have seen that this access can sometimes be overwhelming and that the special class is needed to support that overwhelmingness. Teachers reported that having a place in the special class provided children with '*the best of both worlds*' (SCT 2; SCT 4; MCT 2; MCT 4). '*We are able to give them that time and that space and that quiet place to be able to regulate without having the mainstream class just going on around them*' (SCT 1–74). Some parents reportedly shared this attitude, happy in the knowledge that their child could spend time in the mainstream class but also get the support they needed from the special class setting (SCT 2). SCTs and MCTs highlighted the fact that the special class allows autistic pupils to focus on social skills, life skills, and regulation skills that the mainstream classes do not have the time to focus on due to curriculum constraints (SCT 1, SCT 3, MCT 2, MCT 3).

Across all participant cohorts, the idea that teaching in a special class is a different type of teaching arose. There are many different facets to this idea. One difficulty that all participants faced was the '*link to academic development, if they're in mainstream, there is going to be or should be a focus on academic development*' (MCT 4–15), which is not always the main focus for autistic pupils. The special class was noted as providing more than just this academic focus (P4), though the lack of curriculum guidelines was noted as a difficulty (SCT 3).

> 'It's not all about the curriculum. It's about giving them the life skills that they need in order to survive in society. It's not about your English, Irish, your Maths. . .it's a different curriculum.' (P4–29)

Time and again, the idea of the special class providing a safe space for students during the school day was mentioned. An opinion that resonated with the SCTs in particular was that '*If you haven't met a child's emotional needs, then you won't meet their curriculum needs either*' (SCT 2–39). SCT participants saw their classes as being able to support the emotional needs of their students in a way that the mainstream cannot (SCT 1, SCT 2, SCT 3).

> 'They actually put themselves under a level of pressure to conform . . . in the in the mainstream. . .the ASD class was a safe haven or, you know, what, exactly what they needed to be able to just let their guard down' (MCT 3–19)

For some MCTs, having the security of a safe space to regulate actually facilitated better, more meaningful inclusion in the mainstream class (MCT 1). Friendships and social interaction are often difficult for autistic children to navigate, but some participants reported less difficulty when students were properly regulated after time in the special class. MCTs, in particular, felt that peer interactions were better supported and friendships were better developed with their mainstream peers (MCT 1, MCT 3) after taking that space and time in the special class. One teacher described this as a symbiotic support model:

> 'One helps the other. . . it allows the child to be much more involved and much more productive in the mainstream setting, if they have the special class because they have those extra resources, space kind of time, but also the quiet, that they the child can kind of regulate themselves' (MCT 1–38)

One SCT spoke about how the mainstream class environment resulted in so much overwhelmingness for a student that she would have aggressive outbursts in the classroom, which affected her peer relationships. After time spent in the special class focusing on emotional regulation, the child was able to return to the mainstream without any challenging behaviours. Without the safe space of the special class, the teacher noted *'she'd be back to having her outbursts'* and *'wouldn't be able to cope'*. (SCT 2–71). The special class had the resources and flexibility to support pupils who constantly walk and move around the room while learning, children who will only complete work while sitting on a windowsill, etc. (SCT 1, SCT 3).

While participants identified the advantages of adaptations afforded through access to a special class setting, they also indicated disadvantages emanating from this separate form of provision within a whole-school inclusive model. In some contexts, this '*different approach to teaching*' can lead to challenges in interfacing with other classes or staff across the school. This can result in the children from the special class struggling to feel they belong within the school community, as they do not have a solid foundational peer base or class cohort. It can also lead to confusion among staff and require additional staff collaboration to create inclusive environments that foster students' feelings of belonging.

These differences can also impact an SCTs relationship with the rest of their staff. SCTs and principals, in particular, spoke about special class staff being '*easily isolated*' as a result (P2–23). Special class staff are often '*not part of the special education team, but you're not part of the mainstream either*' (SCT 2–42), thus often seen as completely separate to the rest of the staff. Principal participants appeared very aware of the '*demoralization*' of staff (P1–27) teaching in a special class, as other members of staff just '*don't get it*' (P4–12). SCTs spoke of how some staff members remained fearful of even stepping foot in the special class, to the extent that some participants reported difficulty in finding cover for their break times, which is commonplace for MCTs in most schools. Another participant recounted how an MCT in their school was described as '*shaking*' and '*petrified*' (SCT 3–43) at the thought of being in a room with autistic pupils, something not noted to happen when covering mainstream classes.

Just as participants mentioned feeling unprepared to teach within an inclusive mainstream classroom in theme one, some participants felt that this extended to their teacher education for teaching in a special class for pupils with autism. It was noted that they felt their initial teacher education inadequately prepared colleagues to feel confident to work in autism class contexts, which was described as '*a whole other kind of teaching*' (MCT 2) that '*wasn't in the job description when you signed up as teacher*' (SCT 1). One SCT provided a description how she views her role as SCT:

> 'I would describe myself as a teacher, speech and language therapist, occupational therapist, psychologist, police inspector sometimes because I have to try and get to the bottom of who's telling me the truth and who's not telling me the truth eh, counsellor, manager. . . so teaching is a tiny bit of it' (SCT 1)

The expectations of teachers to fulfil so many different roles in the special class setting is something that '*we're just not prepared for and that we're not trained in*' (MCT 2–76). Some

participants felt that there should be a specific course for teachers going into the special class (MCT 2, MCT 3) to create a path for teachers moving into the special class (P3) and to ensure that students are properly supported and included within the mainstream school environment. In the absence of such a course or such specific teaching criteria, CPD was highlighted by all participants as 'absolutely essential' (SCT 2–30) in supporting the education and inclusion of autistic pupils.

Teacher efficacy as a result of a lack of training was seen to have a big impact on class choices and class allocations within the school. There is often a lack of movement of teachers in and out of the special class due to fear of the specialised environment. Many SCTs felt that they have and will continue to be '*pigeonholed to stay in the class*' (SCT 2).

3.3. Leading by Example, Learning on your Feet: The Role of the Principal

This final thematic section presents participant views on the importance of leadership in the inclusive use of the special class within a mainstream primary school setting. As the leader of the organisation, it was deemed vital by all participants that principals set the tone for inclusion. Principals reported difficulties in creating inclusive environments for autistic pupils within their schools, resulting from their own lack of training and departmental support, and leading to the aforementioned domestication of inclusive policy.

The role of the principal in developing an inclusive school environment and a positive attitude among staff towards a special class was seen as vital. The attitude of the principal towards the special class was deemed to be very important in the context of the wider school environment. As one principal said regarding opening a special class, '*if I don't support it…nobody else will*' (P1). This view was shared by many teacher participants, for example:

> 'When I first came to the school, it was all very new and everybody was unsure and threatened. I think the principal did support and encourage and put a positive spin on what was otherwise seen as a scary prospect…she set the tone and everybody followed.' (MCT 4)

While principals have an important role, however, all participating principals noted a lack of support when opening special classes, which they viewed as a key barrier to schools opening such classes in the first place (P4). Principals stated that they were '*promised the sun, the stars*' (P1) to convince them to open a special class, but in reality, were operating on '*a wing and a prayer*' (P2). This lack of support spanned from the decision to open the class to the operation of the class once sanctioned and opened.

While teacher participants within this study reported a lack of training regarding inclusive teaching, principals too reported a lack of training for inclusive leadership, which has led to a '*learn on their feet*' (P3) approach for many principals. Most of the courses for supporting autistic children and inclusion appear aimed at teachers, and, while principals could attend these courses, it was not directly applicable to their role in supporting inclusion (P2). One principal suggested that an annual or termly workshop to support principals in their use of the special class, where best practices for inclusion and creating inclusive school environments could be discussed, would be highly beneficial (P3). This kind of workshop would also help principals to see exactly what is expected of them and support them in implementing the inclusive expectations of the Department (P4). Most principal participants relied on informal, self-sought peer support, often in the form of WhatsApp groups or message forums (P1, P3, P4) in the absence of formal department support.

Such training and guidance was felt to be particularly important, as managing a special class and supporting the inclusion of the special class can take up a lot of a principal's time, especially when challenging behaviour is involved. One principal spoke of how, while he was there to support all of his staff, '*You've got to kind of got to be ready to jump straight away for the for the ASD class*' (P3) because the teachers in the special class '*are at the coal face. They're there, they're dealing with the difficult problems*' (P3).

'There have been years where I've literally lived in it because of of difficulties around children. . .I've had like really serious behavioural problems with some. So that would mean that literally, I could spend the majority of my day supporting the teacher being in the room, being outside or being in withdrawal rooms' (P2)

While principals noted that they wanted to support their special class staff, the data suggests that the balance between supporting and isolating SCTs runs a fine line. Outside of challenging behaviour incidents, some principals operated a climate of trust (P4) with their special class staff, with one teacher commenting that her principal '*considers it a positive that we are left to our own devices*' (SCT 1). In some cases, participating SCTs appreciated that their professional opinion and their skills as a teacher were valued and trusted. One SCT, in particular, spoke of how nice it was to have the autonomy to make decisions about the children in her class, as she knew them best, and appreciated the fact that her principal trusted her to make such decisions (SCT 3). However, other participating SCTs felt isolated and burdened by enforced self-sufficiency. In some cases, SCTs were left in charge of every aspect of the operation of the class, from the day-to-day running of the class (SCT 2) to sourcing mainstream classes for inclusion opportunities (SCT 1, SCT 3). The balance between autonomy and isolation was of particular concern to the principal interviewees, who did not want the burden of creating an inclusive school environment '*to be left to those staff*' (P2) in the special class.

4. Discussion

This research sought to explore the views among school staff regarding the role of a designated autism class in supporting inclusive education provision for autistic pupils within Irish mainstream schools, with the role of leadership and adequate supports taking central roles.

The concept of inclusive special education [42], with its continuum of support based on student need, appears to align with what the research participants felt is the best approach to supporting children with SEN in mainstream primary schools. The findings appear to indicate that, from the perspective of participant groups, autism classes fulfil a potentially important role for many autistic pupils as part of a continuum of educational access options [43]. Such a continuum is designed to cater for 'the full diversity of need and support required by all pupils' [44] (p. 17) within the Irish education system. This continuum of support for children with SEN is not a new concept [45], and access to such a continuum was highlighted within Section 20 of the EPSEN Act [13]. The findings of this study suggest that participating school staff believe that the use of a special class to resource inclusion and participation for autistic pupils can be an important support in facilitating individualised provision in a manner consistent with Florian's [15] concept of contextualised inclusion.

Acknowledging the individuality of inclusion, as stated in the Irish definition of inclusion [2], means that while each school is recommended to have an explicit policy detailing its approach to inclusion, it should be remembered that inclusion is a process aimed at supporting and addressing the needs of <u>all</u> students within the school [46]. This is made even more important given the high levels of school autonomy and diversity across the Irish education system [11,14] and the current paucity of guidance regarding how such inclusion is to be operationalised within schools across the system [11,12]. These circumstances foreground the importance of the previously discussed concept of contextual inclusion [15] that has been highlighted by the DES [17] and must be a consideration for policymakers when addressing any future changes within the Irish education system in their bid to fulfil the full terms of the EPSEN ACT [13]. Engagement across the full school community with regard to how inclusion is to be operationalised is of the utmost importance. Additionally, consideration of how practices within schools are influenced by the supporting policy, funding, and social systems within which individual schools find themselves in the Irish educational system is also important [11,47]. Top-down policy-led reforms that do not consider the perspectives of staff working in schools, parents, and

pupils themselves are unlikely to effectively address the challenges in developing coherent and consistent educational inclusion across the school systems more generally.

4.1. Individualised Inclusion

It is clear that the research participants feel that our current special class model works well in providing the differentiated support that our children on the spectrum so often need. The special class has been noted, in the literature and in the interviews, as an important support in addressing and supporting the complex needs of autistic children within the mainstream school environment [2,17,48]. In the current study, SCT participants especially highlighted the greater flexibility and individualised support available to children within the special class, based on their individual needs, which can greatly reduce the frustration and overwhelming experiences of autistic children in a mainstream setting [49]. Additionally, MCTs reported experiencing challenges in supporting participation for pupils with higher and varying levels of complex needs within their classrooms [50] in the absence of additional professional supports or professional development. For similar reasons, the current system of supports and funding for many mainstream primary schools means they may struggle to meet the needs of children with more complex diagnoses. Given that attitudes among teachers can significantly impact a school's inclusive culture [19], this negative impact could result in situations such as the reported limited movement in and out of the special class for daily inclusion [17].

The mainstream class environment can be challenging or unsuitable for autistic pupils in the absence of appropriate preparation and coherent differentiation of instruction. The noise within a mainstream classroom can cause sensory difficulties for autistic pupils [51], and the large class sizes [52], with a lack of space and, often, overstimulation, can be a challenge for these pupils [53]. The unpredictable nature of the mainstream classroom can, in fact, be a disruptive or upsetting experience for autistic children, leading to negative interactions which teachers perceive as challenging behaviours, such as aggressive outbursts. Such episodes have been described as expressions of stress or difficulties coping in what can be an environment of immense stress [49]. This sentiment was echoed in the findings in this research, with many participants expressing concerns that our current mainstream class environment was not structured in a way that would provide effective support for many autistic pupils. This is doubly concerning given that recent NCSE [54] data suggest two-thirds of autistic pupils within the Irish education system are enrolled in mainstream class settings.

Research participants felt that the presence of the special class in a mainstream school, rather than a full-inclusion model approach, actually allowed more children to access mainstream education and stay in their local communities. Having a place within a specialised environment, while it may appear separate, provides students an opportunity to be included as part of the school community that they may not have otherwise [14]. The DES [17] recommends that in order for children in the special class to foster a sense of belonging, inclusion opportunities should be arranged with one particular mainstream class, but this does not appear to be the case in practice, according to some of the research participants. This aligns with the findings reported in the recent DES Inspectorate report [17]: that practices in how schools utilised special classes did not always align with inclusive policy, with many being used as separate or segregated provisions within schools. Coherent transition planning and systems to support collaboration between SCT and MCT staff is key to support links and appropriate inclusive practice within schools. However, without clear guidance from the Department on the operation of the special class, discrepancy in provision for autistic pupils will remain.

A disconnect in staff attitudes towards children in the mainstream class versus children in the special class was also highlighted within this research. One possibility for this disconnect may be a need for more engagement between MCTs and the students that are included from the special class. Within the literature, it is noted that teachers often find it

more difficult to foster such connections with students from the special class, as they have such limited time with large class sizes and curricular pressures [53].

Self-efficacy in supporting the needs of all students has been seen as one of the driving forces in creating inclusive environments [55]. It was particularly expressed by participants that, should students not be taught by quality, highly trained teachers who had the experience and skills necessary to support children with additional needs such as autism [56], the students themselves would be seriously impacted. Providing adequate training that improves a teacher's efficacy in supporting autistic pupils can only be a positive thing, for both students and teachers, with an improvement to the overall implementation of inclusive practices on a whole-school level [57]. However, none of the teachers in the current study, regardless of age or years of teaching experience, felt that their college education in any way prepared them to teach in a specialised area, such as a class for autistic pupils, or to support children with SEN in their mainstream classrooms [54]. It has been noted that while it is part of the Cosán Framework for Teacher's Learning [58] to encourage teachers to engage in CPD, the highest uptake of CPD appears to come from teachers working with SEN students [59]. However, participants discussed the challenges of accessing CPD due to inadequate numbers of available places. It is important that policymakers ensure that teachers have access to the training necessary to support inclusion in schools to ensure student needs are met for the entirety of their educational careers.

4.2. Leadership and Inclusion: The Role of Principals

Within any organisation, leaders are fundamental in its operations and success; this stems largely from the example they set for their teams [60]. One way in which inclusive leadership can be developed is for principals to explicitly define the meaning of inclusion within their school environment and to guide and support staff members to fulfil this expectation for all school students [60].

Principal participants noted that they are operating with limited direction and guidance in not only creating inclusive school environments but in maximising the inclusive potential of the special class within their school [16]. Some principals have mentioned that this immense level of autonomy allowed for the setting up and operation of a model of special class provision that worked within their particular context [15], to support their cohort of additional needs students, in their own way [56]. This highlights a need for specific criteria for principals to follow when operating the special class model within their schools. It also calls for the Department to follow through on the promises made to principals when asking them to open a special class and provide the adequate support necessary for the success of an inclusive school environment.

This feeling was further compacted by the lack of understanding, awareness, and training in autism education among other staff members [53], which can not only create a difficult working environment for special class staff but can intensify the feeling of disconnect between mainstream and special class staff. In addition, some participating principals also reported being very involved in the working and supporting of the special class, a reality that can add greatly to their workload. This raises an interesting question about the burden felt by special class teachers within the mainstream environment. An additional research study investigating the impact of this overall lack of staff awareness, education, and training on the special class teachers themselves within the wider school community would offer an interesting perspective into the experiences of the special class teacher.

Within the literature, it is suggested that the best support for SCTs and principals in reducing these feelings of isolation and sharing responsibility for children in the special class is through the use of a whole-school approach to inclusion that includes the special class in its overall operation and not as an additional thought at the end of the decision-making process [17,51,60]. Further research into inclusive leadership for schools operating the special class model may prove highly beneficial in supporting the inclusive potential of mainstream Irish primary schools.

4.3. Limitations

While the findings within this study are representative of the schools and settings of the participants, the small sample size of four members per participant cohort provides a limited generalisability [61]. Furthermore, there still remains a 'low-credibility' attitude [62] (p. 105) towards qualitative research. Thus, while this research aims to be of significance within the discussions around a move towards a fuller inclusion model within the Irish education system, its qualitative nature may limit its overall impact.

5. Conclusions

This research aimed to explore the perspectives of school staff on the inclusive nature of the special class within the mainstream primary school, the role of leadership in inclusion for autistic pupils, and the supports necessary to make the special class model for autistic students as effective as possible.

Participants felt that the presence of a special class affords students many inclusive opportunities that are denied to them due to the current mainstream class setup. Their perspectives were influenced by consideration of the impact of the learning environment on the learner's experience, a perspective that would benefit from the voices of autistic children themselves.

If the overarching goal of the special class is to achieve full mainstream participation for its students [2], this model of support, according to participants, will not work. If, however, each individual student is encouraged and supported to achieve their individual inclusive potential, the current special class model could be incredibly successful. Despite the publication of the *Autism Good Practise Guidelines* (2022), the operation of the special class remains vastly different from school to school. As such, it is perhaps better to acknowledge the current realities of the use of contextual [15], inclusive special education [42] within mainstream primary education and support it as a way forward for the Irish education system. In fact, educational provision for autistic children through the use of the special class may align with the DES Continuum of Support, which outlines 'Support for a few' as the top layer of support for pupils in mainstream primary schools.

Leadership appeared to have a significant impact on maximising the inclusive potential of the special class. The principal is responsible for setting the tone for and promoting a whole school approach towards supporting inclusion, though it appears that they have been forgotten in the conversation of inclusive professional development. Principals noted that they lacked specific guidelines on supporting and operating the special class in a way that best serves the pupils within it, often resulting in completely autonomous decisions related to their classes. This has resulted in a tightrope walk between supporting the special class staff and forced self-sufficiency for said staff, a thin line walked by principals that often results in the isolation and burdening of staff.

Large class sizes and learning that is noise by nature can create sensory difficulties for autistic pupils in the mainstream class environment [49]. Coupled with the lack of educational supports available to MCTs, the lack of 'safe space' for autistic students within the mainstream environment and limited teacher self-efficacy due to CPD limitations combine to create environments that can be significantly overwhelming for children on the spectrum. This study suggests that a vicious cycle of unintended consequences may develop between the reactions of autistic pupils who cannot cope in the mainstream environment and how this response is negatively perceived by MCTs. Addressing class sizes, available resources, and training are seen as supports that would have major implications on the inclusive potential of mainstream primary schools.

The importance of the special class was clear from the data, but its designation was questioned. Through discussion and research, a stark and worrying discrimination against educational provision for other additional needs in favour of provision for autistic pupils emerged as significant within our current educational system. It would be worth exploring why educational provision for autistic students has been deemed more important than provision for children with MGLD or additional diagnoses.

When looking to the future of educational provision for autistic pupils and other additional needs, it is important that we listen to those on the front lines of inclusion. In doing this, we stand to make Ireland a model of excellence in providing inclusive education for autistic pupils and those with SEN in the mainstream primary school setting.

Appendix A

Interview Schedule for Special Class Teachers

Introduction	-	Explain structure of interview (*semi-structured, themes to be discussed*)
	-	Discuss confidentiality and consent to record (*use of pseudonyms in write up, no names of schools, data storage*)
	-	Give the research topic and the rationale for (*the role of the special class in supporting inclusion in mainstream schools in the context of proposed policy changes*)
Participant Background	-	How long have you been in your role as special class teacher? (prompts for mainstream experience, roles before current one)
	-	How did you end up teaching the special class?
Theme: Inclusive Education	-	What is your understanding of the term inclusion within a mainstream primary school? (Can yougive an example of how this extends to your own practise)
	-	Has your understanding changed or developed over time? Why is this? Can you give me an example?
	-	Overall, inclusion has come to be about all students, not just children with special needs. What impacts do you see inclusive practise having in your school? (What students have been impacted?)
	-	Has inclusive practise had an impact on autistic students in your school? (Why do you think this is? Can you give me an example?)

Theme: The Role of the Class	- How does the special class for autistic pupils operate in your school? What do you think of this approach? - Is there something that a placement in a special class can offer your students compared to a placement in a mainstream class? (Can you give an example? Why do you think this is?) - What part do you think special classes play within the larger school organisation?
Theme: Teacher Education	Based on answer from participant background questions - Did you notice any differences in teaching between mainstream and the special class environment? (Can you give an example?) - Do you think there would be any differences between teaching in a mainstream class and the special class environment? (Can you give me an example?) - How prepared did you feel to teach in such a specialised environment? (Did your college education prepare you? Previous teaching experience?) - Was there any additional CPD or professional learning experience that supported you in preparing for the role? - What opportunities do you have to continue your professional development to support your teaching?
Theme: Leadership	- Can you tell me about the typical input your principal has in the operation of the special class? What form does this typically take? - How is a whole-school approach to the inclusion of autistic pupils fostered in your school? (staff collaboration, sharing of information, whole school CPD, etc.) - How do you think leadership can impact a school's approach to inclusion? (attitudes, collaboration, altering environments) - Do you feel that there are any areas in which you would like more support from leadership in supporting the inclusion of the children in your class?
Theme: Future Roles and Areas of Development for the Special Class	- Can you tell me about some potential challenges and opportunities that your students would face if they were to be fully educated in a mainstream classroom? - Do you think there is a need for the class for autistic pupils? - Can you think of any ways that we could improve upon the special class provision to create a more inclusive educational environment for our students with autism in special classes in mainstream schools?
Close	- Thank you for your participation - Reminder of right to withdraw and that they will be provided with a copy of the interview transcript

Appendix B

Interview Schedule for Mainstream Class Teachers

Introduction	- Explain structure of interview (*semi-structured, themes to be discussed*) - Discuss confidentiality and consent to record (*use of pseudonyms in write up, no names of schools, data storage*) - Give the research topic and the rationale for (*the role of the special class in supporting inclusion in mainstream schools in the context of proposed policy changes*)

Participant Background	-	How long have you been in your role as special class teacher? (Prompts for roles before current one, any experience with SET or SEN teaching?)
Theme: Inclusive Education	-	What is your understanding of the term inclusion within a mainstream primary school? (Can you give an example of how this extends to your own practise?)
	-	Has your understanding changed or developed over time? Why is this? Can you give me an example?
	-	Overall, inclusion has come to be about all students, not just children with special needs. What impacts do you see inclusive practise having in your school? (What students have been impacted?)
	-	Has inclusive practise had an impact on autistic students in your school? (Why do you think this is? Can you give me an example?)
Theme: The role of the Class	-	How does the special class for autistic pupils operate in your school? (Linkage with mainstream classes, integration etc.) What do you think of this approach? Is it an effective approach?
	-	Is there something that a placement in a special class can offer students compared to a placement in a mainstream class? (Can you give an example? Why do you think this is?)
	-	What part do you think special classes play within the larger school organisation?
Theme: Teacher Education	-	Have you had much experience teaching autistic pupils in your time teaching mainstream?
	-	Do you think there is a difference in teaching a child with autism who is fully enrolled in mainstream and autistic pupils in the special class?
	-	Do you feel like your teacher training prepared you for teaching autistic pupils or including autistic pupils from a special class?
	-	Was there any additional CPD or professional learning experience that supported you in preparing for including children from the special class?
	-	What opportunities do you have to continue your professional development to support your teaching?
Theme: Leadership	-	Can you tell me about the typical input your principal has in the operation of the special class? What form does this typically take?
	-	How is a whole-school approach to the inclusion of autistic pupils fostered in your school? (staff collaboration, sharing of information, whole school CPD, etc.)
	-	How do you think leadership can impact a school's approach to inclusion? (attitudes, collaboration, altering environments)
	-	Do you feel that there are any areas in which you would like more support from leadership in supporting the inclusion of the children in your class?
Theme: Future Roles and Areas of Development for the Special Class	-	Can you tell me about some potential challenges and opportunities that your students would face if they were to be fully educated in a mainstream classroom?
	-	Do you think there is a need for the class for autistic pupils?
	-	Can you think of any ways that we could improve upon the special class provision to create a more inclusive educational environment for our students with autism in special classes in mainstream schools?

Close	- Thank you for your participation - Reminder of right to withdraw and that they will be provided with a copy of the interview transcript

Appendix C

Interview Schedule for Principals/Deputy Principals

Introduction	- Explain structure of interview (*semi-structured, themes to be discussed*) - Discuss confidentiality and consent to record (*use of pseudonyms in write up, no names of schools, data storage*) - Give the research topic and the rationale for (*the role of the special class in supporting inclusion in mainstream schools in the context of proposed policy changes*)
Participant background	- How long have you been a principal/deputy principal? (prompts for previous experience, roles before current one) - What made you want to become a principal/deputy principal?
Theme: Inclusive Education	- What is your understanding of the term inclusion within a mainstream primary school? (Can you give an example of how this extends to your own practise?) - Has your understanding changed or developed over time? Why is this? Can you give me an example? - Overall, inclusion has come to be about all students, not just children with special needs. What impacts do you see inclusive practise having in your school? (What students have been impacted?) - Has inclusive practise had an impact on autistic students in your school? (Why do you think this is? Can you give me an example?)
Theme: The Role of the Class	- How do you understand inclusion for autistic young people in your school? (Can you explain? Can you give me an example?) - Do schools have a role in supporting inclusion? How? What does this look like in action? - What do you see as being the function of the special class for autistic pupils in your school? - Do you think that all students' needs can be met in a mainstream school? (Why do you think this? Can you give an example that may have informed your opinion on this?)
Theme: Teacher Education	- What skills or characteristics do you feel may be important for teachers in a special class setting? (Can you give me some examples? Why do you feel these are important? How would you identify these teachers among your staff?) - How are teaching positions in the special class filled? (everyone takes a turn, most experiences, volunteers?) - Where do you feel teacher's need the most support in teaching autistic pupils in a mainstream school? (How do they get this support? Can you give an example of what you mean?) - Education is also a big part of becoming a principal and taking on a management position. Do you feel that principals are provided with adequate training to create an inclusive school environment? (Can you give me an example of this in practise?)

Theme: Leadership	-	How would you typically support the operation of the special class in your school? (teacher support, involvement in IEPs, integration)
	-	How do you foster a whole-school approach to the inclusion of autistic pupils in your school? (staff collaboration, sharing of information, whole school CPD, etc.)
	-	How do you think you as a leader can impact a school's approach to inclusion? (attitudes, collaboration, altering environments)
	-	Do you feel that there are any areas in which principals need support in creating inclusive environments for autistic pupils in their schools?
Theme: Future Roles and Areas of Development for the Special Class	-	Can you tell me about some potential challenges and opportunities that your students and staff would face if all students with autism were to be fully educated in a mainstream classroom?
	-	Do you think there is a need for the class for autistic pupils?
	-	Can you think of any ways that we could improve upon the special class provision to create a more inclusive educational environment for our students with autism in special classes in mainstream schools?
Close	-	Thank you for your participation
	-	Reminder of right to withdraw and that they will be provided with a copy of the interview transcript

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