



**An Roinn Oideachais  
agus Scileanna**  
Department of  
Education and Skills

# **Educational Provision for Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Special Classes Attached to Mainstream Schools in Ireland**

**INSPECTORATE: EXCELLENCE IN LEARNING FOR ALL**

**AN CHIGIREACHT: FEABHAS NA FOGHLAMA DO CHÁCH**

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## Glossary of Terms

**Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)** is a neurological, developmental disorder which affects how people communicate, socialise and interact with others.

**Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA)** is an intensive, highly structured teaching programme using discrete trials and stimulus-response reinforcement techniques.

**Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)** is a teaching method by which children are taught to communicate their needs by exchanging a picture or object.

**ABLLS-R (Assessment of Basic Language & Learning Skills-Revised Edition)** and **VB-MAPP (Verbal Behaviour Milestones Assessment & Placement Program)** are specialised communication assessment tools designed specifically for children with language impairments and autism.

**Attention Autism** is an intervention model designed to develop natural and spontaneous communication through the use of visually based and motivating activities.

**Lámh** is a manual sign system used in Ireland by children and adults with intellectual disability and communication needs in.

**PEP-3 (The Psychoeducational Profile-Third Edition)** is an individualised assessment for children with ASD aged from 2 years to 7.6 years derived from the TEACCH programme.

**Social Stories** are stories used to teach or reinforce social skills to learners experiencing difficulties with communication and social skills.

**The TEACCH Autism Programme** is a structured teaching approach which recognises that the environment and daily activities often need to be adapted to meet the unique needs and strengths of individuals with autism.

## Executive Summary:

In early 2019, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills conducted a series of evaluations in mainstream schools in which special classes for learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) were allocated. The evaluations were carried out at the request of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to provide current, school-based evidence for its policy advice function. Inspectors used the Special Educational Needs (SEN) evaluation model to collect evidence in sixty-five special classes in primary schools and twenty special classes in post-primary schools. In addition to the SEN inspection report published for each of the schools, inspectors collected and returned summary data from each special class for collation and analysis prior to completing this composite report. Inspectors' data returns included ratings of practice related to the *Looking at Our School 2016* statements of effective practice, some ASD specific quantitative observations together with qualitative or observational descriptions of school practice. A meeting of inspectors who participated in the evaluations was also convened following completion of the school visits for discussion and interrogation of their inspection findings. This composite report presents the statistical data in visual format while also analysing inspectors' comments and excerpts from the published school reports to establish the key findings.

The number of special classes for learners with ASD has risen rapidly over recent years. At the time that the inspections were carried out, there were 746 such classes at primary level and 321 at post-primary level. Within the mainstream school system, many primary schools have had the opportunity to develop their expertise and practices in this area over a longer period of time. As increasing numbers of learners from primary special classes transition to post-primary school, this has led to a significant growth in demand to open post-primary special classes. This relatively recent development and shorter tradition of hosting special classes must be understood as a contextual factor when comparing practices between the primary and post-primary settings.

Special classes for learners with ASD are organised in different ways at primary and post-primary school levels. At primary level, each special class is the responsibility of one teacher, and the vast majority of pupils enrolled spend most of their time in the special class with some opportunities for planned mainstream integration. Depending on the needs of the pupils enrolled and their self-regulation skills, periods of integration are progressively increased with the aim, where appropriate, of full enrolment into the mainstream class. At post-primary level, responsibility for the special classes is shared between a co-ordinating teacher and one or more teachers who teach a required number of hours per week in the special class. This sharing of responsibility requires co-ordination between teachers to ensure continuity and consistency in students' learning programmes. Typically, students spend some of their time in the special class while also receiving opportunities to integrate with their mainstream peers during certain lessons. Depending on their needs, some students spend the majority of their time in the special class, while others may only need to use it as a base at certain times of the day or for social or sensory needs. Mindful of these differences in context, this composite report presents its findings and recommendations on a sectoral basis, as follows.

## Summary of Key Findings for Primary Special Classes

The following key findings summarise the analysis of inspection evidence from the **primary** special classes for pupils with ASD:

- The enrolment policy for the primary special classes was found to be clear and appropriate in just over half of the settings. In a minority of cases, enrolment policies contained restrictions either limiting access to the special class to pupils with general learning disability categories or who were able to be integrated into mainstream classes for a considerable proportion of their time in schools.

- In almost all of the primary special classes, pupils were deemed to be in the correct educational setting for their needs; in a small number of cases some pupils would have benefited from being fully enrolled in mainstream classes. The suitability of placements should be reviewed regularly as is outlined in NCSE Guidelines for the establishment of such classes.
- In almost all cases in the primary special classes, some pupils were integrated meaningfully in mainstream classes at some point during the school day or week; in particular instances there was potential to extend this integration further towards full inclusion.
- In the primary special classes, the individualised planning process identified learning targets accurately in over two-thirds of settings; there was scope in the remaining settings to link targets more effectively to professional reports and baseline assessment and to ensure that targets were SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time bound) and that their achievement was monitored.
- Suitable autism-specific assessments were used in over half of the primary special classes to identify needs and track progress; some teachers were unfamiliar with the existing range of ASD assessments and the availability of CPD to support their use.
- Almost all primary special class teachers demonstrated the requisite subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills; in a small number of cases these were lacking because the special class teacher was not familiar with ASD approaches.
- Most pupils in the primary special classes enjoyed their learning, were motivated to learn, and expected to achieve as learners during the lessons observed, especially where teachers had high expectations and affirmed pupils' efforts; some settings needed more consistency of approach, structure and clearer targets to improve learning outcomes for pupils.
- Most primary special class pupils were achieving the stated learning objectives for the term and year; more specific ASD teaching approaches, particularly those acknowledging the visual modality of ASD learning, were required in some settings.

## Summary of Key Findings for Post-Primary Special Classes

The following key findings summarise analysis of the inspection evidence for the **post-primary** special classes for students with ASD:

- The enrolment policy for the post-primary special classes was deemed to be clear and appropriate in half of the settings. Some schools explicitly prioritised enrolment for students with higher cognitive functioning or for those who could easily integrate into mainstream classes thereby potentially denying places for students with more complex needs.
- In approximately two-thirds of the post-primary special classes inspected, inspectors found that at least some students with special educational needs were inappropriately placed in mainstream classes or special classes for autism. In some cases, students' needs were not being met through mainstream integration and they were not allowed to access the supports they needed in a special class setting, while there were other students who should have been fully enrolled in mainstream classes because their needs did not merit special class support.
- Parents were meaningfully consulted during the individualised planning process for their children in less than half of the post-primary special classes. Some parents would have liked greater involvement in this planning. They also wanted better

communication with the school regarding the design of programmes and learning experiences for their children.

- Suitable autism-specific assessments were used in less than one-third of the post-primary special classes to identify needs and track progress; there is a need for upskilling in this area in many schools.
- Fewer than half of the teachers in the post-primary special classes effectively used a range of autism-specific teaching approaches; there is significant scope to upskill teachers in these methodologies through CPD.
- During the lessons observed, most students enjoyed their learning, were motivated to learn, and expected to achieve as learners at a satisfactory level or better. However, in some instances, teachers needed to demonstrate higher expectations of their students' learning capabilities. Students also required more support to develop self-regulation skills.
- The majority of post-primary students were enabled to demonstrate the knowledge, skills and understanding required by the curriculum, but almost half of students were not attaining this outcome sufficiently due to the lack of ASD-specific teaching interventions.
- In the post-primary special classes, records examined in over half of the settings indicated that students' learning was progressing appropriately from term to term; there is scope to improve record keeping to ensure that students' progress is assessed, monitored and recorded accurately in their Student Support File to assist with future target setting.

## Implications for Special Class Provision

While the system of establishing special classes is intended to support learners with different needs on a journey towards full inclusion, there is always the danger that these learners will be seen as being separate from their mainstream peers and that partial integration may be perceived as a successful outcome for the learner.

The evidence from the inspection visits suggests that, in some schools, and more particularly at post-primary level, the effect of restrictive clauses in their enrolment policies is that some learners with less challenging needs are enrolled into the special classes when they are capable of greater integration within mainstream classes. As a result, these learners spend most of their time integrated with their peers on a partial basis, but do not achieve full mainstream enrolment. The evidence also suggests that, at the same time, other learners with more pronounced autism needs and co-occurring learning needs<sup>1</sup> encounter difficulties enrolling in the special classes within these schools and some of them are directed towards home-tuition or special schools.

In the context of Ireland's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and the possible implications of Section 24 (Part 2) in particular, it would be worthwhile for policy makers to examine if the current configuration of special classes is the most effective model to fully include all learners in school life. Specifically, if full inclusion or ultimate enrolment into mainstream classes is to be viewed as the index of success, the current system of special classes appears to be having limited success for many learners who enrol in a special class. With increasing demands being made for the opening of new special classes for learners with ASD as distinct from other types of special classes, and the reported reluctance of some school authorities to open these special classes, there is a danger that segregated educational provision could expand unintentionally. Policy makers and education

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<sup>1</sup> For example; Learning needs related to sensory issues, communication needs, self-regulation difficulties and a requirement for structure and predictability in the learning environment.

partners will need to reflect on the effectiveness and inclusiveness of current provision as they plan for Ireland's future response to the conditions attached to the CRPD.

### Main Recommendations

Analysis of the findings of the Inspectorate's evaluations in sixty-five primary and twenty post-primary special classes for learners with ASD in mainstream schools has 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 and Skills. The recommendations are made in the current context within a continuum of placements being provided for learners with special educational needs, namely mainstream schools, special classes attached to mainstream schools and special schools.

- The NCSE should provide schools sanctioned to operate special classes for autism with more explicit direction about the designation of the class, specifically in relation to any permissible stipulations about enrolment of pupils with particular levels of cognitive functioning. This designation should also be published for parents and the public.
- Schools' enrolment policies for their special classes should not prioritise places in the special class for higher functioning learners who, despite anxiety and other needs, have the potential to be more easily integrated in mainstream classes with appropriate support.
- To foster inclusion, all learners' placements in special classes should be reviewed collaboratively and formally with school personnel, external professionals, parents and the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) annually to determine if full enrolment in a mainstream class is now more appropriate. Where possible, learners should be involved in these discussions and decisions.
- Leaders in all schools with special classes should prioritise the allocation of the most skilled, experienced teachers with the appropriate levels of CPD to the special classes. Newly-qualified or substitute teachers should not be deployed to the special classes.
- Leaders at post-primary level should examine the effectiveness of the supports being provided for students enrolled in the special classes, especially where students are being integrated without supports available from the SEN team or the special class teachers.
- Management and leaders in post-primary schools should ensure that the grant-aided rooms and resources provided for the special classes remain available for these students' use for as long as the special class has official recognition.
- Leaders at primary level should examine the possibilities and make plans for extending periods of mainstream integration for pupils from the special classes with the ultimate aim of achieving full mainstream enrolment.
- In all schools with special classes, a whole-school approach to accessing ASD-specific CPD should be agreed and an audit of skills in this area should be completed. Mechanisms to facilitate collaborative sharing of ASD expertise among staff should be strengthened.
- All instances of shortened school days/reduced timetables should require written parental consent and be reported immediately to TUSLA. If agreed in consultation with parents and external professionals, shortened days should always include an action plan outlining how the school intends to fully include the learner in school life as soon as possible.
- School leaders in post-primary schools should examine their timetabling of supports for students in the special classes to ensure that these students are able to access

their entitlement of twenty-eight hours of tuition per week and that they have access to an appropriate range of subjects.

- At primary and post-primary level, special class teachers and mainstream teachers supporting learners with ASD should use a range of suitable ASD-specific teaching methodologies to support learning, self-regulation, social development, life skills and engagement in school life.
- Special class teachers should access CPD on ASD-specific assessments and use these to establish baselines for the individualised planning process and to establish priority learning needs, especially for learners with communication or behavioural difficulties.
- All schools should ensure that they have systems in place to monitor, assess and record achievement of learners' targets and that the programmes of work are pitched at the correct level of challenge.
- The Department of Education and Skills' support services should provide more specific guidance for schools with special classes on SMART target setting suitable for individualised planning.
- An individualised plan (or equivalent school support plan) should be devised and reviewed at least twice annually for each learner enrolled in a special class to ensure that there is continuity and clarity in learning programmes.
- All schools, including post-primary schools, should ensure that parents (and students, where possible) are consulted meaningfully about the individualised planning process and that parents of learners in special classes are provided with a copy of the current Student Support Plan.

## Chapter 1 Introduction and Background

The quality of provision and interventions for children and young people with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has long been a focus of considerable attention and debate. In 2001, the Report of the Task Force on Autism made recommendations regarding policies and practices for the educational provision of children and young people with ASD in Ireland. While acknowledging the importance of having a range of provision, the report proposed that learners with ASD should have priority of placement in mainstream schools. To support this goal, the report recommended adequate training for all relevant staff, closer partnerships with parents and multi-disciplinary and cooperative approaches between agencies and services. Furthermore, it highlighted the need for monitoring procedures to be put in place to evaluate the effectiveness of provision. The recommendations of the report have been addressed to some extent through two pieces of legislation, the EPSEN Act (2004)<sup>2</sup> and the Disability Act (2005). Taken together, the two pieces of legislation provide a framework within which the needs of all children with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN) can be assessed, supported and monitored throughout their education.

Since the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) many countries have developed policy frameworks designed to enable all children with special educational needs (SEN), including those with ASD, to be educated in their local communities. In Ireland, there has been recognition of a need for a continuum of provision, which includes specialist provision in order to effectively support this diverse group of children and young people. Many children with ASD in Ireland are currently educated in mainstream schools, either through supported inclusion in mainstream classes or through enrolment in special classes attached to the mainstream school. The Irish system emphasises the importance of having a continuum of special educational provision that is available, as required, in relation to each type of disability. A continued commitment to inclusion is also reiterated in a recent document (NCSE, 2013), which outlines six key principles, including the entitlement of all children to be enrolled at their local school, equitable distribution of resources, and access to those resources to meet needs. Additional supporting policy advice was issued to the Department of Education and Skills on provision for students with ASD by the NCSE in 2016/17.

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 disabled people. 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 continuum of educational provision determined by disability or diagnosis.

In 2006, the Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate undertook an evaluation of the quality of ASD provision and sampled a range of mainstream and specialist education settings. The evaluation noted the progress that had been made in providing a range of ASD supports and identified a number of strengths and areas for development. Strengths included parental satisfaction with educational provision and an increasing range of training opportunities for teachers. Areas for development included the need to address delays in diagnosis and access

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<sup>2</sup> The Sections of the EPSEN Act which have not been implemented are those which would have conferred a statutory entitlement to (1) An educational assessment for all children with special educational needs. (2) Consequent development of a statutory individual educational plan (IEP). (3) The delivery of detailed educational services on foot of this plan. (4) An independent appeals process. Source: <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2018-01-16/311/>

to early intervention. Areas where there had been progress, but which could continue to be enhanced, included ensuring home-school collaboration, individualised support, multi-agency working, staff training, and evidence-based interventions.

Meanwhile, the NCSE commissioned and published research on special class provision in its research reports 16 and 24; *Understanding Special Class Provision in Ireland Phase 1 (2014)* and *Special Classes in Irish Schools Phase 2: A Qualitative Study (2016)*. These reports examined provision in a range of special class types including a small number of special classes for learners with ASD. Researchers noted that learners in the special classes for ASD tended to have higher levels of need and that there was an emphasis in these classes on social development and life skills. Teaching and learning were described as structured, and were guided by the individualised planning process. It was also noted that few opportunities were provided for learners to integrate with their mainstream peers.

A separate study (Research Report 21, Daly and Ring et al. 2016) commissioned by the NCSE, examined provision for students with ASD across a range of educational settings, including mainstream and special classes. For this study, researchers used an evaluation framework developed by the NCSE in collaboration with the Middletown Centre for Autism. The research findings indicated a wide range of positive practice in relation to:

- Teaching and learning
- Promotion of an inclusive school culture
- School management and staff development

However, the demands of the assessment process presented challenges for schools in

- Documenting the rationale for selecting specific assessment approaches
- Differentiating assessment for individual children
- Aligning assessment approaches with the curriculum for children with ASD
- Acknowledging the impact of a child's co-occurring special educational need for assessment

While the 2016 NCSE study (Research Report 21) examined provision in a wide range of settings, including early intervention classes, mainstream classes and special classes at primary and post-primary levels and special schools, the number of special class settings visited and examined was relatively small. The study was carried out during the 2014/2015 academic year at a time when there were 530 special ASD classes in primary and post-primary schools and 95 early-intervention classes. By early 2019 these numbers had risen substantially to 1067 special classes for students with ASD in primary and post-primary schools and 131 early-intervention classes. This number of special classes for students with ASD continues to rise. It is reported that, notwithstanding the considerable growth in their overall number, some special classes have waiting lists for enrolment, and that the demand for places in some areas exceeds supply.

In the current context, the Department of Education and Skills asked the NCSE to provide the Minister with policy advice on the future role of special classes and special schools in meeting learners' needs. 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 special classes for ASD in early 2019. The purpose of the evaluation was to examine practice, understand the placements, to identify the strengths and areas for improvement in provision and to inform policy makers about the overall effectiveness of special ASD classes in the context of emerging international trends for inclusion.

## Chapter 2 Methodology and Evaluation Focus

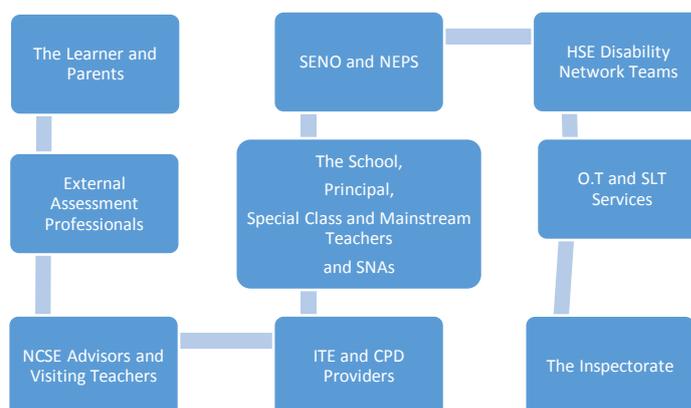
### 2.1 Understanding the Special Class Context

In its advice to schools setting up special classes, 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, within their local mainstream schools. 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.

Within the cohort of learners with an ASD diagnosis there can be significant differences in the level of additional learning needs. In some cases, the ASD diagnosis can co-exist with other physical or intellectual disabilities. Some learners can experience high levels of difficulty with communication, comprehension and self-regulation, while also displaying rigid behaviour patterns and poor social skills. In other cases, additional learning needs can be less challenging and, with the correct supports, can be addressed effectively in mainstream classrooms.

Special classes operate within the context of mainstream schools. Following a diagnostic process, learners enrolling in the special classes have a written professional recommendation for such a placement. Vacancies in the special classes are notified to the local NCSE Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENO) who also liaise with parents seeking to enrol their child in a special class. The effective operation of a special class centres largely on the leadership of the principal and school management team, and the effective co-operation of special class and mainstream teachers and special needs assistants (SNA). The following graphic illustrates some of the agencies and professionals whose efforts contribute to the effective operation of a special class.



Special classes have been a feature of the Irish educational system since the 1970s. The earliest special classes for learners with ASD were linked to the Beechpark ASD services in Dublin. Beechpark provided supports for learners with mild general learning disabilities only. It is possible that this historical link with Beechpark has been interpreted by some schools as a basis for limiting enrolment to their special classes to those learners with ASD and a co-occurring mild general learning disability (GLD).

## 2.2 Primary Schools

At primary level, each special class for pupils with ASD is allocated a full teaching post and two special needs assistants (SNAs), thereby enabling the enrolment of six pupils in the classes. In primary schools, the teacher allocated to this position teaches in the special class all day, and most of the pupils attached to the class, typically spend substantial time in that class. The teacher generally leads the planning process and tracking of progress for all pupils attached to the class. Effective communication channels should enable parents of pupils in the primary special classes to contribute to the planning and review of individualised education and care plans and also help align home and school supports for pupils. Depending on the pupils' needs and abilities, primary schools encourage and support some pupils from the special classes to integrate with their peers in mainstream classes for certain lessons during the school day with the ultimate aim of extending this integration towards full inclusion in the mainstream class. For some special class pupils, the process of moving to the unfamiliar surroundings of a mainstream classroom can be challenging, and some special classes use a process of reverse integration to bring small groups of pupils from mainstream settings to interact with their peers in the special classes during suitable learning activities.

## 2.3 Post-Primary Schools

At post-primary level, each special class has a maximum enrolment of six students, with an allocation of 1.5 teaching posts and two SNAs. Typically, a co-ordinating teacher with relevant knowledge, experience and additional training in ASD provides teaching supports to students allocated a place in this class. Similar to their primary counterparts, the teacher usually leads the planning process and tracking of progress for all students allocated to the class. Teaching should focus on the students' autism-specific needs and aid the students' inclusion within mainstream provision in the school. The students should be provided with an individual timetable which, whilst providing for these focused supports, enables students to be integrated into mainstream subject lessons relative to their preferences, abilities and their best interests. According to the Department *Guidelines*<sup>3</sup> issued to schools to support students with SEN, teachers should provide students with differentiated teaching within mainstream subject lessons to ensure that they are meaningfully included in their learning. In circumstances where, due to the complexity of their individual needs, students spend most of the school day in special classes, they should be provided with a broad and balanced curriculum designed to meet their developmental, autism-specific and curricular needs. To address students' need of structure and routine, the number of teachers involved with students who may need this type and level of support within the special class provision should be kept to a minimum.

Parents of students enrolled in special classes should be enabled to communicate and collaborate on the education of their children through regular contact with the co-ordinating teacher. Typically, the learning environment spaces which are provided for the benefit of students with ASD are utilised by other students with similar needs at recreational times during the school day and as needed by students without ASD, if deemed appropriate. Mainstream students should be provided with opportunities to learn with students who spend most of the time in the special class through reverse integration at relevant times during the school day.

## 2.4 Evaluation Focus

The main purpose of the evaluation was to observe practice and provision for children in special classes with a view to making judgements regarding the quality and nature of learning of students with special educational needs, with particular reference in these inspections to

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Special-Education/Guidelines-for-Post-Primary-Schools-Supporting-Students-with-Special-Educational-Needs-in-Mainstream-Schools.pdf>

the special ASD classes. The Inspectorate's SEN primary and post-primary evaluation models have 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 guides<sup>4</sup>, inspectors use this model to 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 evaluation model, inspectors were enabled to report on provision and outcomes for learners with SEN through the school's published report while also contributing to the overall evidence base of this composite report.

The 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 learners 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 focus groups of learners and special needs assistants. The SEN inspection model for post-primary schools includes all of these activities but also allows for the organisation of a focus group meeting with parents of students with special educational needs.

## 2.5 Inspection Methodology:

The NCSE's published list of schools with special ASD classes was analysed along with the schools' inspection histories to identify a number of different types of schools around the country for inspection. Within this sample, some schools had only one special class while many had two or more. Inspectorate management identified a small group of regionally-based inspectors with particular expertise and experience in evaluating special education 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 SEN inspections in primary and post-primary schools, inspectors were required to complete evaluation schedules which focused on relevant aspects of schools' provision and practice in ASD special classes. In addition to submitting these schedules for analysis, inspectors were also invited to provide additional qualitative commentary on areas where practice was judged to be particularly effective or ineffective.

A meeting of inspectors involved in the school visits was convened in April 2019 during which the key features of practices observed in the schools were discussed.

## 2.6 The Inspection visits

The inspection visits were carried out in the spring of 2019 in the selected schools in accordance with agreed inspection procedures. Each inspection resulted in a published report on the school involved.<sup>5</sup> When the publication process was complete, reporting inspectors submitted their data on the special classes to the authors of this composite report.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/A-Guide-to-Inspection-in-Primary-Schools.pdf>

<https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/A-Guide-to-Inspection-in-Post-Primary-Schools.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluations-of-Provision-for-Pupils-with-Special-Educational-Needs-in-Primary-Schools/>

In total, inspectors visited and completed returns on sixty-five primary special classes and twenty post-primary special classes. Responses from each sector were collated and analysed separately under each heading to produce a range of tables and graphs representing the percentages for each rating applied. Qualitative comments for each heading were collated to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses recorded by inspectors to explain their ratings of practice.

## 2.7 Presenting the Evidence

The following chapters present the results of the evaluations as indicated by analysis of the various sources of evidence. The information is presented separately for primary and post-primary schools to enable discussion of the particular issues in each sector and to identify sectoral strengths and challenges. In line with the Inspectorate’s established reporting style, learners from primary settings are referred to as “pupils”, learners from post-primary schools as “students,” and where learners from both sectors are being referenced together, the term “learners” is used. Evaluative commentary on the quality of 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:

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

Towards the end of the chapter, summaries relating to the quality of provision are provided for special classes across both sectors and these inform the overall conclusions and recommendations of the report.

## 2.8 Limitations of the Report

The findings in this report draw from a variety of sources related to the SEN evaluations carried out during a very short timeframe in early 2019. The evidence base relies heavily on inspectors’ observations, their interactions with teachers and learners and some interaction with parents, collection of data and analysis of the overall effectiveness of provision for learners in the special classes. While the evidence base and evaluation methodologies were broadly similar for the primary and post-primary settings, it is important for readers to be aware of some differences in approach if comparing the findings of the two school sectors. Readers should also be aware that while the numeric results in this report are presented in respect of each special class, some schools in the sample had one, two or three special classes. Consequently, the results reflect percentages of classes and not the percentage of schools involved.

At primary level, SEN evaluations have been conducted in schools since late 2016. The primary SEN 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 questionnaire 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.

The post-primary SEN model, by contrast, includes a focus group interview with parents of students with SEN, and inspectors engaged with some parents of children enrolled in post-primary special classes and their views are represented in the report. There was a disparity in the number of special classes visited in post-primary schools (20 out of a national total of 321) compared to primary schools (65 out of a national total of 746). This is because the SEN inspection model at post-primary level is new, and the first of these inspections commenced in March 2019. The smaller sample size at post-primary level should be taken into consideration by readers wishing to compare statistical data between the school sectors. Notwithstanding these quantitative differences, the qualitative data, commentary and analysis provided by inspectors provide valuable insight into the operation and effectiveness of the special classes across the school system.

## Chapter 3 Primary Special Classes: Results and Key Findings

This chapter outlines the findings of the visits to the primary special classes in quantitative and qualitative terms. The chapter concludes with some key messages for the primary sector.

### 3.1 Enrolment and Appropriate Placement of Pupils

All of the special classes visited in the primary schools consisted of a base classroom where an allocated teacher was responsible for the special class for the full day. In most cases, some pupils from the special classes were integrated into mainstream classes for varying portions of the day according to their ability to deal with such a transition. Some pupils spent the majority of their time in the special classes. Most schools had separate enrolment policies to outline the criteria and procedures for enrolling new pupils in their special classes. As part of the evaluation, inspectors examined these enrolment policies and determined that many were clear and appropriate. However, in the majority of policies the following problems were identified:

- References to deferring enrolment
- Confinement of enrolment to certain categories of intellectual functioning
- Prioritising places for students easily integrated into mainstream
- Negative language about the school's behaviour expectations.

Some of these issues are exemplified in the following excerpt from a SEN report:

The current enrolment policy for the ASD classes is not fully inclusive; school management should ensure that the inclusive practices observed during the evaluation are reflected in the enrolment policy for the ASD classes.

A school's enrolment policy is likely to be among the first documents read by prospective parents. It is possible that certain phrases or enrolment conditions, as noted by inspectors, can be interpreted by those parents as a barrier to enrolment for a child with particularly complex needs, poor self-regulation or lower cognitive functioning. While many of the special classes visited catered for a wide variety of needs, some very complex, other special classes comprised pupils with much less challenging needs. Where pupils with less complex needs are prioritised for enrolment in the special classes, it is possible that some children with more complex needs are denied the opportunity to enrol in the special classes and could instead be directed towards home-schooling or special school provision. While very few of the schools had been subject to an appeal under Section 29 of the Education Act for refusing enrolment or expelling a pupil, some of the special classes have long waiting lists for enrolment.

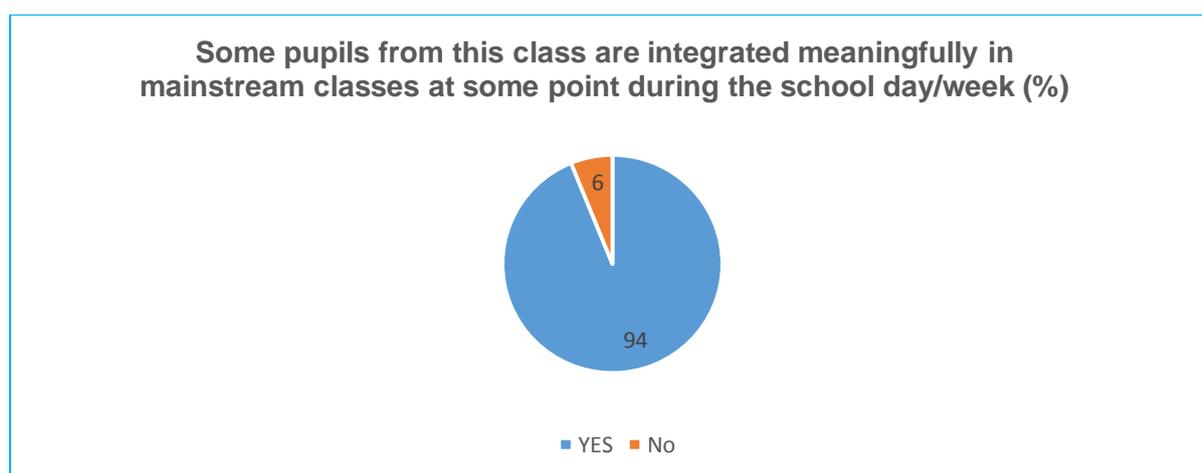
Inspectors were asked by the inspection template for their opinions on the suitability of the special class placement for the pupils they observed. In almost all cases, inspectors felt that the placements were appropriate to the pupils' needs, especially with the opportunities to be included in the mainstream school through integration and reverse integration. In some cases, the special class placement is seen as a first step towards fully integrating pupils into the mainstream school. However, it was also noted that a very small minority of pupils with greater capacity to access mainstream provision continued to remain in the special class when their needs might be better served through full inclusion in mainstream classes with available supports. In one special class, a number of the pupils were in the process of enrolling in a special school because it was felt by the school that the current placement was unsuitable for their needs.

### 3.2 Integration and Inclusion of Pupils

In almost all of the special classes, some pupils were integrated meaningfully in mainstream classes at some point during the school day or the week (Figure 1). In one report the inspectors commented that:

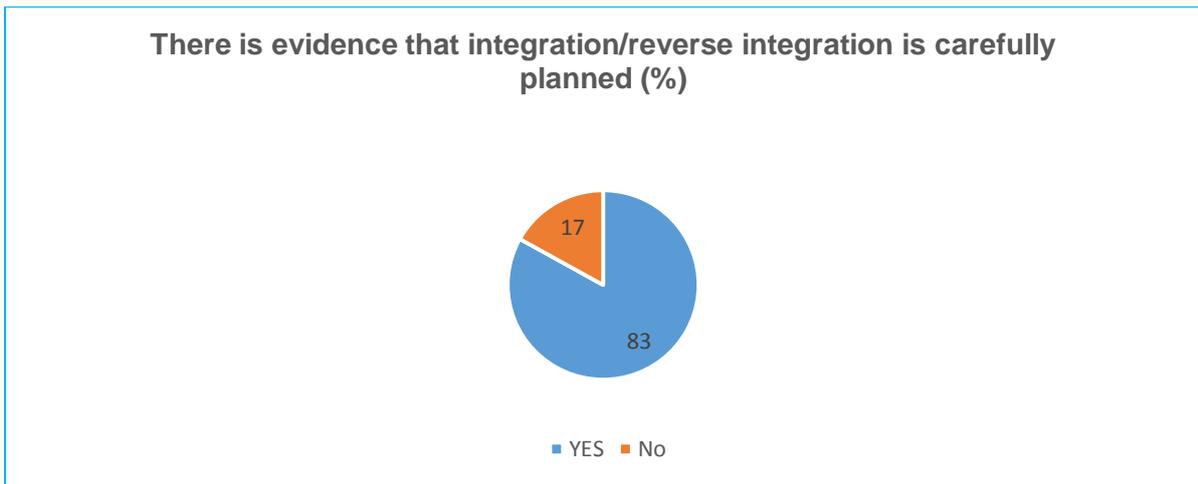
Pupils with ASDs in the special classes have regular opportunities for supportive inclusion in mainstream classrooms where appropriate. The school's commitment to the integration of pupils from the special classes into mainstream settings is praiseworthy.

In many cases, arrangements were made between the special class and a particular mainstream class to ensure that pupils' sense of belonging to their peer group was developed. Typically, pupils from the special class attended mainstream classes, accompanied by their SNAs, for integration during particular curricular subjects or activities such as *Aistear*, digital technology, story time, station teaching or Physical Education. Reverse integration occurs when groups of pupils from the mainstream class join their special class peers for activities which include pupils for whom integration with mainstream classes may not be possible. Where integration was most successful, inspectors observed that it was carefully planned and structured by the special class teacher in consultation with the mainstream teacher to support pupils' social skills and to add to their experience of a broad and balanced curriculum in the company of their peers. In the best instances, it was evident that periods of integration were being extended incrementally, with a very small number of pupils achieving full integration.



**Figure 1**

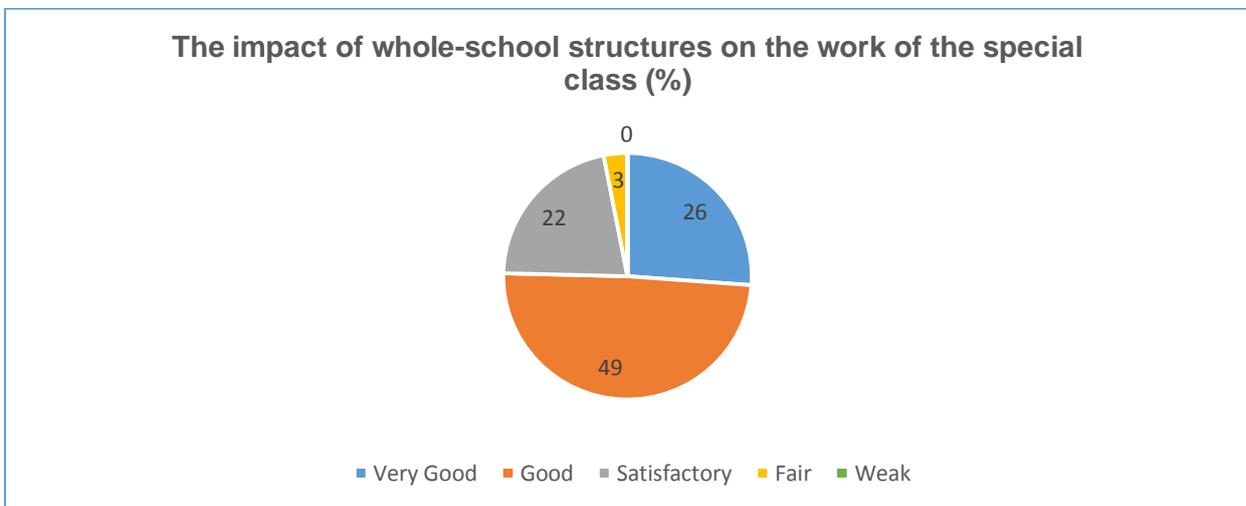
While inspectors praised the planning for integration in many cases, they also highlighted the need for better collaborative planning between the special class and mainstream teachers to ensure that integrated provision is aligned accurately to the pupil's support plan and the curriculum at an appropriately challenging level (Figure 2). Efforts to integrate pupils can also depend very much on the needs of pupils, with integration being much more likely to be organised and supported for pupils with less complex needs and higher levels of cognitive functioning.



**Figure 2**

### 3.3 Whole-School Structures

The impact of whole-school structures and organisation on the work of the special classes was satisfactory or better in almost all cases, with the impact being good or very good for most schools (Figure 3). Inspectors praised some schools for the systems they had in place to share practice, communicate information, timetable activities and support staff on SEN matters. Some schools were also affirmed for the systematic manner in which professional reports were analysed and their recommendations addressed. Conversely, the lack of a coherent whole-school approach to assessment and target-setting, and a lack of staff expertise in SEN were highlighted as areas for improvement in a small number of schools.



**Figure 3**

### 3.4 School Leadership and Management

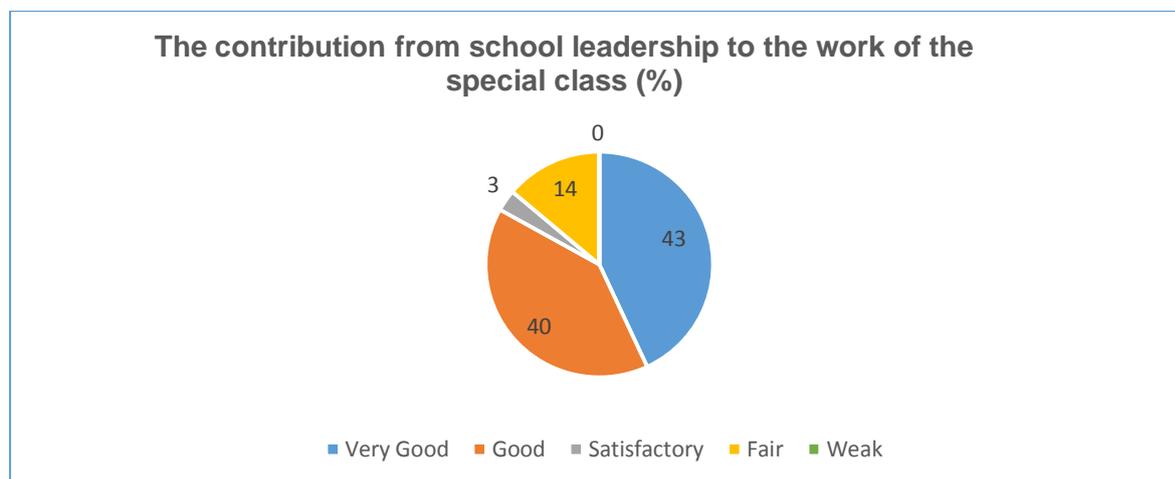
The contribution from school leadership towards the effective operation of the special classes was good or very good in most cases (Figure 4). Features of best practice included good use of the Continuum of Support approach in the school, high interest in SEN and ASD among key school leaders, supportive boards of management and the cultivation of very effective links with external agencies. Where the contribution of school leadership was less effective, there was a need to establish better whole-school approaches to inclusion, collaborative

practice, assessment and target-setting. In some of these cases, inspectors raised queries with school management about the rationale for allocating teachers who are inexperienced or without any expertise in SEN to the special classes while other teachers in the school with SEN experience and expertise taught in mainstream or support roles. Where this practice exists, it represents poor deployment of available staff expertise, especially in light of the specialised classroom approaches required to support pupils with complex learning needs. Such deployment is also at odds with NCSE’s policy advice (2015):

Given that students in specialist settings have the most complex needs, the NCSE considers that teachers should have a minimum of three years’ teaching experience post-probation, before taking up a position in a special class for students with ASD.

In a few schools there needed to be better supports provided for teachers as they commenced in their teaching roles in the special classes, especially through opportunities to undertake CPD. Advice on this was provided in one report which stated that:

Developing a discrete approach to upskilling teachers who are new to special education teaching roles in approaches specific to ASD provision and in target-setting is advocated.



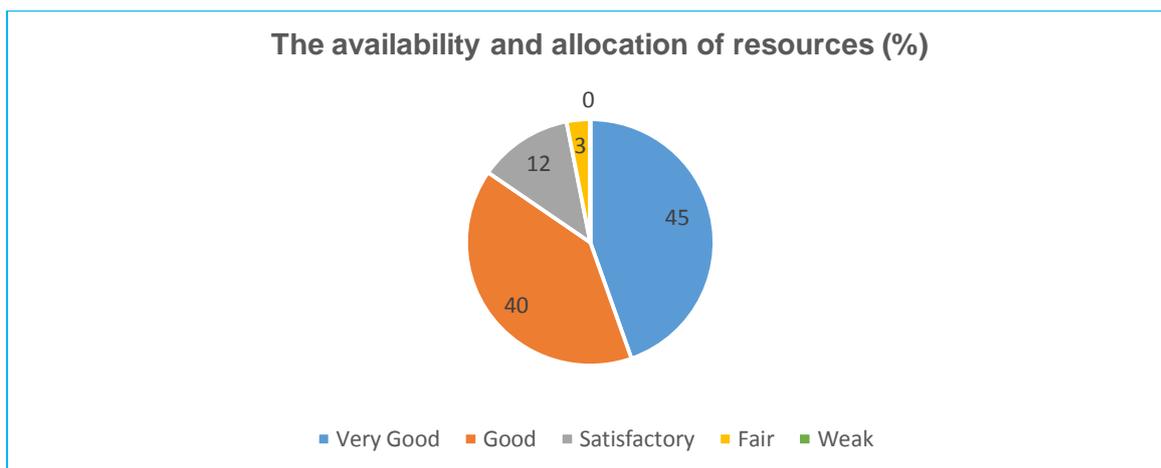
**Figure 4**

### 3.5 Availability of Resources

The availability and allocation of resources was good or very good in most of the special classes (Figure 5). The special classes were generally well resourced and most had been laid out appropriately to create spaces for structured learning, pupils’ individual work, sensory rooms and group instruction areas. Some special classes also had well-resourced outdoor areas. One report noted that:

...the organisation of individual workstations in ASD settings, a sensory room, soft play area, school garden and an occupational therapy room all contribute to positive provision.

In a small number of special classes, inspectors were critical of the absence of window blinds, lack of access for some pupils to relaxation areas, limited use of digital technologies and the scarcity of resources for subjects such as Science.



**Figure 5**

### 3.6 Inclusive Culture

The inclusive nature of the school’s culture was deemed to be good or very good in almost all settings (Figure 6). In the most inclusive schools, inspectors noted that school leadership was very invested in creating an inclusive culture and that this contributed to the commitment to equality of opportunity and the holistic development of each pupil by individual teachers. There were also many examples of very effective integration of pupils from the special classes into mainstream classes. For example, in one school, *Lámh* sign language was taught to all pupils in the school so that pupils with SEN or from the special classes could interact and communicate with their mainstream peers during school assemblies or periods of integration.

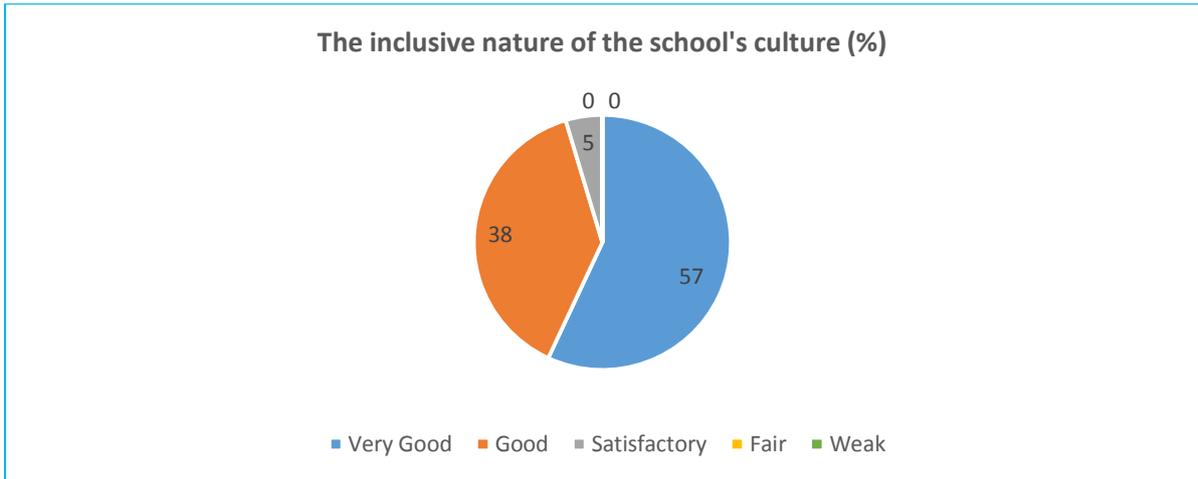
Where the school culture did not appear to be as inclusive, inspectors highlighted issues in enrolment policies which contained soft barriers to enrolment of children with ASD. The issue of pupils being placed on reduced timetables was also identified in a small number of cases. Inspectors were satisfied that this measure was implemented following consultation with parents and was being used as a means of gradually increasing the pupil’s engagement with school with a view to him/her accessing a full school day. One report noted that:

Currently, a very small number of pupils experience a reduced timetable. Commendable and clearly documented efforts have been made in addressing this issue to date. The school should continue striving to support these pupils’ increased tolerance of the full school day.

However, in a small number of reports, inspectors were critical of aspects of schools’ procedures as exemplified in the following excerpt:

The teaching of certain pupils is limited due to the operation of a shorter school day.

To address such erosion of teaching time, all schools are required by the Department of Education and Skills to record arrangements such as these in writing and to agree a written, time-bound plan with parents and professionals detailing how and when the pupil’s timetable will be restored to the full entitlement. All instances of reduced timetables should also be reported without delay to TUSLA, in light of the potential for a reduced timetable to be a form of suspension.

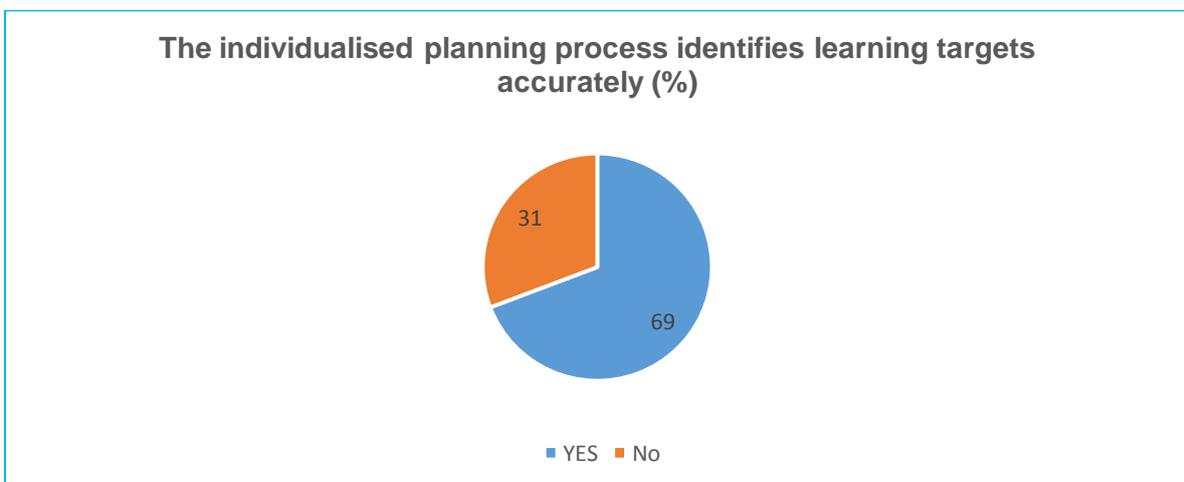


**Figure 6**

### 3.7 Individualised Planning, Assessment and Progress records

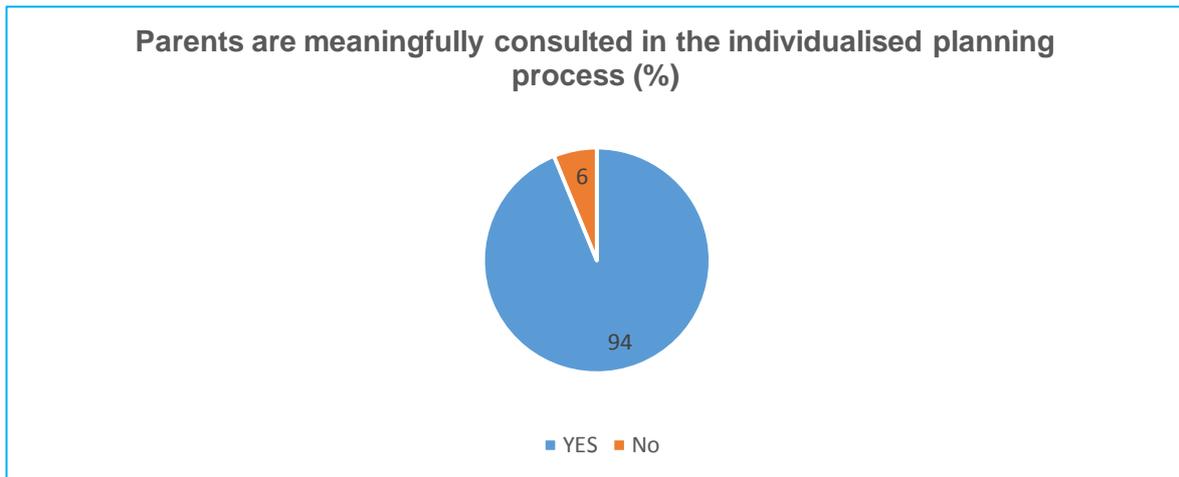
The individualised planning process identified learning targets accurately in the majority of the special classes (Figure 7). Where the planning process was most effective, it drew on a range of assessment information together with inputs from parents, teachers, the pupils and external professionals to identify the priority learning needs across the social, language, behavioural, academic and life-skills domains. In many cases, useful logs of previous actions were used to record pupils' learning journeys and to inform future target-setting.

While individualised plans were prepared for all pupils in the special classes, inspectors frequently identified shortcomings with the type of targets being devised, particularly when the targets were expressed in vague language or where the same target was repeated over a number of instructional terms or years. Inspectors provided advice to teachers on how to break down targets more logically, and to express them in more specific and measurable language to guide teaching approaches and to enable more accurate monitoring of progress. In some special classes, especially where pupils encountered general learning difficulties at mild or moderate levels there was a need for teachers to use the use the *NCCA Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* (GLD) more effectively to match curriculum provision to pupils' current needs.



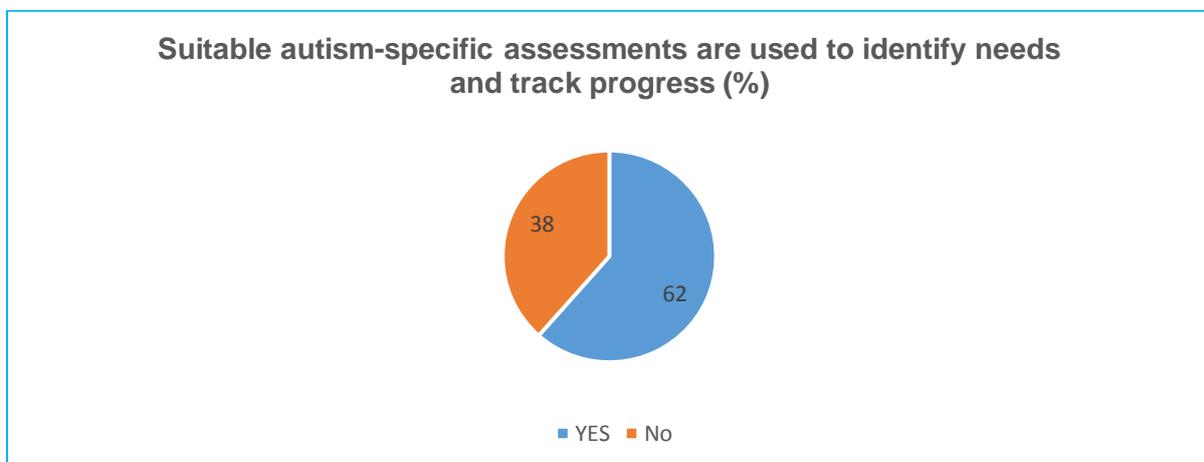
**Figure 7**

Inspectors established, through examination of individualised planning documents and discussion with school staff, that parents of pupils in the special classes were meaningfully consulted in the individualised planning process in almost all settings (Figure 8). Most special class teachers used home-school communication diaries to ensure that there was daily two-way communication between home and school, particularly where pupils had limited verbal skills. In most cases there was evidence that parents contributed strongly to building up the pupil profile and they provided background information intended to guide the target-setting and review process. Parents usually signed the individualised educational plan or school support plan documents twice yearly. In a small number of cases, parents were not provided with copies of their child’s individualised plan and inspectors recommended more meaningful parental consultation for these schools.



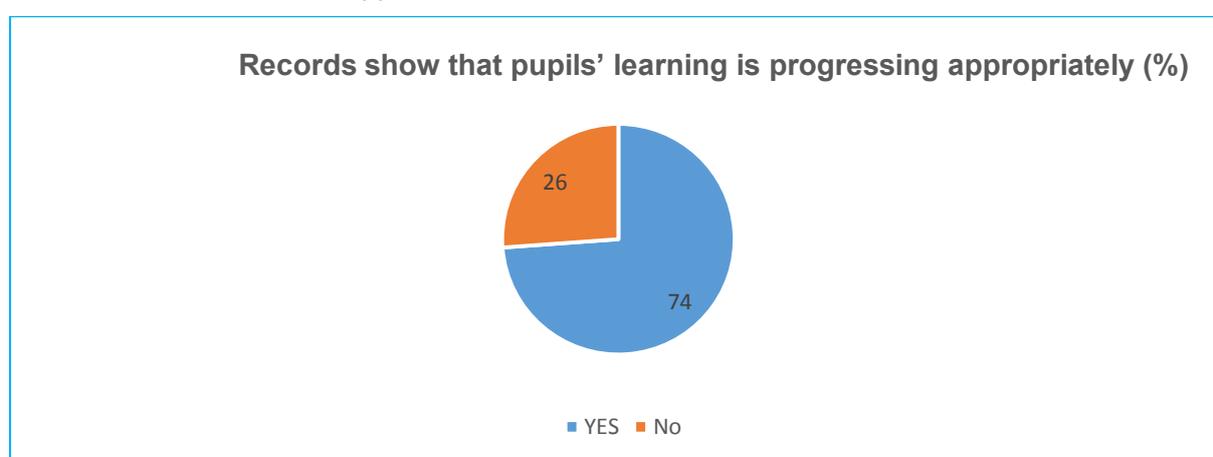
**Figure 8**

While the majority of the special class teachers used suitable autism-specific assessments to identify pupils’ needs and to track progress (Figure 9), it is nonetheless a cause for concern that inspectors noted poor use of these assessments in a significant minority of cases. Where autism-specific assessments were used, they included specialised tests such as PEP-3, VB-MAPP, ABLLS, together with a range of general assessments, checklists and observation notes. However, a few teachers in special classes showed little familiarity with the range of specialised tests developed for pupils with ASD or the availability of CPD support in this area. In feedback to these teachers, inspectors stressed the importance of using specialised assessments and diagnostic assessment to establish more reliable baselines for identifying pupils’ learning needs, especially in areas of emergent learning.



**Figure 9**

Teachers' records show that pupils' learning was progressing appropriately over time in the majority of the primary special classes (Figure 10). Inspectors examined support plans for a sample of pupils and reviewed the pupils' learning journeys since their enrolment in the special classes. The majority of plans examined indicated good levels of progress with respect to the identified learning needs in areas such as behaviour, communication, social skills and aspects of the curriculum. There was also evidence of a cycle of target-setting and review in those plans. However, occasionally the targets were not stated in language specific enough to capture the small incremental improvements required for some pupils. This, combined with a lack of ASD-specific assessment information to establish initial learning needs and strengths, sometimes detracted from the effectiveness of school records in capturing pupils' progress more effectively. To ensure more effective tracking of pupils' progress over time, teachers will need to use appropriate assessment approaches to identify pupils' initial baseline levels of performance in key areas, and to use this information to devise accurate and incremental improvement targets which can be effectively implemented, evaluated, progressed and recorded in the Student Support File.



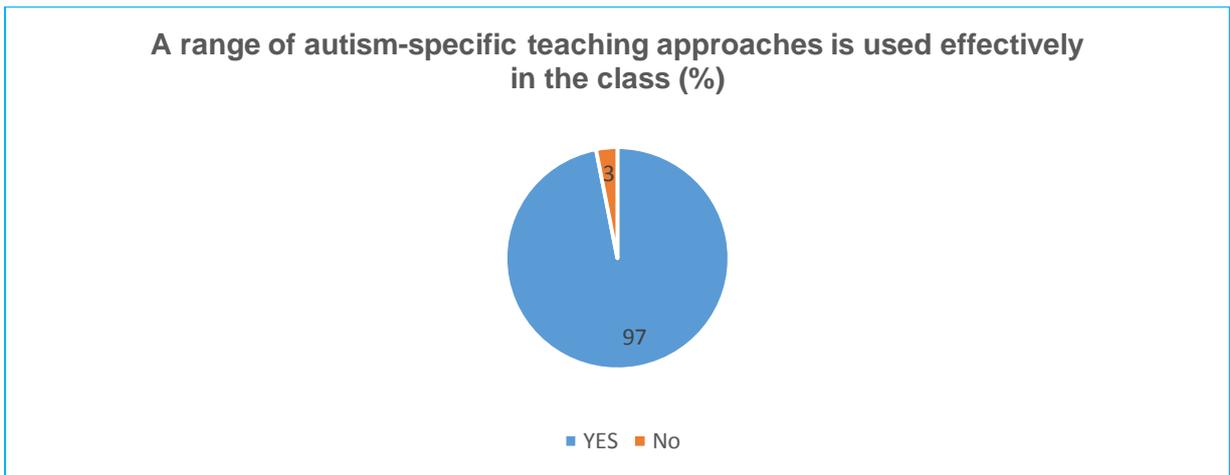
**Figure 10**

### 3.8 ASD-Specific Approaches to Teaching

Almost all of the special class teachers used a range of autism-specific teaching approaches effectively in the class (Figure 11). In one report, inspectors commented that:

The use of autism-specific methodologies and visual learning approaches are effective features of practice in classes for pupils with an ASD.

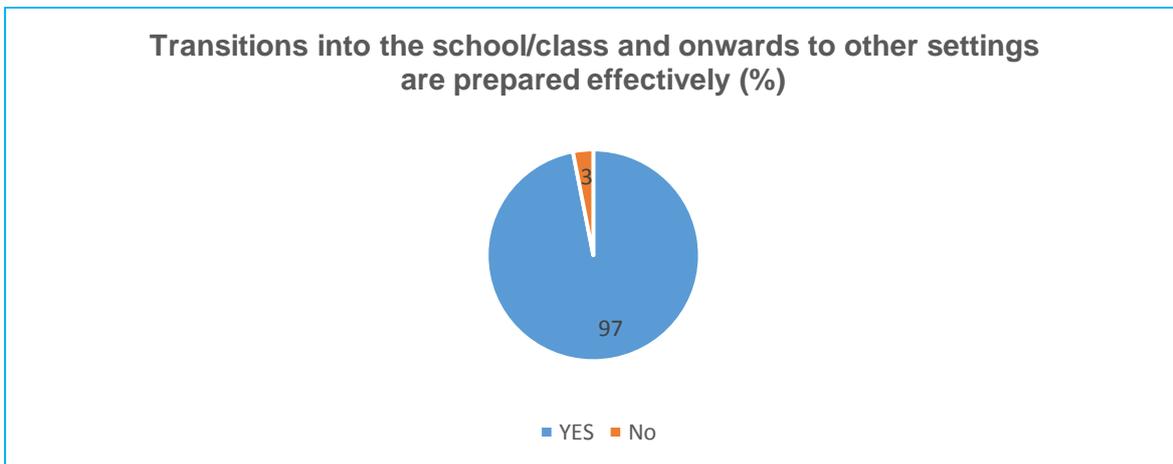
These approaches included use of visual timetables to assist with transitions, token economics for motivation, behavioural strategies to assist with self-regulation, TEACCH stations for structured teaching and PECS or *LÁMH* for communication needs. Instruction in the special classes was provided through a range of individual teaching practices combined with appropriate opportunities for grouped learning. Most teachers took cognisance of pupils' visual learning preferences and their need for an appropriate sensory diet. They often ensured that pupils could make choices and there was good modelling of social and life skills. In some cases, digital technologies were used to help pupils with emergent verbal skills to communicate their choices and needs. In the small number of special classes where ASD-specific approaches were not evident, teachers appeared to be unfamiliar with the methodologies or untrained in their use. In some of these settings, where pupils' needs were complex, the absence of suitable visual and communication methodologies in school was proving to be a barrier to effective teaching and learning, and frustrating for pupils, especially when they were reported as using systems such as PECS to assist their communication at home.



**Figure 11**

### 3.9 Transitions

Transitions into the school or the special class and onwards to other settings were prepared effectively in almost all settings (Figure 12). It was noted that effective hand-over procedures were in place to transfer the pupils to or from the parents or bus escorts in the mornings and evenings and that relevant information was shared at this point. Checklists were often used collaboratively between the adults and pupils to ensure that pupils felt ready to enter the classroom. Preparations for integration and for visits to other settings outside the school were usually planned effectively through use of visuals and verbal discussion. Some schools had established good links with other educational settings or life skills' centres to help pupils become comfortable with transitions. Where practice was poor, there was little preparation for transitions out of the special class, and sometimes there was no pre-teaching of concepts to help pupils participate fully during periods of integration in the mainstream classes.

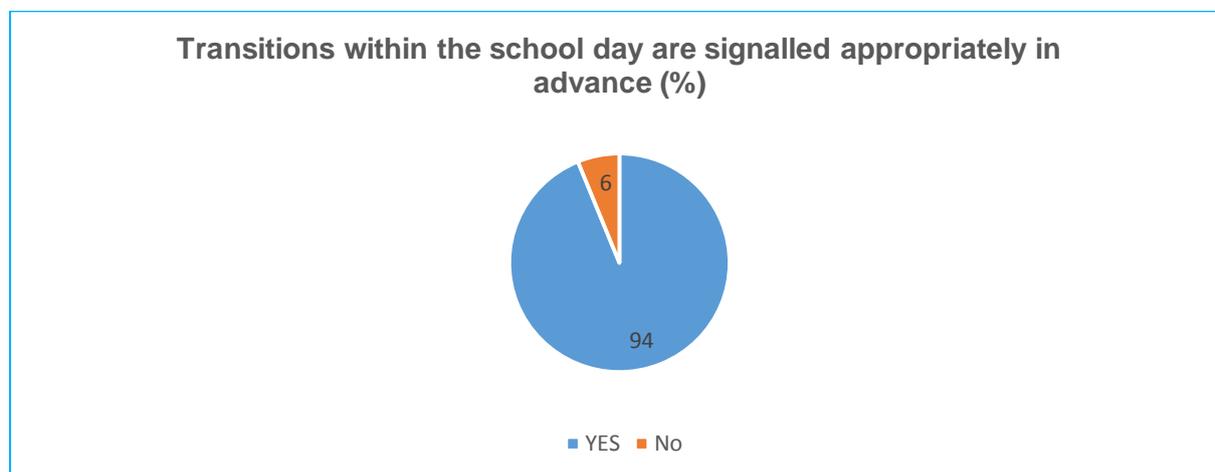


**Figure 12**

Many pupils with ASD can become anxious if they encounter unexpected change during the day. To prevent and alleviate such anxiety it is good practice for teachers of pupils with ASD to help the pupils to understand the structure of the school day in advance and to signal changes in a timely manner. During the evaluations, transitions within the school day were signalled appropriately in almost all of the special classes (Figure 13). This was achieved through use of individual and visual timetables or schedules and regular reminders of what was due to happen next. One inspector commented that:

The use of individualised and visual timetables and schedules is very effective and clearly understood by the pupils who consequently are making progress regarding their self-regulation.

Sometimes the schedules were used for the full class and other times they were only used at individual work stations. In a few settings, teachers were inappropriately relying on verbal signalling for pupils with poor language skills or not signalling transitions during the school day for pupils at all.



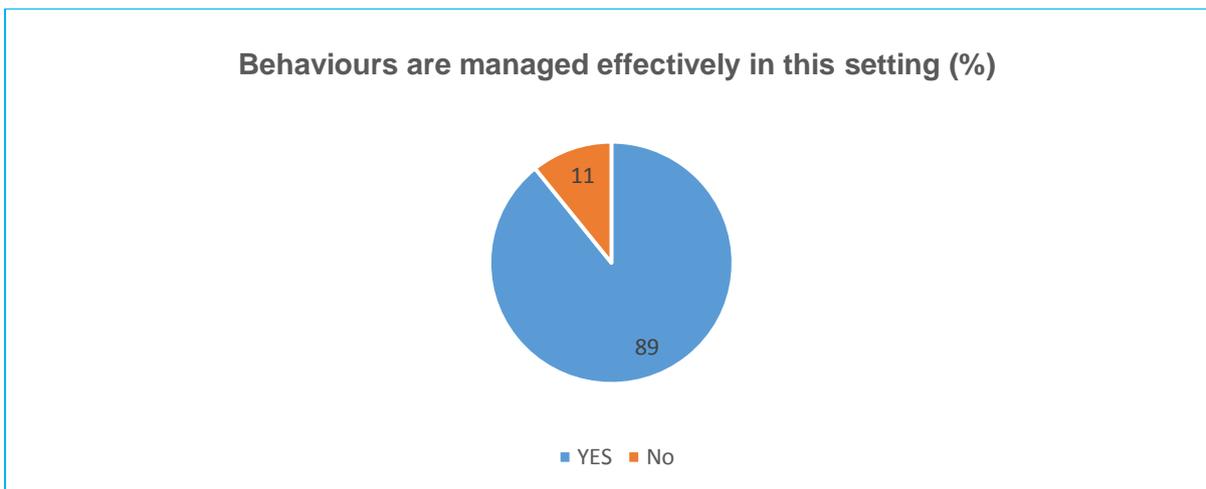
**Figure 13**

### 3.10 Behaviour Management

The management of pupils' behaviour is important for the pupils with ASD themselves and for their peers. Where pupils' behaviour is expertly managed, it enables them to participate meaningfully during lessons. Some pupils with ASD may present with challenging behaviours which can vary due to their anxieties, self-regulation or communication needs. Behaviours were managed effectively in most of the special classes evaluated (Figure 14). This was often achieved through consistent and positive classroom management approaches implemented through high levels of teamwork between the special class teachers and the SNAs, and with good home-school communication and co-operation. The following report excerpt provides one example of good practice:

In addition, high quality well-structured individual care plans and behaviour programmes are in place where necessary for pupils who attend ASD settings. These documents are effective in supporting pupils in their daily activities in the school.

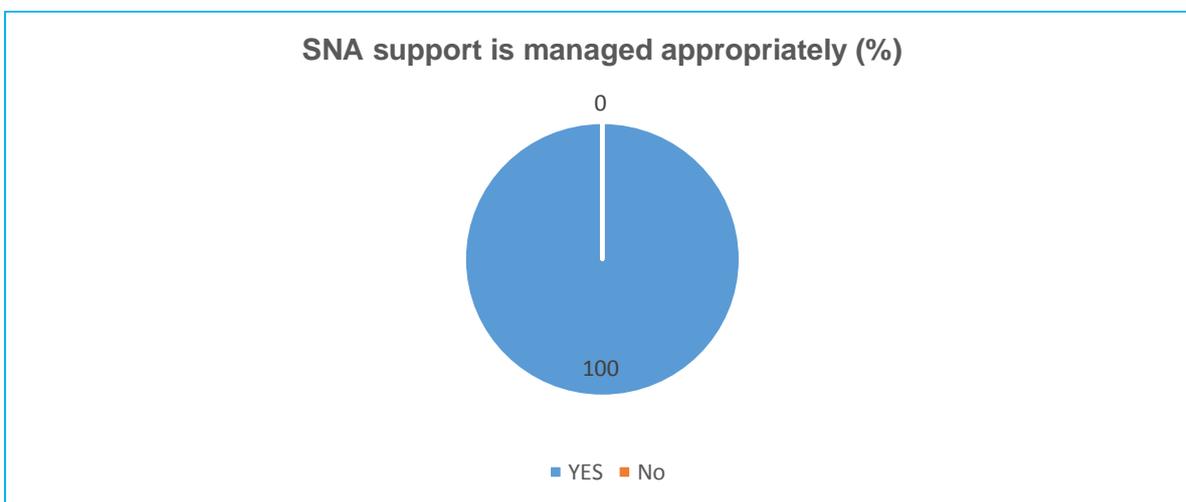
In some situations, where behaviours were not managed effectively, some of the pupils had complex needs and teachers were working conscientiously to understand the triggers and functions of the behaviours. In a small number of cases, the classroom environment seemed to contribute negatively to behaviour management through inconsistent use of visual prompts, poorly signalled transitions or failure to consistently follow agreed behaviour plans.



**Figure 14**

### 3.11 Special Needs Assistants

Overall, inspectors indicated that SNA support was managed appropriately in all settings (Figure 15). There was a high level of teamwork and respectful interactions were evident between SNAs, special class teachers and mainstream class teachers, particularly in relation to transitions and mainstream integration. SNAs often supervised pupils as they practised occupational therapy (OT) exercises or completed speech and language tasks. However, despite inspectors' overall satisfaction with the management of SNA support, difficulties were reported for one setting. The inspectors noted that some pupils were spending too much time with their SNAs, and the teacher was advised to ensure that teaching time was maximised. The report states that "the teaching of certain pupils is limited due to the operation of a shorter school day and substantial time spent solely under SNA supervision".



**Figure 15**

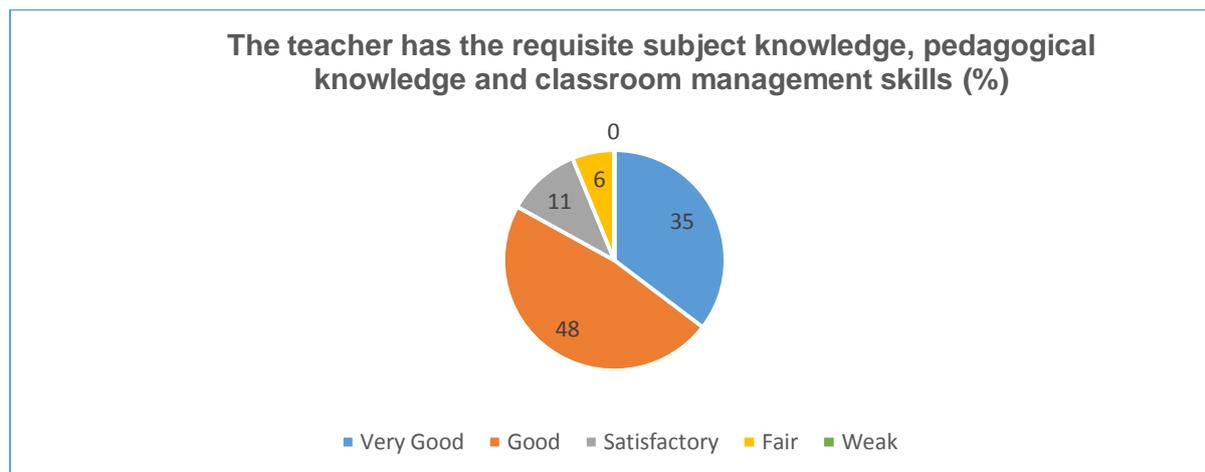
### 3.12 Teachers' Individual Practices

Teachers' subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills were rated as good or very good in most of the special classes observed (Figure 16). Where this aspect was most effective, teachers tended to have been teaching in the special class for a number of years, often having engaged in a wide range of CPD in areas such as ABA, Attention Autism, PECS, *LÁMH* or TEACCH. In settings where subject or pedagogical

knowledge was weaker, the teacher was sometimes in his/her first year teaching in the special class or acting as a substitute. The deployment of such teachers to special classes is contrary to the advice provided by NCSE to schools setting up special classes:

Students in special classes require experienced teachers with appropriate qualifications and, wherever possible, a background in working with students with special educational needs.

Inspectors recommended that teachers in situations such as these receive more support from school leadership and that opportunities for CPD should be explored. In schools where there was more than one special class, inspectors recommended that school leaders should ensure that opportunities are provided for teachers to share expertise collaboratively and to discuss a whole-school approach to autism-specific teaching methods.

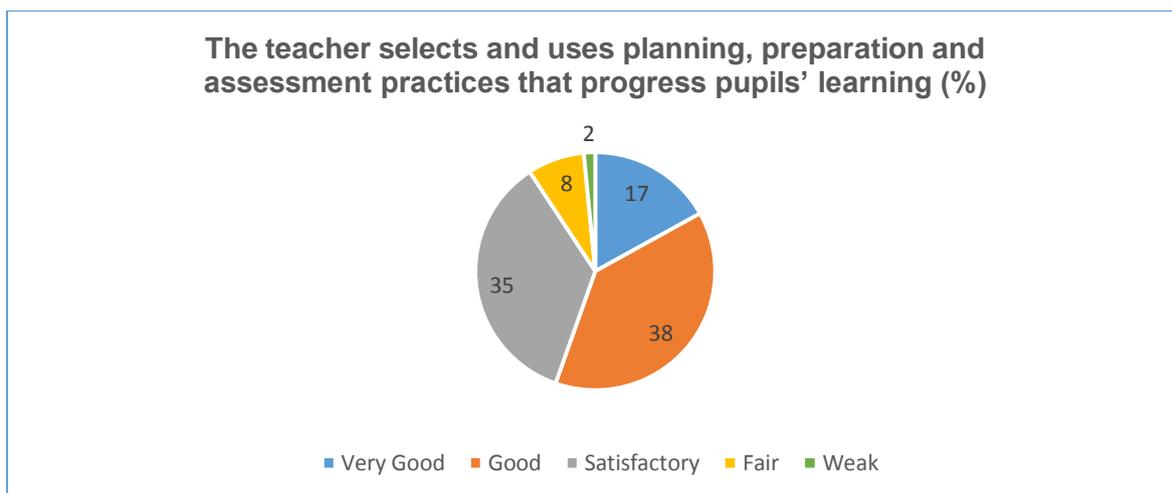


**Figure 16**

Teachers' selection and use of planning, preparation and assessment practices that progress pupils' learning was good or very good in the majority of special classes, although this aspect was just satisfactory in one-third of cases (Figure 17). Where planning, preparation and assessment were strong, teachers were using very specific assessment instruments to establish baselines for pupils' functioning to guide the individualised planning process and approaches to teaching and learning. Good practice in assessment and monitoring is highlighted in one report which stated that:

Assessment information is used very effectively to set realistic targets. Progress is tracked through the learning logs and the individualised process.

Where provision was rated at a satisfactory or weaker level, it was evident that assessment was very generic leading to vague target-setting and an inability to break learning down into suitably small and logical steps to meet complex needs. In a very small number of the special classes, the short-term planning was very ineffective because it was prepared on a monthly basis, a timescale so long that it could not accurately identify the next steps in pupils' learning.

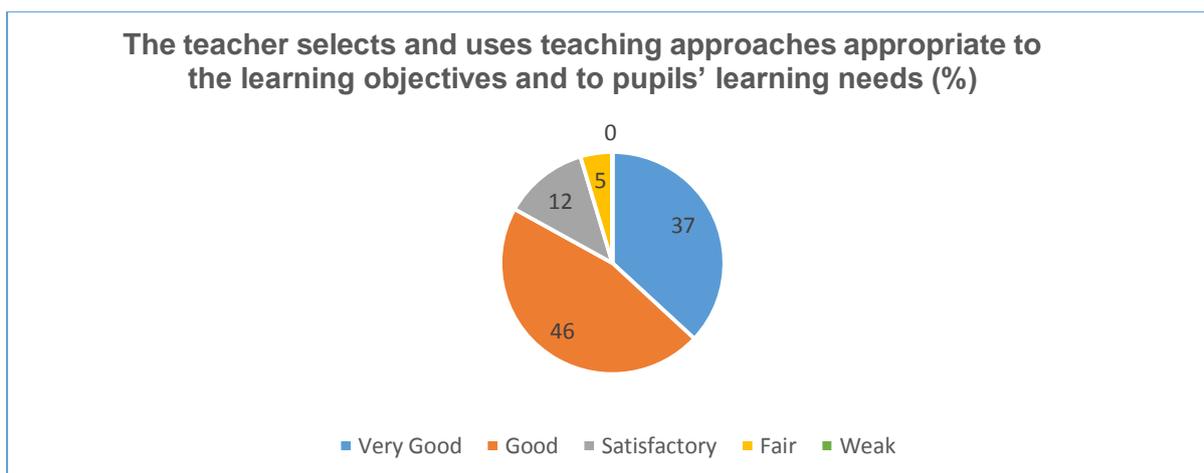


**Figure 17**

Teachers' selection and use of teaching approaches appropriate to the learning objectives and to pupils' learning needs were good or very good in most of the special classes (Figure 18). In the most effective settings it was clear that the teaching approaches chosen were guided by pupils' individual learning needs and a clear understanding of the types of learning difficulties sometimes co-occurring with autism. In these settings the teachers provided predictability, structure and highly visual learning experiences for pupils. Approaches such as visual scheduling, TEACCH, ABA, modelling, active learning and PECS were widely used. There was particular emphasis on language, communication and modelling of social skills and desired behaviours. The following excerpt from a report affirms good practice:

Pupils are provided with a suitably structured learning environment. Individualised programmes identify pupils' priority learning needs and the next steps in their learning.

Where practice was weaker, there was insufficient focus on individual needs, sometimes resulting in the level of challenge being inappropriate for certain pupils. In some cases, lessons for pupils with language difficulties relied too much on adult talk and there was insufficient opportunity for these pupils to process the new information.



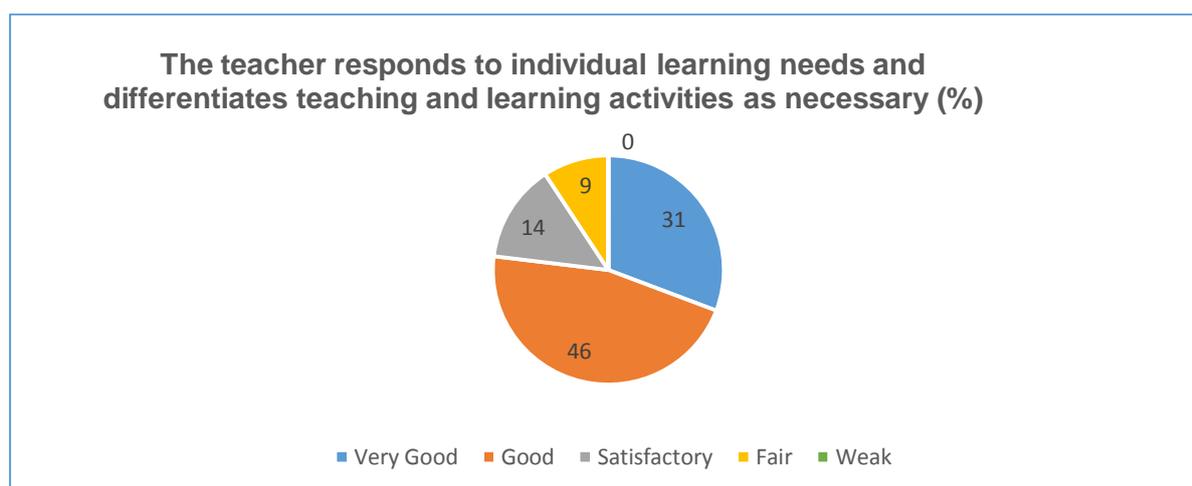
**Figure 18**

Teachers' responses to individual learning needs and differentiation of teaching and learning activities were good or very good in most of the special classes, and just fair in a few cases (Figure 19). Where provision was very good, there were strong links between the activities observed and the targets and learning needs in individual education plans. Differentiated approaches were identified in short-term plans and implemented during the lessons. In some

cases, teachers had identified particular areas of focus for individual pupils' needs across the breadth of the curriculum, as illustrated in the following report excerpt:

Individualised programmes are carefully matched to pupils' specific needs while there is also provision for a suitably wide curriculum.

Where practice was ineffective, inspectors commented about a lack of realistic differentiation being planned for the diverse range of needs in some special classes, spanning from pupils with pre-verbal skills to pupils with high functioning capabilities. This lack of attention to individual needs was sometimes attributed to a dearth of assessment data, ineffective target-setting and poor monitoring of progress.

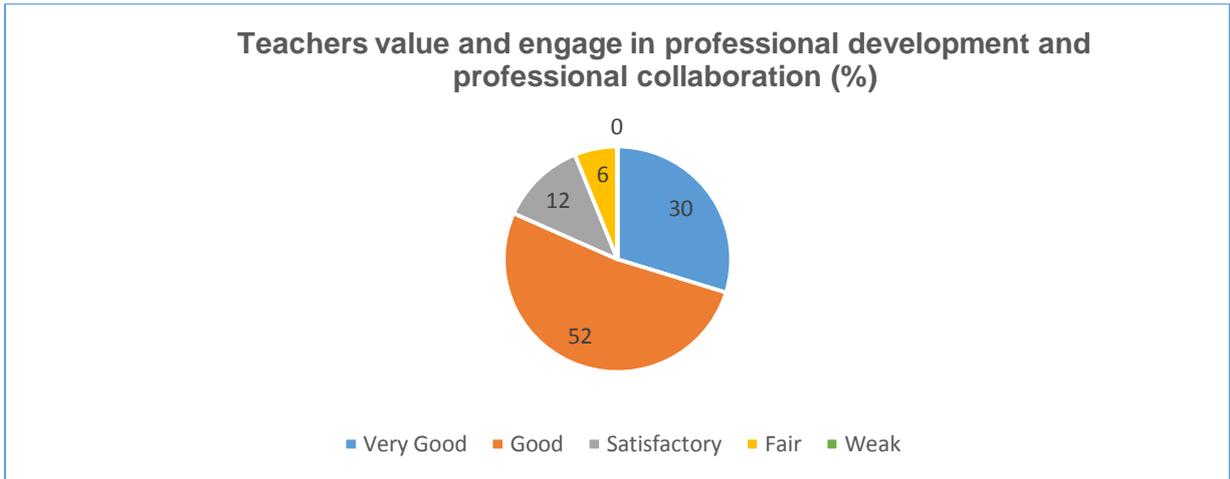


**Figure 19**

### 3.13 Teachers' Collective Practices

Teachers' valuing of and their engagement in professional development and professional collaboration were good or very good in most of the special classes (Figure 20). Many special class teachers attended short relevant courses provided by organisation such as NCSE or the Middletown Centre for Autism on topics such as TEACCH, ABA, Social Stories, ABLLS or management of actual or potential aggression (MAPA). Some schools have been very successful at encouraging staff members to undertake postgraduate studies related to SEN in general, and a small number of teachers had attained an ASD-specific postgraduate qualification. In one class where such a qualification was noted, it was evident that the teacher was very skilled in dealing with communication and regulation needs. In a few schools there had been very little engagement with relevant CPD by the special class teachers. Given that some approaches to assessment and teaching for pupils with ASD can be quite specialised, teachers who have not engaged effectively with CPD in these areas would find it difficult to implement these approaches. Inspectors addressed this issue in the following report extract:

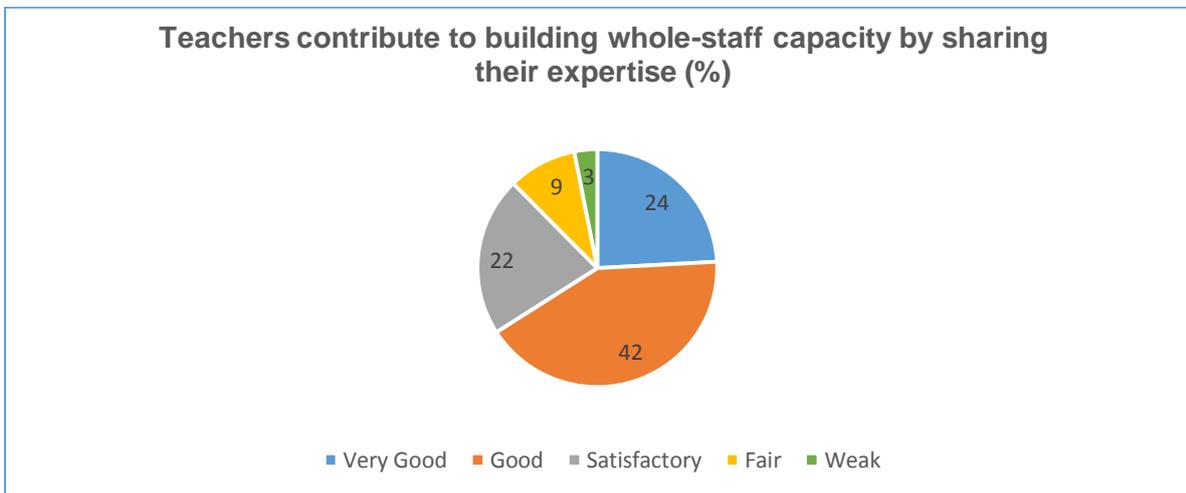
....it would be useful, and would build on the school's strong tradition of supporting staff in meeting their continuing professional development needs, to develop a discrete school policy and approach to upskilling teachers new to SEN roles in ASD-specific aspects of provision and in collective target-setting approaches.



**Figure 20**

Teachers’ contribution to building whole-staff capacity by sharing their expertise was good or very good in the majority of settings (Figure 21). This was sometimes apparent in approaches to team teaching and integration of pupils from the special classes into mainstream lessons. Some schools apply a commendable policy whereby teachers who attend CPD courses are expected to present information from their learning at the next staff meeting. In one school, inspectors commented very favourably about the sharing of practice between an early-years setting and the mainstream, support and special class teachers. In a few schools, however, although individual teachers had engaged in relevant CPD, there was little evidence of this expertise being shared, even between the teachers of the two special classes who fulfil very similar roles. One inspector recommended that the school should implement:

....a system whereby there is systematic and sustained sharing of expertise between teachers leaving the special classes and those commencing work in this role.



**Figure 21**

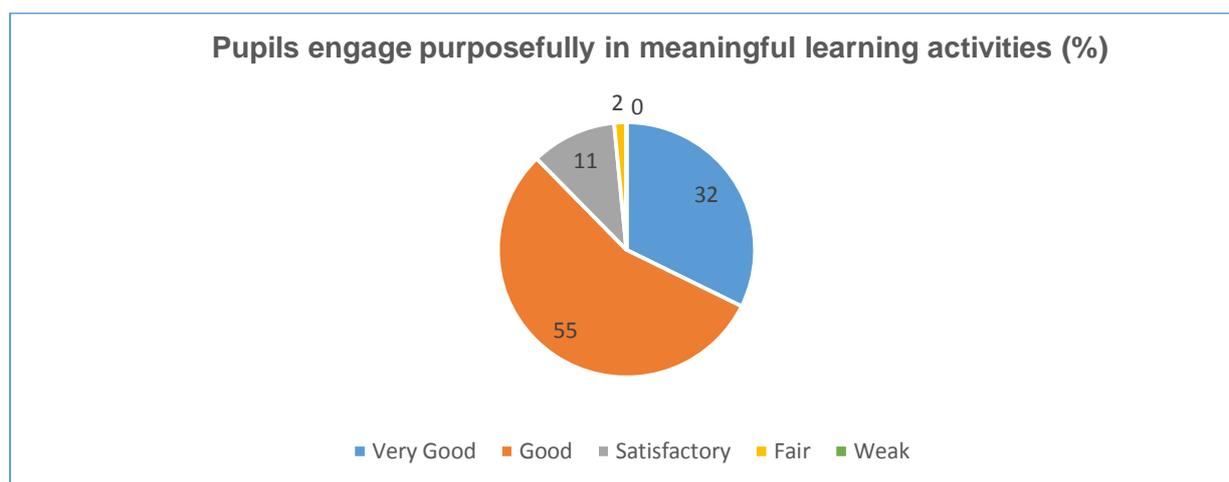
### 3.14 Learner Experiences

Pupils’ purposeful engagement in meaningful learning activities was good or very good in most settings (Figure 22). Where practice was most effective, pupils were engaged by a range of lesson activities differentiated to meet their needs with appropriate challenge, pace and structure. Many of these activities focused on key areas of learning need including, language and communication, social skills and making choices. These activities were explored through

a range of ASD-specific methodologies with visual supports in individual or group settings. Good practice is reflected in the following report commentary:

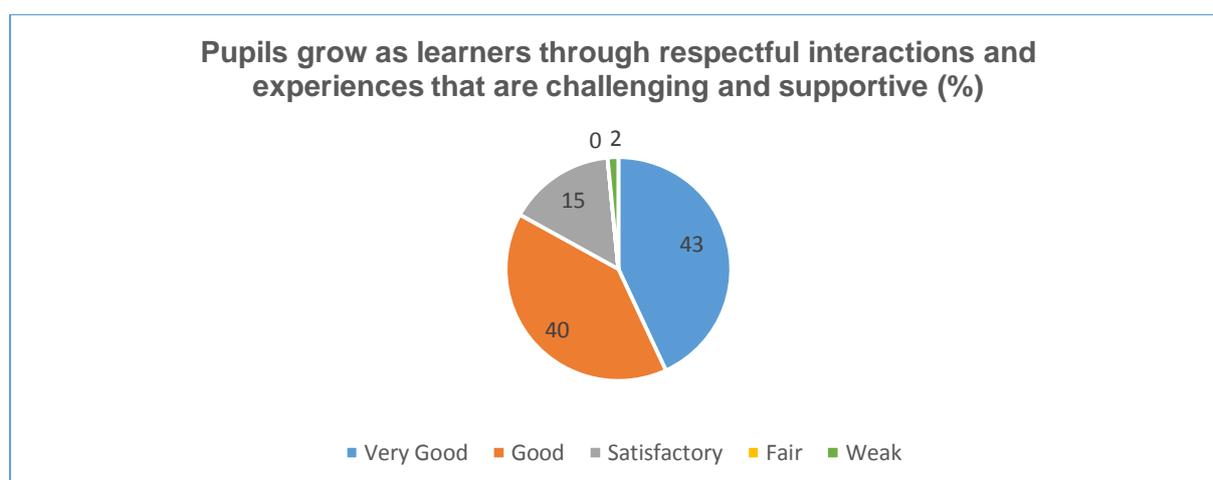
In the classes for pupils with an ASD, pupils generally participated actively in lessons. They develop language and communication and numeracy skills through group work and individual station work.

Where engagement was not sufficiently purposeful, the level of challenge was insufficiently matched to individual pupils' needs through poor differentiation or failure to establish a baseline level of functioning for the pupil.



**Figure 22**

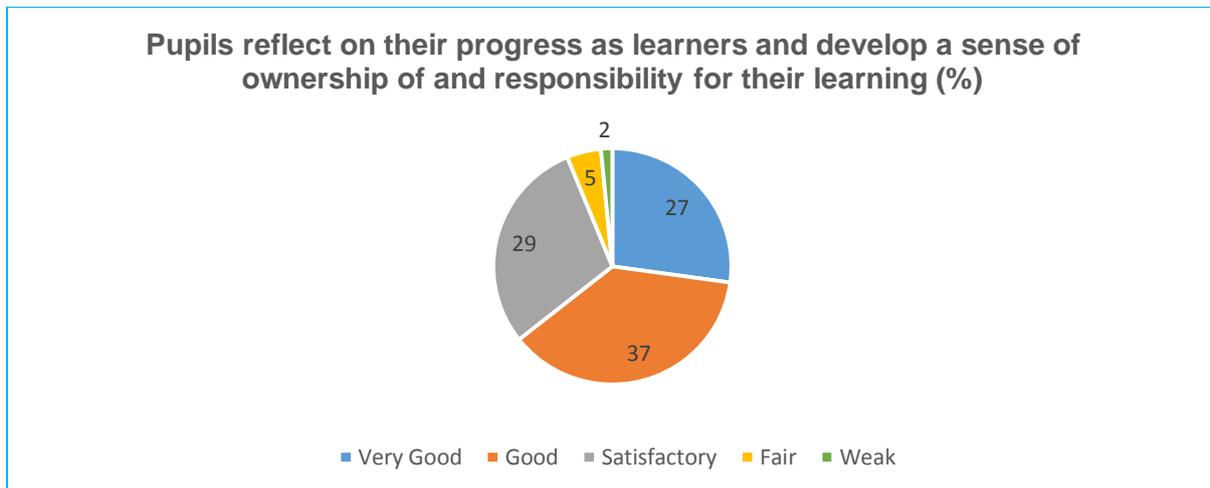
Pupils' growth as learners through respectful interactions and experiences that are challenging and supportive was good or very good in most special classes (Figure 23). Where practice was most effective, pupils were very well supported through a team approach by their teachers and SNAs. Interactions in these cases were very positive, well planned and carefully mediated. Some inspectors affirmed how pupils were regularly facilitated to experience positive feedback and happiness during the learning activities, and that some behaviour incidents were used in an effective manner to cultivate a greater understanding of appropriate communication and interaction. Where practice was weakest, this could usually be attributed to learning tasks not being sufficiently differentiated to provide optimum levels of challenge for the pupils.



**Figure 23**

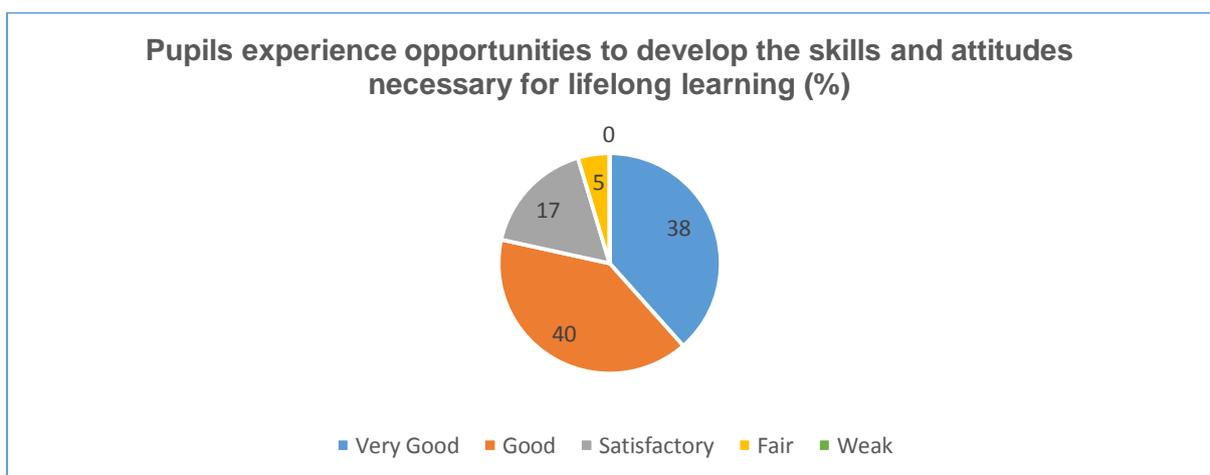
Pupils' reflection on their progress as learners and development of a sense of ownership of and responsibility for their learning was good or very good in a majority of the special classes (Figure 24). Pupils' capability to demonstrate this type of reflection largely reflects their

communication capability and the extent to which they are supported to express their opinions. For some pupils with ASD this level of reflection can prove difficult and will need to be nurtured as the pupils develop their self-awareness, self-regulation and peer interaction skills. Where inspectors observed good practice, they noted that pupils were effectively supported to self-regulate, they were encouraged to discuss, self-reflect and review their work, and rewards and motivators were used appropriately to heighten awareness of progress. In the significant majority of cases where practice was weaker, teachers were not regularly affording pupils sufficient opportunities to discuss their tasks or achievements.



**Figure 24**

Pupils’ experience of opportunities to develop the skills and attitudes necessary for lifelong learning was good or very good in most of the special classes (Figure 25). Many teachers planned a wide variety of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities to develop pupils’ learning and life skills. This sometimes included emphasis on areas such as real-life Mathematics, use of money, preparation for mainstream integration, cookery, visits to local clubs and shopping trips. In some cases, teachers used checklists to record pupils’ mastery of particular life skills and, in one setting, it was commendable that teachers devised specific plans for developing pupils’ metacognition skills. In settings where practice was weaker, there was significant scope to develop these skills and attitudes through involving the pupils themselves more centrally in their integration plans and the individualised target-setting process.



**Figure 25**

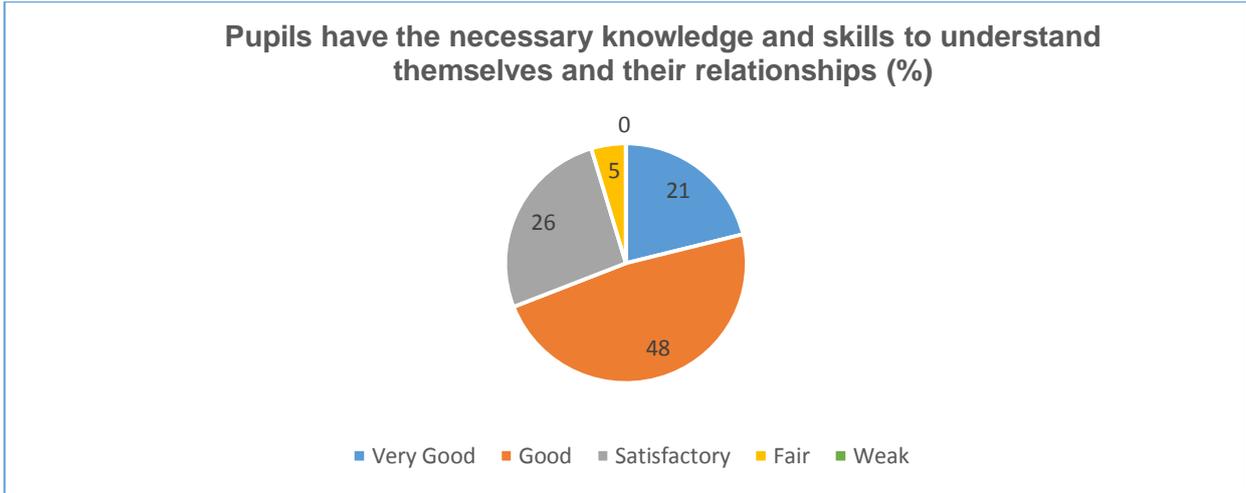
### 3.15 Learner Outcomes

Pupils' enjoyment of their learning, their motivation to learn, and their expectation to achieve as learners were good or very good in most special classes (Figure 26). Where practice was most effective, teachers demonstrated and communicated high expectations for pupils' learning and there were high levels of engagement during lessons. Lesson tasks were differentiated effectively across a suitably broad curriculum, often mediated through ASD-specific approaches. However, there were challenges in some special classes, particularly where pupils had difficulty self-regulating and their behaviours negatively influenced the learning dynamic for the group. Learning outcomes were also compromised in a few classes where teachers' planning lacked sufficient differentiation to meet the range of learning needs across the full curriculum.



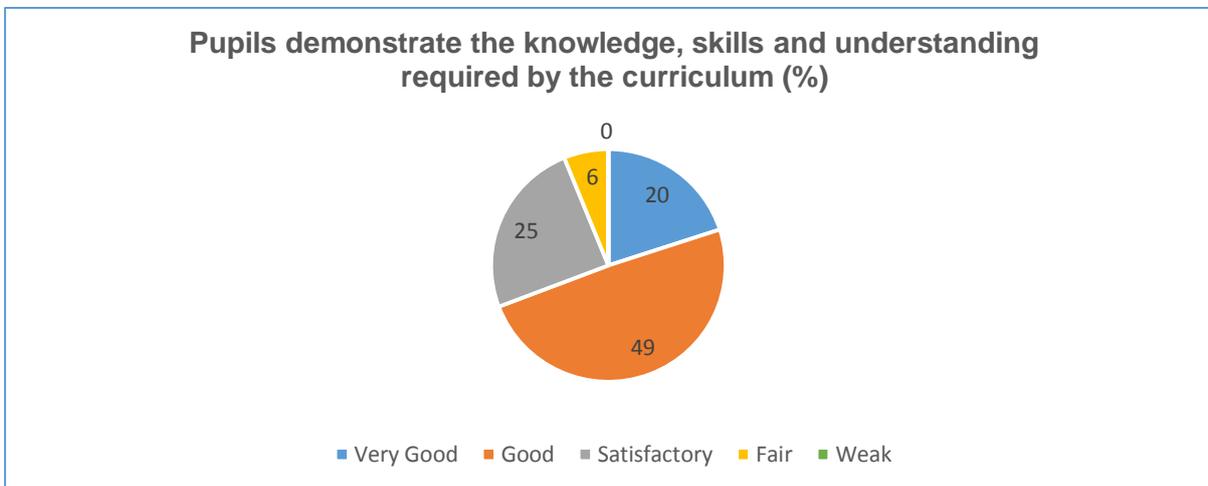
**Figure 26**

Pupils' demonstration of the necessary knowledge and skills to understand themselves and their relationships was good or very good in most of the special classes (Figure 27). This knowledge and its associated skills varies naturally between pupils according to the type of learning needs or other disabilities they may be experiencing due to their autism. For some, understanding of themselves and basic self-regulation skills need to be mastered initially to enable them to participate in class and to interact socially. Inspectors noted that awareness by pupils of those around them was often easier for pupils than understanding of themselves. Notwithstanding the difficulty of establishing the depth of pupils' understanding of themselves, from observing classroom interactions inspectors commented that this type of understanding was being fostered and was emerging well for many pupils. Where the relevant knowledge and skills were not being developed, inspectors advised on the use of assessment to establish baseline skills and to facilitate monitoring of progress in this area.



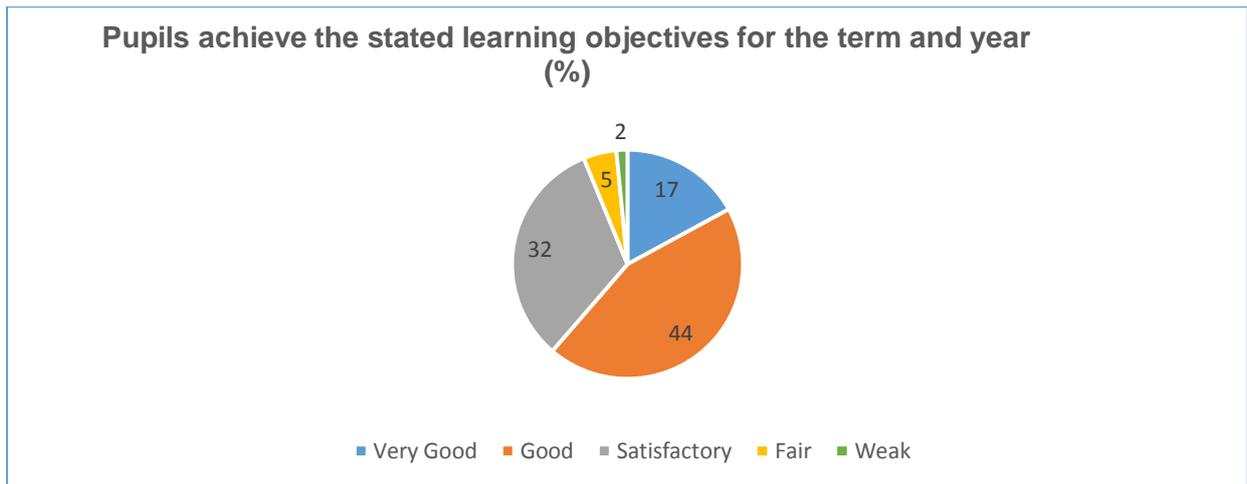
**Figure 27**

Pupils’ demonstration of the knowledge, skills and understanding required by the curriculum was good or very good in a majority of the special classes (Figure 28). In the best instances, inspectors provided positive commentary on the level of cognitive challenge provided for pupils and their progress in literacy, numeracy, social and life skills. Inspectors also praised the manner in which some pupils were enabled to engage appropriately with the curriculum during their periods of integration in mainstream lessons. Where practice was less effective this was linked to an absence of appropriate assessment information, poor establishment of baseline performance levels, little use of GLD guidelines and inappropriate matching of learning tasks to pupils’ needs. In a small number of cases, inspectors expressed concern that some pupils’ work was being unduly influenced or restricted by concentration on programmes and activities recommended by external personnel while not sufficiently reflecting the breadth of the curriculum.



**Figure 28**

Pupils’ achievement of the stated learning objectives for the term and year was good or very good in the majority of the special classes (Figure 29). Where best practice was identified, inspectors attributed this to high quality planning by the teachers, consistent tracking and monitoring of progress in key areas related to pupils’ priority learning needs, effective mainstream integration and good adaptation of material to match complex needs. Where practice was observed to be less effective, inspectors made recommendations about the need to improve planning and target-setting, more consistent use of ASD-specific approaches to teaching and more accurate assessment and progress tracking.



**Figure 29**

### 3.16 Summary of Key Findings for Primary Special Classes

The following key findings summarise the analysis of inspection evidence from the primary special classes for pupils with ASD:

- The enrolment policy for the primary special classes was found to be clear and appropriate in just over half of the settings. In the remaining cases, enrolment policies contained restrictions either limiting access to the special class to pupils with general learning disability categories or to pupils who were able to be integrated into mainstream classes for a considerable proportion of their time in schools.
- In almost all of the primary special classes, pupils were deemed to be in the correct educational setting for their needs; in a small number of cases some pupils would have benefited from being fully enrolled in mainstream classes. The suitability of placements should be reviewed regularly.
- Some pupils from almost all of the primary special classes were integrated meaningfully in mainstream classes at some point during the school day or week; in some cases there was potential to extend this integration towards full inclusion.
- In the primary special classes, the individualised planning process identified learning targets accurately in over two-thirds of settings; in the other third there was scope to link targets more effectively to professional reports and baseline assessment, and to ensure that targets were SMART and that their achievement was monitored.
- Suitable autism-specific assessments were used in over half of the primary special classes to identify needs and track progress; some teachers were unfamiliar with the range of ASD assessments available and the availability of CPD to support their use.
- Almost all primary special class teachers demonstrated the requisite subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills to teach pupils with ASD; in a small number of cases these skills and knowledge were lacking because the special class teacher was not familiar with ASD approaches.
- Most pupils in the primary special classes enjoyed their learning, were motivated to learn, and expected to achieve as learners during the lessons observed especially where teachers had high expectations and affirmed pupils' efforts; some settings needed more consistency, structure and clearer targets to improve learning outcomes for pupils.

- Most primary special class pupils were achieving the stated learning objectives for the term and year. More specific ASD teaching approaches, particularly those acknowledging the visual modality of ASD learning, were required in some settings.

## Chapter 4 Post-Primary Special Classes: Results and Key Findings

This chapter outlines the findings of the visits to the twenty post-primary special classes in quantitative and qualitative terms. The chapter concludes with some key messages for the post-primary sector.

### 4.1 Enrolment and Appropriate Placement of Students

Just half of the enrolment policies examined for entry to the special classes at post-primary level were judged by inspectors to be clear and appropriate. Some of the policies made enrolment conditional to the school having the resources to meet the student's needs or the student having a particular level of cognitive functioning. Other policies specified that the student must be able to fully integrate into mainstream class or learn consistently in a mainstream environment. One policy stated that:

The admissions panel should judge that the child is well placed in the mix of children already in the special class.

In another case, the school assigned a student a place in the special class pending an assessment for an ASD diagnosis, leading the inspector to comment that:

The current admissions policy for students with SEN to enrol in the school or the special class for students with ASDs is neither in line with the Resource Allocation Model nor the NCSE guidelines for setting up a special class.

While most of the schools indicated that they had not refused students enrolment or been involved in a Section 29 Appeal in relation to the special classes, inspectors identified difficulties in a number of schools. In one case, school management reported that four spaces were being reserved for primary school pupils for the following school year. In other cases, there were indications that students were forced to stay out of school or to apply for special school placements because their application to enrol in the special class was unsuccessful.

In over two-thirds of settings, inspectors were of the opinion that at least one or more of the students in that setting were not in the correct educational setting for their needs. When placement was considered appropriate, students received support in the special class and were also increasingly integrated throughout the school. One report praised the practice of reviewing placements:

By carrying out an annual review of the students' SEN needs, the school has commendably transferred students from the special class to the general enrolment of the school, when appropriate.

Where difficulties with the placement were identified, they often related to students whose level of special needs was not particularly challenging being enrolled in the special classes and holding their places there for the duration of their time in the school despite spending almost all of their time in mainstream classrooms. Although this might be a stepping stone towards full integration, one inspection report highlights the need to support these students appropriately:

Whilst it is positive that students with ASD and who are assigned to the special classes, attend the majority of their lessons with their typically developing peers, there is an urgent need to further support the complex learning and wellbeing needs of these students. Designated and skilled special class teachers with a knowledge and understanding of autism should be deployed to the special classes and appropriate autism specific interventions and strategies should be used to meet their needs.

Analysis of inspection findings suggests a number of problems with enrolment and placement of students with ASD in post-primary special classes. Schools require further specific directions from the NCSE on the intended purpose of their special classes and on how to draft fair and transparent enrolment criteria. Integration of students is an admirable goal, and schools will need to ensure that the students enrolled into the special classes are not those who could have been enrolled in mainstream classes with supports provided out of the school's allocation of resources for special education teaching.

Students enrolling in special classes should be, as advised in the NCSE Guidelines, those whose level of need is such that placement in the special class is necessary. Taking account of the extent of a student's special educational need, one of the principal aims of enrolment in special classes should be the provision of opportunities for gradual enrolment in mainstream provision for the student. Strategies to advance the student's transition to mainstream should be identified in the Student Support File. Accordingly, placements in special classes should be reviewed annually, and where successful integration into mainstream provision is achieved, students should be fully enrolled in the mainstream school. This provides the opportunity to celebrate their progression, while at the same time offers the possibility of making special class spaces available for new students. The Department of Education and Skills and the NCSE should examine if there are any resourcing barriers or other unintended disincentives for schools in transitioning students from special classes to mainstream placement.

## 4.2 Integration and Inclusion of Students

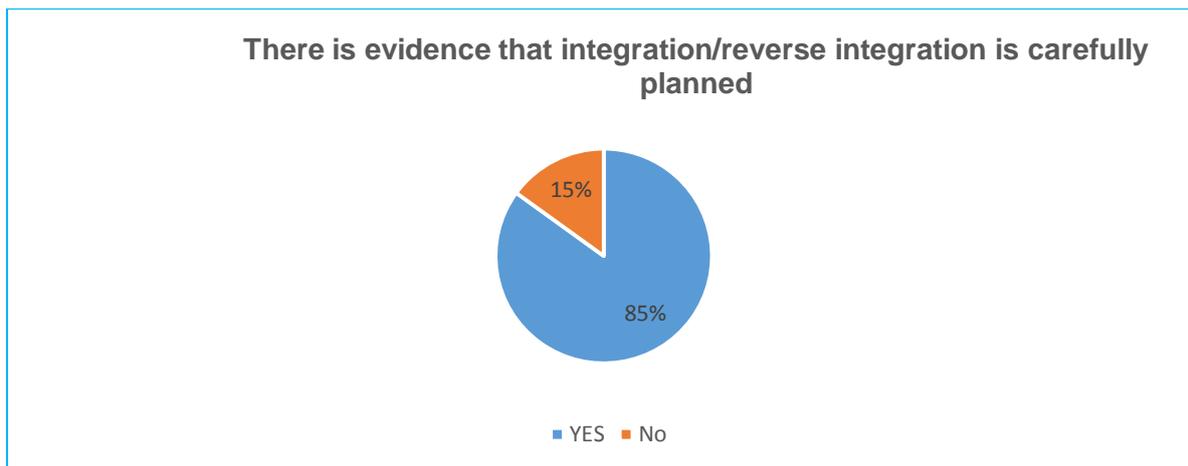
In all of the special classes, inspectors noted that at least some students were integrated into mainstream classes and, in most cases, the integration or reverse integration was planned (Figure 30). Some examples of good inclusion were noted and there was positive commentary about students without ASD being very kind towards their peers with ASD and engaging positively with them in learning and social activities. The following report extract highlights good practice in supporting students' integration:

Most students who access the special classes spend most of their time in mainstream lessons and considerable planning and timetabled support goes into ensuring that mainstream teachers are supported in facilitating the meaningful inclusion of these students.

In a small number of cases, inspectors formed the opinion that the students being integrated did not have very complex needs or did not require a place in the special class at all. Where students did not have very complex needs, integration was not difficult for students. However, where schools attempted to integrate students with complex needs without providing appropriate supports, students experienced difficulties in adapting to the change. One inspector was critical about such students with needs being integrated without sufficient supports:

Students are integrated as this is school policy regardless of whether they are able to manage themselves and their social, emotional and communication needs and whether or not it is in the students' best interests.

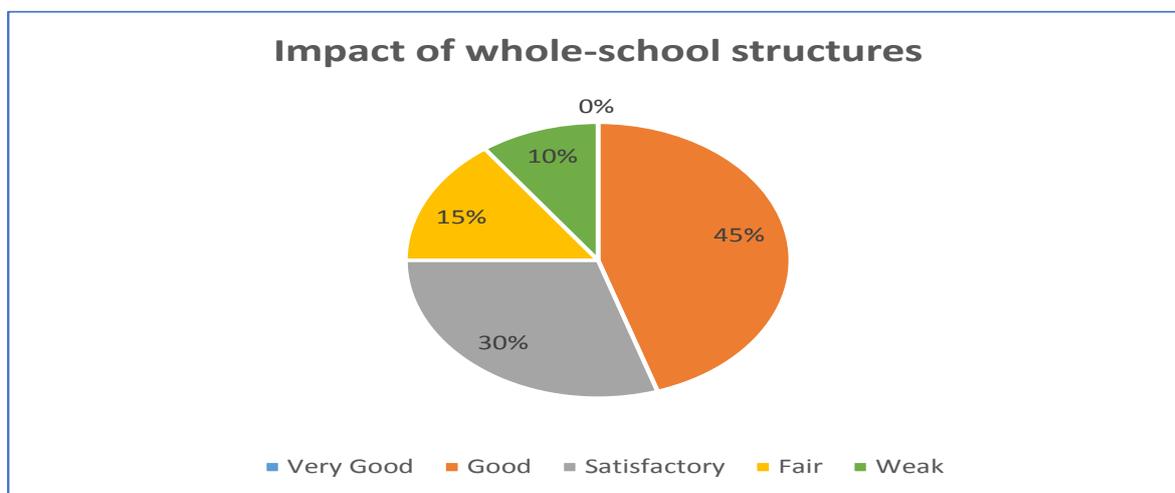
Examples such as this highlight the need for schools to adopt an individualised approach to managing the needs of children with ASD. Integration and inclusion of students from the special classes is very much linked to the school's approach to enrolment. Where students with less complex needs are enrolled in the special class, it is usually possible to integrate them in mainstream classes for most of the time, although further supports may be required. Students with more complex needs will require significant support in the special class setting and higher levels of support in order to achieve successful integration.



**Figure 30**

### 4.3 Whole-School Structures

The impact of whole-school structures and organisation on the work of the special classes was satisfactory or better in most cases, with good impact noted for almost half of the classes (Figure 31). Where inspectors praised whole-school structures, they referred to arrangements being in place to provide integration, reverse integration or arrangements to use the special classroom as a space of comfort for students. Where whole-school structures were deemed to be less effective, inspectors related this to a lack of collaborative planning to support students’ needs across the different learning settings.



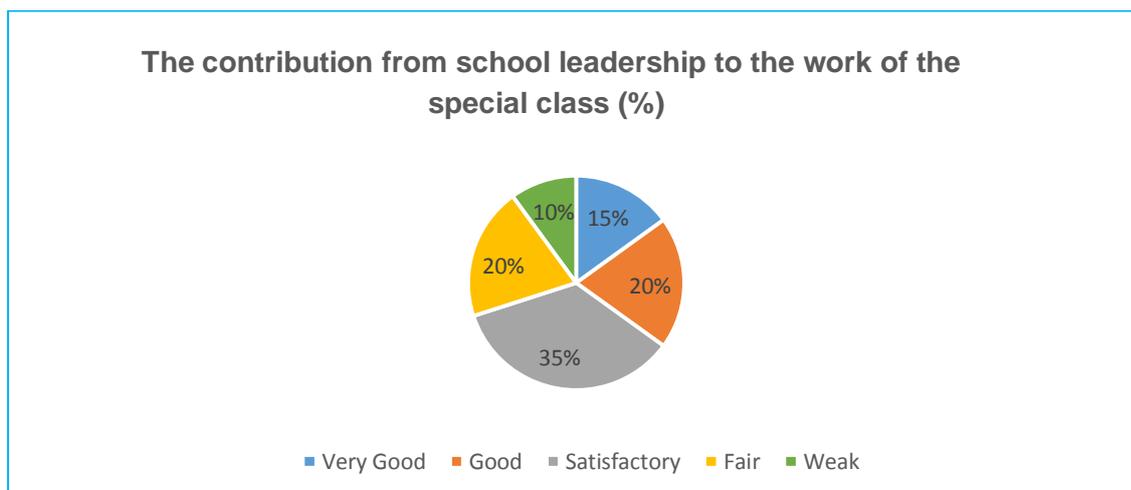
**Figure 31**

### 4.4 School Leadership and Management

The contribution from school leadership towards the effective operation of the post-primary special classes was judged to be satisfactory or better in the majority of settings (Figure 32). Inspectors’ comments on this aspect of provision typically referred to overall school policy and the effective deployment of resources to support students’ needs. However, this contribution was less than satisfactory in a significant minority of the schools evaluated. One report recommends more appropriate teacher deployment:

Designated and skilled special class teachers with a knowledge and understanding of autism should be deployed to the special classes and

appropriate autism-specific interventions and strategies should be used to meet their [the students'] needs.



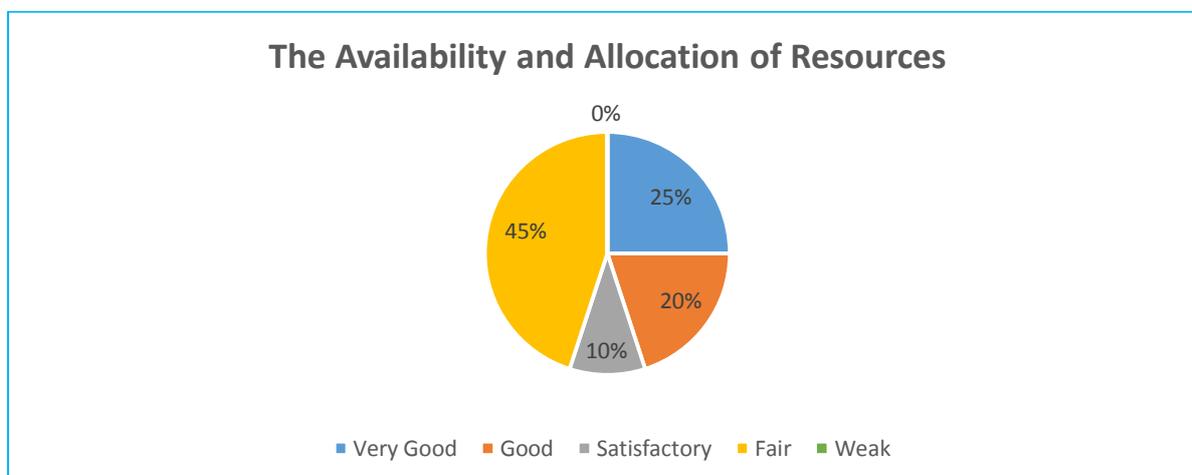
**Figure 32**

#### 4.5 Availability of resources

The availability and allocation of resources were satisfactory or better in just over half of the special classes (Figure 33). Schools were praised for providing students with access to the special class at break times and in the morning to support reverse integration and to provide a space of comfort. However, difficulties with the allocation, availability and use of resources were identified in a significant minority of special classes. Inspectors' criticism of the allocation of resources was largely related to the special class itself or the sensory rooms. In one setting the inspector commented that:

The experiences of students with ASD vary. The resources are not used to support students with ASD optimally. The sensory room is not in use, the special class is used more as a withdrawal setting with lockers and desks, resource area with sofa and mini pool table. There is very little evidence of the use of funding.

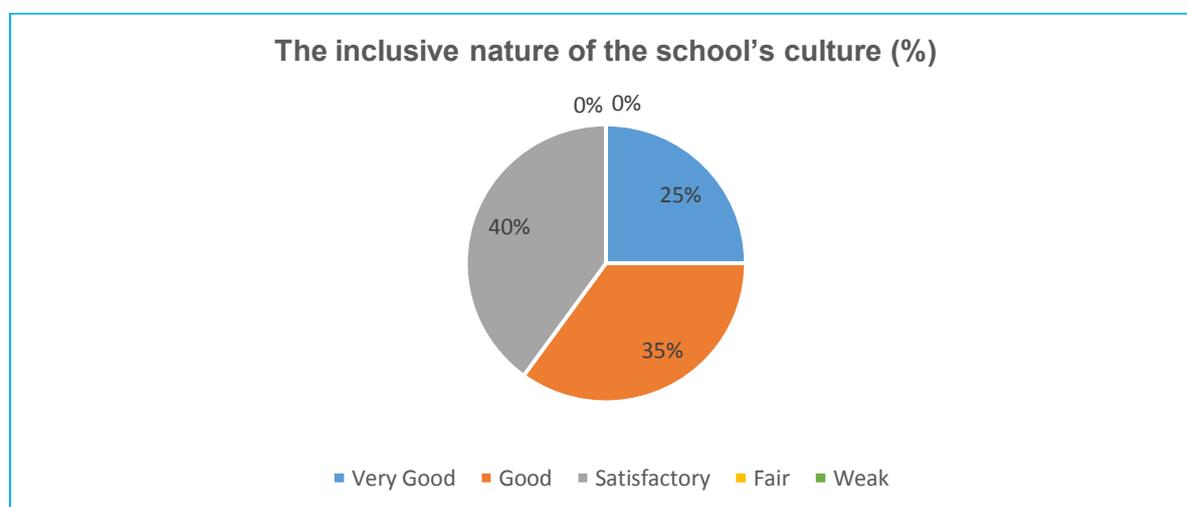
In another school the sensory room was no longer in existence although teachers reported that the grant available to provide such rooms and associated equipment was received and used.



**Figure 33**

## 4.6 Inclusive Culture

The inclusive nature of the school's culture was rated as good or very good in more than half of the settings (Figure 34). Where practice was praised, inspectors commented favourably on the extent of students' integration into mainstream lessons. However, where the culture was deemed less inclusive, inspectors criticised enrolment practices and the lack of collaborative planning for students' needs across settings.



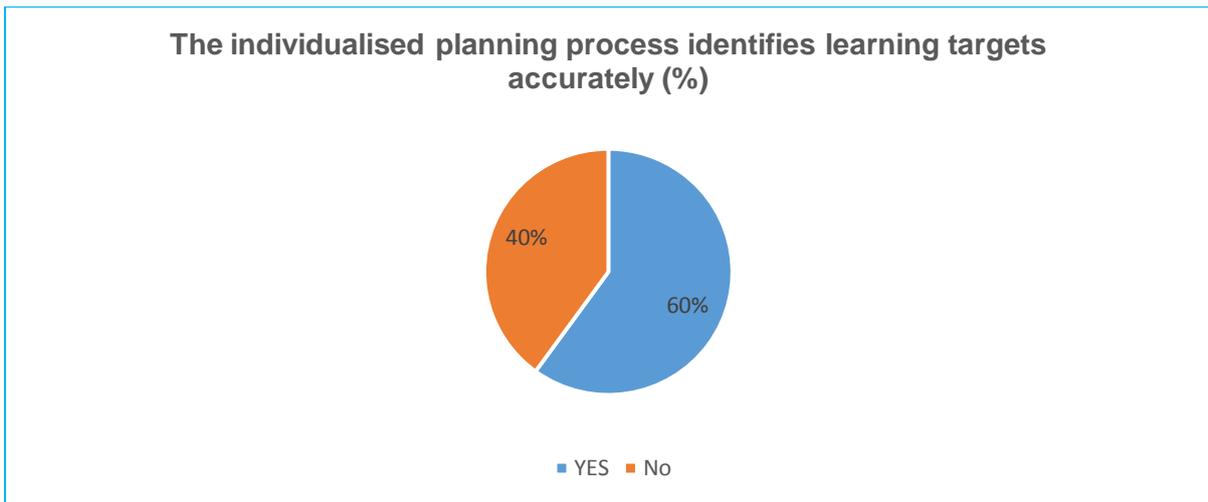
**Figure 34**

## 4.7 Individualised Planning, Assessment and Progress Records

In the majority of classes, inspectors noted that the individualised planning process identified learning targets accurately (Figure 35). Where practice was best, the individual education plans were reviewed regularly to take account of changing needs. Where improvements in the planning process were required, inspectors noted that targets were unclear and not specific.

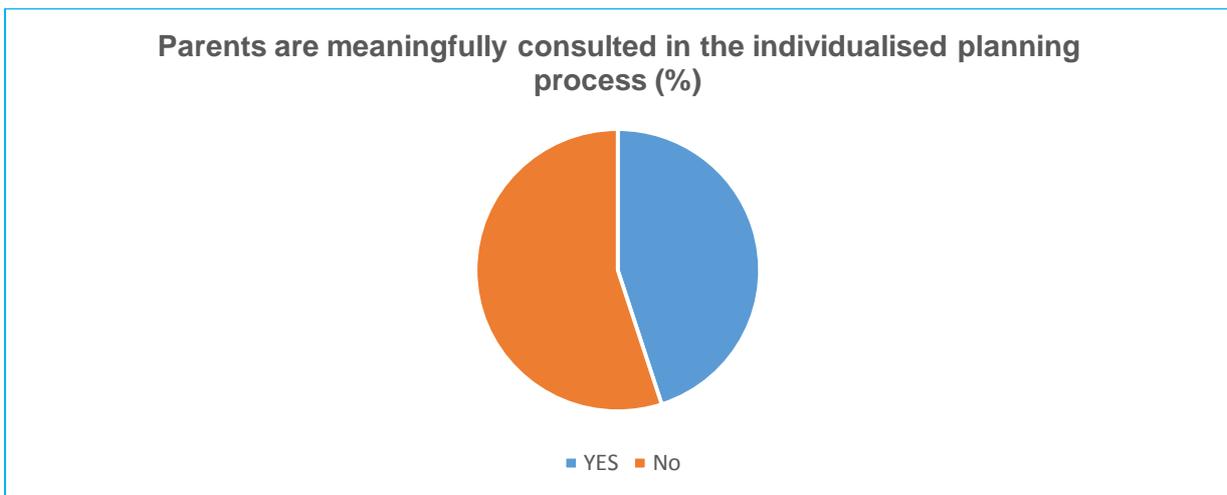
In some cases, parents were not consulted meaningfully as part of the target-setting or review phases of planning. Inspectors were not given access to individual plans in a small number of classes because of a trade union directive to teachers not to co-operate with the individualised planning process. While teachers may have prepared Student Support Plans in these schools the inspectors were not enabled to view these plans or to confirm their quality.

However, given the importance of establishing priority needs and targets for students which are necessary to direct teaching approaches and educational programmes to meet their specific needs, the Department of Education and Skills should consider measures to ensure that individualised educational planning becomes mandatory for all special classes.



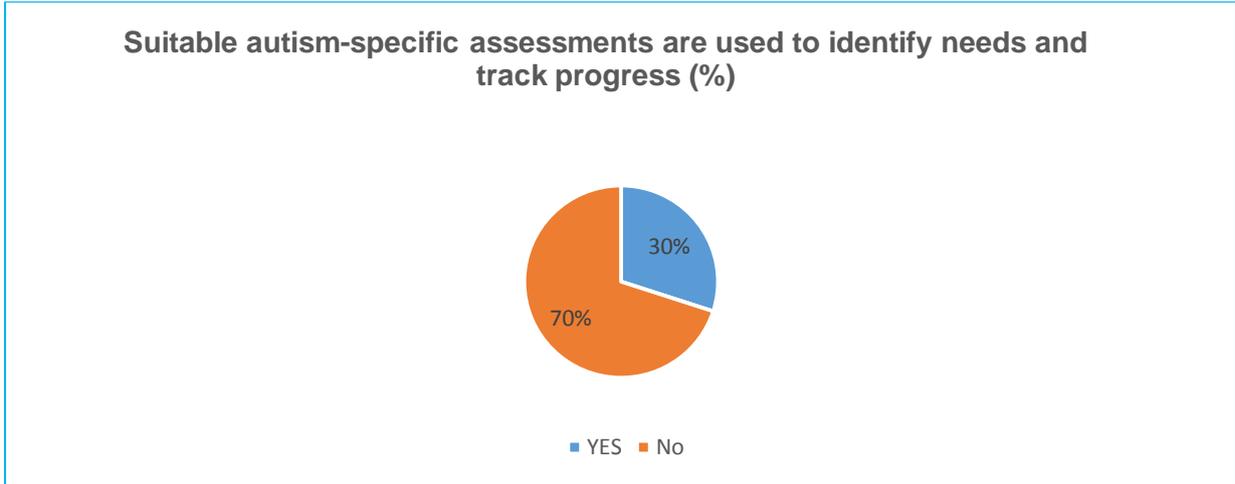
**Figure 35**

Parents were meaningfully consulted during the individualised planning process in less than half of the special classes (Figure 36). During the focus-group interviews, some parents praised their schools’ consultation process and the extent to which the school involved parents in planning and review. However, in other cases, parents indicated to inspectors that they would like greater involvement in planning their child’s learning programmes and experiences. In a small number of cases, parents described the communication with the school as being poor.



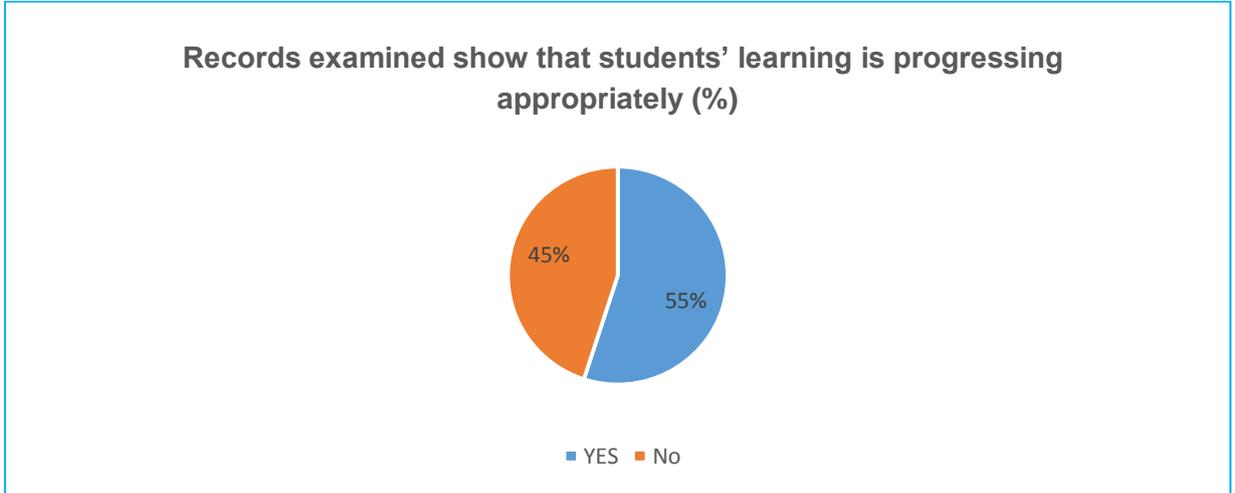
**Figure 36**

Suitable ASD-specific assessments were used in less than one-third of the special classes (Figure 37). This low figure varies considerably from the primary school results. Where students with complex learning needs are enrolled into special classes, it would be logical that specialised assessments would be required to establish baseline attainment levels and to assist with individualised target-setting and progress monitoring. Perhaps the lower level of ASD-specific assessment use in some settings could be explained by some students with less complex needs being enrolled in the post-primary special classes and their apparent ability to be readily integrated into mainstream classes for most of their time in school. Where inspectors noted use of ASD-specific assessment, it was typically administered by the co-ordinating teachers because of their familiarity with the specialist testing procedures required.



**Figure 37**

In just over half of the records examined, appropriate progression in students’ learning was recorded clearly (Figure 38). Inspectors described the record-keeping in a minority of special classes as being very good in relation to tracking academic and other progress. Where practice was poorer, progress records were not being maintained in the special class itself, while some students were only assessed by the mainstream subject teachers. These findings appear to be closely related to enrolment practices and the suitability of students for placement in a special class. While it is praiseworthy that subject teachers are taking responsibility for assessment and recording of progress, special responsibility must be attached to the co-ordinating teacher to collate and use the full range of available assessment information to assist with target-setting and reviews of individualised planning. Correct use of this information should inform decision-making in regard to the ultimate transition of students from the special classes into fulltime mainstream placements.



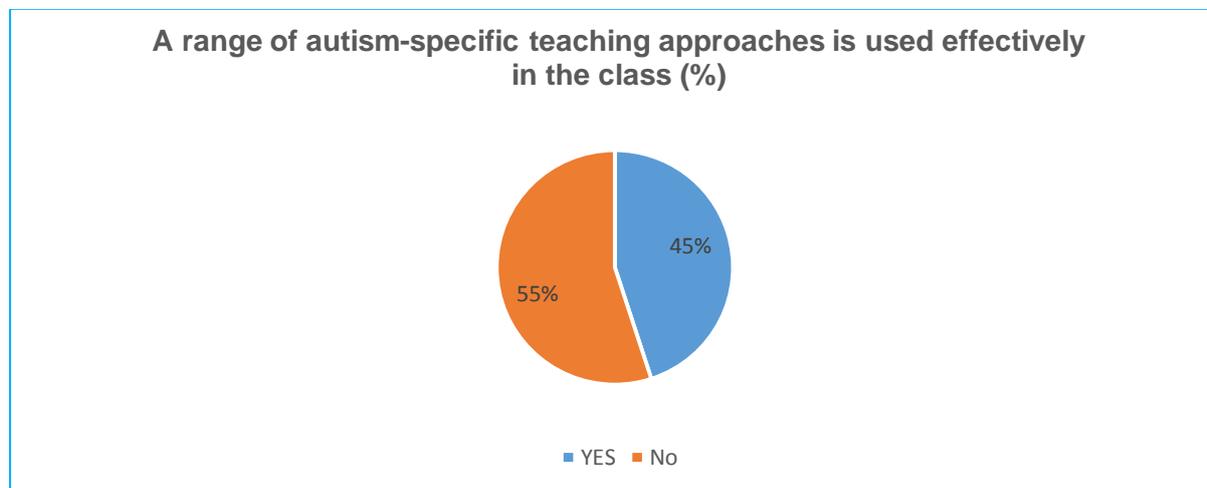
**Figure 38**

**4.8 ASD-Specific Approaches to Teaching**

Inspectors noted the use of a variety of ASD-specific approaches to teaching in less than half of the settings observed (Figure 39). Where practice was most effective, it included highly differentiated approaches, good overall teaching skills, very good use of visual materials, support for self-regulation and targeted work on the development of social skills. In the majority of settings, no ASD-specific approaches were used. The absence of these approaches may

be due to a number of factors ranging from students' needs not being complex to teachers not having the expertise required to use ASD-specific approaches. Commenting on such a scenario, one inspector noted that:

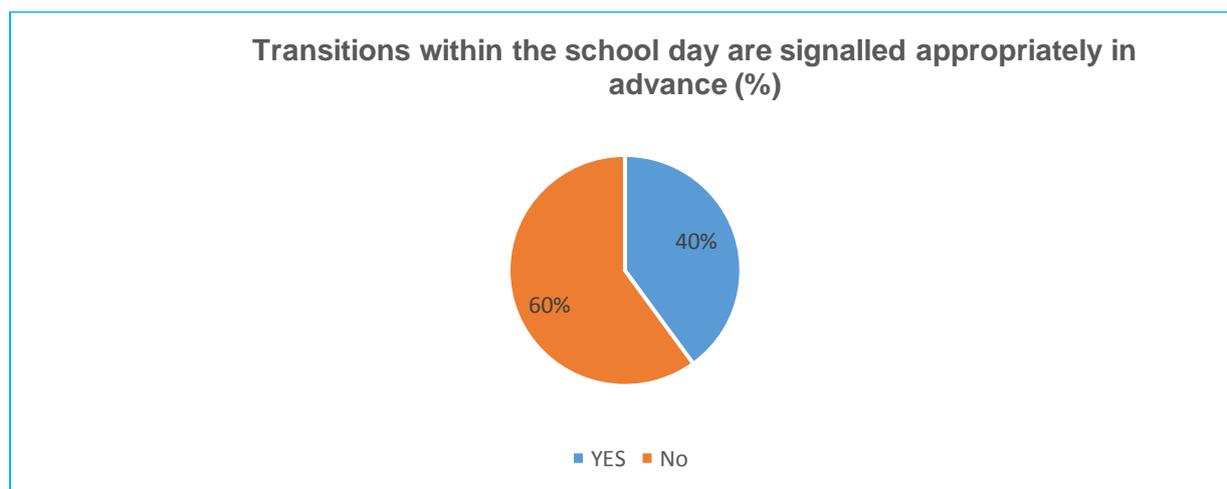
Qualified staff from this class are currently on leave and teachers without qualification are filling in.



**Figure 39**

## 4.9 Transitions

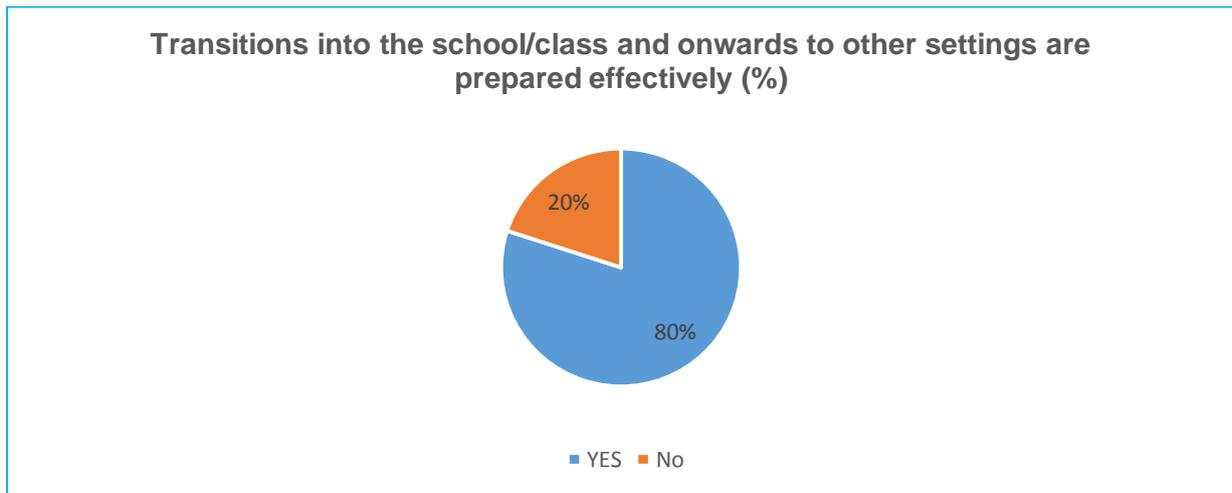
Inspectors examined how students were prepared for transitions during the school day and also more generally between educational settings (Figure 40). Transitions within the school day were signalled effectively in less than half of the settings. Good practice included the use of visual timetables and schedules, students being familiar with routines, and in some cases, timetable exercises being completed each morning to prepare students for the day's activities. In one setting, the teacher was trying to help students with their transitions, but due to the staffing allocation, the teacher worked with the students only twice weekly and this support was not provided consistently.



**Figure 40**

Overall, inspectors noted that students' transitions into the school, the special class and onwards to other settings were supported effectively in most settings (Figure 41). Inspectors commented favourably in some cases about transitions into post-primary schools from the primary schools and noted that that most students settled in well. However, in one case, the

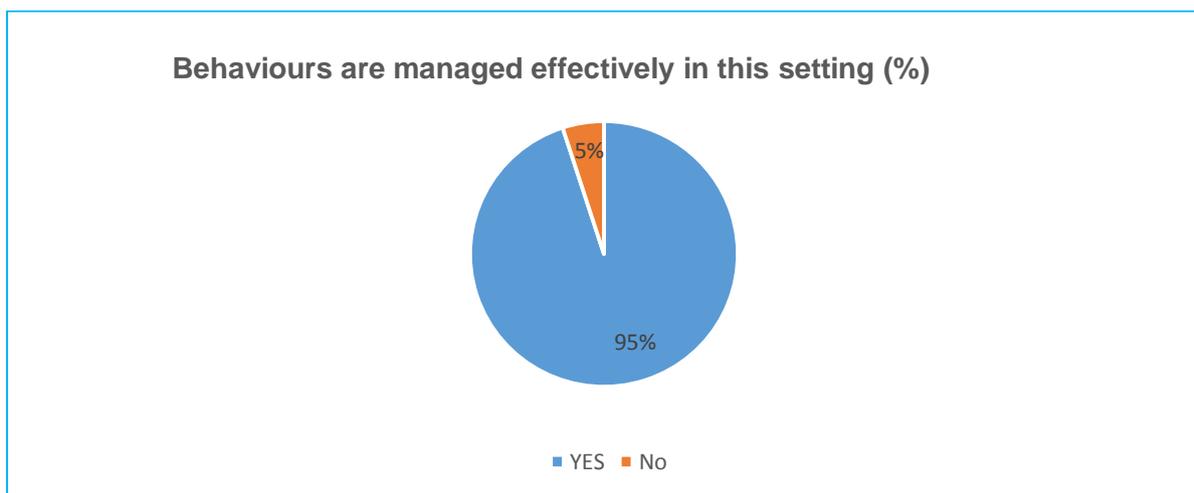
inspector linked a newly-enrolled student's reluctance to attend the special class to inadequate preparation for the transition.



**Figure 41**

#### 4.10 Behaviour Management

In almost all cases, students were enabled to manage their own behaviours to help them participate in school life (Figure 42). Where this was done well, inspectors commented about effective routines for managing stress levels being built into the daily routine and noted that students were happy and ready to learn through good teaching and planning for their needs. In a very small number of settings students were observed to be upset and not coping well with their setting. In one case, a student had recently returned from a suspension and his attendance was now being increased from a reduced day. All cases of reduced timetables or shortened days should be fully documented, agreed with parents and reported to TUSLA in accordance with regulations on suspensions.



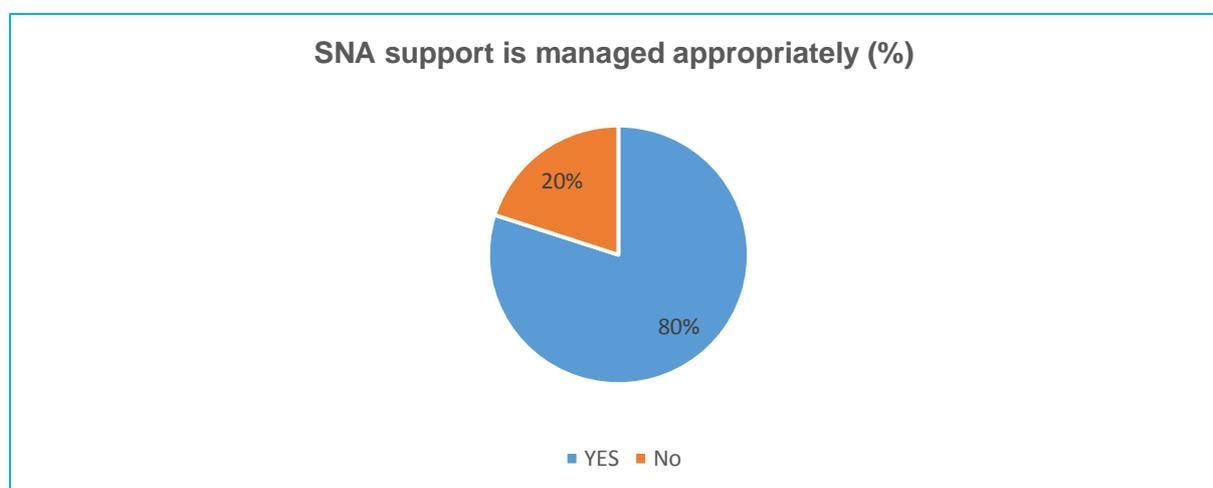
**Figure 42**

#### 4.11 Special Needs Assistants (SNA)

SNA support was managed effectively in most classes (Figure 43). Where provision was most effective the SNAs' roles were very clear and there was good teamwork with the teachers to

attend to students' needs. In many settings, SNAs contributed to a structured classroom approach and they met regularly with the teachers to discuss classroom supports. SNAs also carried out valuable work in helping students with transitions between settings during the school day, often between the mainstream and special classes. They played a particular role in helping students to access sensory breaks, as needed.

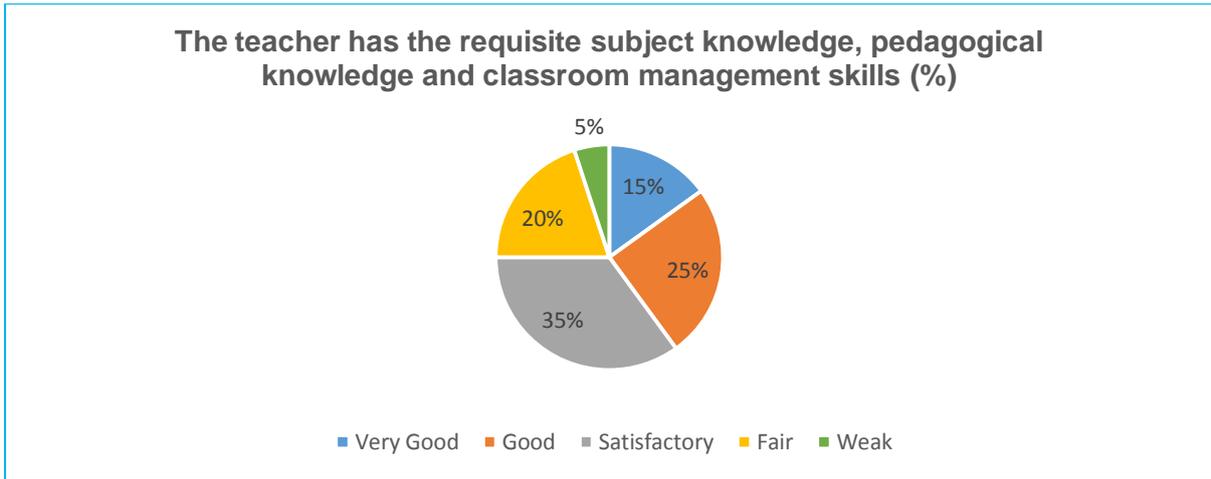
In the small number of cases where SNA support was deemed to be managed ineffectively, inspectors referred to SNAs not being present in the setting, uncertainty about the SNA's distinctive role or students being over supported. In a setting where uncertainty about the SNA role was noted, the inspector commented that it was difficult to differentiate between the observed role of the teacher and that of the SNA. Given the respective and different roles and responsibilities of teachers and SNAs, schools should define those roles in school policy and ensure that the teaching functions are carried out by suitably qualified teachers only. While SNAs have overall responsibility for attending to the care needs of students, reinforcing and helping with the generalisation of skills taught by teachers, this should be guided by the agreed individualised planning process to ensure that SNA support is proportionate and does not become a barrier to students' personal independence.



**Figure 43**

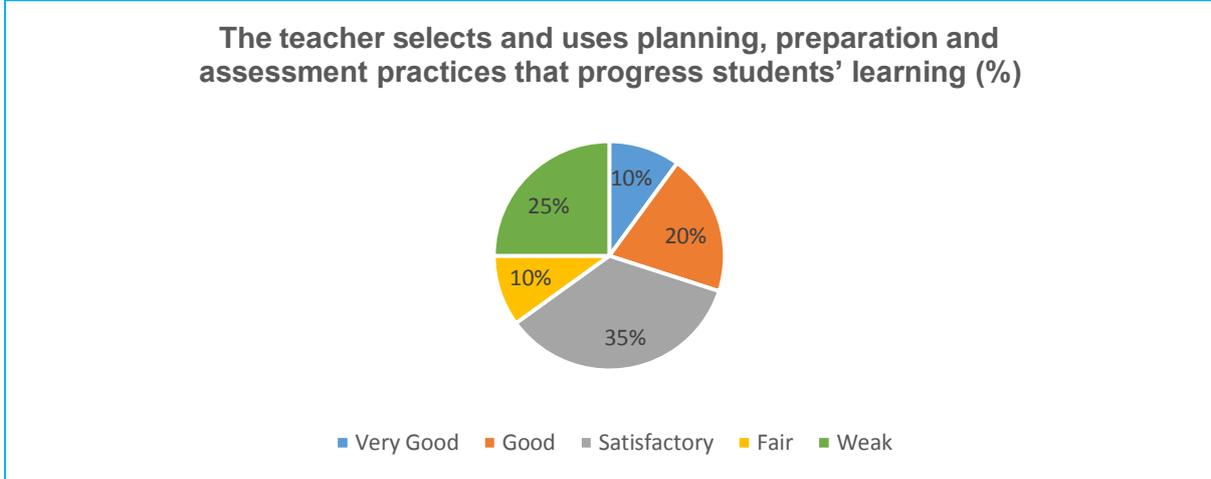
#### 4.12 Teachers' Individual Practices

Teachers demonstrated the requisite subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills at a satisfactory or better level in most settings (Figure 44). Where practice was most effective, teachers demonstrated very good knowledge about the students and their needs and also the pedagogical strategies required to support them. Some teachers had availed of high levels of CPD in relation to autism and this was evident in their teaching approaches. However, in some cases, the teachers with this specific expertise were not allocated to teach the special classes and while they supported students with ASD very well in mainstream lessons, other teachers with much less expertise and experience of CPD in ASD were allocated to teach the special classes.



**Figure 44**

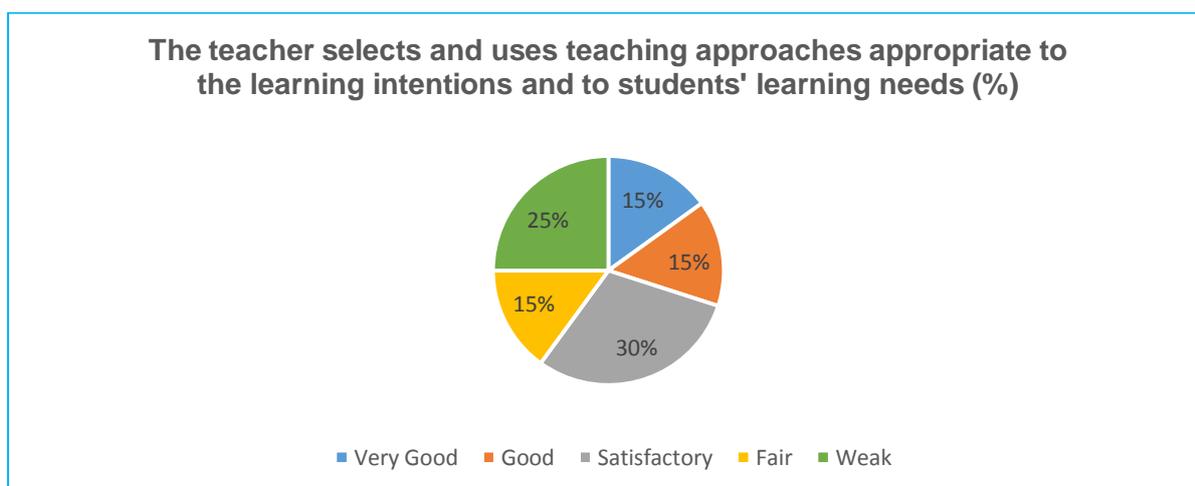
Teachers’ selection and use of planning, preparation and assessment practices to progress students’ learning was deemed to be satisfactory or better in the majority of classes visited (Figure 45). The most effective practice was characterised by thoughtful lesson planning based on the teachers’ knowledge of students’ needs and interests and relevant assessment. However, in a significant minority of settings, planning was deficient, with no individualised plans in some cases, a lack of collaborative planning and a need for clarity about targets among teachers dealing with the same students. In the context of students’ enrolment in a special class, these deficiencies in planning, preparation and assessment are a cause of concern because they make it difficult for the teachers to identify needs accurately and to address them consistently. The implications of this deficit in planning need to be explored by special class teachers individually and collaboratively.



**Figure 45**

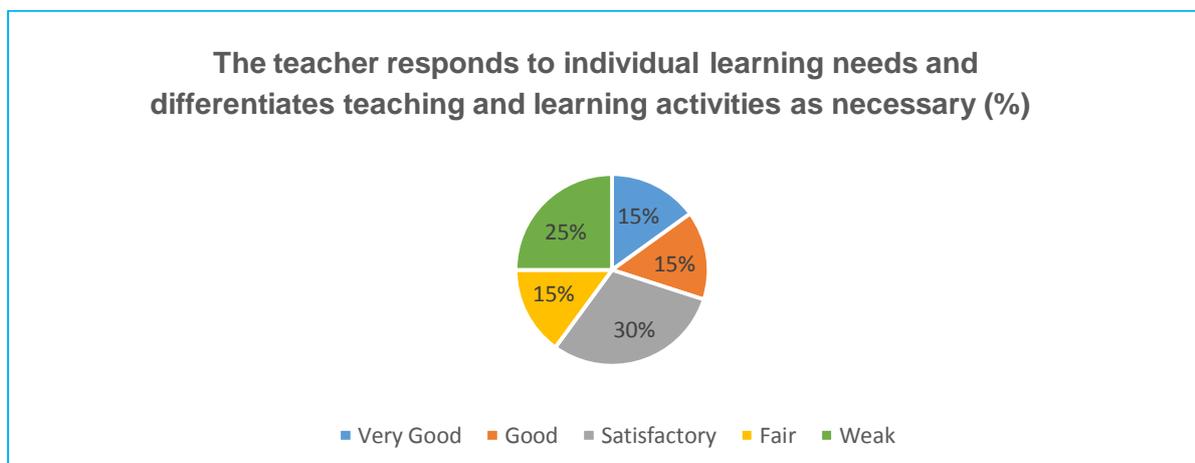
Teachers’ selection and use of teaching approaches that were appropriate to the learning intentions and to students’ learning needs was satisfactory or better in a majority of the classes visited (Figure 46). Where practice was rated as good or very good, teachers used visuals well, showed very good understanding of the students and used a variety of approaches and resources to support good outcomes for students. In the significant minority of settings where teachers’ selection and use of appropriate teaching approaches were either fair or weak, inspectors commented on a lack of ASD-specific teaching approaches, over-use of teacher-led approaches and lack of appropriate support for students with more complex needs, some of whom were observed to be upset or disengaged. One report states that:

There is a lack of autism-specific, evidence-based interventions being used in this setting.



**Figure 46**

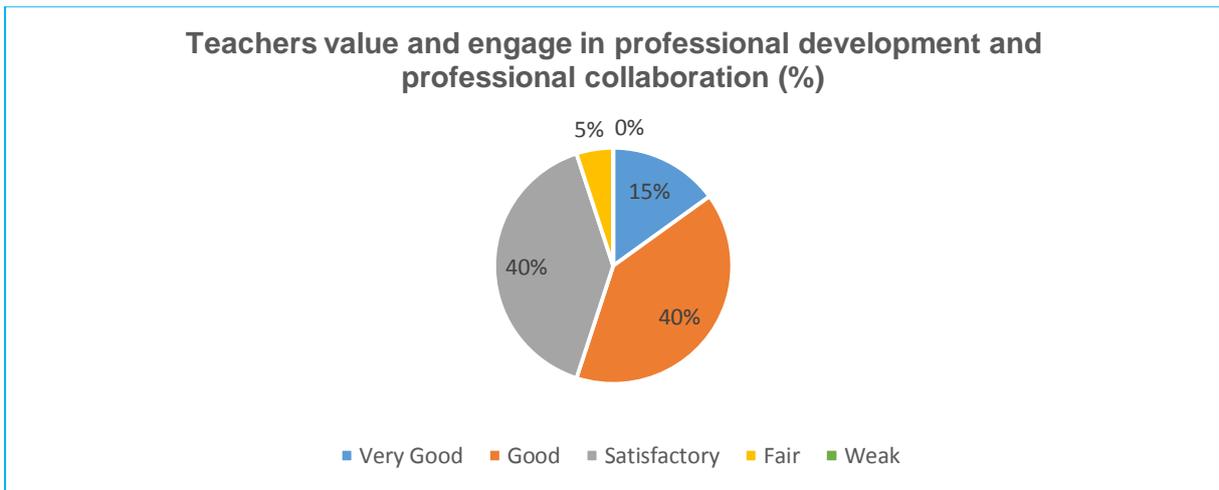
Teachers' responses to individual learning needs and differentiation of teaching and learning activities, as necessary, was rated as satisfactory or better in just over half of settings evaluated (Figure 47). Where practice was effective, lessons were planned purposefully to meet the range of needs. However, while effective differentiation was noted in some of the special classes, it was not reflected when students from some special classes were integrated into mainstream lessons. This aspect was rated as weak in one quarter of the settings because differentiation was either limited or absent entirely during lessons.



**Figure 47**

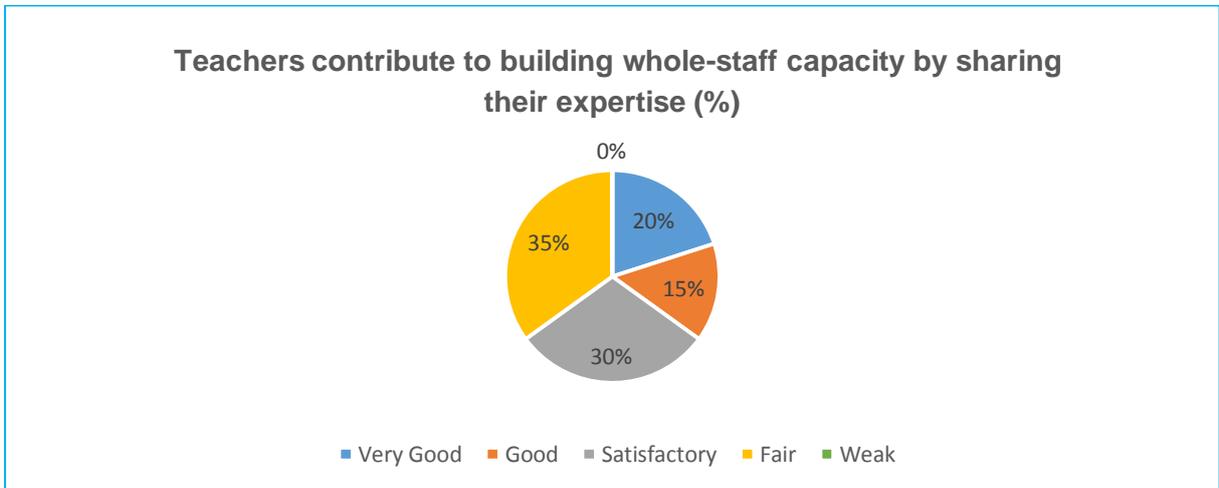
### 4.13 Teachers' Collective Practices

In just over half of settings, inspectors rated teachers' valuing of and engagement in professional development and professional collaboration as being good or very good (Figure 48). Inspectors described how some schools have teachers on staff with very good levels of CPD or postgraduate qualifications in SEN and ASD, and that uptake of CPD is increasing. However, it was noted that sometimes the more experienced or most highly-qualified teachers were not deployed to teach the special classes. While there was evidence in a number of settings that teachers worked together to plan supports for students, discrepancies between the approaches used in some special classes located in the same school cast doubt on the impact of collaboration being claimed.



**Figure 48**

Teachers’ contribution to building whole-staff capacity by sharing their expertise was satisfactory or better in the majority of settings (Figure 49). Where this aspect was very effective, inspectors commented on the expertise and capacity within the school, as well as the sharing of planning approaches and systems for team teaching within mainstream lessons where students from the special classes were included. Comments on poor sharing of expertise usually referred to schools where the levels of expertise or CPD uptake were low. This highlights the need for post-primary schools with special classes to ensure that at least some of their core SEN team and special class teachers avail of relevant CPD and that mechanisms are put in place for effective sharing of this knowledge.

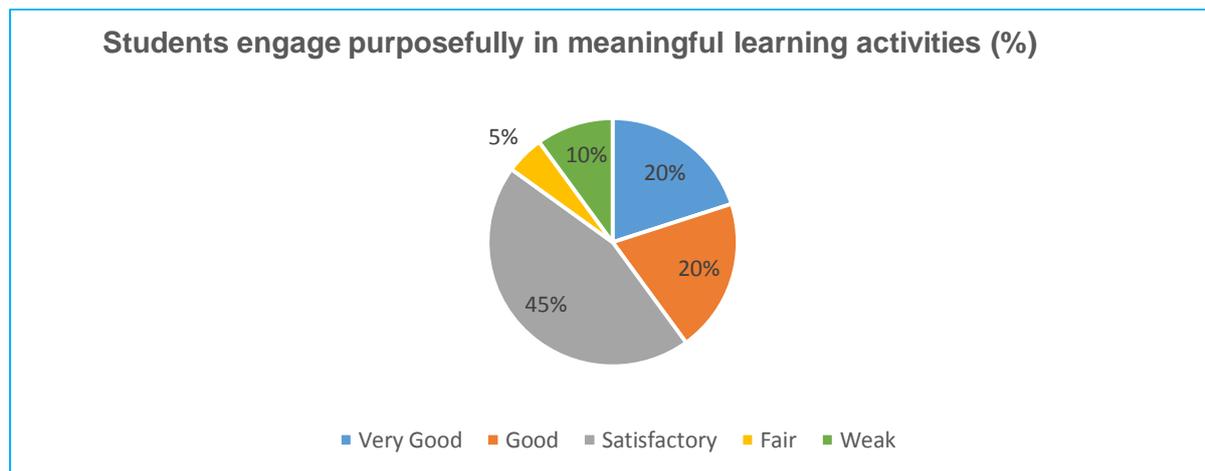


**Figure 49**

#### 4.14 Learner Experiences

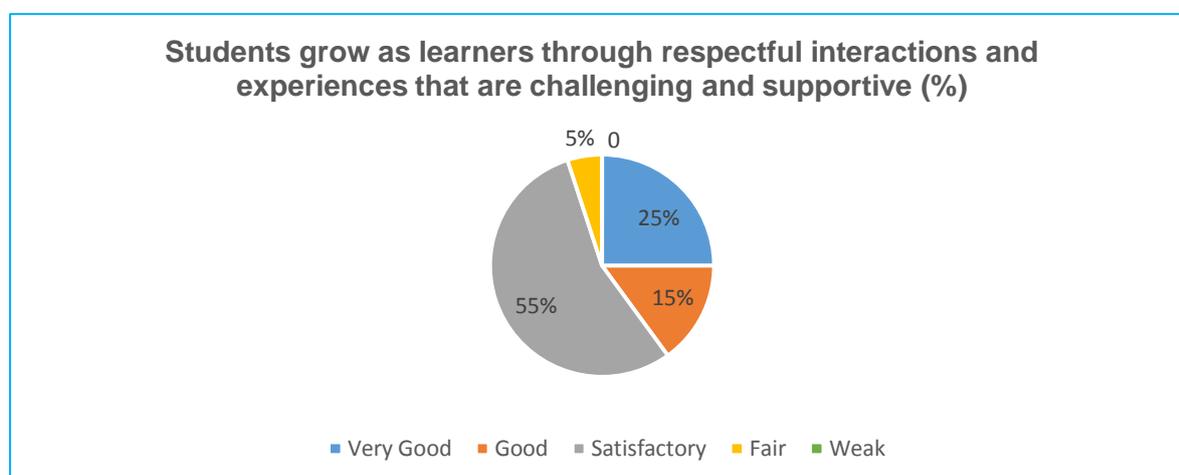
Students’ purposeful engagement in meaningful learning activities was rated as satisfactory or better in most settings, but it is a matter of concern that over one third of the engagement was only rated as fair, indicating considerable scope for improvement (Figure 50). Purposeful engagement in meaningful learning activities is central to a student’s work at school and requires teachers to match learning activities to needs and ability levels. Where this was done successfully, inspectors commented about autism needs being met, and on schools’ efforts to ensure that meaningful tasks and challenges, turn-taking and self-regulation skills are being

developed. They also commented positively on the suitability of tasks, peer interaction and the fostering of independence for students to complete the tasks independently. When engagement was less purposeful there was very little focus on social and life skills and the lack of differentiation to address students' varied autism needs made it difficult for some students to participate purposefully. This highlights the need for very specific target-setting to be undertaken in the individualised planning process and for these targets to be used consistently by teachers to guide their choice of learning activities and teaching approaches to support students with ASD, either in the special classes or while students are integrated into mainstream lessons.



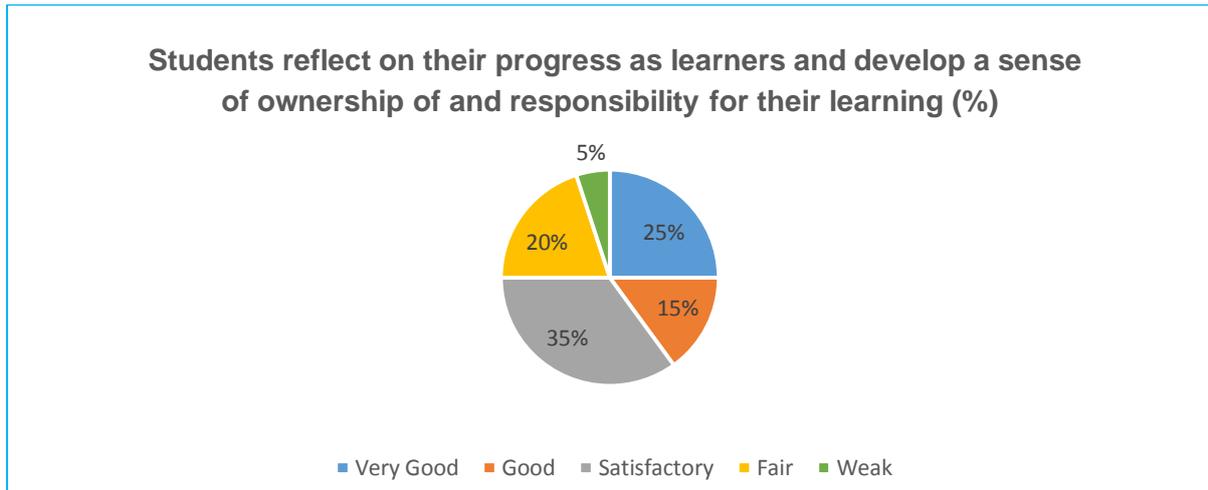
**Figure 50**

Students' growth as learners through respectful interactions and experiences that are challenging and supportive was satisfactory or better in almost all settings, although this aspect was only deemed satisfactory in just over half of the classes (Figure 51). Features of good practice identified included good student/teacher relationships, positive interactions and communication, respect for students and recognition and support for individual needs. Where practice was less effective, inspectors commented on individual needs not being planned for, lack of ASD-specific teaching methodologies, insufficient development of students' social skills and learning experiences not being sufficiently challenging. To grow as a learner, a student must not only experience a positive learning environment, but the level of challenge must be pitched accurately to build on previous knowledge in order to extend the student's learning realistically within the zone of proximal development. As many students with ASD can have varied needs and strengths across many areas of their learning, accurate classroom assessment and individualised target-setting are essential to ensure the optimal level of challenge for each student.



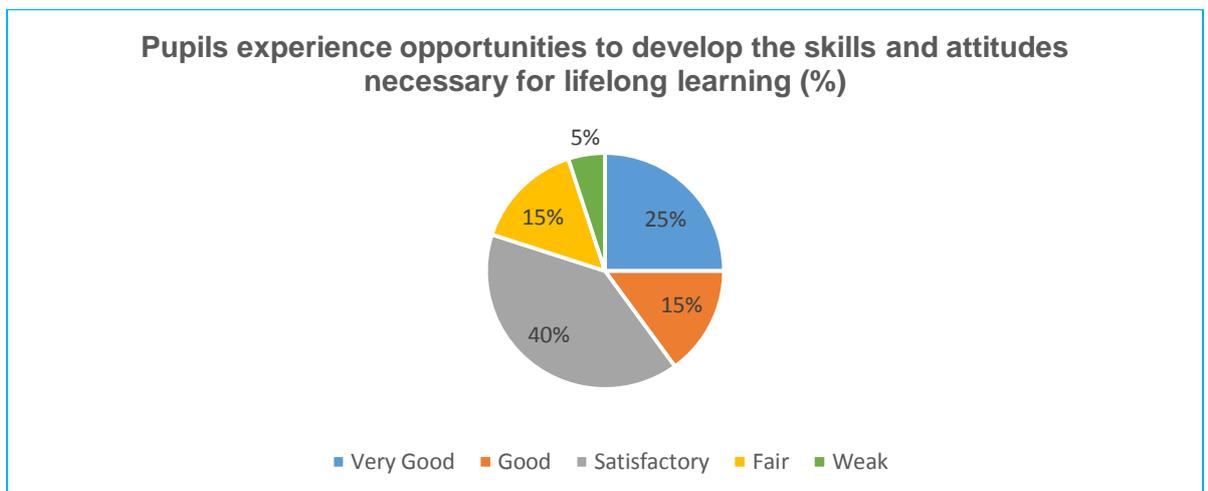
**Figure 51**

Students' reflection on their progress as learners and their development of a sense of ownership of and responsibility for their learning were rated as satisfactory or good in most settings (Figure 52). Where provision was most effective students were given appropriate opportunities to reflect on their work and their emotions through conversations and interactions with staff. In the settings where provision was weaker, few opportunities were provided for students to reflect on their achievements, or the opportunities to reflect did not take sufficient account of the student's complexity of need. Given the variation between students' needs, the individual planning process should guide teachers' approaches to developing students' capacities to reflect on their learning while fostering a sense of responsibility and ownership for that learning.



**Figure 52**

Students' experience of opportunities to develop the skills and attitudes necessary for lifelong learning were satisfactory or better in the majority of settings (Figure 53). Where these opportunities were beneficial they were usually identified through good lesson planning and often focused on emotional development, conversation skills, turn-taking, food preparation, laying the table, eating together and other common life skills. Where provision was weaker, the development of these skills was not planned for or was provided in a very limited way. In one case, the small size of the room and the limited range of teaching methods and resources were cited as barriers to this type of learning.



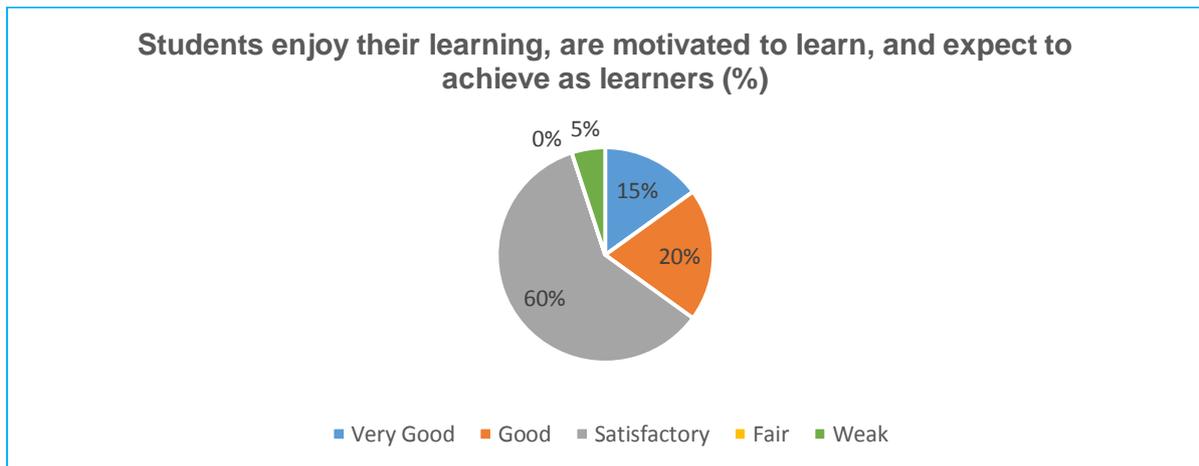
**Figure 53**

#### 4.15 Learner Outcomes

Students' enjoyment of their learning, their motivation to learn, and their expectation to achieve as learners was rated as satisfactory or better in almost all of the lessons observed (Figure 54). During the more effective lessons inspectors observed students being engaged and enjoying most tasks and noted that students were confident in completing their tasks. Very good practice was identified in some reports. For example, one report stated that:

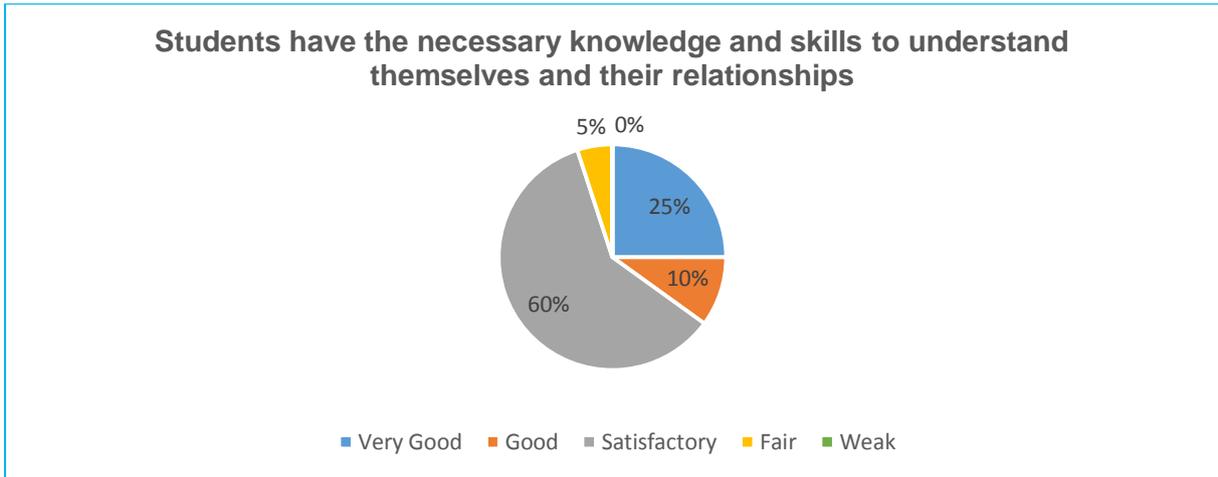
Learning outcomes for students identified with ASD who access the supports provided in the special class setting were very good. Students, through their interactions with each other, with their teachers and with SNAs, demonstrated progression in their communication and social skills and all were benefiting from integration with the mainstream classes. These students were achieving, and sometimes surpassing, their intended learning. They clearly enjoyed the carefully planned learning activities and demonstrated achievement with pride.

Where practice was less effective, inspectors cited a small number of cases where students were unable to self-regulate or became upset during the lessons. In one setting, the learning tasks indicated exceedingly low expectations for learners and some students were mainly supported by the SNA rather than by the special class teacher.



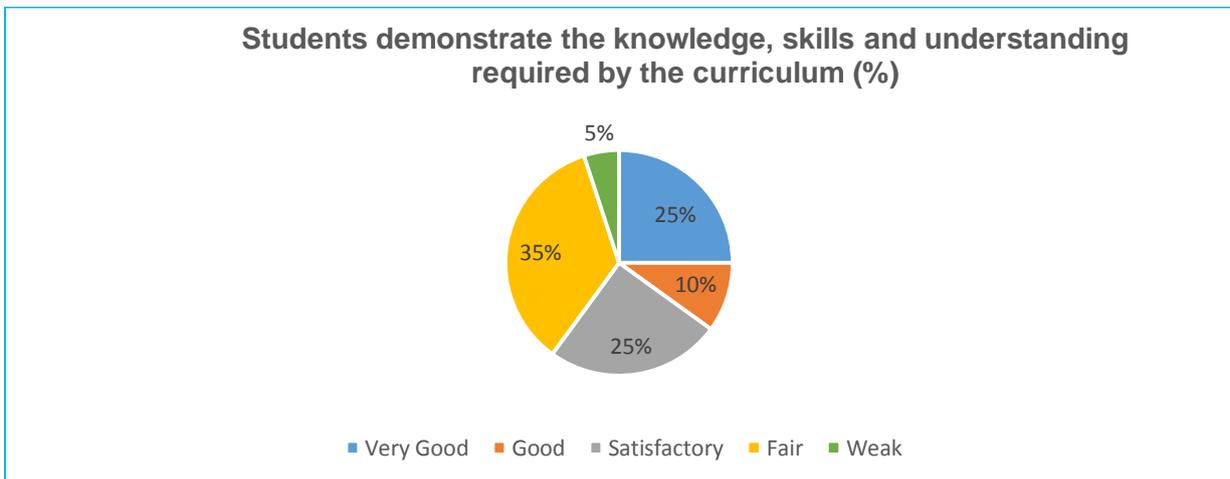
**Figure 54**

Students' demonstration of the necessary knowledge and skills to understand themselves and their relationships was rated as satisfactory or better in almost all settings (Figure 55). However, the majority of the ratings fell within the satisfactory category indicating that improvement is needed in some areas. Where this aspect was very effective, students demonstrated a developing understanding of themselves and their community, they could recognise and assess their own learning and they engaged well in opportunities to apply their social and communication skills. In settings where practice was poorer, these key skills were not taught effectively to meet the significant levels of need in some of the classes.



**Figure 55**

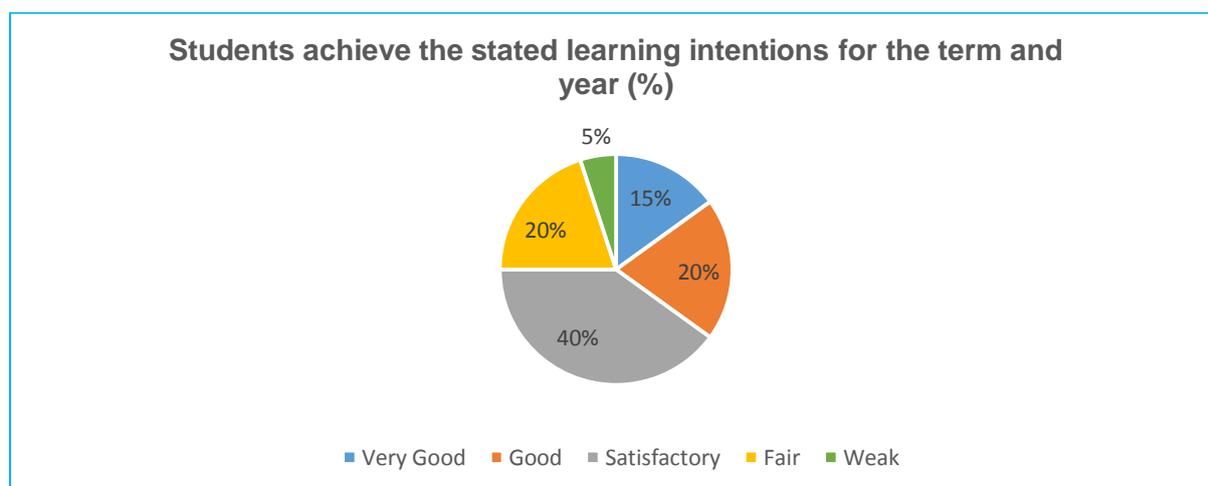
Students’ demonstration of the knowledge, skills and understanding required by the curriculum was rated as satisfactory or better in over half of the settings, although it was rated as fair or poor in a significant minority of classes (Figure 56). These judgements take into account the fact that some students have hugely different needs from their peers and require differentiated access to the curriculum. It was noted that in some cases, the students with ASD were the most academically able in the school despite being assigned to the special class. Where students’ subject knowledge, skills and understanding were good, this was achieved through well-supported meaningful tasks and opportunities for students to reflect on their learning. Where practice was less effective, inspectors identified a lack of ASD-specific interventions, a lack of diagnostic assessment, low teacher expectations and disjointed approaches to ensuring incremental learning as barriers to students’ progress. Schools, especially schools with special classes, should examine their provision in relation to these aspects of practice to ensure that all students are given appropriate access to the curriculum and that their learning is incremental and suitably challenging and rewarding.



**Figure 56**

Students’ achievement of the stated learning intentions for the term and year was satisfactory or better in most settings although it was lower in a quarter of classes (Figure 57). In the settings with the best practice, parents commented on the very positive learning, development and progress made by their children through the ASD interventions and supports. Inspectors also noted that students were developing independence with support as necessary, with opportunities provided to develop social and communication skills, particularly at Junior Cycle. In cases where poorer practice was evident, it was noted that intentions were often

inadequately based on learners' needs and strengths and, in some cases, tasks were not meaningful enough or students were over-supported in their learning.



**Figure 57**

#### 4.16 Summary of Key Findings for Post-Primary Special Classes

The following key findings summarise analysis of the inspection evidence for the post-primary special classes for students with ASD:

- The enrolment policy for the post-primary special classes was deemed to be clear and appropriate in half of the settings. Some schools explicitly prioritised enrolment for students with higher cognitive functioning or those who could easily integrate into mainstream classes thereby potentially denying places for students with more complex needs.
- In approximately two-thirds of the post-primary special classes inspected, inspectors found that at least some students with ASD were inappropriately placed in mainstream classes or in special classes for autism. In some cases, students' needs were not being met through mainstream integration and they were not allowed to access the supports they needed in a special class setting, while there were other students who should have been fully enrolled in mainstream classes because their needs did not merit a special class support.
- Parents were meaningfully consulted during the individualised planning process for their children in less than half of the post-primary special classes; some parents would have liked greater involvement in this planning and better communication with the school regarding the design of programmes and learning experiences for their children.
- Suitable autism-specific assessments were used in less than one-third of the post-primary special classes to identify needs and track progress; there is a need for upskilling in this area in many schools.
- Fewer than half of the teachers in the post-primary special classes used a range of autism-specific teaching approaches; there is significant scope to upskill teachers in these methodologies through CPD.
- During the lessons observed, most students enjoyed their learning, were motivated to learn, and expected to achieve as learners; however, some students required more support with self-regulation and, in some instances, teachers' expectations of their students needed to be higher.

- The majority of post-primary students were able to demonstrate the knowledge, skills and understanding required by the curriculum but almost half of students were not attaining this outcome sufficiently due to the lack of ASD-specific teaching interventions.
- In the post-primary special classes, records examined in over half of the settings indicated that students' learning was progressing appropriately from term to term. There is scope to improve record keeping to ensure that students' progress is assessed, monitored and recorded accurately and recorded in their Student Support File to assist with future target-setting.

## Chapter 5 Conclusion

The Inspectorate's visits to the eighty-five special classes for learners with ASD identified a range of practices. Many aspects of good and very good practice have been identified and affirmed in this report. In highlighting this positive practice, the Inspectorate hopes that those responsible for special classes for learners with ASD across the school sectors can evaluate their own provision against the practices 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.

### 5.1 Enrolment

Enrolment policies in half of the post-primary and the majority of the primary special classes contained clauses which restricted entry to the special class. These clauses typically referred to the class only enrolling learners with mild learning difficulties or those with the ability to be integrated into mainstream lessons for most of the school day. The rationale for such clauses is difficult to establish, but it seems to be based on the types of external supports available to some of the earliest special classes served by Beechpark ASD Services. Such clauses mean that learners with more pronounced learning needs encounter difficulties enrolling in the special classes within these schools and some of them are directed towards home-tuition or special schools. The legality of using clauses such as these to deny entry to special classes is questionable and leaves schools open to the possibility of legal challenge for discrimination on the grounds of disability. The Department of Education and Skills and the NCSE should source and publish legal advice on this aspect.

Where primary schools apply these types of conditions, it is possible that pupils with less challenging needs are initially enrolled into the special classes rather than in the mainstream classes. If this is the case, these pupils will continue to access special class places and perhaps a restricted curriculum right through their educational journeys in primary and post-primary schools. In such cases, the initial placement may not only be unsuitable for these pupils, but may also deny places for other prospective pupils whose learning needs due to autism would require this higher level of specialist support.

Where such restrictions are operated in post-primary special classes, there is the potential for places in the special classes to be taken by students who have less challenging needs while other students with greater needs are not facilitated to enrol. In two-thirds of the post-primary settings visited, inspectors reported that at least one or more of the students from these special classes were not enrolled in the correct setting for their needs. This was particularly evident where the students with complex needs from the special classes were integrated into the mainstream classes without adequate supports, or where students did not appear to have learning needs at a level warranting a special class placement. In the context of increasing demands for special class placements, and in the interest of providing places for students whose needs require such placements most, the Department of Education and Skills and the NCSE should examine the fairness and possible implications of schools attaching their own conditions to enrolment into their special classes. The NCSE and schools should also provide clarity to the public on the designation of each special class so that unnecessary barriers to enrolment are not imposed.

### 5.2 Student Support Files and Assessment

Under the Continuum of Support approach, mainstream schools are encouraged to use the Student Support File to design individualised learning plans based on assessment evidence, reviews of previous progress and consultation with teachers, parents and where possible, the learners themselves.

The concept of and systems for individualised planning are embedded in the primary special classes and there is good consultation with parents at the planning and review stages. While teachers use a range of assessment data to establish priority learning needs, in some cases this does not sufficiently include ASD-specific assessment approaches or reference to attainment linked to GLD guidelines. Despite the availability of CPD and NCSE funding, and promotion of some of these types of specialist assessment kits, some schools and special class teachers appeared to be unaware of their usefulness for establishing precise learning needs. There is also a need for special class teachers to outline pupils' learning targets in their individual plans in very specific and measurable terms to enable more accurate monitoring of progress. Almost one-third of the individualised plans at primary level did not identify targets accurately and a quarter of the progress records did not demonstrate good progression in pupils' learning.

Individualised planning to identify, target and address students' needs was also evident in the majority of post-primary special classes. Suitable ASD-specific assessments were used to identify needs and to track progress in less than one-third of the special classes. In some cases, the lack of such assessment reflected teachers' need for additional CPD in this area. In other classes, students did not require such specialised assessment because their learning needs were not sufficiently complex. There is a need for schools to consult parents (and where possible, the students also) more meaningfully in the individualised planning process in over half of the post-primary special classes. In some cases where individualised planning was not furnished to inspectors, teachers cited a directive from their trade union as preventing them from preparing individualised educational plans. In a significant minority of settings, planning was deficient, with no individualised plans in some cases and confusion about targets and assessment among teachers supporting the same students. In these cases it is difficult for teachers to monitor and record students' progress accurately. Given the importance of individualised planning in guiding students' learning programmes, the Department of Education and Skills should ensure that individualised educational planning becomes a fundamental condition for the continued funding and operation of special classes.

### 5.3 Adequacy of Teaching Approaches

Learners in the special classes can present with a range of learning needs together with other challenges including anxiety, self-regulation, organisation communication, structure and social skills. Given the possible complexity of these needs for some learners, it is essential that the teachers supporting them are equipped with the skills and professional development to match their teaching approaches to address these challenges.

Teaching was generally effective in most primary special classes, although there was scope for more use of ASD-specific methodologies in some settings, particularly to assist pupils with structure, visual learning styles, social skills development and communication needs. Some teachers required additional CPD in these methodologies and, in some cases, there was scope for better sharing of specialist knowledge among teachers, particularly in schools where the teachers with higher qualifications and expertise in SEN were not currently assigned responsibility for the special classes. In some of these cases, the teacher with the expertise had taught the special class for a number of years and was reverting to mainstream teaching duties through personal or professional choice. A small number of teachers reported finding long-term assignment to the special classes stressful and they wished to develop mainstream teaching skills further before reverting to the special classes. Issues such as these should be explored by school leadership to ensure better whole-school approaches to supporting pupils from the special classes in their quest for full inclusion into mainstream education.

While most post-primary teachers demonstrated the requisite subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills, teachers in a quarter of the post-primary special classes required more CPD to improve their practice, most notably in relation to the use of ASD-specific teaching approaches. Most teachers used teaching approaches to match their

learning intentions and students' needs and some ASD-specific methodologies were evident. In a significant minority of settings, teaching approaches were evaluated as being fair or weak and were characterised by insufficient differentiation or support for students' particular needs. In some cases this caused students to be upset or disengaged. In some of these schools, teachers with high levels of expertise or CPD related to ASD were allocated to other teaching duties within the school while teachers with less expertise taught the special classes. School leaders should carry out CPD audits to ensure that they can allocate teachers with adequate expertise to special class teaching roles.

## 5.4 Implications for Teacher Education

In order to support learners with complex learning needs effectively, teachers require a wide range of skills in assessment and teaching approaches. The findings of this report indicate that where teachers had engaged in relevant CPD they were more likely to use these skills competently to plan programmes of work and to match their teaching approaches to learners' preferred styles of communication. However, it is concerning that many teachers working in special classes have not availed of such CPD. In some cases, inspectors related this absence of CPD to observed poor classroom practice. It is also worrying that in a small number of schools there were teachers without additional qualifications, and some who had not previously availed of CPD in SEN allocated to teach in the special classes, while other teachers in the same schools with SEN qualifications were teaching mainstream classes. There should be a greater onus on school leaders to deploy the most appropriately qualified staff to support learners in the special classes.

As special classes are attached to mainstream schools and given that at least some of the learners from these classes will be integrated into mainstream classes for at least some lessons, it is possible to identify CPD needs at a number of levels. All newly-qualified teachers should enter the profession with a good understanding of the principles of inclusion and knowledge of the range of teaching methodologies required for the inclusive classroom. Institutions providing initial teacher education courses should review their programmes to ensure that they address this need. School leaders in all schools with special classes should be provided with CPD by the appropriate support services on inclusive practice, ethical leadership, individualised planning and placement reviews. Whole-staff CPD should also be provided to schools with special classes to ensure consistency of teaching approaches to support learners in both mainstream and special class lessons. Opportunities for teachers of special classes to achieve postgraduate qualifications in SEN should be further highlighted and encouraged.

## 5.5 Purpose of the Special Classes

To fully understand the context and to evaluate the effectiveness of the special classes, it is necessary to revisit the intended purpose for which these classes have been established. In its advice to schools setting up special classes, the NCSE states that:

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, within their local mainstream schools. 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.

A key implication of this advice is that these classes are intended for learners with more complex needs. This intention is not well served when a school, through the operation of a restrictive enrolment policy, prioritises places in its special classes for learners with less complex needs. If a special class placement is seen as part of a continuum with a view to supporting increased inclusion of its learners into mainstream classes, then eventual full enrolment into mainstream classes should be the goal for at least some learners. Currently, very few learners from special classes make the transition to full mainstream enrolment. For this to happen, regular reviews of placement should be undertaken. The NCSE in its advice to schools establishing special classes advocates that “a student’s enrolment in a special class should be kept under continual review by the school and, at a minimum, a review should take place once a year and include a careful examination of the student’s progress in achieving his/her learning targets”. The review should consider “students’ views and those of parents, teachers and other relevant professionals. Such reviews should consider whether the student’s needs might be best addressed in a mainstream setting or whether a more supported setting is required.”

All learners who receive a place in a special class have a professional report recommending such a placement. However, such an initial recommendation cannot always accurately predict a learner’s needs over the longer term. It may be that as a result of the specialised supports provided in the special class over a number of years, the learner’s best interests lie with full mainstream placement. The full involvement of learners, parents and external professionals in this decision-making is essential so that progress to full inclusion is seen as a success and not as a withdrawal of hard-earned supports.

The challenges to schools and parents in deciding to move a learner from a special class placement towards full enrolment in a mainstream class should not be under-estimated. Schools may be reluctant to recommend full mainstream enrolment because they do not feel sufficiently empowered to contradict a professional recommendation, even if this recommendation had been made several years earlier and the learner has made substantial progress in the meantime. Parents may also be reluctant to take this step because they may have encountered substantial difficulty in securing the special class placement in the first place and they may be anxious about removal of the security of this placement for their child’s future needs.

As inclusion is a key element in the rationale for the establishment of special classes within mainstream schools, national data should be collated and analysed to determine if there has been any significant success in fully mainstreaming learners. The data should be further analysed to examine if there are any structural or resource issues which might deter schools from fully transferring learners from their special classes to the mainstream classes. For example, by fully enrolling a learner from the special class into a mainstream class, a school currently will not receive an uplift to its special education teacher allocation, but will have to redeploy some of its existing resources to support this learner’s transition. If mainstreaming is the ultimate aim, then this should be fully explained to schools, parents and learners as an attractive option, and any unintended or perceived losses of resources to schools as they support learners through this final step should be eliminated.

## 5.6 Future Provision

The inspection visits concentrated on evaluating the function of the special classes within their current and intended purpose. The findings and recommendations of this report address this immediate context. However, it is also noteworthy that some possible context changes for special education provision are being currently considered by policy makers. While these policy issues are beyond the immediate scope of the Inspectorate’s role, there is the possibility that the recommendations contained in this report may have implications for any future policy direction. Thus, in the context of Ireland’s ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and the possible implications of Section 24 (Part 2) in

particular, it would be worthwhile for policy makers to examine if the current configuration of special classes is the most effective model to fully include pupils in school life. Specifically, if full inclusion or ultimate enrolment into mainstream classes is to be viewed as the index of success, the current system of special classes appears to be having limited success for most learners who enrol in a special class. With increasing demands being made for the opening of new special classes, and the apparent reluctance of some school authorities to open special classes, there is a danger that segregated educational provision could expand unintentionally. Policy makers and education partners will need to reflect on the effectiveness and inclusiveness of current provision and examine possible alternative models such as the one above as they plan for Ireland's future response to the conditions attached to CRPD.

## 5.7 Main Recommendations

Analysis of the findings of the Inspectorate's evaluations in sixty-five primary special classes (out of a national total of 746) and twenty post-primary special classes (out of a national total of 321) special classes for learners with ASD in mainstream schools has 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 and Skills. The recommendations are made in the current context within a continuum of placements being provided for learners with special educational needs, namely mainstream schools, special classes attached to mainstream schools and special schools.

- The NCSE should provide schools sanctioned to operate special classes for autism with more specific direction about the designation of the class, particularly in relation to any permissible stipulations about enrolment of pupils with particular levels of cognitive functioning. This designation should also be published for parents and in the public.
- Schools' enrolment policies for their special classes should not prioritise places in the special class for higher functioning learners who can be more easily included in mainstream classes with appropriate support.
- To foster inclusion, all learners' placements in special classes should be reviewed collaboratively and formally with school personnel, external professionals, parents and the SENO annually to determine if full enrolment in a mainstream class is now more appropriate.
- Leaders in all schools with special classes should prioritise the deployment of the most skilled, experienced teachers with the appropriate levels of CPD to the special classes. Newly-qualified or substitute teachers should not be deployed to the special classes without effective professional supports.
- Leaders at post-primary level should examine the effectiveness of the supports being provided for students enrolled in the special classes, especially where students are being integrated without supports from the SEN team or the special class teachers.
- Management and leaders in post-primary schools should ensure that the grant-aided rooms and resources provided for the special classes remain available for these students' use for as long as the special class has official recognition.
- Leaders at primary level should examine the possibilities and make plans for extending periods of mainstream integration for pupils from the special classes with the ultimate aim of achieving full mainstream enrolment.
- In all schools with special classes, a whole-school approach to accessing ASD-specific CPD should be agreed and an audit of skills in this area should be completed.

Mechanisms to facilitate collaborative sharing of ASD expertise among staff should be strengthened.

- All instances of shortened school days or reduced timetables should require written parental consent and be reported immediately to TUSLA. If agreed in consultation with parents and external professionals, shortened days should always include an action plan outlining how to fully include the learner in school life as soon as possible.
- School leaders in post-primary schools should examine their timetabling of supports for students in the special classes to ensure that these students are able to access their entitlement of twenty-eight hours of tuition per week and that they have access to a good range of subjects.
- At primary and post-primary levels, special class teachers and mainstream teachers supporting learners with ASD should use a range of suitable ASD-specific teaching methodologies to support learning and self-regulation.
- Special class teachers should access CPD on ASD-specific assessments and use these to establish baselines for the individualised planning process and to establish priority learning needs especially for learners with communication or behavioural difficulties.
- Institutions providing initial teacher education courses should examine the extent to which their graduates are equipped with the expertise required to meet the particular needs of learners with ASD.
- All schools should ensure that they have systems in place to monitor, assess and record achievement of learners' targets, and that the programme of work is pitched at the correct level of challenge.
- The Department of Education and Skills' support services should provide specific guidance for staffs in schools with special classes on SMART target-setting suitable for individualised planning.
- An individualised plan (or equivalent School Support Plan) should be devised and reviewed at least twice annually for each learner enrolled in a special class to ensure that there is continuity and clarity in learning programmes.
- All schools, including post-primary schools, should ensure that parents (and students, where possible) are consulted meaningfully about the individualised planning process and that parents of learners in special classes are provided with a copy of the current document.

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**SEN Evaluations 2019 - ASD Special Class Data Return Sheet**

Primary/Post-Primary (*Delete, as appropriate*)

**Special Class Identifier:** \_\_\_\_\_

1. 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). You may also elaborate in narrative, but only if you need to clarify further.

<b>Standards</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Clarification, (if needed)</b>
<b>Learner Outcomes</b>		
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		
<b>Learner experiences</b>		
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		
<b>Teacher's Individual Practice</b>		
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		
<b>Leadership and Management</b>		
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		

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

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Clarification, (if needed)</b>
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		

3. Please comment briefly on the following aspects of provision

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Yes/No</b>	<b>Comment</b>
A range of autism-specific teaching approaches is used effectively in the class		
The individualised planning process identifies learning targets accurately		
Suitable autism-specific assessments are used to identify needs and track progress		

Records show that pupils' learning is progressing appropriately		
Behaviours are managed effectively in this setting		
Transitions within the school day are signalled appropriately in advance		
Transitions into the school/class and onwards to other settings are prepared effectively		
Some pupils from this class are integrated meaningfully in mainstream classes at some point during the school day/week		
There is evidence that integration/reverse integration is carefully planned		
SNA support is managed appropriately		
The enrolment policy for the special class is clear and appropriate.		
Has the school refused enrolment to the special class or permanently excluded pupils – or been challenged by Section 29 appeal?		
The pupils currently enrolled in the special class are in the correct setting for their needs		
Advance provision is made for transition of pupils to the next educational setting (internal or external)		
There is evidence that the pupils from this class have been successfully included in mainstream classes in recent years.		
Parents are meaningfully consulted in the individualised planning process.		

4. Key feedback provided for this special class:

Strengths	Recommendations:
•	•

Level	Description	Example of descriptive terms
<b>Very Good</b>	<b>Very good</b> 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 <b>outstanding</b> and provides an example for other schools of exceptionally high standards of provision.	<b>Very good;</b> 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
<b>Good</b>	<b>Good</b> 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.	<b>Good;</b> good quality; valuable; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; some areas for improvement
<b>Satisfactory</b>	<b>Satisfactory</b> 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.	<b>Satisfactory;</b> adequate; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist; acceptable level of quality; improvement needed in some areas
<b>Fair</b>	<b>Fair</b> 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.	<b>Fair,</b> evident weaknesses that are impacting on pupils' learning; less than satisfactory; experiencing difficulty; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve
<b>Weak</b>	<b>Weak</b> 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.	<b>Weak;</b> unsatisfactory; insufficient; ineffective; poor; requiring significant change, development or improvement; experiencing significant difficulties;

This report provides a picture of the quality of the educational provision for a sample learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) enrolled in special classes attached to mainstream primary and post-primary schools in Ireland.

The report draws its key findings from a series of inspection visits to schools with special classes in early 2019 carried out using the Inspectorate's Special Educational Needs (SEN) evaluation model.

The evidence from the inspection visits is presented and analysed to highlight areas of practice where supports for students in the special classes are deployed effectively. The report also identifies some areas where school practice can be improved.

Overall, the report's findings and recommendations will be of interest to teachers, schools, parents and policy makers as focus for the sharing of good practice and as an impetus for improving outcomes for learners with ASD.