



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Educational provision for pupils with Specific Speech and Language Disorder:

Special Classes attached to Mainstream Primary Schools in Ireland

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Terms and abbreviations

BPVS3: British Picture Vocabulary Scale (Assessment)

CELF: Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (Assessment)

CPD: Continuing Professional Development

DEAP: Diagnostic Evaluation of Articulation and Phonology (Assessment)

DLDD: Developmental Language Disorder. This describes language difficulties experienced by children likely to endure into middle childhood and beyond, with a significant impact on everyday social interactions or educational progress

NCSE: National Council for Special Education

RAPT: Renfrew Action Picture Test (Assessment)

SEN: Special Educational Needs

SERC: Special Education Review Committee (1993)

SLI: Specific Language Impairment

SLT: Speech and Language Therapist

SNA: Special Needs Assistant

SSLD: Specific Speech and Language Disorder. This includes types of disorder which may involve difficulty with one or more of the main components of communication through spoken language, receptive and/or expressive, such as patterning and production of speech sounds, the message content, the syntax and grammar, or the use of speech in interacting with other people.

STAP 2: South Tyneside Assessment of Phonology 2 (Assessment)

TALC: Test of Abstract Language Comprehension (2) (Assessment)

UNCRPD: The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is a rights-based treaty which was adopted by the United Nations in 2006 to protect and reaffirm the human rights of people with disabilities

YARC: York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension (Assessment)

Executive Summary

The Irish education system makes provision for pupils' special educational needs (SEN) through a continuum of interventions ranging from additional support teaching in mainstream schools to placement in a special class or, in some cases, enrolment in a special school. As part of a review of overall SEN policy, the Department of Education asked the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to provide the Minister with policy advice on the future role of special classes and special schools in meeting learners' needs. The NCSE carried out extensive research and consultations to help it with the formulation of its policy advice and, in turn, asked the Inspectorate to examine educational provision in a sample of special classes for pupils with specific speech and language disorders (SSLD).

There are sixty-three special classes for pupils with SSLD attached to mainstream primary schools in dispersed geographical locations. These classes cater for pupils with a very specific set of language needs by enrolling them for a maximum of two years. The enrolment criteria for these classes originate from the recommendations of the Special Education Review Committee Report (SERC) (1993). As envisaged by SERC, the classes were designed to provide a time-limited, targeted intervention for children with severe impairments in their skills of understanding and expressing themselves through spoken language. SERC stipulated that the special classes should focus on a relatively narrow cohort of pupils whose language difficulty was not otherwise attributable to co-morbid factors such as general learning disability, deafness or behavioural challenges. Enrolment criteria for entry to the special SSLD classes do not align neatly with the current diagnostic definition (developmental language disorder DLD) which has been used by speech and language therapists in Ireland, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and New Zealand since 2017.

Therefore, the role of the special SSLD class is clearly designed to be at the highest level of the continuum of provision for those children most likely to benefit from co-ordinated teacher support as well as speech and language therapy (SLT) support for their language difficulties in small class groupings. As such, this specialist intervention is not intended to support all children with less complex speech and language needs as these needs should be met through other school or community-based language interventions.

Using the Primary SEN evaluation model, the Inspectorate inspected twenty-one special SSLD classes in early 2020. Inspectors made observations on teachers' practices. They applied ratings and submitted qualitative and quantitative data to generate the findings and recommendations contained in this report.

Inspectors noted that the enrolment policies and procedures for all of the special classes were aligned to the national criteria outlined in SERC. Principals, psychologists and speech and language therapists worked together on enrolment committees to prioritise enrolment for applicants with the highest language needs within the criteria. While in most cases the enrolment process operated smoothly, some schools indicated that there were difficulties caused by the divergence between the DLD diagnostic criteria and the narrower SSLD definitions, as well as the requirement for psychological assessments to establish children's intellectual ability.

Overall, inspectors found that the pupils attending the special classes were in the correct setting for their needs. Most pupils had to move school to enrol in the special class and a small number of pupils were travelling up to forty-five kilometres (one-way) to their new schools. This can have implications for pupil welfare and inclusion. Inspectors noted that there were good arrangements for pupils to integrate into mainstream lessons from most of the special classes and that there was an inclusive culture in most schools.

However, the enrolment of junior pupils into a special class located in a senior school made it difficult for those pupils to experience age-appropriate mainstream integration. However, overall there was evidence of some very good practice in relation to enabling pupils to transition into the special class setting and, more particularly, the role played by teachers and SLTs to prepare pupils for their return to mainstream education. There is scope for this practice to be extended across all remaining settings.

This report comments very favourably, overall, on the quality of teaching and learning in the special SSLD classes. Most of the special class teachers demonstrated good or very good subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills. Most teachers planned their work effectively, with due consideration of pupils' specific needs and the teaching approaches were usually very appropriate. Inspectors identified a small number of classes where teachers were not planning sufficiently for individual needs or differentiating their instruction appropriately.

When pupils enrol in a special class, it is very important that their specific language and educational needs are identified accurately to establish realistic targets and learning programmes. In almost all of the special SSLD classes, teachers, in collaboration with the speech and language therapists, had devised suitable individualised support plans to direct the educational and language programme for pupils. In the majority of cases, the quality of targets examined was good and, in some cases, there was very good collaboration with the SLT resulting in plans which included speech and language therapy targets, as well as targets in other areas of the curriculum.

There was evidence in most cases that individual plans were reviewed regularly and, for most pupils, inspectors could identify commendable progress for pupils in the areas of literacy, motor skills, social development, pupils' written work and communication skills. A very small number of teachers had not devised individualised plans for their pupils and this lack of planning detracted from the coherence of pupil supports. Inspectors commented very favourably about the quality of pupils' learning in almost all of the special classes. Pupils engaged purposefully in meaningful learning activities in most lessons and they experienced respectful interactions which encouraged their growth as learners.

This series of evaluations highlighted the desire of some parents and teachers to ensure that pupils continue to study Irish either formally or informally during their special SSLD class placements. Some parents and teachers opted for Irish to be taught at a particular level in preparation for the pupil's return to mainstream education. The evidence suggests a need for the Department, NCSE and relevant professionals to further analyse issues relating to Irish language learning, specifically examining the advisability or implications of teaching a

second language during the placement and the longer term impact of the discontinuity of Irish instruction for pupils from special SSLD classes returning to mainstream schools.

Schools highly value the services of the SLTs allocated to them to support the work of the special classes. There was evidence that many SLTs shared professional knowledge very effectively with teachers. Co-professional approaches between SLTs and teachers have huge potential to integrate educational and therapeutic practice to support pupils' needs. Inspectors described some very effective collaboration between SLTs and teachers, sometimes exemplified by joint classroom practice focused on agreed language programmes.

However, there has been a reduction of HSE-provided SLT supports to the classes in recent years. Originally there was a commitment to provide for a minimum of twenty hours' SLT support per week to capitalise on co-professional collaboration and to improve continuity of support for pupils. This level of SLT support should be restored to meet pupils' needs and to match the Department of Education's continued funding to provide a very favourable pupil-teacher ratio in these classes. Notwithstanding the reductions in provision, teachers acknowledged the expertise SLTs contributed to assessment while also advising on approaches, individual planning, co-teaching and individual therapy.

The special SSLD classes are at the highest end of the continuum of provision for children with severe speech and language impairments. As such, they are relatively few in number and their locations are regionally dispersed. Provision in these settings has, in general, been rated positively by inspectors. The concept of having joint therapeutic and educational supports in a school setting is attractive and where professional collaboration approaches are agreed they can be very effective. The disparity in definition between the DLD diagnostic and original SSLD enrolment criteria needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency to ensure that the pupils most in need of this specialised support will continue to be prioritised for enrolment. It will be equally important that pupils with lesser language needs, but who might fit into the broader DLD diagnostic category, are supported more appropriately throughout the educational system. This may be achieved by enhancing SLT supports to mainstream schools, upskilling mainstream and special education teachers and by enhancing modules on language difficulties in initial teacher education and post-graduate courses.

Special SSLD classes differ significantly from other types of special classes in that almost all of the pupils return to mainstream education. The pupils are carefully selected and there is usually a good intervention plan and provision for transition back to the mainstream school. This fluidity allows the classes to serve many pupils. When the inclusion implications of UNCRPD - Section 24 (2) for the Irish educational system are fully determined by policy makers, the ultimate role of this particular type of short-term intervention may be transposed into new structures. In the meantime, the provision, with the improvements suggested in the following recommendations, is an effective support for those pupils with the greatest language needs. The recommendations are made in the current context within a continuum of placements being provided for pupils with special educational needs, namely mainstream schools, special classes attached to mainstream schools and special schools.

Main Recommendations

- There is an urgent need for the Department, in consultation with the NCSE, the HSE and representatives of relevant clinicians, to analyse all aspects of the disparity between the existing criteria for enrolment in special SSLD classes and the wider DLD criteria currently used by SLTs for diagnostic purposes.
- The Department, in consultation with its education partners, should examine how pupils with lesser SSLD or DLD needs can be supported more consistently in mainstream education to ensure that the special SSLD classes continue to be reserved for pupils with the greatest levels of need.
- The Department, NCSE and other relevant professionals should examine the advisability or implications of teaching a second language to pupils during their placement in SSLD classes and the longer term impact of the discontinuity of Irish instruction for pupils from these classes returning to mainstream schools.
- At a local level, NCSE should discourage the location of junior special classes in senior primary schools as this approach presents difficulty for meaningful mainstream integration.
- School leaders should ensure that, wherever possible, teachers allocated to the special SSLD classes are experienced practitioners with relevant additional qualifications in special educational needs. This should be augmented by encouraging teachers to engage in relevant CPD.
- To meet pupils' needs and to match the Department of Education's continued funding to provide a very favourable pupil-teacher ratio in these classes, the HSE should reinstate the original commitment to provide for a minimum of twenty hours SLT support per week to capitalise on co-professional collaboration and to improve continuity of support for pupils.
- School leaders and SLT managers should encourage teachers and SLTs attached to special SSLD classes to work collaboratively and to maximise the potential synergy of co-teaching approaches to support pupils' needs.
- All teachers in special SSLD classes should engage pupils with dialogic language teaching methodologies designed to scaffold and extend pupils' expressive oral language.
- All teachers in special SSLD classes should collaborate with the SLT, parents and any other relevant professionals to devise individualised plans and targets for each pupil and to review progress in respect of these plans on a regular basis.

Chapter 1 Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

In 2019, the Department of Education and Skills asked the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to provide the Minister with policy advice on the future role of special classes and special schools in meeting learners' needs. The NCSE engaged in a wide programme of research and consultation to gather information to guide the policy advice. As part of this process, the NCSE requested the Inspectorate to design and conduct a focused evaluation of the quality of education provided in a sample of special classes for children with severe speech and language disorders who meet the criteria for access to classes for children with specific speech and language disorders (SSLD). In that regard, the Inspectorate conducted a series of special education evaluations early in 2020 in a sample of mainstream primary schools which have special SSLD classes for pupils with severe speech and language disorders. The findings arising from these evaluations inform this report.

The purpose of the evaluations was to examine the quality of provision for children with SSLD, with particular reference to understanding the placement of children in these classes and to identifying the strengths and areas for improvement in teaching and learning in the classes. This composite report is intended to inform policy makers about the overall effectiveness of special SSLD classes in the context of emerging international trends for inclusion.

Special SSLD classes are designed to offer intensive speech and language intervention integrated within a fully differentiated curriculum. This is based on the premise that good speech, language and communication skills are critically important for children to enable them to develop social and educational skills. Being able to understand language and to express oneself using language is recognised as an essential gateway for learning across most areas of the curriculum.

1.2 Policy context

The rationale for the existence of special classes, including special SSLD classes, has been influenced by a range of evolving international and national policy decisions. This section examines the origin of these decisions and discusses their impact on educational provision for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in the Irish context.

Since the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), many countries have developed policy frameworks designed to enable all children with special educational needs (SEN) to be educated in their local communities. The report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC, 1993) outlined the following seven principles designed to serve as basic guidelines for the future development of the education system in Ireland:

1. All children, including those with special educational needs, have a right to an appropriate education.
2. The needs of the individual child should be the paramount consideration when decisions are being made concerning the provision of special education for that child.
3. The parents of a child with special educational needs are entitled, and should be enabled, to play an active part in the decision-making process; their wishes should be taken into consideration when recommendations on special educational provision are being made.
4. A continuum of services should be provided for children with special educational needs ranging from full-time education in ordinary classes, with additional support as may be necessary, to full-time education in special schools.
5. Except where individual circumstances make this impracticable, appropriate education for all children with special educational needs should be provided in ordinary schools.
6. Only in the most exceptional of circumstances should it be necessary for a child to live away from home in order to avail of an appropriate education.
7. The State should provide adequate resources to ensure that pupils with special educational needs can have an education appropriate to those needs.

The Irish education system emphasises the importance of having a continuum of educational provision that is available, as required, to support students with a range of disabilities or additional needs. Depending on the level of need, education can be provided in mainstream classes, special classes or in special schools. Following policy advice provided by the NCSE in 2013, the Department is committed to ensuring that provision for all children is underpinned by the following principles:

- All children, irrespective of special educational need, are welcome and able to enrol in their local schools.
- All educational supports are allocated equitably to schools in line with the educational needs of students.
- All students with special educational needs have access to available educational supports in line with their needs.
- Students with special educational needs have an individualised assessment which informs teaching and learning and forms one part of an ongoing and cyclical process of assessment, intervention and review of outcomes.
- Available resources are used to maximum effect to drive improved outcomes for children; State services work together to achieve this.
- Parents' role as the natural and primary educators of the child is respected.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), is a rights-based treaty which was adopted by the United Nations in 2006 to protect and reaffirm the human rights of people with disabilities. The Irish Government signed the Convention in 2007 and subsequently ratified it in March 2018. Section 24 (Part 2) requires States to ensure that "persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education

system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability.” It also requires that “persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live.” The future implications of Ireland’s signing of this convention need to be examined carefully, with particular reference to the current continuum of educational provision determined by disability or diagnosis.

As with many other disability categories, the level and severity of needs experienced by individual pupils with SSLD or specific language impairments (SLI) vary considerably along a continuum. However, those children with a developmental language disorder (DLD) diagnosis who will require a special class placement should only comprise the subset for whom the severity and pervasiveness of their needs indicates that they require a more intensive integrated therapeutic approach within their educational setting.

Many SSLD (and DLD) needs can be addressed routinely through mainstream education with differentiated mainstream provision and with additional teaching supports. Most children with SSLD/DLD will benefit from speech and language therapy (SLT) input and this is often received following referral from health professionals, parents or schools. Prior to the introduction of the Department’s special education teacher (SET) allocation model for mainstream schools in 2017, pupils with SSLD diagnoses in mainstream schools could access 3 hours 24 minutes of additional resource teaching per week to address their particular needs. From 2017, mainstream schools were given the flexibility to allocate their special education teaching hours on the basis of identified learning needs rather than on a disability category through use of the *Continuum of Support* approach. Accordingly, most pupils with SSLD are educated in mainstream classes with appropriate levels of SET supports. A temporary special class placement is only available to those pupils with SSLD whose needs meet the Department’s prescribed criteria and their return to mainstream class is mandatory after a two-year placement period in the special class.

1.3 Origin of the special SSLD classes

The origin of this type of special class provision can be traced back to the recommendations of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC, 1993). SERC defined pupils with SSLD as:

Those whose non-verbal ability is in the average band or higher and whose skill in understanding or expressing themselves through the medium of spoken language is severely impaired. Their disability is not attributable, however, to factors such as defective hearing, emotional or behavioural disorders or a physical condition. The disorders may involve difficulty with one or more of the main components of communication through spoken language, receptive and/or expressive, such as patterning and production of speech sounds, the message

content, the syntax and grammar, or the use of speech in interacting with other people.

The Committee proposed a range of interventions to support pupils with SSLD, including:

- Early identification and intervention
- A curriculum that is taught through the medium of the language of the home, which does not include a second language and, while similar to that followed by their peers in mainstream classes, has a particular and constant emphasis on the language involved in each subject area
- A structured language programme matched to identified needs
- Intensive speech and language therapy
- Opportunities to interact with other children in ordinary classes; and
- The adoption of a co-ordinated approach by parents and teachers in relation to the child's language development.

Among its conclusions, the SERC Report recommended “the establishment of special classes in designated ordinary schools with a pupil-teacher appointment ratio of 7:1 and a speech therapy service, at present being provided through the relevant health board, to assist the designated ordinary school in catering for such pupils”. Arrangements to institute and administer these special classes were put in place through a range of Department Circulars culminating in the current provisions of Circular 38/2007.

1.4 Operation of special SSLD classes

The Department of Education funds an additional capitation grant for each pupil enrolled in the special class. The Health Service Executive funds the provision of speech and language therapy services for the classes and therapists work on the school premises for various durations each week. The therapists and special class teachers are expected to collaborate professionally to ensure that pupils have access to an appropriately integrated balance of therapeutic support and curriculum provision to meet their specific needs.

Currently, enrolment in the special SSLD classes is regulated by the following Department of Education criteria:

- The pupil has been assessed by a psychologist on a standardised test of intellectual ability that places non-verbal ability within the average range or above (i.e. non-verbal IQ of 90, or above).

- The pupil has been assessed by a speech and language therapist on a standardised test of language development that places performance in one or more of the main areas of speech and language development at two standard deviations or more below the mean, or at a generally equivalent level. (i.e. 2 standard deviations or below, at or below a standard score of 70).
- The pupil's difficulties are not attributable to hearing impairment; where the pupil is affected to some degree by hearing impairment, the hearing threshold for the speech-related frequencies should be 40Db.
- Emotional and behavioural disorders or a physical disability are not considered to be primary causes.

A qualifying pupil is enrolled in the special class for one year initially, and this may be extended to a maximum of two years. Due to the regional location of the special SSLD classes, most pupils will need to transfer to a different school to access this type of SSLD support. Following this period of intervention, pupils return to mainstream education, generally in their original schools. In instances where there is spare capacity in a special SSLD class because of an insufficient number of children who meet the criteria, the board of management may offer a place to a maximum of two pupils who do not meet the eligibility criteria, but who could benefit from enrolment in the class for one year on a concessionary basis. Such concessionary placements must be supported by the recommendation of a speech and language therapist and/or psychologist.

1.5 International practice

Educational provision for pupils with specific language needs varies internationally. Many countries, however, operate a tiered range of supports. The United Kingdom (UK) offers a range of supports, including mainstream education interventions, language resource sections in mainstream schools, specialist speech and language schools and local authority special schools. Australia operates a similar system of dedicated language schools accessible by a commissioning process based on pupils' needs. In countries such as Belgium and Greece, most pupils with language impairments usually attend local mainstream schools, sometimes with extra SLT supports, while a very small number of pupils with more pronounced needs attend special schools. In the USA, SLTs are employed directly by the schools to provide supports locally.

1.6 Relevant Irish evaluation and research

In 2005, the Inspectorate published its findings from a series of evaluations carried out in 2002 in special SSLD classes. The evaluations initially gathered data from fifty-four SSLD classes through use of questionnaires and profiles. Inspectors conducted a more focused evaluation of sixteen special SSLD classes through classroom visits, document reviews, interviews and a meeting with parents. Overall, the 2005 report

concluded that the special classes were working well, but it provided recommendations about prioritising early intervention, better adherence to enrolment procedures and wider dissemination of information about entry criteria. For schools, the report recommended additional professional development for teachers, more effective integration of pupils, improved assessment practices and the incorporation of the special class into whole-school policy. Almost all of these recommendations have since been implemented as a result of directions issued in Department Circulars and information provided by the NCSE.

Qualitative case-study research commissioned by NCSE (2016) noted that the speech and language classes it examined were seen as “providing a mechanism in which to bring students academically up-to-speed with their mainstream peers”. The researchers concluded that “in the intervention setting of the speech and language class, students made ‘huge gains, both socially and academically.’ However, the report also highlighted difficulties with reduced provision of speech and language therapy supports for the special class due to financial cutbacks. The researchers were also critical of the fact that pupils in the special class had “little or no integration with mainstream classes during the intervention period” and that this might pose difficulties for them in transitioning back to their mainstream classes at the end of their placements.

In preparing for the 2020 special SSLD class evaluations, the Inspectorate took account of the 2005 evaluation findings, the implementation of the recommendations and any changes in national policy and inspection practices since 2005 to assist the design of the evaluation approach. For the sake of consistency and comparability, the evaluation design followed similar parameters to those used in the Inspectorate’s 2020 report on the quality of educational provision in special classes for learners with autism¹.

¹ [Education-provision-for-learners-with-autism-spectrum-disorder-in-special-classes-attached-to-mainstream-schools-in-ireland](#)

Chapter 2 Evaluation Focus and Methodology

2.1 Understanding the special class context

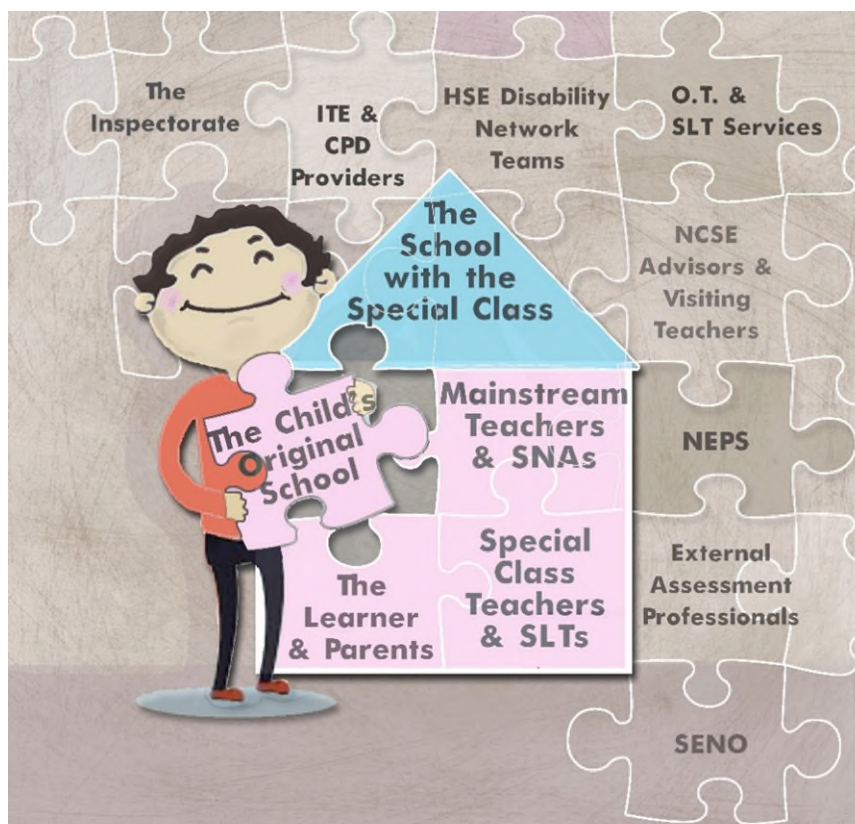
In its advice to schools when setting up any type of special class, the NCSE provides the following description of the provision:

Special classes are part of a continuum of educational provision that enables students with more complex special educational needs to be educated, in smaller class groups. They offer a supportive learning environment to students who are unable to access the curriculum in a mainstream class, even with support, for most or all of their school day. Students enrolled in special classes should be included in mainstream classes to the greatest extent possible, in line with their abilities.

Currently, there are sixty-three special SSLD classes attached to forty-five mainstream primary schools. These classes are in schools located across the country, though they are more frequently to be found in larger schools in urban or town settings.

While special SSLD classes operate within the context of designated mainstream schools, most pupils enrolling in such classes need to leave their original schools and travel some distance to attend a designated school. Enrolment in special SSLD classes is limited to a maximum duration of two years and is subject to very specific criteria. Entry eligibility is typically determined locally by a committee comprising the school principal, HSE speech and language therapists and their managers and a NEPS, or other, psychologist.

At a whole-school level, the effective operation of special SSLD classes depends largely on the quality of leadership provided by the principal and the school management team. In the areas of teaching and learning, it is essential that there is appropriate co-operation and professional collaboration between the special class teacher, the speech and language therapist (SLT) and mainstream teachers and special needs assistants (SNA). The following graphic illustrates some of the agencies and professionals whose efforts contribute to the successful operation of a special class.



2.2 Evaluation focus

The main purpose of this series of evaluations was to observe practice and provision for children with special educational needs with particular reference in these inspections to the quality of provision in special classes for pupils with SSLD. It was decided to use the Inspectorate's Evaluation of Provision for Pupils with Special Education Needs – Primary (SEN-P) inspection model for this purpose, because it has both the flexibility and focus required to examine educational provision in both mainstream and special class settings within a whole-school context. As outlined in the published guide² for the SEN-P inspection model, inspectors report on the following questions:

- How good are the learning outcomes of pupils with special educational needs?
- Is the school using the resources it receives for pupils with special educational needs to improve outcomes for pupils with special educational needs?

As these two questions were consistent with the key focus of the research, it was decided to use this evaluation model to carry out the research project. By using the SEN

² [A-Guide-to-Inspection-in-Primary-Schools](#)

evaluation model, inspectors were enabled to report on provision and outcomes for pupils with SEN through the school's published report while also contributing to the overall evidence base of this composite report.

The SEN evaluation model has the advantage of being able to examine provision for SEN at whole-school level while also providing inspectors with evidence from a range of settings, including special classes. During SEN evaluations, inspectors visit classes, engage with pupils and review their work. They also review individual plans and assessment data and administer parent questionnaires. Inspectors meet with teachers, the SEN team, school leadership and they also conduct focus group meetings with pupils and special needs assistants.

2.3 Inspection methodology

The Inspectorate examined the NCSE's published list of schools with special SSLD classes and its own school inspection history records to identify a number of different types of schools around the country for inspection. Within this sample, some schools had only one special SSLD class while many had two. Inspectorate management identified a small group of regionally-based inspectors with particular expertise and experience in evaluating special education provision to carry out the evaluations. Inspectors were asked to work in pairs and to alternate the reporting inspector role for the purpose of processing the school reports. In the context of conducting the SEN inspections, inspectors were required to complete evaluation schedules which focused on relevant aspects of schools' provision and practice in the special SSLD classes. In addition to submitting these schedules for analysis, inspectors were also invited to provide further qualitative commentary on areas where practice was judged to be particularly effective or ineffective.

A structured online meeting of inspectors involved in the school visits was convened in April 2020 during which the key features of practices observed in SSLD classes in the schools were discussed. Inspectors were asked to collaboratively review their draft inspection reports and their observation notes to provide additional examples and qualitative commentary structured around the key themes of this report. This meeting provided the inspectors and the authors with the opportunity to discuss and analyse examples of practice more comprehensively with reference to the school context and the extent to which particular practices were replicated nationally.

2.4 The inspection visits

The inspection visits were carried out in the spring of 2020 in the selected schools in accordance with agreed inspection procedures. Each inspection resulted in a published

SEN Evaluation report on the school involved.³ When the publication process for each evaluation was complete, reporting inspectors submitted completed data on the special SSLD classes to the authors of this composite report.

While the Inspectorate had originally planned to evaluate provision in 25 special SSLD classes, the closure of schools on 12 March due to COVID-19 resulted in some evaluations not being carried out. Inspectors succeeded in visiting and completing returns on 21 special SSLD classes. These responses were collated and analysed under each heading to produce a range of tables and graphs representing the percentages for each rating of quality applied. Qualitative comments for each heading were collated to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses recorded by inspectors to explain their ratings for the quality of practice.

2.5 Presenting the evidence

This following chapter presents the results of the evaluations as indicated by analysis of the various sources of evidence. The chapter identifies strengths and challenges in the operation of the special classes and outlines commentary on the effectiveness of provision. Evaluative commentary on the quality of educational provision is presented in line with the Inspectorate's five-point Quality Continuum (Appendix 2). Where percentages are not presented in numeric form, they are represented by the qualitative terms explained in the following table:

More than 90%	Almost all
75% – 90%	Most
51% – 74%	Majority / more than half
50%	Half
25% – 49%	Less than half / a significant minority
16% – 24%	A small number / less than a quarter
Less than 15%	A few

Towards the end of Chapter 3, there is a summary relating to the quality of provision in the special SSLD classes which signals the overall conclusions and recommendations of the report.

³ <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluations-of-Provision-for-Pupils-with-Special-Educational-Needs-in-Primary-Schools/>

2.6 Limitations of the report

The findings in this report draw from the SEN evaluations carried out during a very short timeframe in early 2020. The intended number of special classes evaluated was reduced slightly because of the COVID-19-related school closures. The evidence base relies heavily on inspectors' observations and quality ratings, their interactions with teachers and pupils, collection of data, and analysis of the overall effectiveness of provision for pupils in the special classes. Readers should also be aware that while the numeric results in this report are presented in respect of each special SSLD class, some schools in the sample had only one special class, but others had two or more. Consequently, the results reflect percentages of classes and not the percentage of schools involved.

The results and findings of this report reflect inspectors' opinions of the outcomes currently being achieved by the pupils in their special classes and any evidence of progression since the pupils enrolled. The authors are unable to draw any conclusions about the longer-term outcomes for pupils with SSLD after they return to their mainstream classes following the two-year placement. Researching this aspect comprehensively would entail designing a much larger evaluation project to determine, to the extent that is possible, the longitudinal impact of SSLD class provision on a sample of pupils.

Primary SEN evaluations have been conducted in schools since late 2016 and the model is well established. However, its procedures do not yet include opportunities for inspectors to engage with the parents of children in the special classes through focus group interviews. While parents of children with SEN were afforded an opportunity to respond to a paper-based survey, this was carried out anonymously and therefore it was not possible to accurately isolate the responses from parents with children in the special classes.

Chapter 3 Results and Key Findings

This chapter outlines the findings of the visits to the special SSLD classes in quantitative and qualitative terms. The chapter concludes with some key messages on the operation of these classes.

3.1 Enrolment and appropriate placement of pupils

As outlined in Chapter 1, the Department has specified a very precise set of criteria in Circular 38/2007 for the enrolment of pupils into special SSLD classes. Notwithstanding this national guidance, each school formulates its own enrolment or admissions policy, and usually there are separate policies for entry to the mainstream school and the special classes. Inspectors examined the enrolment policies for all of the special classes and, in all cases, found that the schools had prioritised enrolment criteria correctly for those pupils most likely to benefit from the placement, and that the procedures outlined for processing enrolment applications were consistent with these criteria (*Figure 1*). Inspectors also judged that the pupils enrolled in all of the special classes were in the correct setting for their needs. Inspectors reported that the enrolment selection process is managed by a committee usually comprising the principal, the special class teacher, speech and language therapists and a psychologist. The committees apply a rating scale to each enrolment application to prioritise places for the children with the greatest needs within the criteria. A waiting list is established if necessary. While acknowledging the expertise of the enrolment committee, one inspection report advised that the formal communication of enrolment decisions be delivered by the school's board of management to comply with school admissions' responsibilities:

The school is highly commended for the collaborative, interagency approach employed to prioritising pupils for enrolment in the special class ... However, it is recommended that applications for places in the class be received by the school board of management rather than the interagency advisory board and that the board communicates the decisions regarding enrolment to all parents of applicants.

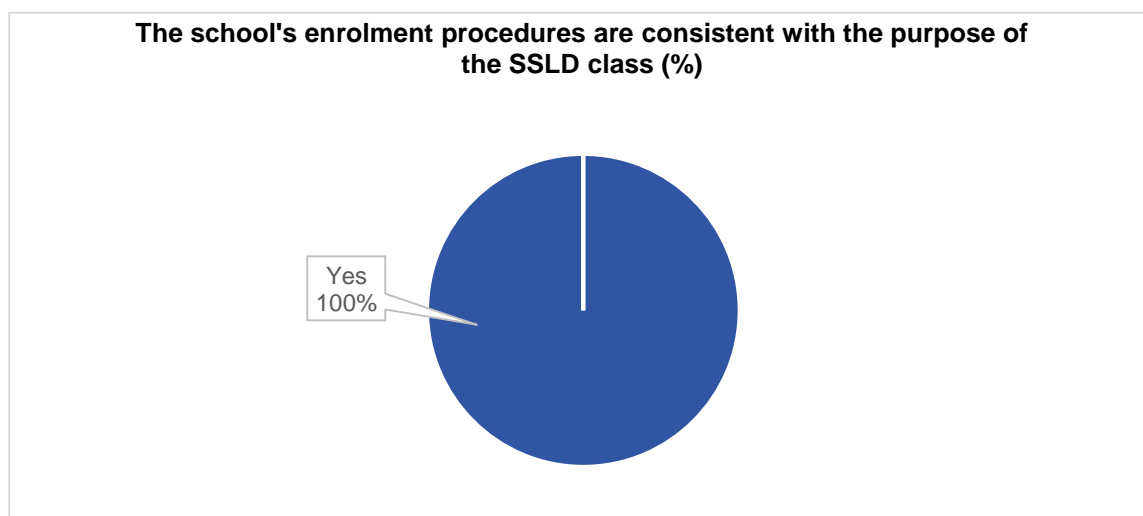


Figure 1

Despite schools' apparent success in outlining enrolment criteria and the very small number of Section 29 appeals (under the Education Act 1998)⁴ by parents against decisions to refuse enrolment, teachers (in some cases supported by the speech and language therapists) in almost half of the classes reported some difficulties with interpretations of the enrolment criteria (*Figure 2*). The main reason for difficulty is based on a view that the Department's published criteria for SSLD class placement are too narrow and that they do not take account of the current system of diagnosis for DLD being used by speech and language therapists. Specifically, some teachers and SLTs argued that the IQ cut-off at 90, and the SLT assessment requirement for two standard deviations below the mean, excludes many pupils with DLD from satisfying the criteria for entry to the SSLD classes. While a move to using a more holistic definition to revise the enrolment criteria might allow more pupils to compete for the very limited number of SSLD special class places, it would not guarantee priority placement for those pupils with DLD with the greatest levels of need in specialist educational provision.

Some local difficulties regarding psychological assessments were reported which highlight a lack of clarity on whether the HSE or NEPS had the responsibility for carrying out assessments for particular children. NEPS does not currently have a role with pre-school children. For children already enrolled in mainstream settings, NEPS typically becomes involved in direct assessment work in cases where the child has not responded to school-based intervention and support. These cases are identified through the school planning process in consultation with the principal.

It was also stated by some SLTs that pupils with behavioural issues were less likely to satisfy the current enrolment criteria because it was sometimes difficult to establish if the behavioural issues were caused by frustration with the child's own inability to

⁴ The Education Act 1998

communicate through speech. Inspectors were also alerted by SLTs to concerns about the 40db hearing requirement and whether this should be an unaided (i.e. without a hearing aid) value.

While acknowledging these viewpoints as areas for further exploration, the intended purpose of the special SSLD classes should remain central to future decision-making for policy makers. The classes were established as part of an overall continuum of supports for a small cohort of pupils with very specific language needs and there is already a high demand nationally for the limited number of places from those who satisfy the existing criteria. To provide greater clarity for schools, it is recommended that the apparent disparity between the new DLD definition, specifically those within this category who require specialist therapeutic and educational supports and the current SSLD class entry requirements, be further explored jointly by the Department, NCSE, NEPS, Health Service Executive (HSE), SLTs and other key stakeholders. This exploration should also examine the resultant effects on enrolment and SSLD class capacity.

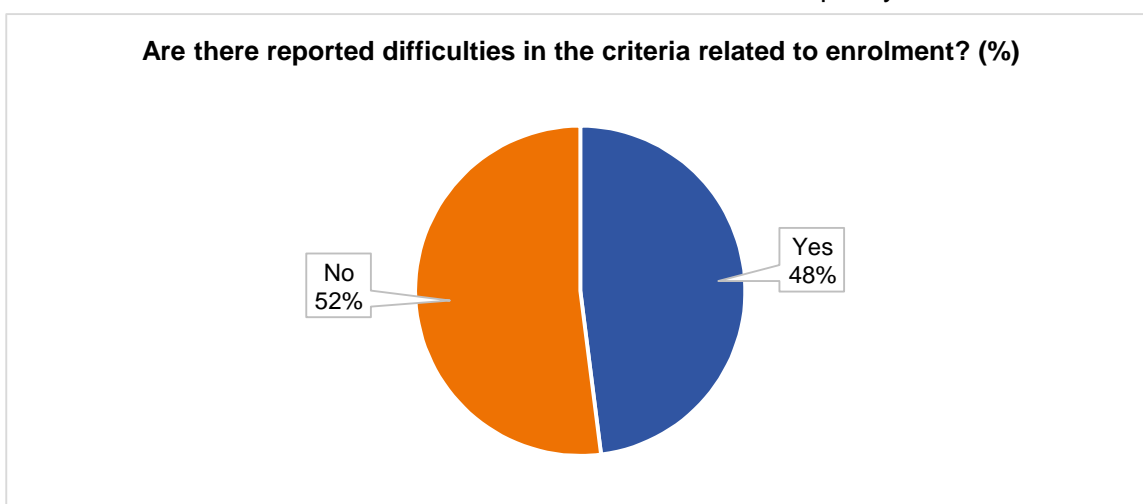


Figure 2

3.2 Transitions

Depending on pupils' ages, they may transfer into the special class from a mainstream class in the same school or from another school in the broader locality. In some cases, children are provided with special transport arrangements to travel up to 45 km to attend the special class, and it is difficult for them to maintain contact with their local school during their placement. It is notable also that the small number of pupils enrolling in the special class at fifth-class level do not return to their original primary school because they transfer into post-primary education.

These issues of distance and separation may have implications for the child's sense of inclusion. For some pupils, their first experience of primary school may be their enrolment in the special SSLD class. Depending on the entry route, the special classes have implemented a range of practices to assist pupils transitioning into the class.

Where inspectors identified very effective arrangements for pupils transitioning into the special classes, these arrangements sometimes involved the SLT and special class teacher visiting the pupils' early-years' setting and engaging with the parents to ensure that all relevant information was shared to assist with the transition. For older pupils, there were sometimes opportunities to visit the special class with their parents informally in early spring. These parents got the opportunity see the school and class, and meet the relevant staff and the teacher and SLT got the chance to meet the child. Best practice in managing transitions into and out of special classes should involve familiarising the pupil with the new learning setting, sharing of relevant progress records between the existing and new settings and collaborative planning to build on prior learning achievements.

Some schools have arrangements in place for pupils to maintain links with their base schools during their placement in the special class. Examples of these include pupils writing to their classmates, attending key school events or, where relevant, receiving sacraments with their peers in their base schools. However, in most cases, communication between the schools reportedly diminishes throughout the first year of placement and recommences in the final terms of the second year to assist with the transition back to the mainstream class. During these final terms, many of the special classes encourage pupils to return to their mainstream class on particular days. The SLT and the special class teacher may visit the mainstream school and discharge and follow-up meetings are arranged. On discharge, relevant information on the pupil's progress is shared with the parents and the mainstream school, and the SLT usually links with the community SLT about transferring case responsibility. On return to their mainstream classes, pupils may continue to access the appropriate level of support for their learning needs under the *Continuum of Support* process. To assist with the continuity of educational care it is recommended that with parental consent, the special class teacher and the special education team from the pupil's base school maintain regular contact throughout the placement to foster continuity in the learning programmes.

3.3 Who are the pupils enrolled?

There were seven pupils (the maximum allowed) enrolled in all but one of the special classes visited. In exceptional cases where a special class is not operating at its maximum enrolment capacity, the school has flexibility to grant concessionary enrolment to pupils outside the prescribed criteria. Almost all pupils in the classes inspected fitted the strict enrolment criteria and permitted concessionary enrolments were noted in only a very small number of classes. Typically, pupils were quite young with almost all of the special classes catering for pupils ranging in age from four to eight. There were two classes with senior pupils (3rd to 6th class) enrolled. The overall pattern of enrolment in the classes evaluated appears to indicate a move towards earlier assessment and intervention for speech and language needs, an approach recommended in the

Inspectorate's 2005 report⁵. The enrolment of younger pupils in these special classes was appropriate because almost all of the classes were attached to junior or vertical schools and the placement provided possibilities for integration with pupils' peers. In a very small number of instances there were junior pupils attending a special class in a senior school, an arrangement which would render age-appropriate integration very difficult. To address such apparent anomalies, NCSE, at a local level, should examine the age-appropriateness of pupil placements in senior schools with an emphasis on locating early intervention SSLD classes for younger pupils in junior or vertical schools where HSE-funded SLT support is available.

Regarding the pupils' needs, almost all of them presented with specific speech and language impairment as their primary diagnosis (*Figure 3*). Inspectors also noted examples of severe DLD, articulation disorders, speech dyspraxia, mild hearing loss and moderate expressive language difficulties among the descriptors of some pupils' needs in almost half of the classes. In a small number of cases there were pupils who had also been diagnosed with conditions such as specific learning needs, cystic fibrosis, low muscle tone or sensory needs as co-morbidity issues.

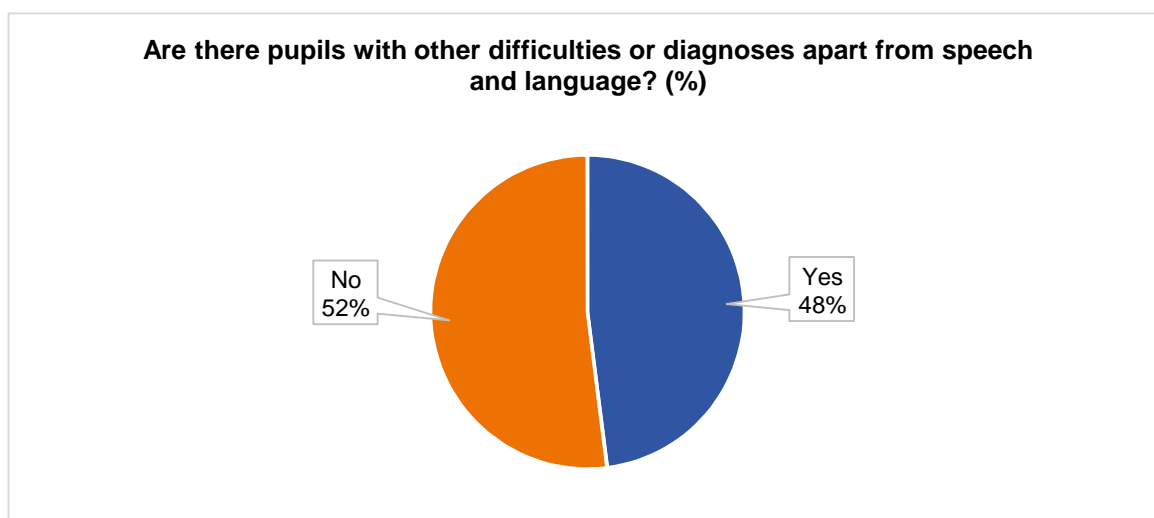


Figure 3

⁵ An Evaluation of Special Classes for Pupils with Specific Speech and Language Disorder 2005

Most pupils in the classes used English as their first language, but there were a small number of pupils in over half of the classes whose home language was not English (*Figure 4*). This additional language need sometimes posed challenges for teachers and speech and language therapists in communicating with the children and their parents. In some schools, the SLTs use the services of independent interpreters to communicate with children in their home language in order to make a distinction between language delays and difficulties. Some teachers and SLTs report difficulty in promoting the home language as parents tend to revert to English once it is evident that there is a problem with their child's language and communication. In these cases, the school encourages the parents to speak their home language with the child to improve fluency and confidence.

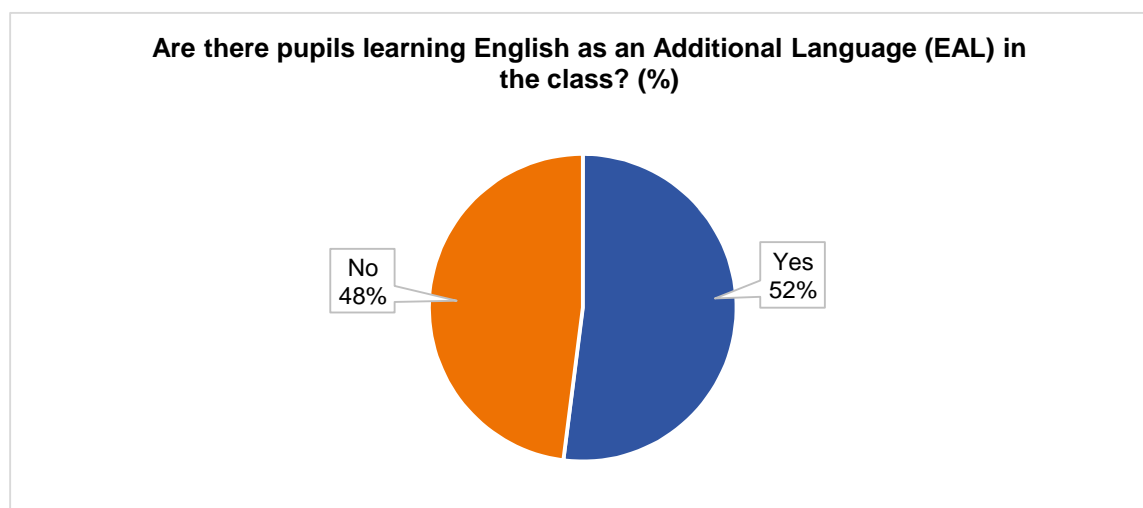


Figure 4

In all cases, pupils were enrolled in the special class for one year, initially, and following the end of year formal review, almost all pupils were enrolled for their second and final year. There were some views expressed by a very small number of teachers and SLTs that the two-year limit appeared to be arbitrary. However, at the time of the evaluation, inspectors found no evidence of any pupil remaining in the special classes beyond the maximum term of two years. At the end of the placement, most pupils returned to mainstream education in their original schools, although it was reported that some local children enrolled in a mainstream class in the school where the special class was located instead of in their original schools. Inspectors reported that a very small number of pupils moved to some other type of special educational setting such as another type of special class or a special school. It is not always clear why these pupils move to such settings, but sometimes it can be explained by a new diagnosis linked to needs associated with other co-morbid conditions.

3.4 Integration and inclusion of pupils

Inspectors commented positively on the extent to which pupils from the special classes integrated into mainstream classes for various activities. While provision in the special classes is intended to be specialised and focussed on pupils' particular speech and language needs, some integration with mainstream is desirable to foster inclusion and belonging for these pupils who are often new to the school. *Figure 5* indicates that schools ensure that at least some pupils from most of the special classes have integration opportunities. One school's inspection report notes that:

... Meaningful inclusion is a well-established feature of practice with integration and reverse integration of pupils in the special classes and of pupils in the mainstream classes.

Some schools published their approach to integration in their admission policies in phrases such as "the pupils in the Language Class are integrated with the other pupils at playtime, during school trips and outings, and through integration during non-core subjects". Typically, integration occurred for subject areas such as Visual Arts, Physical Education (PE), Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Music. Despite the intention that Irish would not be taught as a second language during the placement, a very small number of pupils integrate during mainstream Irish lessons at their parents' request in order to maintain their connection and continuity with the language. Some schools integrate pupils from the special class into mainstream activities such as station teaching, Aistear: *the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and school assemblies.

Decisions about integration for individual pupils are usually taken by the special class teacher on the basis of pupils' needs and their ability to integrate. Periods of integration often increase during the final term of the placement as a means of preparing the pupils for their full return to mainstream education. In a very small number of cases, inspection reports recommend that further opportunities should be provided for pupils from the special classes to integrate with their mainstream peers. In some of the settings where integration was either not provided for or not provided for very well, teachers cited the lack of an SNA for the class as a barrier to integration as there would be no adult available to bring the pupils from room to room. Another special class teacher also expressed a view that the attainment level of the particular cohort of pupils in that class was too low for integration to be either meaningful or beneficial. While these are indeed barriers, neither provides sufficient reason to deny pupils in the special SSLD

opportunities to be included meaningfully in mainstream school life through an appropriate programme of integration or reverse integration.

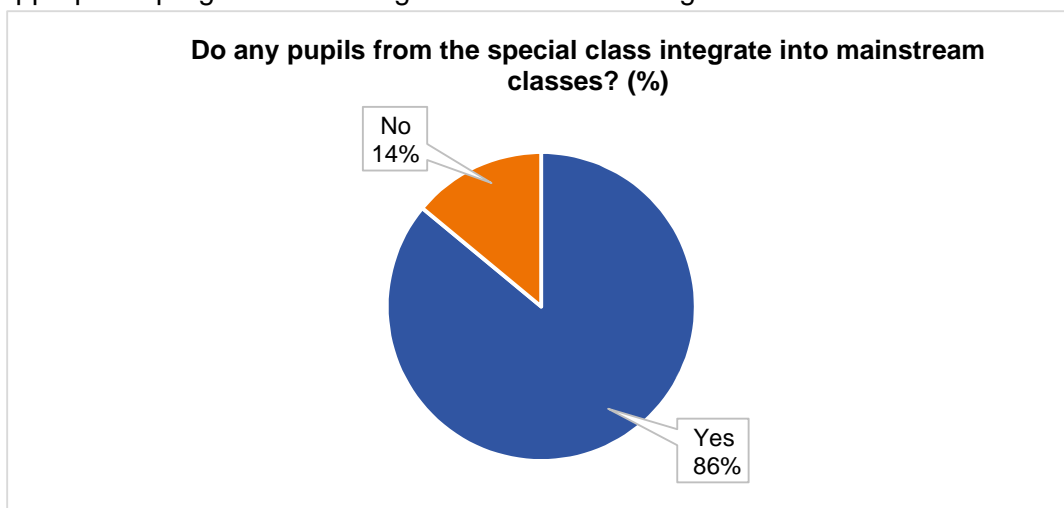


Figure 5

In almost half of the special classes there were some opportunities provided for mainstream pupils to integrate into the special class (*Figure 6*). In a few cases, this occurred occasionally and without any particular plan. The most common form of integration involved mainstream pupils joining the special class for specific interventions in literacy, phonological awareness or buddy reading. In a few cases, children from mainstream classes regularly joined the special class free play sessions. Schools should ensure that frequent periods of integration are planned, with a particular emphasis on providing additional supports for mainstream pupils in key aspects of language development and providing peer audiences for pupils in the special class as they practise their conversational skills. Integration should be planned purposefully and the intended outcomes for the pupils involved should be monitored consistently.

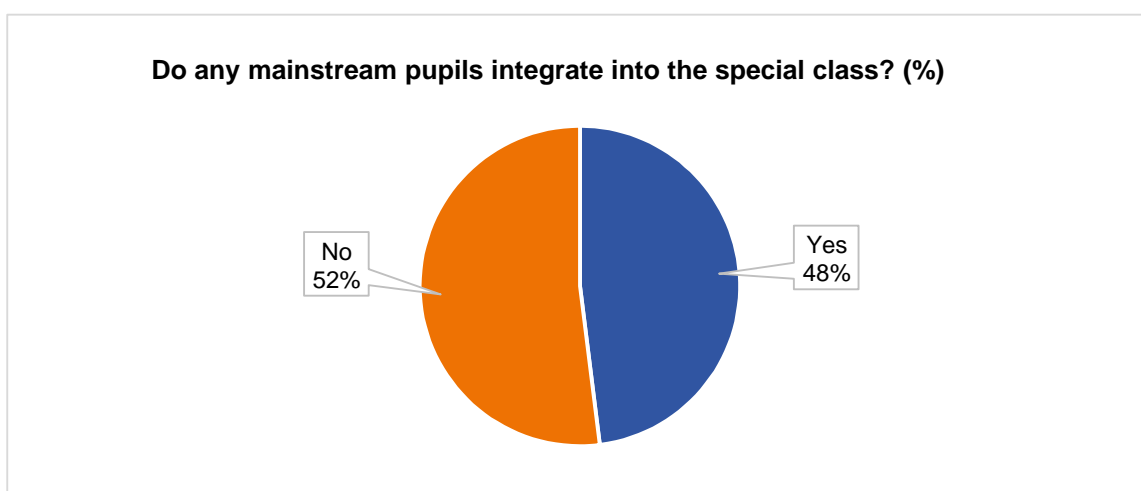


Figure 6

From their evaluative work throughout schools with special SSLD classes, inspectors found that there was an inclusive culture in most cases (*Figure 7*). Where the culture was deemed to be most inclusive, inspectors elaborated on the evidence of daily integration for pupils, positive school policies and definite routes for re-integrating pupils into mainstream education. In the cases where the culture was rated as less inclusive, inspectors made recommendations about increasing the opportunities for mainstream integration. There were no instances noted of any pupil enrolled in a special SSLD class being put on a reduced timetable or a shortened school day.

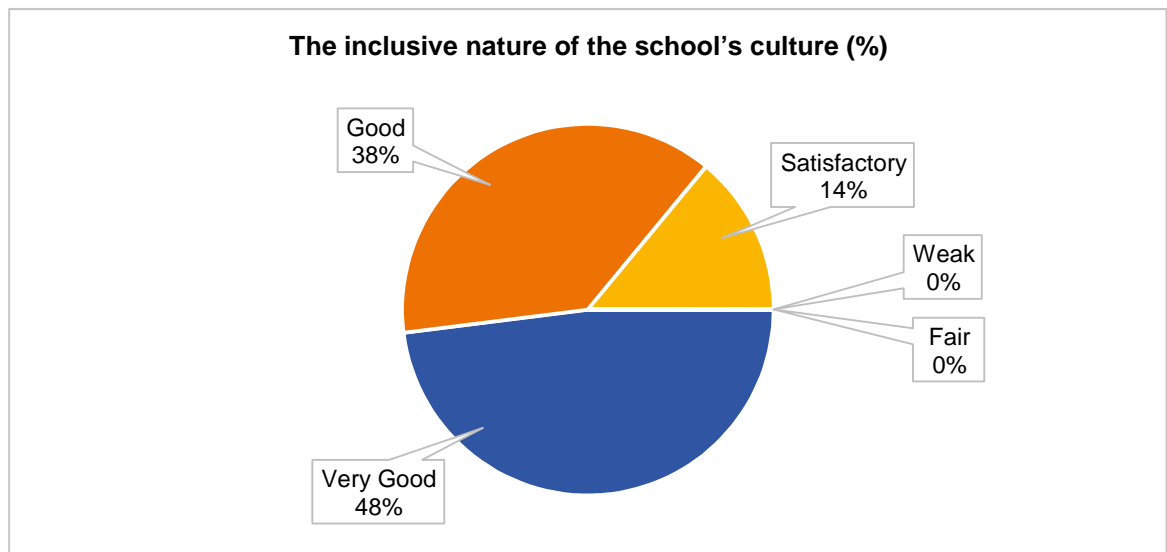


Figure 7

3.5 Whole-school structures

In all cases, inspectors rated the impact of whole-school structures on the work of the special class as satisfactory or better (*Figure 8*). Where the impact was most positive, inspectors noted a culture of improvement supported by school leadership, effective staff rotation and positive engagement in continuous professional development (CPD). In the small number of cases where the impact was less positive, there was evidence of deployment of inexperienced teachers to the special class, logistical supervision issues and missed opportunities for integration.

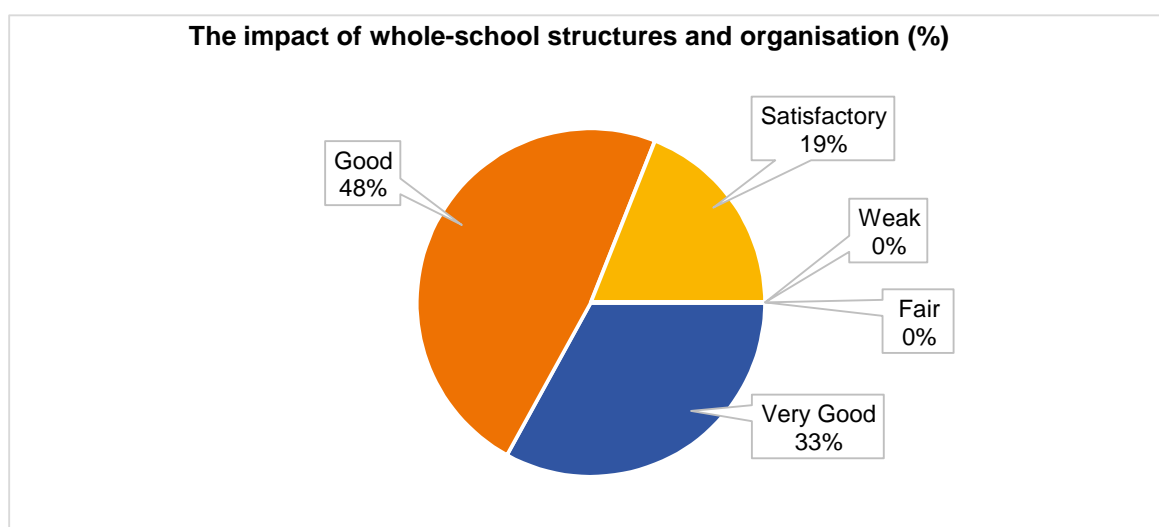


Figure 8

The 2005 Inspectorate report made a recommendation about including the operation of the special classes in the whole-school plan. The 2020 evaluations indicate that almost all of the whole-school plans make appropriate reference to the work of the special classes (*Figure 9*). Where such references exist, they range from general information linked with the special education and enrolment policies, to very specific policies outlining roles and responsibilities for each special class. In a very small number of

cases inspectors could not find any specific reference to the special class in the whole-school plan and they provided recommendations that this issue should be addressed.

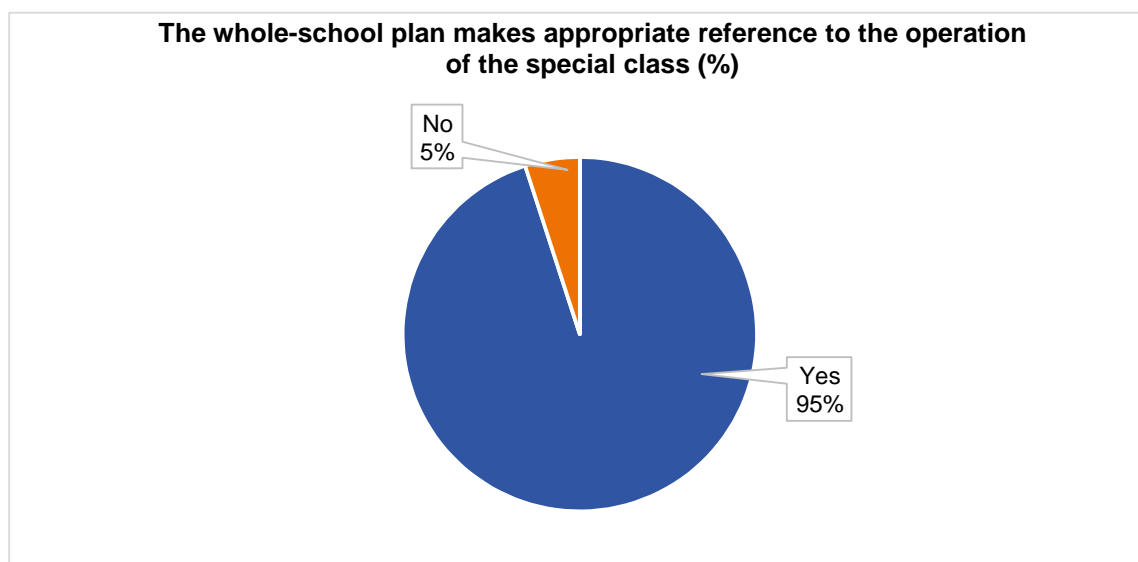


Figure 9

3.6 School leadership and management

Inspectors noted that strong and effective leadership was a key ingredient for setting an inclusive tone in the school and for promoting the quality of the special class provision. The contribution of school leadership to the successful operation of the special class was rated as being satisfactory or better for almost all classes (*Figure 10*). Positive contributions included strong leadership, support for inclusion, encouragement of collaborative practice, promotion of CPD and prudent rotation and allocation of staff. Strong and effective leaders also promoted whole-school approaches, collaboration and sharing of best practice. Where the contribution was deemed to be fair, members of the school leadership team appeared to be unaware of difficulties being encountered in the special class or the lack of individualised planning for some pupils. It is recommended that all courses and training opportunities for newly-appointed school leaders should

include specific modules and guidance for participants on developing effective inclusive leadership practices in their schools.

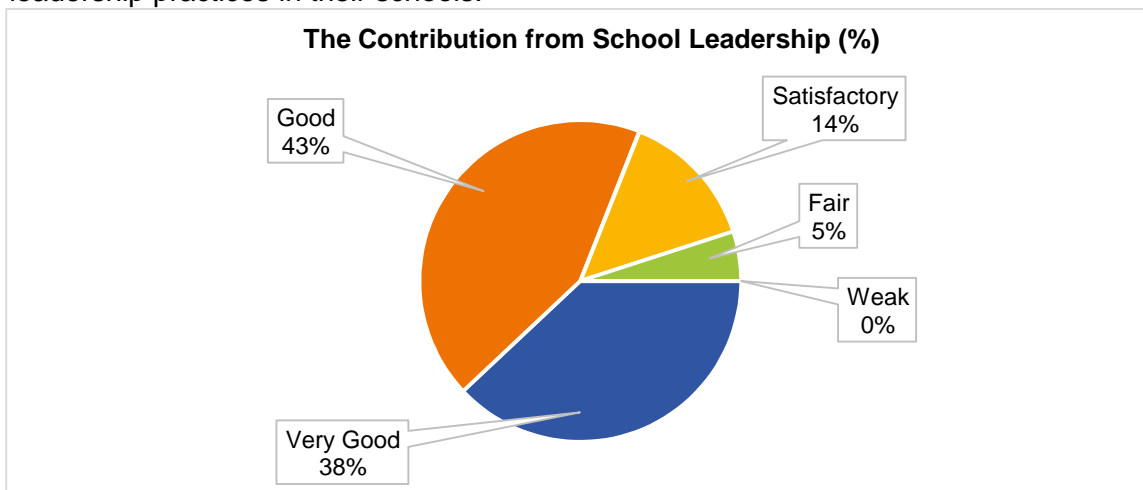


Figure 10

3.7 Availability of resources

The availability and allocation of resources for the special classes was described as good or very good in all cases (*Figure 11*). Inspectors commented on the attractive layout of many special classes and the availability of educational resources to support teaching and learning. Resources noted included pictorial and visual materials, toys, sound systems, digital technology, kits for language and auditory processing, syntax materials, specialised textbooks and other good resources for literacy and numeracy. Some classroom environments were particularly rich with examples of pupils' learning across a wide range of subject areas. The location of the speech and language therapist adjacent to the special class was seen as an essential resource for the effective operation of the class.

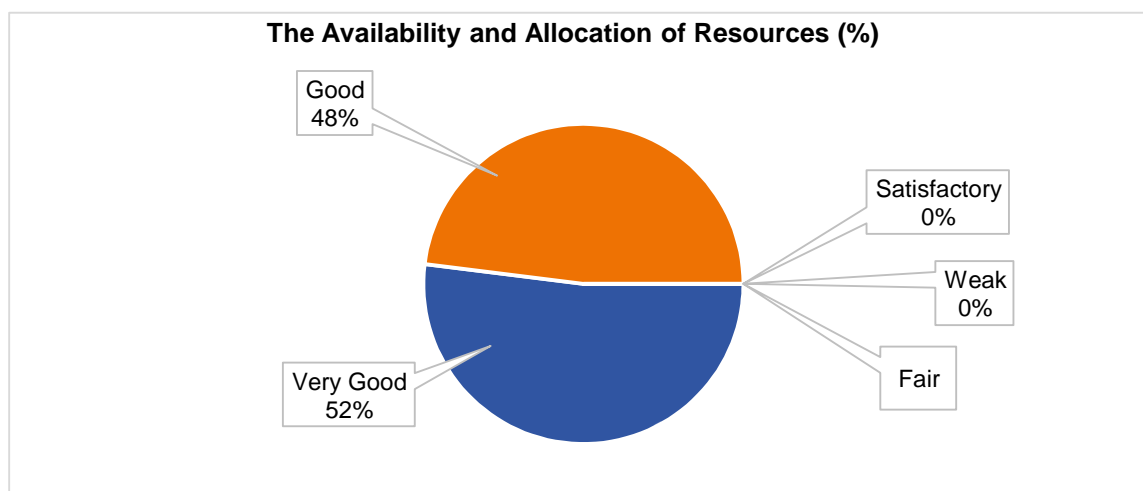


Figure 11

3.8 Individualised planning, assessment and progress records

3.8.1 Individualised planning

The individualised planning process is a formal mechanism to establish a pupil's priority learning needs for the term ahead through analysis of assessments, review of professional reports and consultation with parents, and the pupil, where appropriate. The priority learning needs should be addressed through clearly articulated targets which identify the next steps in the pupil's learning and can also be used to evaluate progress. Individualised plans (sometimes called IEPs) at the School Support Plus level of the *Continuum of Support* are retained in the *Student Support File*.

In almost all of the special SSLD classes, teachers, in collaboration with the speech and language therapists, had devised suitable individualised support plans to direct the educational and language programme for pupils (*Figure 12*). In the majority of cases, the quality of targets examined was good, and some inspectors noted very good collaboration with the SLT, resulting in plans which included speech and language targets, as well as targets in other areas of the curriculum. Inspectors noted a very small number of instances where the teacher and SLT prepared separate support plans or joint plans where the speech and language targets eclipsed all other educational targets. In one class there were no support plans for the majority of pupils, and the inspector noted that there was also scope to improve overall classroom practice in this setting in order to meet pupils' needs more systematically. The school's inspection report recommended that "teachers in special classes should prepare individualised support plans for all pupils".

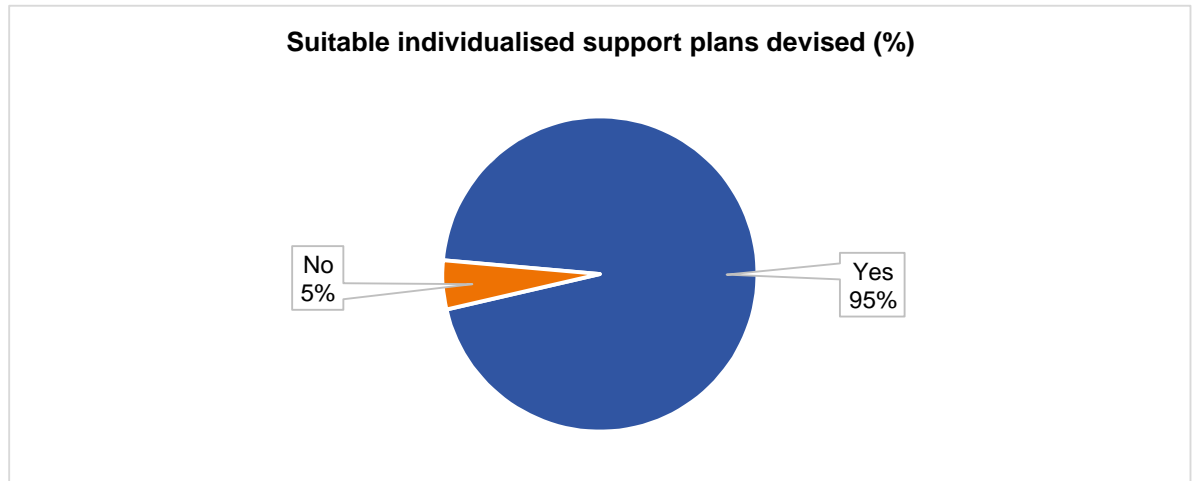


Figure 12

Overall, inspectors found the individualised plans to be well informed in almost all cases (*Figure 13*). There was evidence that teachers and SLTs consulted with parents in almost all cases and that sometimes the views of the child's previous teacher were collected either verbally or through written reports. In less than a quarter of the classes, the views of the pupils were not sought during the planning process. A few teachers expressed the view that the children in those particular classes were "too young to contribute actively to the planning process," although these teachers afforded pupils choice in regard to play and other classroom activities.

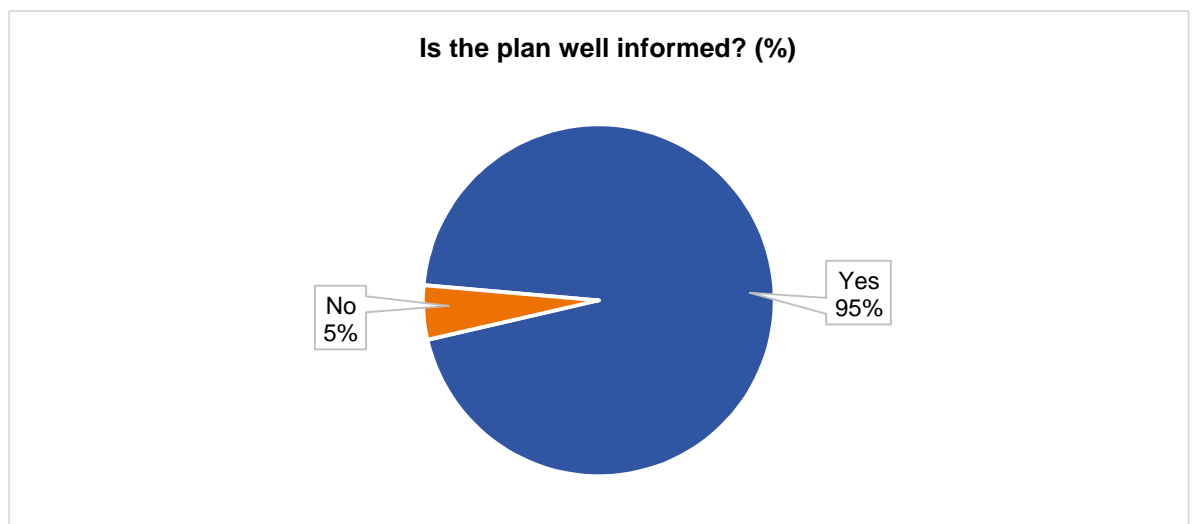


Figure 13

In the majority of special SSLD classes, the individualised plans were formally reviewed on a twice-yearly basis, most typically on establishment in the autumn and with a further review in early spring (*Figure 14*). In a few classes, plans were reviewed three times per year while in a very small number of cases there was only one annual review. Most teachers indicated that they consulted the plans frequently during the term to guide their work and to gauge progress.

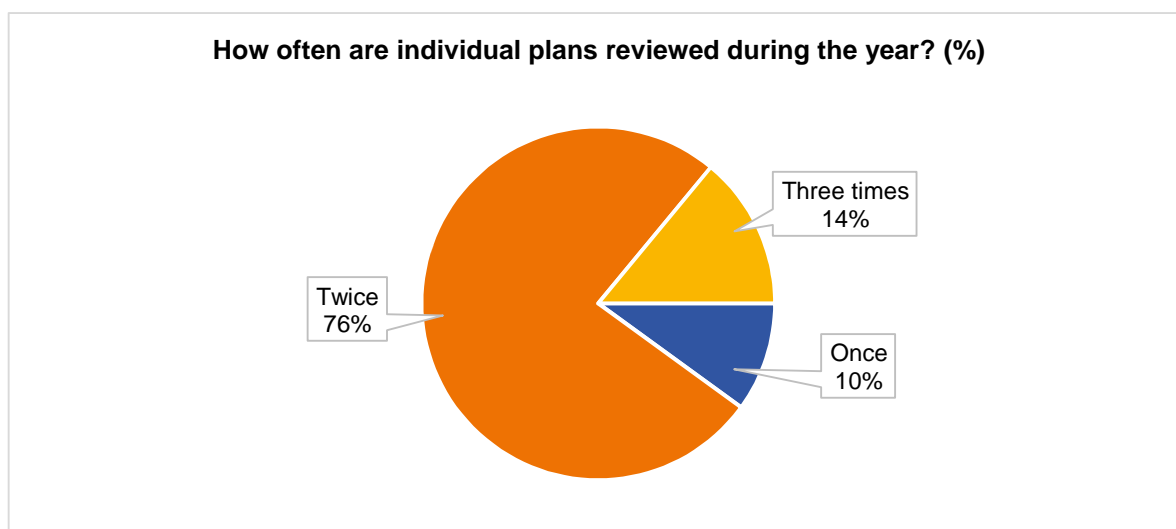


Figure 14

In most cases, inspectors expressed the view that the special class teacher had the capacity to deliver on the prepared plan (*Figure 15*). Where this capacity was noted, inspectors acknowledged the expertise and experience of teachers, good collaboration with other SSLD teachers and with the SLT. Where it was deemed that there was poor capacity to deliver on the plan, there were references to substitute or temporary teachers or a lack of professional development. One teacher commented on not having the knowledge or capacity to plan for all the pupils in the class or to address the specific speech difficulties that the pupils have without some support or upskilling.

While there may be some difficulties for school leaders in recruiting suitably-qualified teachers for short-term vacancies, principals should look within their existing staffing to allocate teachers with the greatest expertise in SEN to their special classes for longer-term assignments. Schools should encourage teachers who are new to the special classes to access the NCSE seminars co-delivered by NCSE Advisors and an NCSE Senior Speech and Language Therapist which provide an overview of Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) and how they impact on access to the curriculum. School leaders should also encourage SSLD class teachers to join or form

professional networks to explore greater opportunities for collaborative learning and sharing of knowledge from CPD.

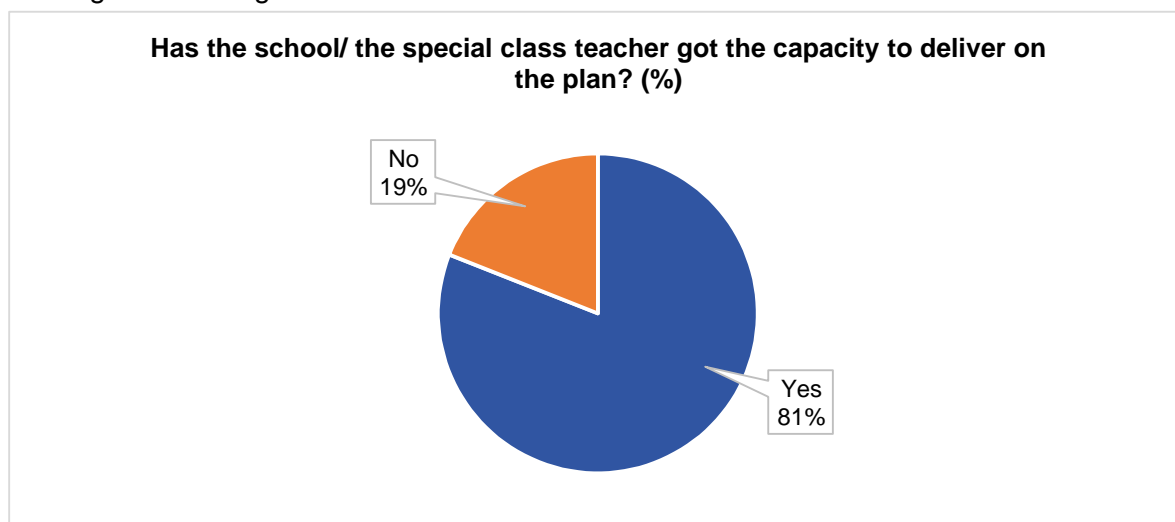


Figure 15

3.8.2 Assessment and recording of progress

In almost all of the special classes, inspectors noted evidence of the administration of a range of specialised assessment tests (*Figure 16*). Many of the most specialised assessments require SLT administration and interpretation and the importance of their use is reflected in the SLT input to individualised planning and support programmes. Examples of some of the specialised assessments administered by SLTs include CELF 4, RAPT, STAP2, DEAP and BPVS3. In many cases, the tests are administered initially to establish a baseline measure of pupil's performance and compared to the results of later tests to gauge any progress. Special class teachers administered assessments in areas such as reading, comprehension, phonological awareness, number, and other curriculum-based measures of attainment and progress. Both teachers and SLTs

maintained a range of observational data to contribute to their assessments of pupils' progress.

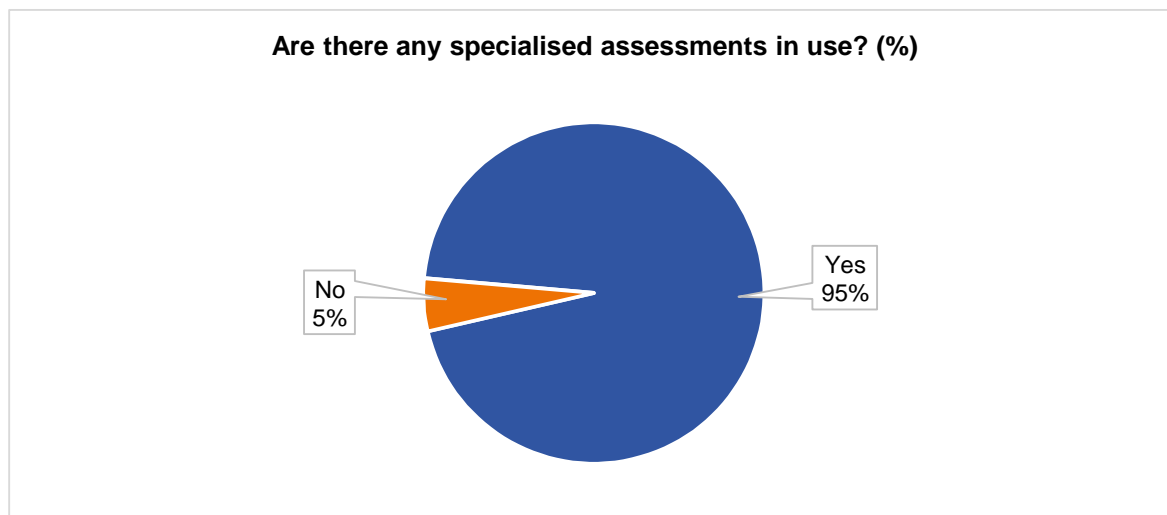


Figure 16

As part of the SEN evaluations, inspectors analysed a sample of assessment records and support files supplied to them and further discussed issues with the special class staff and

SEN co-ordinators. The purpose of this analysis was to look for evidence of pupils' progress in relation to their priority SSLD needs and also their needs across the wider curriculum. In almost all of the special classes, there was evidence that the pupils were making good progress across these areas and, in one example, a pupil was noted to have progressed from being non-verbal on enrolment to being able to use a range of single words at the time of the evaluation (*Figure 17*). More widely, inspectors identified commendable progress for pupils in the areas of literacy, motor skills, social development, written work and communication skills. Illustrating this, the published report for one of the schools stated that:

Pupils in the special classes demonstrated clear progression in their communication and social skills, and all were benefiting from integration with the mainstream classes. The pupils were achieving at their levels of abilities and, at times, surpassing their intended learning objectives.

In the small number of classes where evidence of acceptable progress was not identified in the records, inspectors linked this to poor provision for individualised planning, insufficient differentiation, a lack of baseline assessment data or a very limited approach to recording outcomes.

It should also be noted that the positive commentary on pupils' short-term progress outlined in this section is based on evidence of an intensive special class environment where teachers, SLTs and parents co-operate to focus on identified needs and implement the relevant supports. It is not yet known if the progress evident in the special class continues or is maintained on the pupils' return to mainstream. One SLT reported that some of her former special class pupils were later referred to her community clinic after transitioning back to mainstream education as they continued to have a language disorder, and that the quality of the ongoing intervention in the base school was often variable. The longer term outcomes for former special SSLD class pupils merit further evaluation to identify best practice in supporting pupils in the transition back to mainstream education.

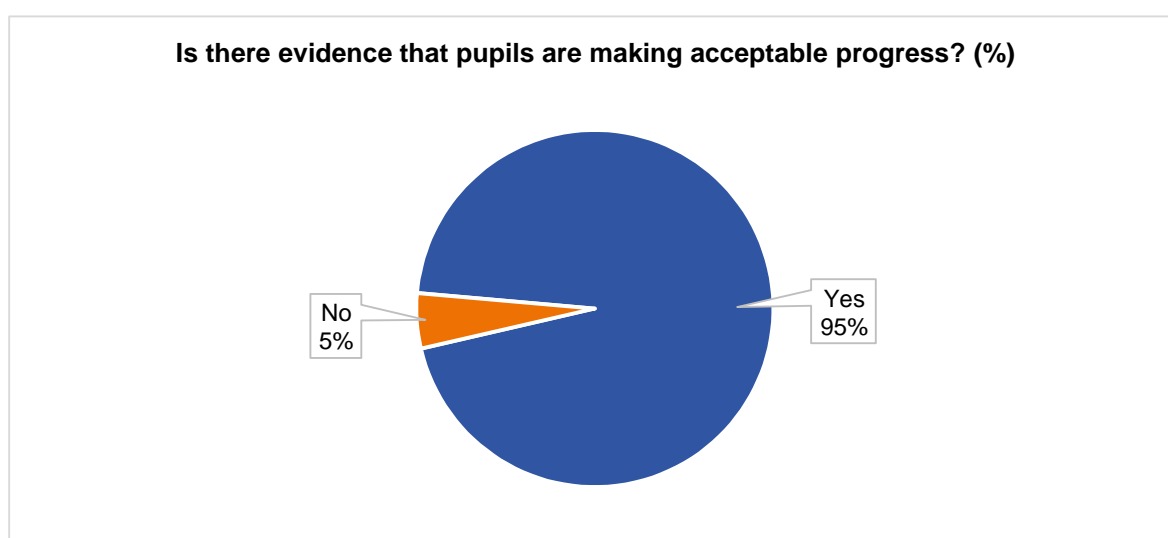


Figure 17

3.9 Staff roles in the special class

3.9.1 The speech and language therapist (SLT)

The special SSLD class model differs from most other types of special class because of the co-location of the SLT and teachers with a clear joint focus on addressing speech and language needs in a classroom environment. The 2005 Inspectorate report outlined that there was an expectation that "speech and language therapists employed by local health boards will provide speech and language therapy for the children in the classes, usually for a minimum of four hours per day." However, the 2005 report noted that "most classes had between three and four hours' speech and language therapy, while a quarter had less than three hours, and some had a very restricted contribution from the therapist." The 2020 Inspectorate evaluations provide evidence that the provision of SLT supports to the special classes by the HSE has diminished substantially since 2005. From the 21 classes evaluated, the availability of the SLT on the school site varied from

two to five full days, but most schools had the SLT present for at least three partial days. Some principals indicated that they had successfully resisted further cuts to SLT supports by threatening to close the special class unless it was staffed appropriately. Given the Department of Education's continued commitment to providing a very favourable pupil-teacher ratio in these classes, the HSE should reinstate the original commitment to providing for a minimum of twenty hours SLT support per week.

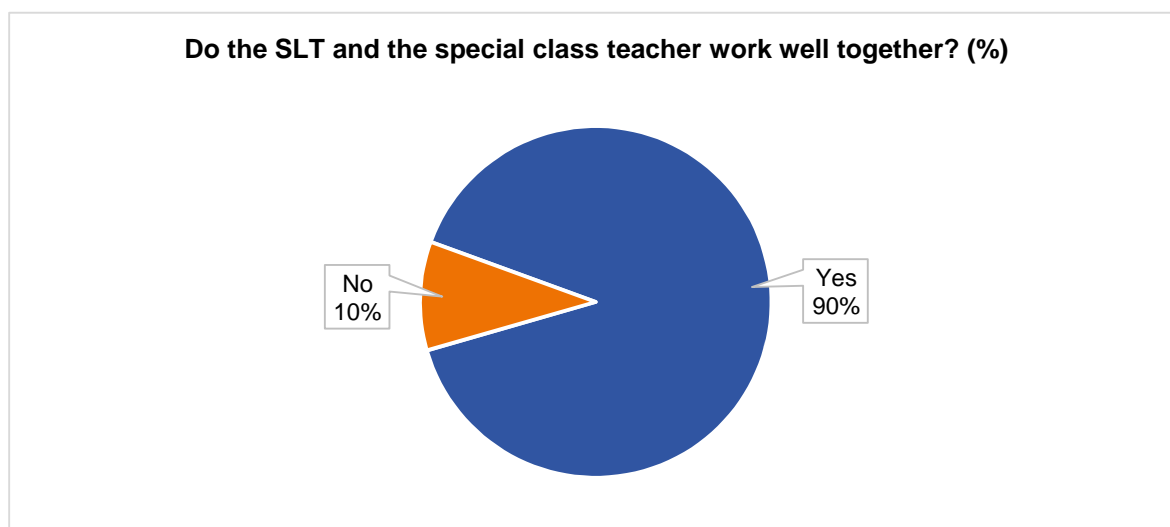
Where collaboration between teachers and SLTs was most effective, it often involved joint classroom practice focused on agreed language programmes. Typically, SLTs were involved in activities which included:

- Assessing pupils on enrolment and during their placement
- Advising teachers about suitable approaches for language development
- Planning and reviewing programmes of work
- Intensive one-to-one therapy
- Co-teaching
- Supporting functional and social communication goals.

SLTs provided support through a combination of withdrawal and in-class interventions. It was also reported that many SLTs linked very effectively with pupils' base schools in relation to pupils transitioning into and out of the special classes. From their conversations with staff members, inspectors reported that, in most cases, the special class teacher and the SLT appeared to work well together and that there was good sharing of responsibility and expertise (*Figure 18*). One inspector commented that:

It is evident that the class teacher collaborates with the SLT and has learned specific strategies from the SLT to support particular pupils' language learning needs.

In one of the very small number of settings where the teacher and SLT did not appear to be working well together, the inspector reported that the SLT was doing her own thing in the withdrawal room and that she did not work in the special class. To address such an undesirable, fragmented approach to supporting these pupils, school leaders and the schools' special class policies should make explicit reference to the need for maximum collaboration between SLTs and teachers for this role.

**Figure 18**

3.9.2 The special class teacher

Given the complexity of language needs outlined in the enrolment criteria for this type of special class, it is essential that both the special class teacher and the SLT have the requisite skills to plan and implement the specialised types of programmes required by pupils with SSLD. In the majority of settings, inspectors noted that the teachers were experienced with this type of learning need and that many had engaged in relevant CPD to build up their expertise (*Figure 19*). Where classroom practice was particularly effective, this was evident through the positive classroom atmosphere, collaboration with the SLT, appropriately high teacher expectations, playful learning experiences, differentiated supports, specialised language approaches, language modelling, formative assessment and motivation of pupils. One inspection report noted that:

In the special class, exemplary practice was observed during a team-teaching lesson with the speech-and-language therapist and class teacher.

During this, the class teacher and SLT worked together on an agreed and differentiated language approach where pupils were prompted to extend their sentences through skilful use of language games and questioning techniques. In the settings where teaching required improvement, inspectors made recommendations encouraging teachers to provide:

- More regular and sustained opportunities during lessons for pupils to engage in the development of expressive language skills
- Time and space to construct oral language sentences
- Opportunities for the pupils to engage in talk with each other
- Learning tasks which facilitate opportunities to engage in language exchanges.

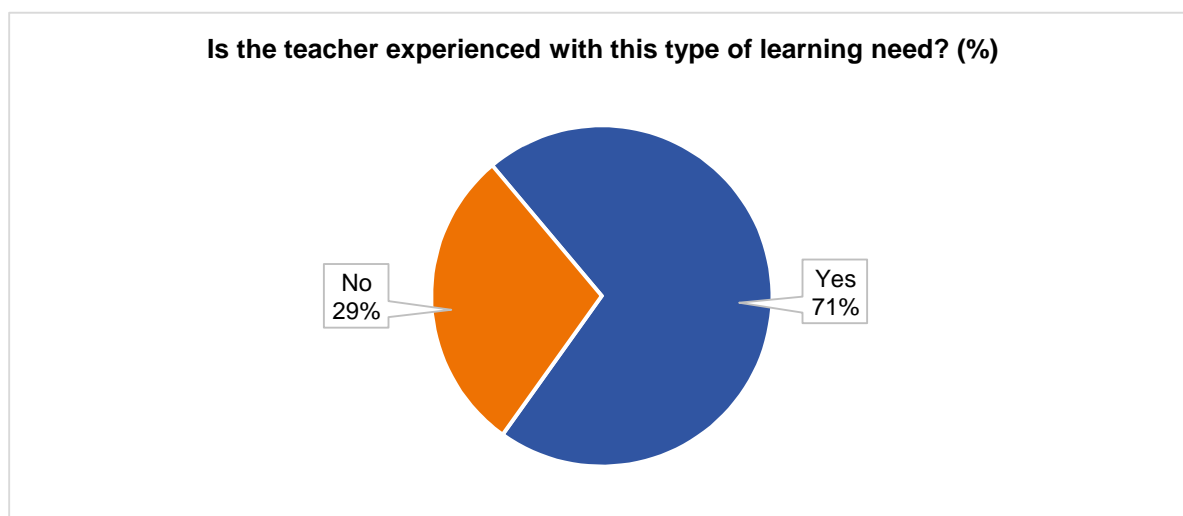


Figure 19

3.9.3 The special needs assistant (SNA)

The NCSE provides 0.33 of an SNA post for each special SSLD class with the option for additional support where specific care needs are identified. Within the schools visited, a small number of special SSLD classes had no SNA provision while most others had shared or full SNA access (*Figure 20*). In almost all cases, SNAs were deployed appropriately, but in one case an inspector queried the allocation of an SNA to an instructional duty during station teaching.

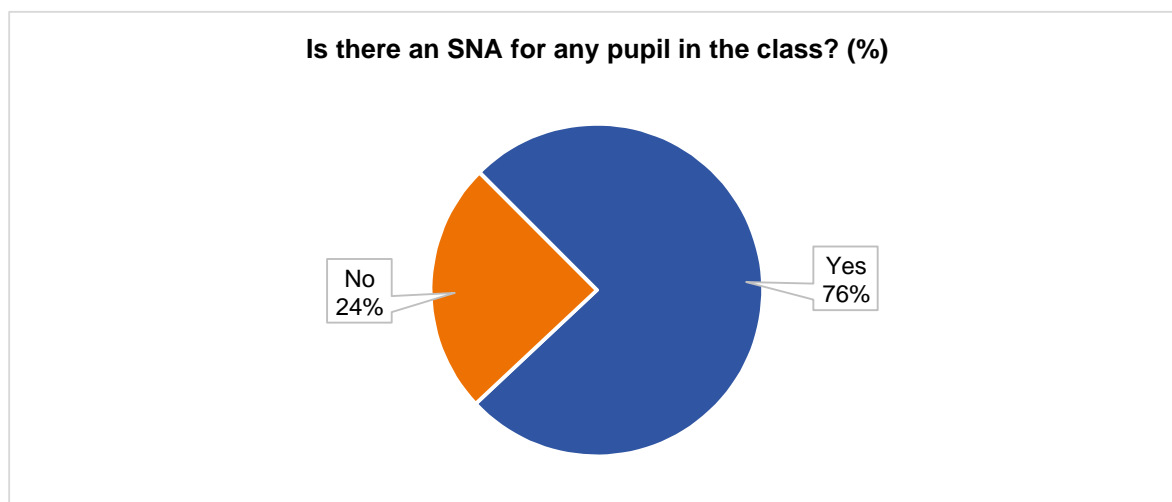


Figure 20

3.9.4 Other professionals

While pupils' diagnosed SSLD needs are the primary rationale for their enrolment in the special classes, it has already been noted that almost half of them have additional needs linked to co-morbid factors. Depending on the extent of additional needs in the

class, the special class teacher and parents may seek the support and guidance of a range of external professionals such as NEPS or HSE psychologists, various therapists or the visiting teacher service. Describing the value that schools place on advice from external professionals, one inspection report notes:

Its engagement with the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and other professionals in the Health Service Executive (HSE) is considered by the school to be fundamental to the successful operation of the special classes for pupils with an SSLD. The school has an open and positive approach in place to optimise the skills and expertise of the speech and language therapist assigned to the two special classes for pupils with SSLD.

Generally, psychologists take part in admissions meetings and, in some cases, this initial involvement is followed up during the placement period or when the pupil is preparing to return to mainstream education. Where a school deems it essential to involve a NEPS psychologist further with the special class, school leaders will prioritise this provision from within its overall NEPS school allocation. Accordingly, only around one-third of the special class teachers reported involvement of the NEPS psychologist in individual casework during this school year (Figure 21).

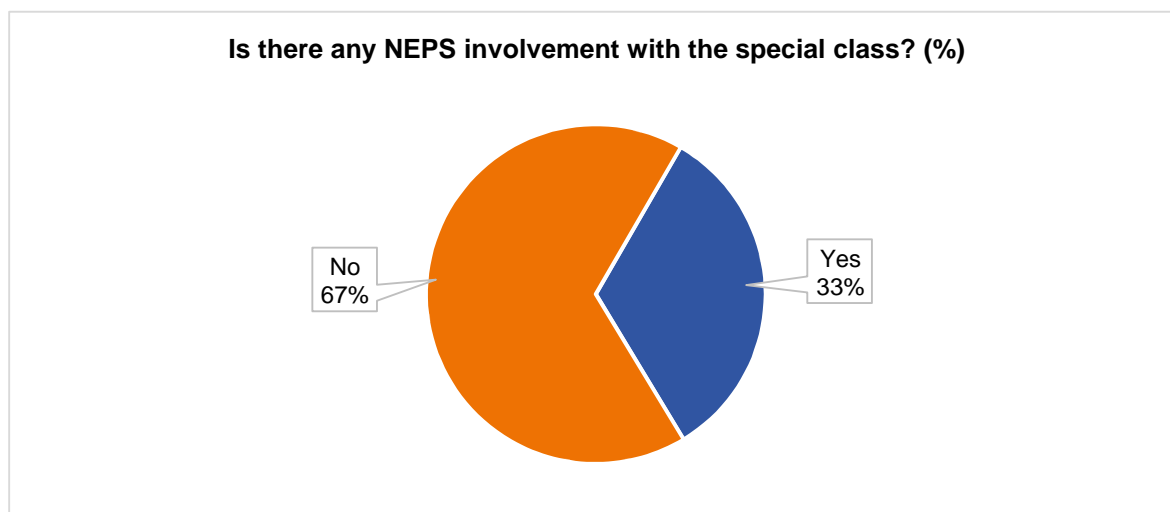


Figure 21

There are a small number of pupils in the special classes who have visual or hearing impairments in addition to their speech and language needs. Similar to the involvement of psychologists, the visiting teachers for pupils who are deaf/hard of hearing or blind/visually impaired and other NCSE or Professional Development Support for Teachers (PDST) services become involved with the special classes on a needs basis. Inspectors reported that one-third of the schools were actively engaging with these supports for particular pupils and that schools were happy with this level of support (*Figure 22*). Where this type of external professional was involved, it was most likely to involve supporting hearing impairments through technology solutions.

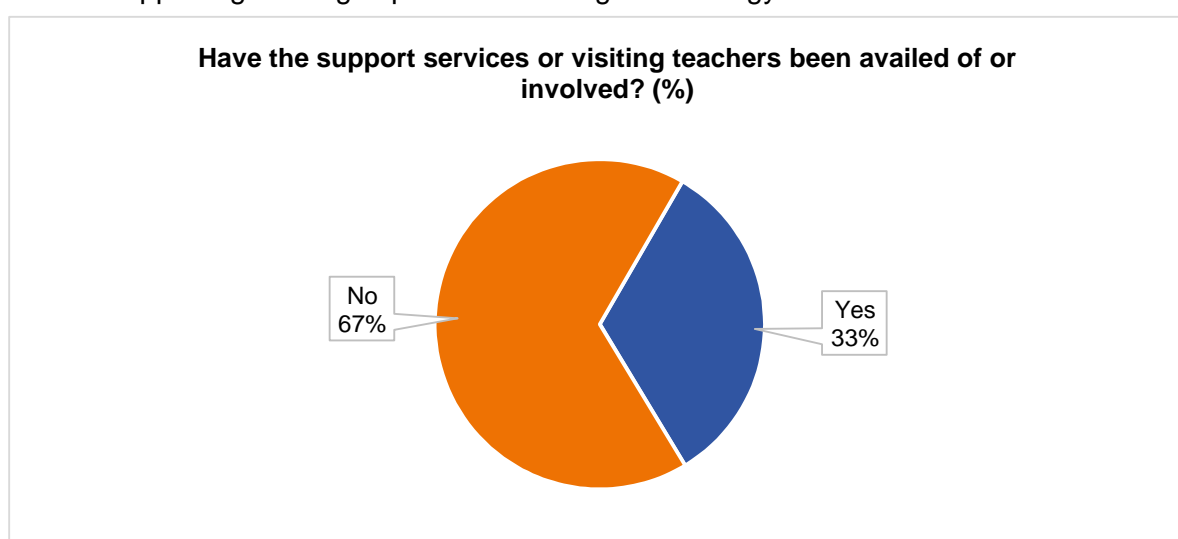


Figure 22

3.10 The curriculum

Inspectors examined a range of classroom documents including teachers' planning, timetables, support plans and assessment records to gauge the breadth and depth of curricular provision for pupils. It was established that pupils in all the special classes had access to a suitably broad curriculum, and that in almost all cases, the curriculum was differentiated appropriately to meet individual needs (*Figure 23*). In the small number of cases where differentiation was identified as a difficulty, inspectors expressed concerns about instruction not being sufficiently challenging for more able pupils. In almost all classes, curriculum provision for literacy included age-appropriate emphasis on the Primary Language Curriculum, oral language, phonics, levelled reading materials and development of writing skills. In a small number of classes, inspectors made recommendations about increasing the emphasis on oral language through regular discrete lessons with the provision of more opportunities for pupils to express their ideas. Increasing this emphasis enables pupils to practise their new language skills and to gain confidence as speakers. In the area of numeracy, pupils in almost all the special classes were working at an age-appropriate level, with their understanding of

mathematical concepts and skills being enhanced through use of concrete materials and discovery learning methodologies.

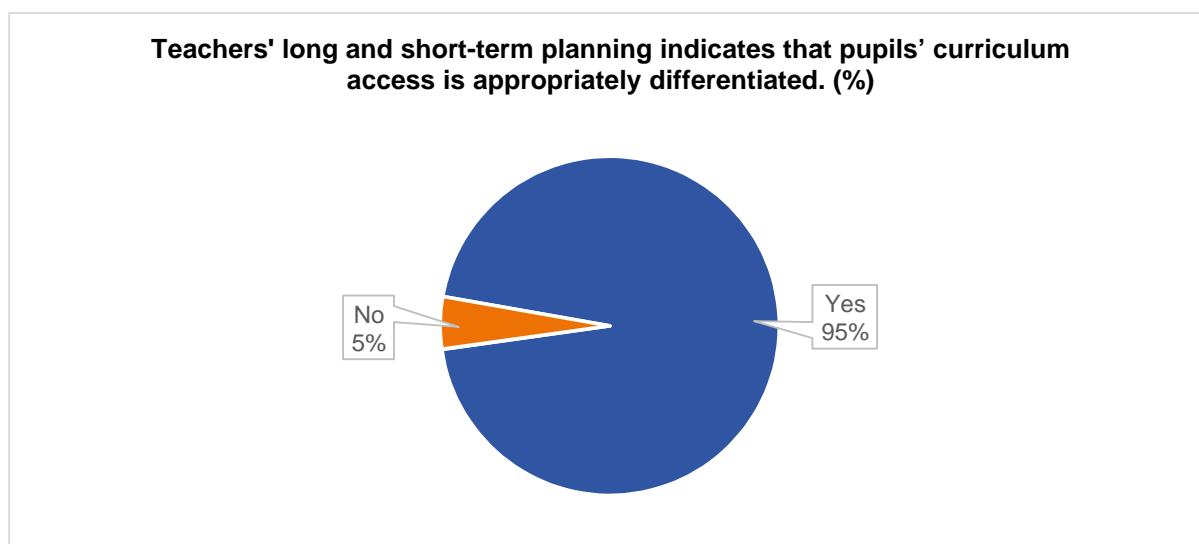


Figure 23

Despite the enrolment criteria and the SERC recommendation that a second language would not be taught during the special class placement, inspectors noted instances of some pupils in almost half of the special classes studying Irish either formally or informally (*Figure 24*). Circular 52/2019 on exemptions from the study of Irish states that:

In the case of pupils in special classes in mainstream schools, and in recognising the authority devolved to the management authorities in decision making concerning the Irish language learning needs of the pupils concerned, a formal application for a Certificate of Exemption is not required. Pupils in special classes in mainstream schools will therefore be exempt without holding a Certificate of Exemption. In line with the Department's policy above, however, schools are expected and encouraged to provide all pupils, to the greatest extent possible and in a meaningful way, with opportunities to participate in Irish language and cultural activities at a level appropriate to their learning needs.

It is clear that at least some parents and teachers of children in almost half of the classes have opted for Irish to be taught at a particular level in preparation for the pupil's return to mainstream education. Anecdotal evidence was provided to inspectors that, in some geographical locations, parents were anxious that their child would continue to study Irish formally during the placement. In some special SSLD classes, parents have been advised by the school to retain this exemption status as an option, should it be required, rather than to exercise it automatically. Enrolment

policies for other special SSLD classes contain explicit statements such as “pupils follow the normal Primary School Curriculum, but they do not study Irish”. Where pupils study Irish formally, it is not usually as a timetabled subject in the special class itself, but is provided for through regular mainstream integration. While Irish is not formally taught in the majority of special classes, several SSLD class teachers engage their pupils through informal Irish activities, as encouraged by circular 52/2019.

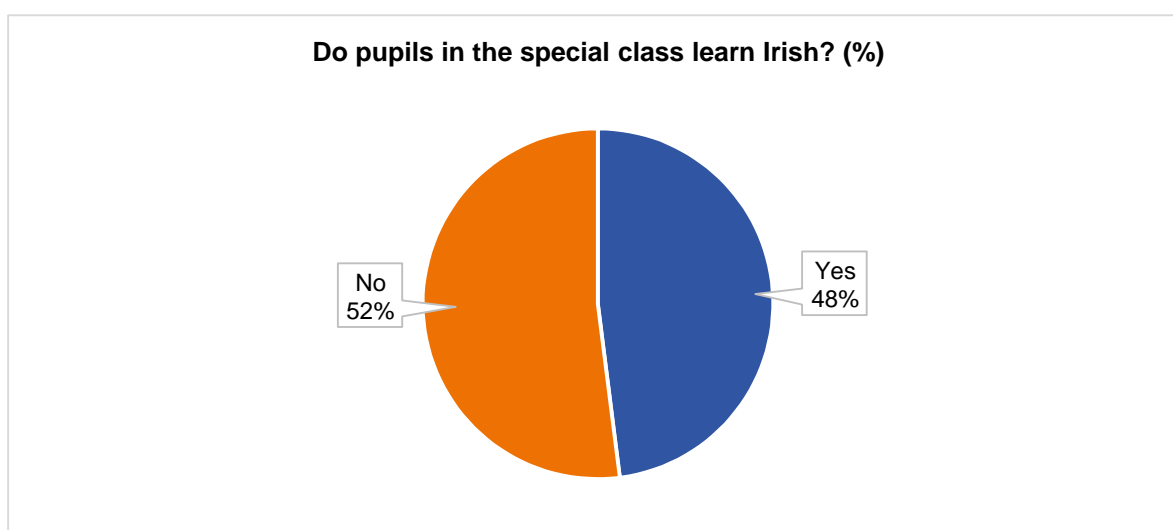


Figure 24

3.11 The quality of teaching and learning

The Inspectorate has previously published its standards in regard to the quality of teaching and learning for schools in Ireland in *Looking at Our School* (2016). The following section uses these standards to make evaluative commentary on the quality of teaching and learning in the special SSLD classes.

3.11.1 Teachers' individual practice

Most of the special class teachers demonstrated good or very good subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills (*Figure 25*). Where practice was particularly effective, teachers were very aware of the needs of the pupils; they created a very supportive classroom atmosphere and worked effectively with the SLT and they had the skills to make instruction engaging for pupils. Good general teaching skills appeared to translate well from the mainstream role into the special class setting, especially for experienced teachers. However, in the small number of cases where teachers' practice was rated as satisfactory, inspectors commented on inexperienced teachers having a lack of pedagogical knowledge for the specialist setting. This should

be addressed appropriately through provision of relevant CPD and through careful staff allocation by school leaders.

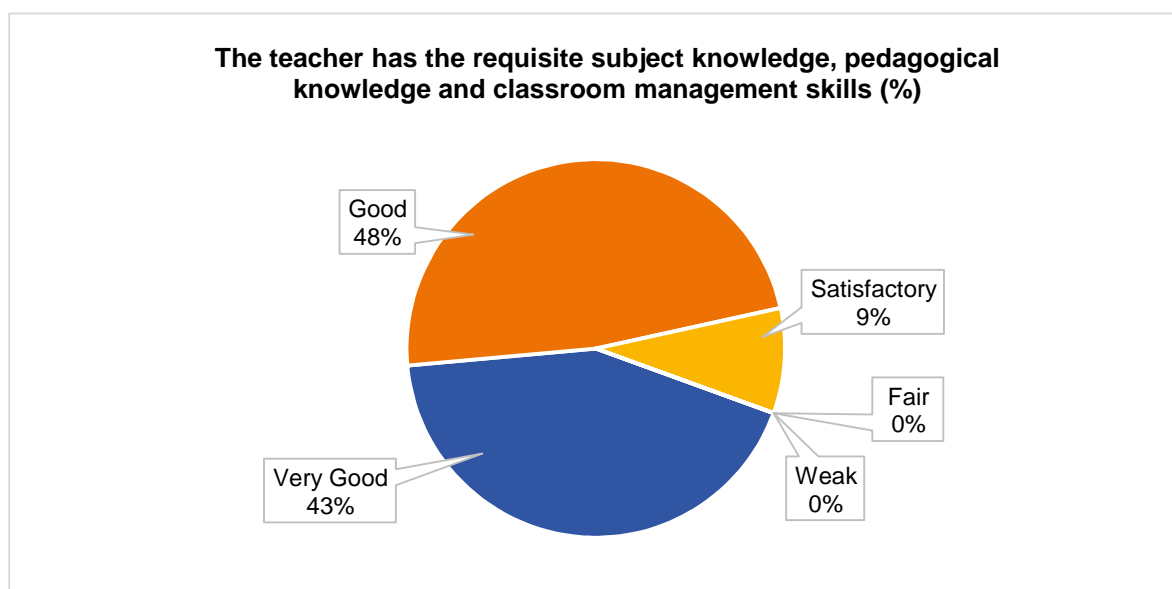


Figure 25

All teachers, including special class teachers, are required to select and use planning, preparation and assessment practices that progress pupils' learning. Inspectors rated teachers' practices in these aspects as good or very good in over three-quarters of the classes (*Figure 26*). The rating identifies the teacher's preparedness for teaching and the impact of such preparation on teaching and learning. Features of best practice included consistent short-term planning centred on pupils' needs, good individualised planning and review, and good alignment between the teacher and SLT priorities and targets. However, planning and assessment practices were deemed to be less than satisfactory in a few classes. In these settings, individual plans were not in place for all pupils, there was poor monitoring and tracking of progress and the teachers were not preparing adequate short-term plans to guide their teaching. In one setting, the only available short-term plan had been prepared by the SLT. The impact of poor teacher planning can be very detrimental to the time-bound opportunity being afforded to pupils during their very short placement in this type of special class.

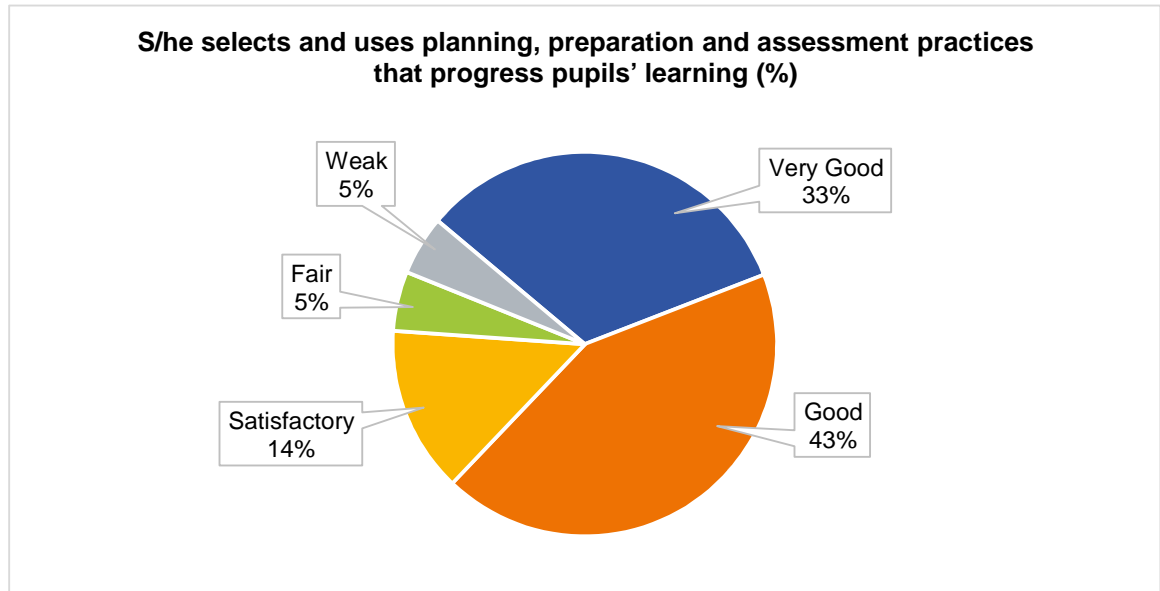


Figure 26

In most of the special classes, teachers' practice was deemed to be good or very good in relation to their selection and use of teaching approaches appropriate to the learning objectives and to pupils' learning needs (*Figure 27*). Inspectors described a range of high quality teaching approaches, including effective use of digital technologies, being employed to build pupils' receptive language and to provide supportive opportunities for expressive communication. In a small number of cases, the quality of pedagogy was inconsistent between lessons and the lack of effective planning detracted from the overall effectiveness of instruction.

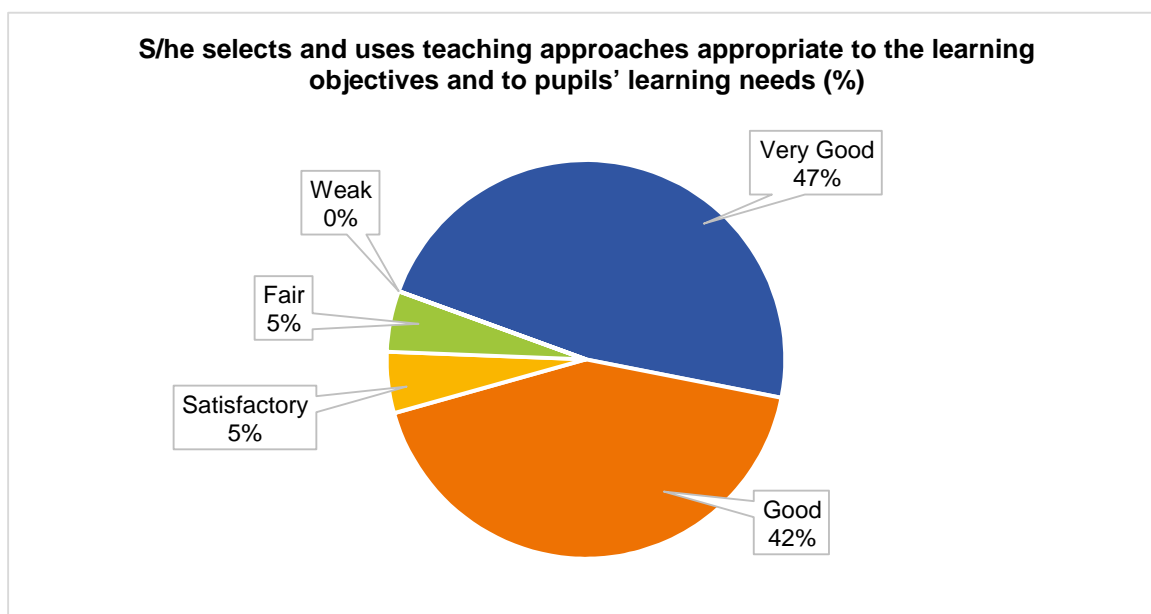


Figure 27

Over three-quarters of the special class teachers demonstrated good or very good practice in responding to individual learning needs and differentiating teaching and learning activities as necessary (*Figure 28*). In some cases, inspectors identified this aspect as a key strength of the teacher's practice. Differentiation was often evident in the organisation of groups, the selection of reading materials and through the focus on individual language priorities. However, in almost one-quarter of the classes, the teacher's approach to individual needs was described as just satisfactory or fair. In these classes teachers tended to rely on textbooks for instruction and did not take individual needs into account adequately during lessons resulting in inappropriate levels of challenge for pupils. As many of the special classes span a range of ages and abilities, teaching in these settings requires similar differentiation skills to those required for multi-grade classrooms.

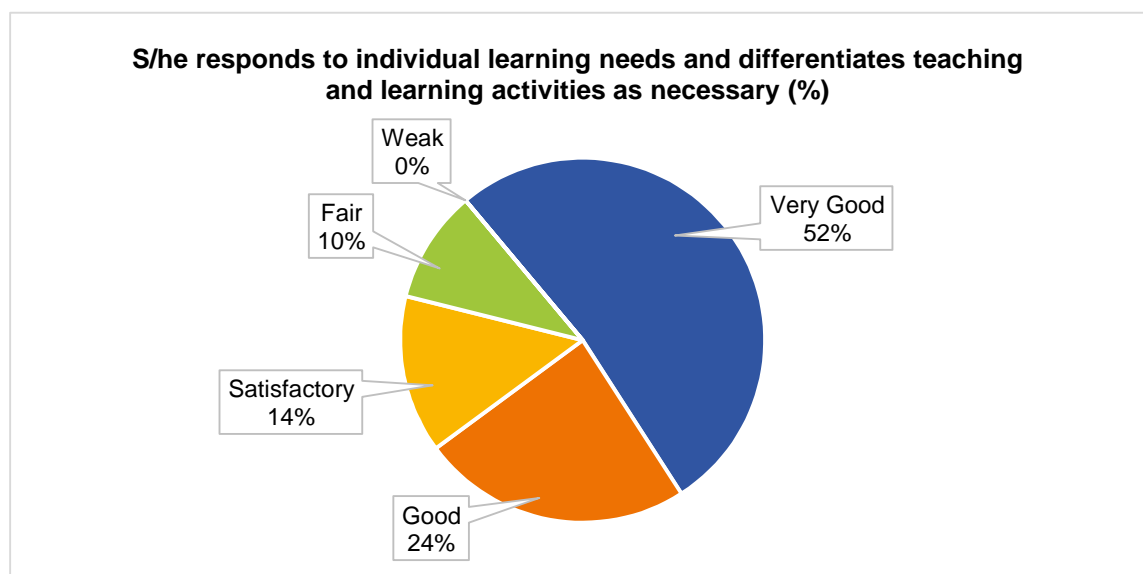


Figure 28

3.11.2 Teachers' collective practices

Over two-thirds of the special class teachers were deemed to have valued and engaged effectively or very effectively in professional development and professional collaboration (*Figure 29*). In some cases, teachers had attained post-graduate qualifications in special education while others had engaged with shorter-term CPD in specific areas of relevance. In many cases, high levels of professional collaboration and sharing of expertise were evident between the special class teacher and the SLT and with other members of the SEN team as well as with the SEN co-ordinator and principal. Inspectors noted that some of the special class teachers were very experienced and had very specific expertise enabling them to communicate very effectively with other professionals. However, in one-third of the settings, the teacher's engagement in CPD or professional collaboration was rated as satisfactory or fair. In some of these cases, the teacher was relatively new to the special class or was acting as a substitute. A few teachers indicated that they would like to undertake bespoke CPD for the SSLD role, but that such courses were not available for them. Teacher educators should explore the feasibility of designing such courses with appropriate accreditation.

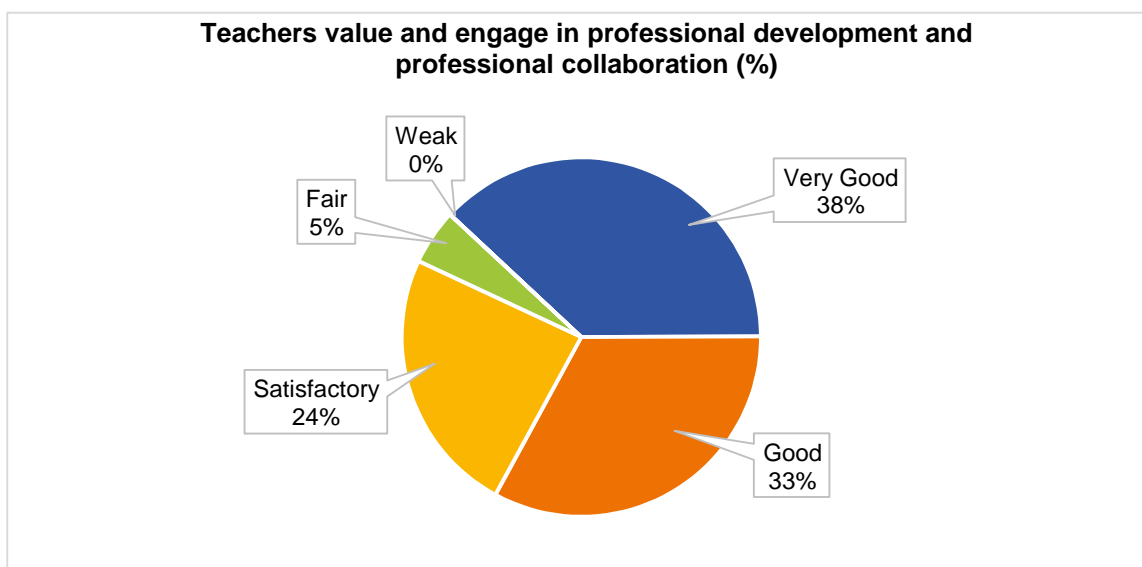


Figure 29

Teachers' contribution to building whole-staff capacity by sharing their expertise was rated as being good or very good in the majority of cases (*Figure 30*). There was evidence of good practice in relation to whole-staff sharing of learning from courses and information about particular methodologies and resources. It was evident also that many of the SLTs spent time explaining terminology, assessments and interventions to their teaching colleagues in both special class and mainstream settings. One school's report states that:

It is highly praiseworthy that the speech-and-language therapist in the special class has shared knowledge and expertise with the support teaching staff to develop pupils' language skills across the school

In over one-third of the classes, teachers' contribution to building staff capacity was satisfactory or weak. For a few schools, inspectors reported that there was even a variance of teaching approaches between the two special classes located within the same school building. There were a small number of cases where the guidance for the special class teacher was being provided solely by the SLT because school management had no effective mechanisms in place to induct or support new special class teachers. School leaders in all schools with special SSLD classes should ensure that teachers being appointed to these classes are inducted carefully and that they are supported as they learn their roles, and that, where possible, a system of succession planning is implemented whereby the experience and expertise of teachers leaving the role is shared effectively with the new teacher.

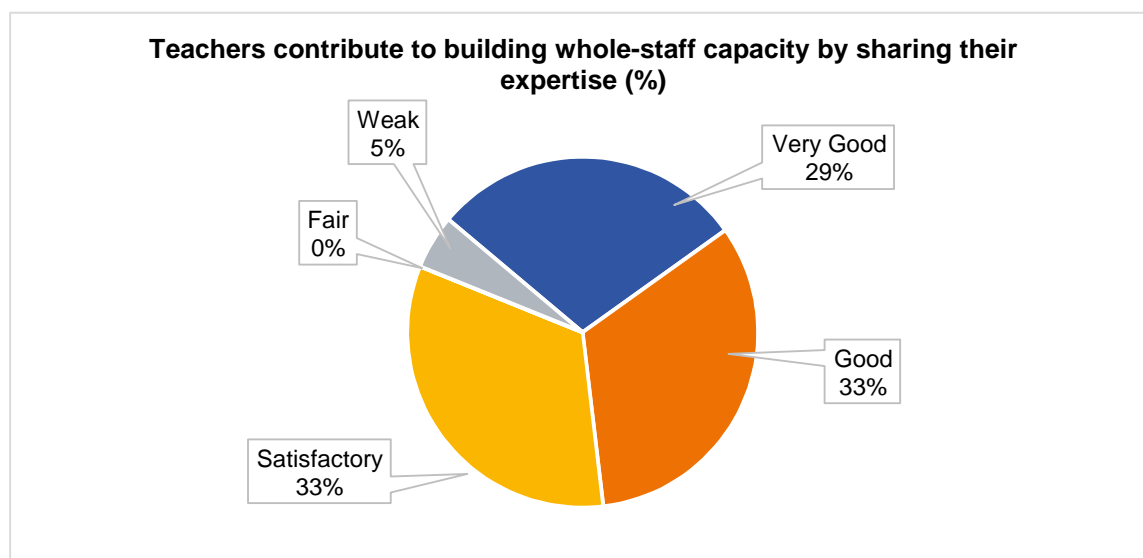


Figure 30

3.11.3 Learner experiences

Pupils' purposeful engagement in meaningful learning activities was described as good or very good in most of the special classes (*Figure 31*). Where practice was very effective, inspectors cited examples of pupils being engaged in a broad range of language development experiences across the breadth of the curriculum. They described lesson activities designed with a very clear emphasis on language production, articulation and extension of pupils' sentences. One school's inspection report acknowledges such positive learning experiences:

Pupils attending the special class were observed engaging very positively in a range of exemplary learning activities. Regular and worthwhile links have been established between this class and mainstream classrooms, facilitating very effective integration and reverse integration for pupils.

In the small number of classes where this aspect was rated as less than good, teachers were advised to place more emphasis in their interactions with pupils on dialogic language teaching methodologies designed to scaffold and extend pupils' expressive oral language.

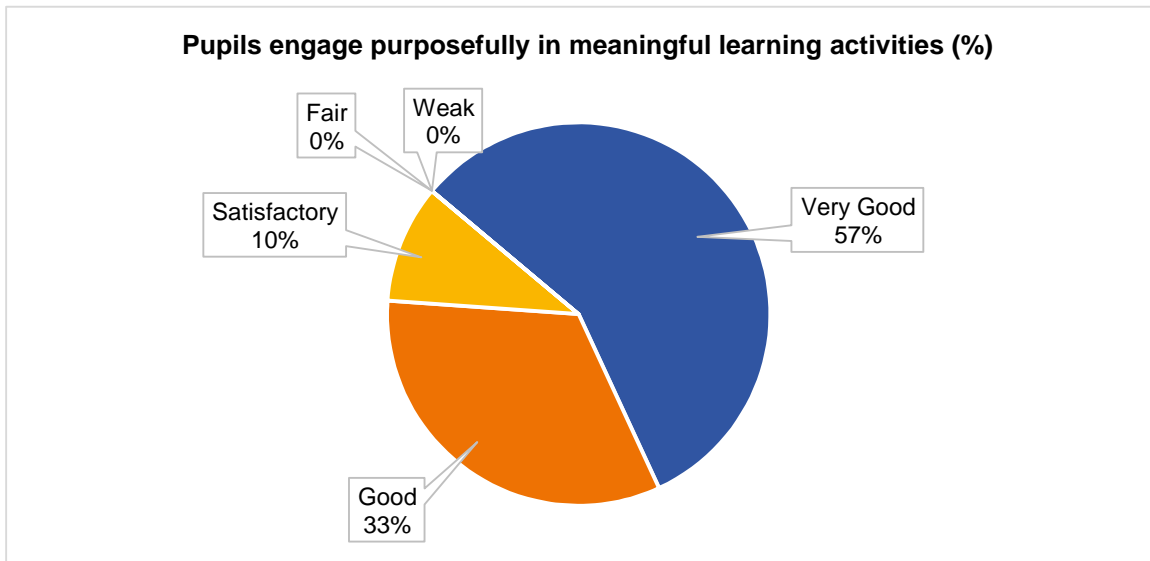


Figure 31

Pupils' growth as learners, through respectful interactions and experiences that were challenging and supportive, was rated as being good or very good in most of the special classes (*Figure 32*). Where this aspect was praised, inspectors commented on the positive and co-operative classroom atmosphere, the respect shown to pupils, affirmation of pupils' work and ongoing work to develop their confidence. Where mainstream integration was effective, this was also seen as supportive for pupils. In the few classes where the interactions and experiences were rated as satisfactory, inspectors made specific recommendations about improving differentiation to challenge and support pupils and also about increasing opportunities for mainstream integration.

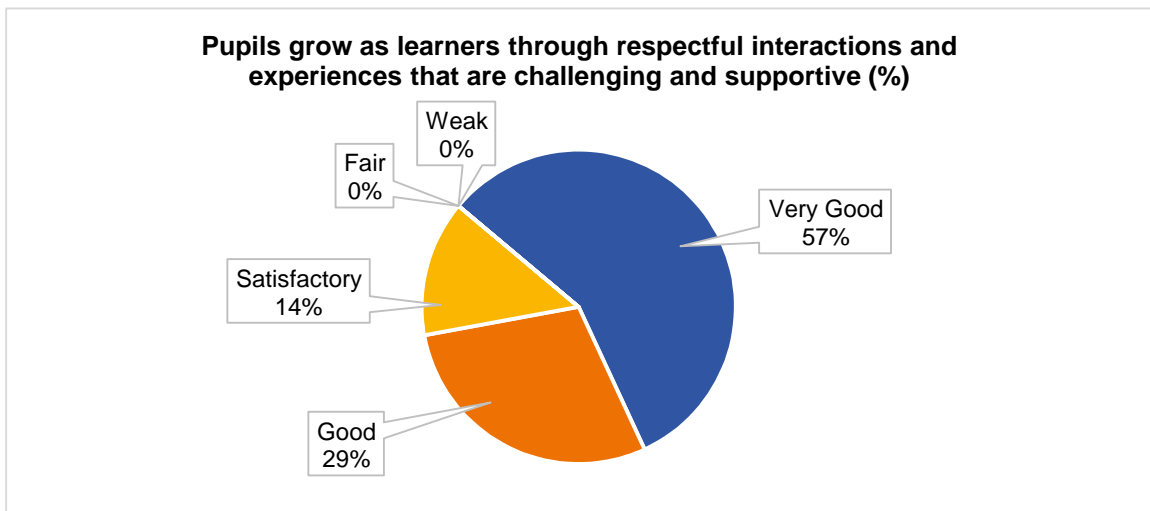


Figure 32

Pupils' ability to reflect on their progress as learners and develop a sense of ownership of and responsibility for their learning was described as good or very good in over three-quarters of settings (*Figure 33*). In an age-appropriate way, these pupils appeared to be growing in confidence and very aware of their own language progress. Where pupils' abilities to reflect was rated as satisfactory, inspectors noted that some pupils were very young or may not have had sufficient language skills to express their personal reflections.

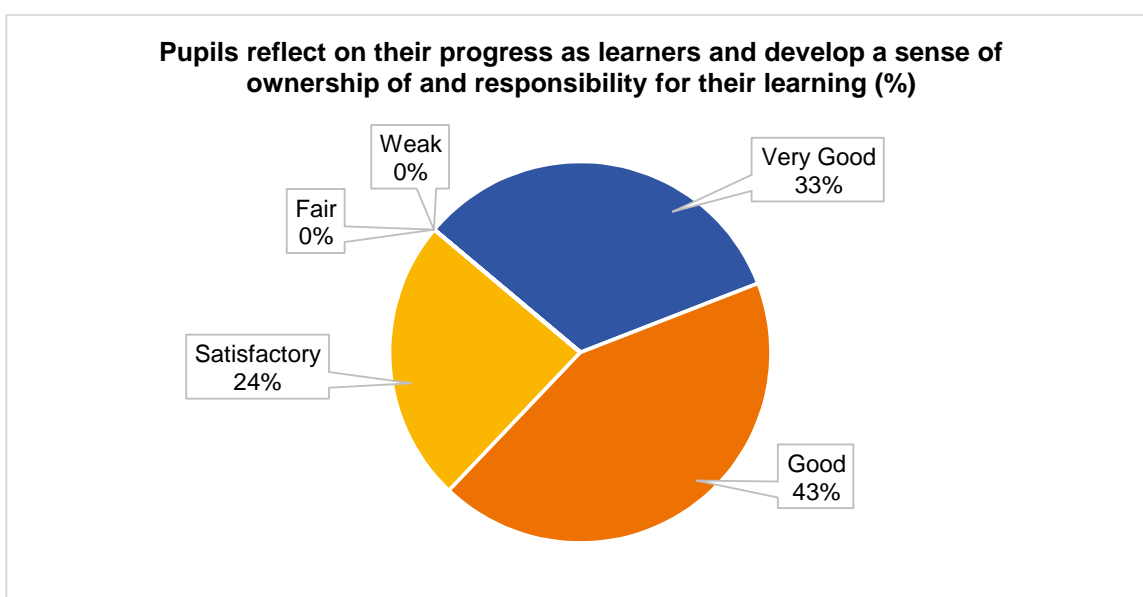


Figure 33

In most classes, inspectors rated the opportunities that pupils experience to develop the skills and attitudes necessary for lifelong learning as being good or very good (*Figure 34*). Features of best practice included very good use of digital technologies, development of expressive language, opportunities for integration and exploration of social Mathematics. In some cases, inspectors praised the implementation of programmes very relevant to pupils' personal needs and the provision of safe spaces for pupils to practise solutions to their own areas of particular language difficulty.

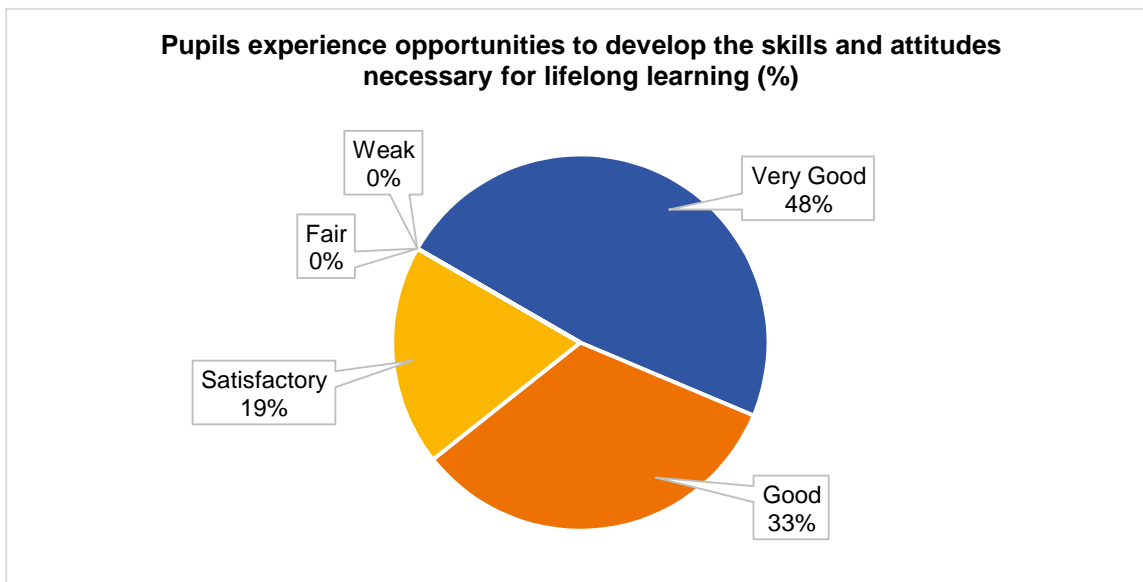


Figure 34

3.11.4 Learner outcomes

Inspectors rated pupils' enjoyment of their learning, their motivation to learn and their expectations to achieve as being good or very good in almost all of the special classes (*Figure 35*). These ratings were supported by commentary on pupils participating actively during lessons and achieving success with their learning tasks, especially if these were pitched at an appropriate level of challenge. Further evidence was provided about observable progression in pupils' facility with language and their social confidence. An inspection report provided the following commendation:

Pupils attending the special classes have access to wide and varied experiences at their appropriate mainstream class level and on a whole-school level. These experiences result in positive outcomes for pupils and also serve to promote pupil voice within the school.

Where pupils' enjoyment of their learning was rated less than good, it was clear that learning tasks were not pitched at the appropriate level of challenge for some pupils in the class.

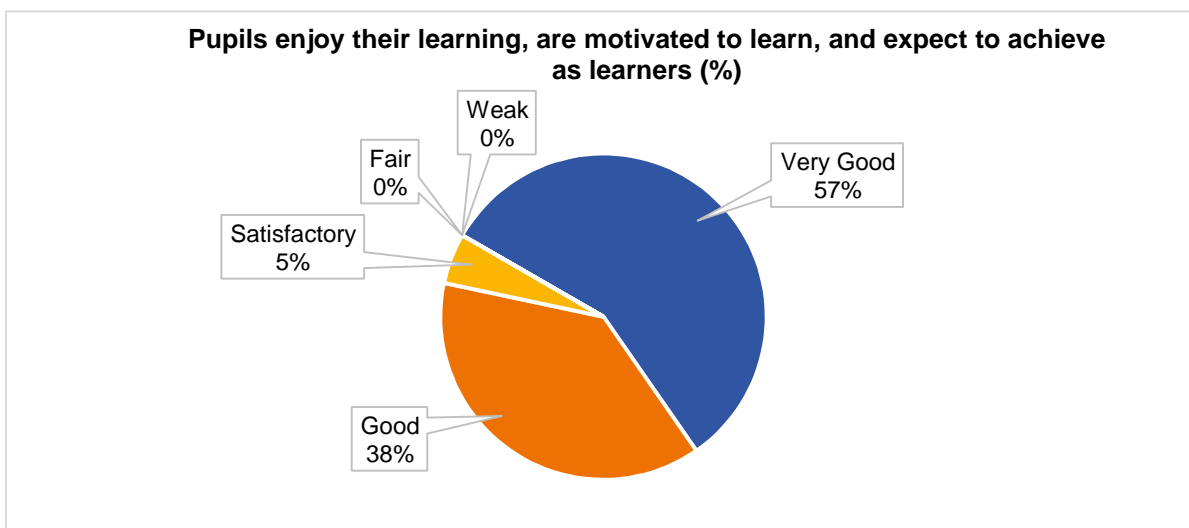


Figure 35

In most of the classes, pupils demonstrated that they had a good or very good level of knowledge and skills to understand themselves and their relationships (*Figure 36*). Inspectors commented on their interactions with pupils and how pupils could describe their roles and the positive relationships within the class. There was evidence that this remained positive even where all the child's classmates were of the opposite gender.

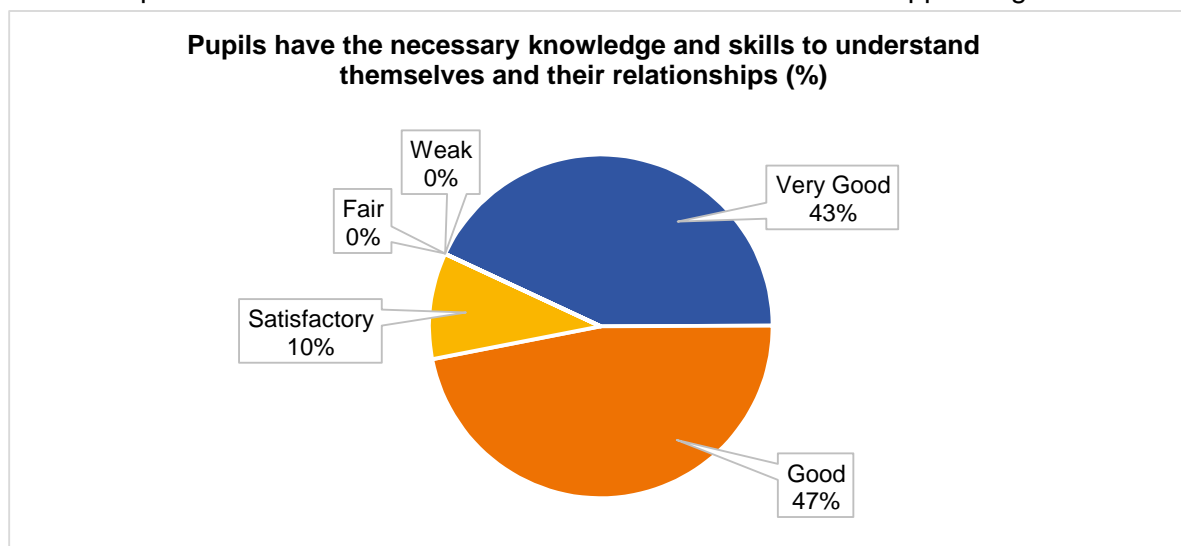


Figure 36

In their ratings of pupils' demonstration of the knowledge, skills and understanding required by the curriculum, inspectors found this aspect of learning to be good or very good in most of the special classes (*Figure 37*). There was evidence that pupils could recall and explain concepts and that the activities they engaged with were developing age-appropriate skills. One inspector described pupils as "behaving in an age-appropriate manner, being curious and engaging positively in both teacher-directed and self-directed learning experiences." Where work was well matched to pupils' individual needs and abilities, there was evidence of effective progression in learning. The recurring recommendation about differentiating work to ensure appropriate challenge for pupils explains the lower rating for a small number of classes.

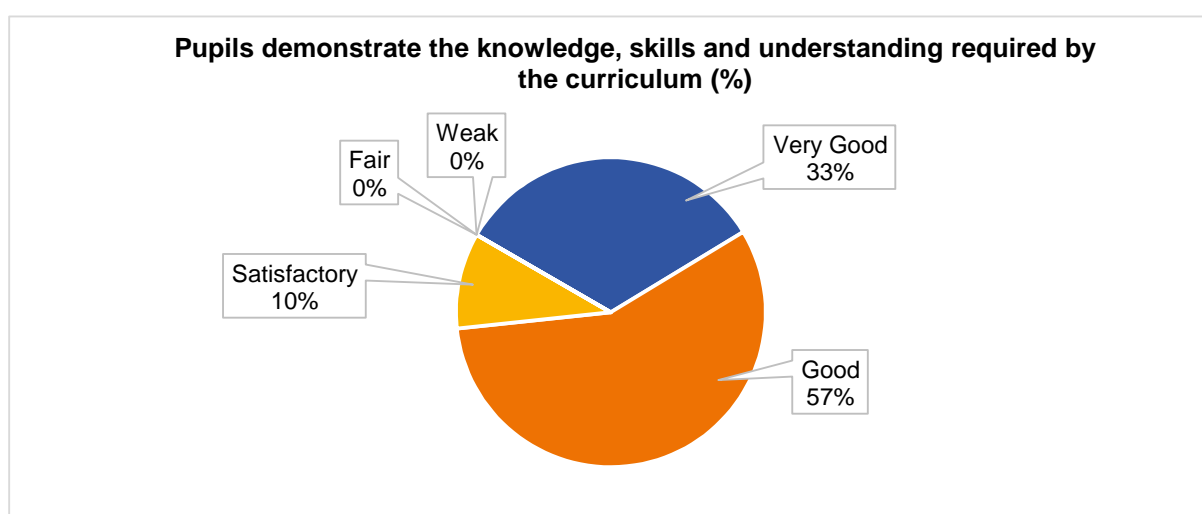


Figure 37

Pupils' achievement of the stated learning objectives for the term and year was good or very good in most of the special classes (*Figure 38*). This evidence of effective learning was easily verified in almost all of the classes where individual planning and assessment identified the appropriate next steps in pupils' learning and where teacher and SLT interventions were matched to these targets. Inspectors remarked that, in some instances, pupils' progress surpassed all expectations based on their previous levels of progress.

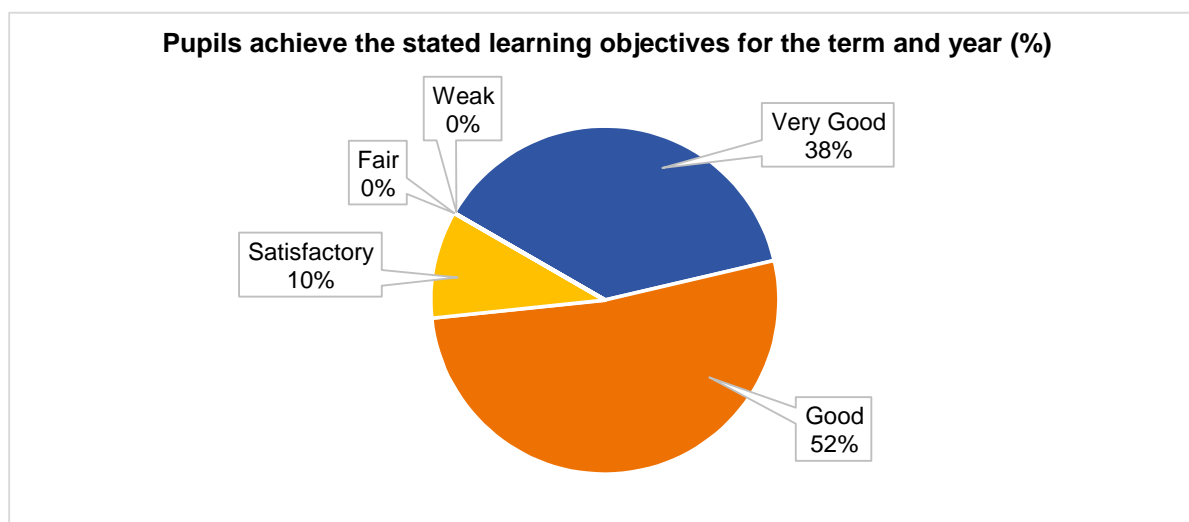


Figure 38

Overall, the evaluations have outlined very positive evidence about most aspects of SSLD class provision. The classes are relatively few in number, geographically dispersed and intended to give additional, intensive educational and therapeutic support to a small number of pupils whose needs are difficult to meet fully in mainstream education without intensive SLT intervention.

The Irish education system operates the *Continuum of Support* model, and mainstream schools have both the resources and the flexibility to provide for most special needs including speech and language needs. For the small group of pupils whose language needs are complex and enduring, the possibility of temporary special class placement is viewed as a valuable extra tier of specialised support. The decision to enrol a child in a special SSLD class cannot be taken lightly, but most of the classes have more applicants than available places.

In terms of inclusion, the idea of a child moving to a different school, sometimes up to 45 kilometres away, and losing contact with friends, cannot be easy. Coupled with this is the challenge of transitioning into the special class and later the experience of transitioning back into mainstream school. There may also be some interruption to the child's curriculum experience, most notably in the learning of a second language. Notwithstanding these and other possible challenges, the evidence from the evaluations describes many worthwhile gains for the vast majority of the special SSLD class pupils, most notably in their learning experiences, learning outcomes, confidence, access to combined educational and therapeutic support and individualised planning and assessment.

On balance from the evidence collected by inspectors, the benefits of special class placement and regular access to in-school SLT support would appear to outweigh the possible disadvantages for the particularly small group of children for which this type of provision was intended. Supports for those children with lesser SSLD needs and for those who do not manage to secure a special class place should be provided through

teacher-led language interventions across the *Continuum of Support* and HSE or HSE-funded SLT services. The provision of SLT supports through the Department's School Inclusion Model (SIM) has the potential to further develop schools' capacity to support pupils with language needs at all level of the continuum.

3.12 Summary of key findings

The following key findings summarise the analysis of inspection evidence from the special SSLD classes:

Enrolment and placement

- There is a clear disparity between the definition for DLD used by SLTs in their diagnostic work and the SSLD class entry criteria used by the NCSE and the Department of Education and Skills for the regulation of the SSLD classes which is causing confusion for the enrolment process.
- Some local difficulties about the need for psychological assessments to meet the Department's criteria were reported, with a lack of clarity on whether the HSE or NEPS had the responsibility for carrying out assessments for particular children.
- Schools have prioritised enrolment correctly for those pupils most likely to benefit from the placement and the enrolment selection process is usually managed by a committee comprising the principal, the special class teacher, speech and language therapists and a psychologist.
- Almost all pupils enrolled in the special classes matched the strict enrolment criteria outlined for this type of class and permitted concessionary enrolments were noted in only a very small number of classes.
- Inspectors judged that the pupils enrolled in all of the special classes were in the correct learning setting for their needs.
- In all cases, pupils were enrolled in the special class for one year, initially, and following the end of year formal review, almost all pupils were enrolled for their second and final year.
- The overall pattern of enrolment in the classes indicates a move towards earlier assessment and intervention for speech and language needs, an approach recommended by the Inspectorate's 2005 report.

Inclusion, integration and transitions

- There was an inclusive culture in most schools; where the culture was rated as less inclusive, inspectors made recommendations about increasing the opportunities for mainstream integration.
- At least some pupils from most of the special classes have integration opportunities for subject areas such as Visual Arts, Physical Education (PE), Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Music.
- In some cases, children travel up to 45 kilometres to attend the special class and it is difficult for them to maintain contact with their local schools during their

placement. It is notable also that the small number of pupils enrolling in the special class at fifth class level will not return to their original primary school because they will transfer into post-primary education. These issues of distance and separation may have implications for the child's sense of inclusion

- In a very small number of instances, there were junior pupils attending a special class in a senior school, an arrangement which would render age-appropriate integration very difficult. Similarly, there was one case of a girl being placed in an all boys' school.
- Most pupils in the special classes had English as their first language, but there were a small number of pupils in over half of the classes whose home language was not English.
- There were some views from teachers and SLTs that the two-year limit appears to be arbitrary.
- Special SSLD classes have implemented a range of supportive practices to assist pupils transitioning into their settings.
- During the final terms of placement many of the special classes encourage pupils to return to their mainstream class on particular days each week as part of preparations for transition.
- At the end of the placement most pupils returned to mainstream education in their original schools, although it was reported that some children enrolled in a mainstream class in the school where the special class was located.
- There were no instances noted of any pupil enrolled in a special SSLD class being put on a reduced timetable or a shortened school day.

Curriculum provision

- Pupils in all of the special classes had access to a suitably broad curriculum, and in almost all cases, the curriculum was differentiated appropriately to meet individual needs.
- In a small number of classes, there was an identified need to increase the emphasis on oral language through regular discrete lessons with more opportunities for pupils to express their ideas.
- Despite the enrolment criteria and the SERC recommendation that a second language would not be taught during the special class placement, inspectors noted instances of some pupils in almost half of the special classes studying Irish either formally or informally.

Whole-school considerations

- The 2020 evaluations indicate that almost all of the whole-school plans are now making appropriate reference to the work of the special SSLD classes.
- Where the impact of whole-school structures on the work of the special class was most positive, inspectors noted a culture of improvement supported by school leadership, effective staff rotation and positive engagement in continuous professional development. In the small number of cases where the impact was less positive there was evidence of deployment of inexperienced teachers to the special class, logistical supervision issues and missed opportunities for integration.

- The contribution of school leadership to the effective operation of the special class was rated as being satisfactory or better for almost all classes, but in a small number of cases, school leaders were not seen to be supporting the work of the special class teacher or encouraging participation in CPD.
- The availability and allocation of resources for the special classes was described as good or very good in all cases; the location of the speech and language therapist adjacent to the special class was seen as an essential resource for the effective operation of the class.
- In almost all of the special SSLD classes, teachers, in collaboration with the speech and language therapists, had devised suitable individualised support plans to direct the educational and language programme for pupils.

Planning and assessment

- Overall, inspectors found the individualised plans to be well informed in almost all cases, with evidence that teachers and SLTs usually consulted with parents.
- In the majority of special SSLD classes, the individualised plans were formally reviewed on a twice-yearly basis.
- In almost all of the special classes, inspectors noted evidence of the administration of a range of specialised assessment, with both teachers and SLT maintaining a range of observational data to contribute to their assessments of pupils' progress.
- In almost all of the special classes, there was evidence that the pupils were making good progress across the areas of literacy, motor skills, social development, written work and communication skills.
- In the small number of classes where evidence of acceptable progress for pupils was not identified, this was linked to poor provision for individualised planning, the lack of baseline assessment data or a very limited approach to recording outcomes.

The quality of teaching and learning

- In a small number of schools there was significant variation between the quality of teaching in the two special classes, indicating a lack of collaboration and no whole-school approach to supporting teachers in this role. There is a case for professional networking and more effective school leadership support.
- In the majority of settings, inspectors noted that the teachers were experienced with this type of learning need and that many had engaged in relevant CPD to build up their expertise.
- Most of the special class teachers demonstrated good or very good subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills. However, in the small number of cases, inspectors commented on inexperienced teachers having a lack of pedagogical knowledge for the specialist setting.
- Teachers' planning and assessment practices were good or very good in over three-quarters of the special classes. However, in a few classes, individual plans were not in place for all pupils; there was poor monitoring and tracking of

progress and the teachers were not preparing adequate short-term plans to guide their teaching.

- In most of the special classes, teachers' practice was deemed to be good or very good in relation to their selection and use of teaching approaches appropriate to the learning objectives and to pupils' learning needs. In a small number of cases, the pedagogy was inconsistent between lessons, and the lack of effective planning detracted from the effectiveness of instruction.
- Over three-quarters of the special class teachers demonstrated good or very good practice in responding to individual learning needs and differentiating teaching and learning activities as necessary. As many of the special class pupils span a range of ages and abilities, teaching in these settings requires similar differentiation skills to those required for multi-grade classrooms.

Collaborative practice and CPD

- The duration of the SLT's availability on the school site appears to vary from two to five full days, but most schools had the SLT present for at least three partial days. This represents a marked decrease in HSE SLT supports since 2005, and falls substantially short of the original intention of providing SLT supports to the classes for a minimum of four hours per day.
- In most settings, the SLT and the special class teacher collaborated very effectively in their roles and there was good sharing of responsibility and expertise.
- Over two-thirds of the special class teachers were deemed to have valued and engaged effectively or very effectively in professional development and professional collaboration. Some teachers indicated that they would like to undertake bespoke CPD for the SSLD role, but that such courses are not available for them.
- Teachers' contribution to building whole-staff capacity by sharing their expertise was rated as being good or very good in the majority of cases. There were a small number of cases where the guidance for the special class teacher was being provided solely by the SLT because school management had no effective mechanisms in place to induct or support new special class teachers.

Learner experiences and outcomes

- Pupils' purposeful engagement in meaningful learning activities was described as good or very good in most of the special classes. In the small number of classes where there was scope for improvement in this regard, teachers were advised to place more emphasis on dialogic language teaching methodologies in their interactions with pupils which are designed to scaffold and extend pupils' expressive oral language.
- Pupils' growth as learners through respectful interactions and experiences that were challenging and supportive was rated as being good or very good in most of the special classes.
- Inspectors rated pupils' enjoyment of their learning, their motivation to learn and their expectations to achieve as being good or very good in almost all of the special classes. Where pupils' enjoyment of their learning was rated as

satisfactory, it was clear that learning tasks were not pitched at the appropriate level of challenge for some pupils in the class.

- In their ratings of pupils' demonstration of the knowledge, skills and understanding required by the curriculum, inspectors found this aspect of learning to be good or very good in most of the special classes. The recurring recommendation about differentiating work to ensure appropriate challenge for pupils explains the lower rating for a small number of classes.
- Pupils' achievement of the stated learning objectives for the term and year was good or very good in most of the special classes.

Chapter 4 Conclusion

The Inspectorate's visits to twenty-one special SSLD classes identified a range of practices. Many aspects of good and very good practice have been identified and affirmed in this report. This positive practice is highlighted so that those responsible for special classes for pupils with SSLD can evaluate their own provision against the good practices identified and affirmed. Equally, the findings have also identified a number of practices which merit further improvement and these are summarised in the following discussion and the final recommendations.

4.1 Purpose of the special SSLD classes and enrolment criteria

This type of special class was established as a result of a recommendation by the SERC report in 1993. As envisaged by SERC, the classes were designed to provide a time-limited, targeted intervention for children with severe impairments in their skills of understanding and expressing themselves through spoken language. SERC stipulated that the special classes should focus on a relatively narrow cohort of pupils whose language difficulty was not otherwise attributable to co-morbidity factors such as general learning disability, deafness or behavioural challenges. The Department constructed enrolment criteria for the special classes to ensure an equitable entry process for pupils matching the SERC recommendation. Following the Inspectorate report in 2005, the criteria were further clarified, and the NCSE ensured that the entry criteria were communicated clearly to schools, practitioners and parents. This report has established that schools are implementing the criteria as intended, although some difficulties have been identified.

The role of the special SSLD class was clearly intended to be at the highest level of the continuum of provision for the children most likely to benefit from co-ordinated teacher and SLT support for their language difficulties in small class groupings. As such, this specialist intervention was never intended to support all children with a diagnosis of SSLD/SLI/SSLI, as most pupils with these needs could be supported through other school or community-based language interventions. The recent change in terminology to using the term DLD has impacted schools in applying their enrolment criteria. Key factors that are not involved in the clinical diagnosis of DLD are the use of discrepancy criteria for assessments and the use of cognitive referencing. DLD encompasses all children for whom their language difficulties are pervasive and impact on functioning, but are not associated with a known condition. These difficulties span a wide continuum. However, those children with a DLD diagnosis who will require a special class placement should only comprise the subset for whom the severity and pervasiveness of their needs indicates that they require a more intensive integrated therapeutic approach within their educational setting.

This small number of children with the diagnosis of DLD will have difficulties that impact their functioning to such an extent that they cannot engage in mainstream educational provision and need more integrated and co-ordinated educational and therapeutic supports. Thus the DLD definition encompasses a much wider group of children than those prioritised by the original SERC recommendation. The divergence in definition is creating difficulty for schools in applying their enrolment criteria, while also creating an expectation among parents of all children with a DLD diagnosis that their children will qualify for entry into these special class places. There is frustration too among clinicians that the Department's criteria have not been revised to recognise and incorporate the DLD definition.

Throughout the SEN evaluations conducted to gather evidence for this report, many inspectors heard the phrases SSLD and DLD being used interchangeably by school personnel. However, the authors of this report were tasked with providing evaluative commentary on the special SSLD classes as they are currently constituted, and this is the reason that the report does not explicitly reference DLD in its findings. Notwithstanding this approach, the report clearly identifies the disparity between the definition of DLD and the entry criteria for SSLD classes, and acknowledges that it presents a dilemma. There needs to be evidence-informed criteria that enable students with severe speech and language disorders, including DLD, with the highest level of need to access the limited number of places in the existing classes

In discussions between the Department and clinicians, the intended purpose of the special SSLD classes should be further explored to establish how the children with the greatest language needs can be successfully prioritised within any future jointly agreed definition. Furthermore, if there is to be a continuum of provision, it should also be determined how children with lesser language needs can be supported appropriately within the existing system of mainstream schooling. Exploration of the outcomes of recent NCSE pilot projects involving in-school therapies may prove useful in guiding discussions on future provision across the continuum of need.

4.2 Suitability of placements

Notwithstanding the challenges raised by apparent disparity between the criteria for access to SSLD classes and DLD definitions, inspectors commented positively on the appropriateness of the enrolment procedures followed by schools. They concluded that schools had prioritised enrolment correctly for those pupils most likely to benefit from the placement and that the enrolment selection process was usually managed by a committee comprising the principal, the special class teacher, speech and language therapists and a psychologist. It was notable that almost all pupils matched the strict enrolment criteria and that permitted concessionary enrolments were evident in only a very small number of classes.

Inspectors judged that the pupils enrolled in all of the special classes were in the correct learning setting for their needs. Most pupils had to move school to enrol in the special class and a small number of pupils were travelling up to forty-five kilometres to their new

schools. This can have implications for pupil welfare and inclusion. Inspectors noted that there were good arrangements for pupils to integrate into mainstream lessons from most of the special classes and that the school's culture was inclusive in most cases. However, the enrolment of junior pupils into a special class located in a senior school made it difficult for pupils there to experience age-appropriate mainstream integration. There was evidence of some very good practice in relation to transitioning pupils into the special class setting and more particularly the role played by teachers and SLTs to prepare pupils for their return to mainstream education. There is scope for this practice to be extended across all remaining settings.

4.3 Appropriateness of the provision

The special SSLD classes were instituted following the recommendations of the SERC Report in 1993. Since then there have been many developments in educational policy, both internationally and nationally. Irish policy has been moving towards a more inclusive educational system featuring a needs'-based approach to support children with special educational needs. Through the 2017 special education teacher allocation model and the *Continuum of Support*, mainstream schools now have the flexibility and autonomy to deploy their additional resources on the basis of learning needs to ensure that those pupils with the greatest level of needs receive the highest level of support. Within any definition of SSLD, SLI or DLD, pupils' language needs will vary in complexity and pervasion. The Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapist's *Position Paper and Guidance Document* (2017) outlines a framework for a comprehensive model of support for all children with DLD across a broad continuum. The paper advises caution in the decision-making to place a pupil in a special class:

Recommendations to place a child in the only currently available intensive model of provision, namely, the SSLD class, must be consistent with the child's profile of need and a requirement for placement arising from severity of need, activity limitations and functional impact. Children may present with a problem confined to speech only and some children while presenting with a language disorder, may not have a severe or pervasive need ... Other factors that bear on a recommendation for placement in an SSLD class include the distance a child may have to travel to attend the class, the child's school readiness, the effect of moving from the local community and the possible social and emotional challenges that such a move could entail.

The Inspectorate's findings support the position that this level of specialist intervention matches the needs of a very small cohort of pupils. For this group, the decision to move school, experience two significant transitions and interruption to their curriculum must be measured carefully against the quality of educational and SLT supports on offer to meet their specific needs. On balance, the findings from the evaluations indicate that

for the vast majority of pupils enrolled in the special SSLD classes visited in 2020, the outcomes were well worth risking the challenge of moving school.

4.4 Learning a Second Language

This series of evaluations highlighted the desire of some parents and teachers to ensure that pupils continue to study Irish, either formally or informally, during their special SSLD class placements. When the SERC Report advocated the establishment of the SSLD classes, it recommended that pupils experience a “curriculum that is taught through the language of the home, which does not include a second language.” The 2005 Inspectorate report noted that, at that time, Irish did not feature on the curriculum for any of the special SSLD classes and, that a small number of teachers used informal Irish to maintain pupils’ awareness of the language. Circular 12/96, which was in operation at the time of 2005 report, did not provide any automatic entitlement to an exemption from the study of Irish for pupils in special classes. Thus the 2005 report recommended an examination of the appropriateness of teaching Irish during the placement and, in particular, the implications of a two-year absence of Irish learning in the special classes for these pupils on their return to mainstream classes where Irish is a requirement unless an exemption had been granted.

The 2020 Inspectorate evaluations have highlighted similar issues, with at least some parents and teachers of children in almost half of the classes having opted for Irish to be taught at a particular level in preparation for the pupil’s return to mainstream education. There was specific evidence of a very small number of parents requesting schools to provide for Irish instruction during periods of mainstream integration. Circular 52/19 states that pupils in special classes in mainstream schools will be exempt from the study of Irish without holding a certificate of exemption, but the circular also encourages schools to provide pupils with opportunities to participate in Irish language and cultural activities at a level appropriate to their learning needs.

The operation of special SSLD classes experiences a particular challenge on this issue. On the one hand, the SERC recommendation discourages the teaching of a second language during the placement. Circular 52/19 allows pupils to be exempt from the teaching of Irish without a formal certificate, while a small number of parents want their children to be taught Irish. On the other hand, almost all pupils from this particular type of special class return to mainstream education after a gap of two years from their study of Irish. While many of these pupils will formally request a certificate of exemption from Irish, others will wish to continue studying Irish despite the disadvantage of interrupted provision in the subject. There is a need for the Department, NCSE and relevant professionals to further analyse these key issues, specifically examining the advisability or implications of teaching a second language during the placement and the longer term impact of the discontinuity of Irish instruction for pupils from special SSLD classes returning to mainstream schools.

4.5 Quality of teaching approaches

This report comments very favourably, overall, on the quality of teaching and learning in the special SSLD classes. Most of the special class teachers demonstrated good or very good subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills. Most teachers planned their work effectively with due consideration of pupils' specific needs and the teaching approaches were usually very appropriate. Inspectors identified a small number of classes where teachers were not planning sufficiently for individual needs or differentiating their instruction appropriately. However, in the small number of cases inspectors commented on inexperienced teachers having a lack of pedagogical knowledge for the specialist setting. To address this issue, school leaders should ensure that, wherever possible, teachers allocated to the special SSLD classes are experienced practitioners with relevant additional qualifications in special educational needs.

4.6 Collaboration between teachers and SLTs

Schools highly value the services of the SLTs allocated to them to support the work of the special classes. Some principals described a reduction of the SLT provision from a full-time role in the school to part-time hours throughout the week whilst schools had the SLT on site for an average of three partial days per week. This represents a marked reduction of SLT supports to the classes since 2005 and falls substantially short of the original intention of providing a minimum of four hours SLT support per day. To meet pupils' needs and to match the Department of Education's continued funding to provide a very favourable pupil-teacher ratio in these classes, the HSE should reinstate the original commitment to provide for a minimum of twenty hours' SLT support per week to capitalise on co-professional collaboration and to improve continuity of support for pupils.

Notwithstanding the reductions in provision, teachers acknowledged the expertise SLTs contributed to assessment, advising on approaches, individual planning, co-teaching and individual therapy. There was evidence that many SLTs shared professional knowledge very effectively with teachers. It was clear also that the collaboration between SLTs and teachers contributed to the quality of target setting and reviews of individualised plans. Co-professional approaches between SLTs and teachers have huge potential to integrate educational and therapeutic practice to support pupils' needs. Inspectors described some very effective collaboration between SLTs and teachers, sometimes exemplified by joint classroom practice focused on agreed language programmes. Many SLTs contributed strongly to upskilling other staff in the schools about language approaches and they played key roles in supporting transitions and in communicating with parents. However, in a very small number of cases, the teacher and SLT worked independently of each other which did not contribute to the most effective practice. School leaders and SLT managers should encourage teachers and SLTs attached to special SSLD classes to work collaboratively and to maximise the potential synergy of co-teaching approaches to support pupils' needs.

4.7 The quality of pupils' learning

Overall, inspectors commented very favourably about the quality of pupils' learning in almost all of the special classes. Pupils engaged purposefully in meaningful learning activities in most lessons. They experienced respectful interactions which encouraged their growth as learners, and their enjoyment of learning was adjudged to be good or very good in almost all classes. Where learning was not optimal, inspectors made recommendations to teachers about differentiating lessons more effectively and, in particular, on engaging pupils with dialogic language teaching methodologies designed to scaffold and extend pupils' expressive oral language.

4.8 Assessment and recording of progress

When pupils enrol in a special class, it is very important that their specific language and educational needs are identified accurately to establish realistic targets and learning programmes. In almost all of the special SSLD classes, teachers, in collaboration with the speech and language therapists, had devised suitable individualised support plans to direct the educational and language programme for pupils. In the majority of cases, the quality of targets examined was good, and some inspectors noted very good collaboration with the SLT resulting in plans which included speech and language therapy targets, as well as targets in other areas of the curriculum. There was evidence in most cases that individual plans were reviewed regularly and, for most pupils, inspectors could identify commendable progress for pupils in the areas of literacy, motor skills, social development, written work and communication skills. A very small number of teachers had not devised individualised plans for their pupils and this lack of planning detracted from the coherence of pupil supports.

4.9 Future provision

The special SSLD classes are at the highest end of the continuum of provision for children with severe speech and language impairments. As such, they are relatively few in number and their locations are regionally dispersed. Provision in these settings has in general been rated highly by inspectors. The concept of having joint therapeutic and educational supports in a school setting is attractive and where real co-professional approaches are agreed, they can be very effective. The disparity in definition between diagnostic and enrolment criteria needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency to ensure that the pupils most in need of this specialised support will continue to be prioritised for enrolment. It will be equally important that pupils with lesser language needs, but who might fit into the broader DLD diagnostic category, are supported more appropriately throughout the educational system. This may be achieved by enhancing SLT supports to mainstream schools, upskilling mainstream and special education teachers and by enhancing modules on language difficulties in initial teacher education and post-graduate courses.

Special SSLD classes differ significantly from other types of special classes in that almost all of their pupils return to mainstream education. Their pupils are carefully selected and there is usually a good intervention plan and provision for transition back to the mainstream school. This fluidity allows the classes to serve many pupils. When the inclusion implications of UNCRPD (Section 24/2) for the Irish educational system are fully determined by policy makers, the ultimate role of this particular type of short-term intervention may be transposed into new structures. In the meantime, the provision, with the improvements suggested in the following recommendations is an effective support for those pupils with the greatest language needs.

4.10 Main recommendations

Analysis of the findings of the Inspectorate's evaluations in twenty-one primary special SSLD classes (out of a national total of sixty-five) identified a number of areas requiring improvement. These areas are addressed in the following recommendations which outline a range of actions for consideration by teachers, school leaders, the NCSE and the Department of Education. The recommendations are made in the current context within a continuum of placements being provided for pupils with special educational needs, namely mainstream schools, special classes attached to mainstream schools and special schools.

- There is an urgent need for the Department, in consultation with the NCSE, the HSE and representatives of relevant clinicians to analyse all aspects of the disparity between the existing criteria for enrolment in special SSLD classes and the wider DLD criteria currently used by SLTs for diagnostic purposes.
- The Department, in consultation with its education partners and the HSE, should examine how pupils with less severe speech and language needs can be supported more consistently in mainstream education to ensure that the special SSLD classes continue to be reserved for pupils with the greatest levels of need.
- The Department, NCSE and other relevant professionals should examine further the advisability or implications of teaching a second language to pupils during their special SSLD class placement, and the longer term impact of the discontinuity of Irish instruction for pupils from these classes returning to mainstream schools.
- At a local level, NCSE should discourage the location of junior special classes in senior schools as this approach presents difficulty for meaningful mainstream integration.
- School leaders should ensure that, wherever possible, teachers allocated to the special SSLD classes are experienced practitioners with relevant additional qualifications in special educational needs. This should be augmented by encouraging teachers to engage in relevant CPD.
- To meet pupils' needs and to match the Department of Education's continued funding to provide a very favourable pupil-teacher ratio in these classes, the HSE should reinstate the original commitment to provide for a minimum of twenty

hours SLT support per week to capitalise on co-professional collaboration and to improve continuity of support for pupils.

- School leaders and SLT managers should encourage teachers and SLTs attached to special SSLD classes to work collaboratively and to maximise the potential synergy of co-teaching approaches to support pupils' needs.
- All teachers in special SSLD classes should engage pupils with dialogic language teaching methodologies designed to scaffold and extend pupils' expressive oral language.
- All teachers in special SSLD classes should collaborate with the SLT, parents and any other relevant professionals to devise individualised plans and targets for each pupil and to review progress in respect of this plan on a regular basis.

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Appendix 1 Research Instrument Used to Collate Inspectors' Observations and Ratings

SEN Evaluations 2020 SLD/SSLD Special Class Data Return Sheet

Please indicate your overall LAOS Ratings for Teaching and Learning in this special class: (Taking the context into account, please rate the provision you observed according to the quality continuum. (Numerically 1= Weak and 5 = Very Good).

Standards	Rating	Clarification, (if needed)
Learner Outcomes		
Pupils enjoy their learning, are motivated to learn, and expect to achieve as learners		
They have the necessary knowledge and skills to understand themselves and their relationships		
They demonstrate the knowledge, skills and understanding required by the curriculum		
They achieve the stated learning objectives for the term and year		
Learner experiences		
Pupils engage purposefully in meaningful learning activities		
They grow as learners through respectful interactions and experiences that are challenging and supportive		
They reflect on their progress as learners and develop a sense of ownership of and responsibility for their learning		
They experience opportunities to develop the skills and attitudes necessary for lifelong learning		
Teacher's Individual Practice		
The teacher has the requisite subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills		

S/he selects and uses planning, preparation and assessment practices that progress pupils' learning		
S/he selects and uses teaching approaches appropriate to the learning objectives and to pupils' learning needs		
S/he responds to individual learning needs and differentiates teaching and learning activities as necessary		
Teachers' collective / collaborative practice		
Teachers value and engage in professional development and professional collaboration		
Teachers contribute to building whole-staff capacity by sharing their expertise		
Leadership and Management		
School leaders promote a culture of improvement, collaboration, innovation and creativity in learning, teaching and Assessment		
School leaders foster a commitment to inclusion, equality of opportunity and the holistic development of each pupil		

1. Please rate the impact of the following whole-school aspects on the work of this special class

Aspect	Rating	Clarification, (if needed)
The contribution from school leadership		
The impact of whole-school structures and organisation		
The availability and allocation of resources		
The inclusive nature of the school's culture		

<i>The Special Class and its Pupils</i>	Yes/No (if relevant)	COMMENT/EVIDENCE
Who is in the class?		

On average, what age are pupils on enrolment?		
Have any pupils any co-morbidity with other difficulties ie any other diagnosis?		If yes, please specify briefly
Are there pupils who are dual language learners..(ie was there a possible delay in diagnosing SSLD due to English not being their L1?)		If yes, please specify briefly
How did they get there? i.e What are the enrolment procedures?		
Are there any reported difficulties in criteria / language assessments to support enrolment applications?		
Do all current pupils fit the enrolment criteria?		
Are the pupils currently enrolled in the correct setting for their needs		
Typically, what is the geographical distance travelled?		
How long are pupils enrolled for and where do they go after they leave the special class?		
SSLD only – Is there SLT provision in the school – please quantify (days)		
What’s the role of the SLT?		
Do the teacher and SLT work well together?		
Is there any NEPS involvement with the special class?		
Is there an SNA? If so, Is the SNA’s role managed appropriately		

Do any pupils from the special class integrate into mainstream classes during the day/week?		
Do any mainstream pupils partake in reverse integration into the special class?		
Are any pupils from the class on reduced timetables or shortened days?		

Pupils' Learning		
Curriculum	Yes/No (if relevant)	COMMENT/EVIDENCE
Students have access to a suitably broad and balanced programme based on the Primary School Curriculum		
Appropriate programmes are implemented to develop pupils' skill in literacy		
Appropriate programmes are implemented to develop pupils' skill in numeracy		
Does the curriculum provision afford appropriate support and challenge for all pupils?		
Do the pupils learn Irish?		
Any further comment on the curriculum/learning programmes provided for pupils in this special class?		

Meeting Educational Needs	Yes/No (if relevant)	COMMENT/EVIDENCE

Is there a suitable individual plan for each pupil? Are targets clear?		
Is that plan well informed? (e.g. by professional reports and/or information from previous teachers)		
What about the parents– have they a say / input into the plan?		
What about the pupils – have they a say / input into the plan?		
Has the school/ the special class teacher got the capacity to deliver on the plan?		
How often are individual plans reviewed?		
Who is involved in the reviews?		
Is progress assessed regularly and effectively?		
Are there any specialised assessment in use and who administers them?		Examples
Is there evidence that pupils are making acceptable progress (generally in curriculum) and also more specifically in their targets / areas of particular need		
How does the class support the wellbeing of the pupils (in light of link between language and behaviour which can impact on anxiety)		
Comment on pupils’ confidence and self-esteem, how they interact and mix with peers, and how they acquire skills in playing together, sharing, chatting together, engaging in formal conversation and taking turns.		

Is there any communication with the pupils' base schools during the 2 year placement in the special school?		
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Quality of Teaching	Yes/No (if relevant)	
Is there real expertise to be seen in the classroom?		
Is the teacher experienced with this type of learning needs?		
Has the teacher availed of CPD? If the teacher has availed of training, where was this accessed?		
Are there any specialised approaches in use for language or dyslexia		
What's really good about the classroom practice?		
What's not so good?		
What resources are used in the classroom?		
Have the support services (or visiting teachers) been availed of / involved?		

5. Planning	Yes/No (if relevant)	
Long and short-term planning indicates that pupils' curriculum access is appropriately broad and differentiated.		

The Whole-school plan makes appropriate reference to the operation of the special class.		
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6. Assessment	Yes/No (if relevant)	COMMENT/EVIDENCE
A range of assessment strategies is used to monitor and review pupils' progress.		
Summative and formative assessment strategies are used appropriately		
Assessment findings are communicated to parents during parent-teacher meetings, home-work journals, pupils' copies and sending home pupils' completed work samples.		

Whole-school Management	Yes/No (if relevant)	
The enrolment policy for the special class prioritises entry for the pupils most likely to benefit from this type of placement		
The school operates the enrolment policy fairly?		Any refusals to enrol or Section 29 cases?
What is the quality of the transition into the special class? – (plans/procedures)		
How does the school prepare pupils for their discharge and is that transition planning effective?		
Are arrangements made with the base school about re-enrolment once the years		

placement is complete? (is re-enrolment guaranteed?)		
In the case of older pupils are arrangements made to enrol in post primary? (And in which catchment? Special Class or Original school?)		

Key feedback provided to this special class teacher:

Strengths	Recommendations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •

Appendix 2: The Inspectorate's Quality Continuum

Level	Description	Example of descriptive terms
Very Good	Very good applies where the quality of the areas evaluated is of a very high standard. The very few areas for improvement that exist do not significantly impact on the overall quality of provision. For some schools in this category the quality of what is evaluated is outstanding and provides an example for other schools of exceptionally high standards of provision.	Very good ; of a very high quality; very effective practice; highly commendable; very successful; few areas for improvement; notable; of a very high standard. Excellent; outstanding; exceptionally high standard, with very significant strengths; exemplary
Good	Good applies where the strengths in the areas evaluated clearly outweigh the areas in need of improvement. The areas requiring improvement impact on the quality of pupils' learning. The school needs to build on its strengths and take action to address the areas identified as requiring improvement in order to achieve a <i>very good</i> standard.	Good ; good quality; valuable; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; some areas for improvement
Satisfactory	Satisfactory applies where the quality of provision is adequate. The strengths in what is being evaluated just outweigh the shortcomings. While the shortcomings do not have a significant negative impact they constrain the quality of the learning experiences and should be addressed in order to achieve a better standard.	Satisfactory ; adequate; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist; acceptable level of quality; improvement needed in some areas
Fair	Fair applies where, although there are some strengths in the areas evaluated, deficiencies or shortcomings that outweigh those strengths also exist. The school will have to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is satisfactory or better.	Fair , evident weaknesses that are impacting on pupils' learning; less than satisfactory; experiencing difficulty; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve
Weak	Weak applies where there are serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated. Immediate and coordinated whole-school action is required to address the areas of concern. In some cases, the intervention of other agencies may be required to support improvements.	Weak ; unsatisfactory; insufficient; ineffective; poor; requiring significant change, development or improvement; experiencing significant difficulties;