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Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
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Post-school Transitions for Students with Intellectual Disabilities in the Republic of Ireland

Trinity Centre for People with
Intellectual Disabilities
and the School of Education



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Abbreviations

AEN	Additional Educational Needs
AHEAD	Association for Higher Education Access and Disability
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
ASDAN	Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network
CAO	Central Applications Office
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DARE	Disability and Access Route to Education
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ETB	Education and Training Board
EPSEN	Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs
FET	Further Education and Training
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HRB	Health Research Board
HSE	Health Service Executive
IEP	Individualised Education Plan
L1L2LP	Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes
LC	Leaving Certificate
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
NABMSE	National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education
NASS	National Ability Supports System
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCGE	National Centre for Guidance in Education
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NIDD	National Intellectual Disability Database
NLN	National Learning Network
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
PRF	Programme Recognition Framework
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
TCPID	Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
WHO	World Health Organization

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Definition: intellectual disability

World Health Organization (WHO)

Intellectual disability means a significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information and to learn and apply new skills (impaired intelligence). This results in a reduced ability to cope independently (impaired social functioning), and begins before adulthood, with a lasting effect on development.

Disability depends not only on a child’s health conditions or impairments but also and crucially on the extent to which environmental factors support the child’s full participation and inclusion in society.

The use of the term intellectual disability in the context of the WHO initiative “Better health, better lives” includes children with autism who have intellectual impairments. It also encompasses children who have been placed in institutions because of perceived disabilities or family rejection and who consequently acquire developmental delays and psychological problems.



Foreword



Jennifer McKenzie
Director
National Centre for Guidance
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This Research Report, presented by the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities and the School of Education, provides an insightful reflection on Post-School Transitions for Students with Intellectual Disabilities in the Republic of Ireland .

The Report highlights that post primary schools provide targeted individual supports for the students with Intellectual Disabilities to reach their own potential. However, future education, training and careers options are limited for these students based on a lack of suitable progression options outside of the traditional health service based adult day centres or vocational training centres. This Report provides a timely reminder that students with Intellectual Disabilities have been supported through “mainstream” education but are not yet supported nationally with targeted progression into further education or training that builds on their own achievements.

Students with Special Educational Needs and in particular those with Intellectual Disabilities require a spectrum of additional supports to complete post primary school and consider their own future education, career and life options. The Report recommendations provide an opportunity for school management to consider their lead role and obligations under both the Education Act (1998) and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004), where the benefits of a whole school inclusive ethos include co-operation and co-ordination between whole school guidance and special education needs supports.



As Director of NCGE I wish to commend Professor Michael Shevlin, Mr Des Aston and Dr Joanne Banks on their completion of this timely research . The one key message threaded throughout this report is the genuine concern of school management, personnel and parents to support young people with Intellectual Disabilities to make suitable transitions which will allow them achieve their potential. Realistically however, the report indicates a recognition and acknowledgment by relevant personnel that school policies and further professional development are required to ensure that school management, guidance counsellors and special education needs co-ordinators have the appropriate knowledge and competences required to work collaboratively to provide transition and progression planning and supports and for students with Intellectual Disabilities.

These developments at school level will require a dedicated focus in the Further Education and Training and Higher Education Sectors to provide appropriate progression options for students with Intellectual Disabilities.

It is incumbent on those of us in the provision of education, training and guidance supports to carefully reflect on the recommendations of this report and consider their implications for future policy and the provision of more suitable progression options for these young people, so that they too , just like their school friends, can aspire to achieve their own life goals.

Is mise le meas,

Jennifer McKenzie

Executive Summary

People with intellectual disabilities are significantly underrepresented within the workforce and within further and higher education in Ireland. Research has consistently highlighted the importance of formal career guidance and transition planning for students, as they prepare to leave post-primary education and enter further or higher education, training, employment, and adult life (McCoy et al., 2014; Smyth et al., 2011). However, for students with intellectual disabilities, little is known about the type of career guidance they receive and the extent to which they make successful transitions from school. The aim of this research study is to examine transitions from school for students with intellectual disabilities in Ireland. The report investigates the extent to which current guidance provision in schools prepares these students for education, training, employment, and adult life more generally. It is written in the context of Ireland's policy commitment to inclusive education, as outlined in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) and, more recently, Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention for People with Disabilities (2018). The research findings are based on a national survey of Irish post-primary school principals and qualitative interviews with school personnel responsible for the transition planning and guidance provision for students with disabilities in their school.

Key Findings

Limited Career Guidance for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

The findings show that guidance and transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities is limited when compared to more general guidance provision in schools. There is a lack of appropriate guidance provision for these students in mainstream schools and an ambiguity among school staff as to who is responsible for their transition planning. In many instances, guidance for students with intellectual disabilities appears to fall between the two roles of the school Guidance Counsellor and the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO).

Barriers and Enablers to Successful Transition

Barriers to successful transitions from school include a fear of a loss of supports in further or higher education institutes and a fear of a lack of suitable places for students with intellectual disabilities. The interviews highlight a mismatch in expectations between schools and parents around the availability of places or the most appropriate placement. Other barriers include a lack of access to relevant information and awareness of post-school options among teachers, SENCOs and school Guidance Counsellors. The research also highlights factors that can enable successful transitions from school, which include greater formal linkages between schools and further and higher education providers, and increased supports from these education providers for students who make a successful transition.

The Importance of an Inclusive Ethos

The research suggests that attitudes of school principals towards inclusive education impact the extent to which appropriate guidance and transition planning is taking place. Schools that adopt a whole-school approach to inclusion are found to have greater levels of cooperation and coordination among staff around guidance and transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities. However, schools that do not have an inclusive ethos are found to relegate the role of Guidance Counsellor for this group of students to the school SENCO.

The Impact of the Covid-19 School Closures

The findings of this report highlight the extent to which the Covid-19 school closures impacted the lives of students with disabilities. Concerns were raised by school personnel about the outcomes for vulnerable students and students with disabilities learning at home. In particular, the respondents in this report highlight the impact of remote learning and the lack of face-to-face contact on students' mental health and wellbeing. School closures also appear to have had an impact on guidance and transition planning, with much of the emphasis being placed on students whose post-school pathways depended on the Leaving Certificate (LC) results. The findings suggest that students with intellectual

disabilities, whose post-school placements were often already decided, were overlooked during this period.

Policy Implications

Implement a Whole-school Approach to Guidance Provision

The findings suggest the need for a whole-school approach to guidance provision, which will involve greater coordination between Guidance Counsellors and SENCOs.

Implementing policies such as the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE's) *A Whole School Guidance Framework* (2017) would aid the planning, design and delivery of guidance for all students, in line with the requirements of the Education Act (1998).

Expand Post-school Options from Traditional Health-based Settings to Further and Higher Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

The report highlights how students with intellectual disabilities rarely make the transition to further or higher education when they leave school. It suggests that, instead of encouraging these students to make transitions to health-based settings such as adult day services, policy needs to ensure that these students participate more fully in further and higher education. To do this, further and higher education providers need to implement policies, many of which already exist, that aim to address participation, completion, and progression for these students.

Broaden the Scope of Guidance beyond Preparing Students for the Leaving Certificate and College Entry

The report highlights concerns, during the Covid-19 school closures, around student outcomes, following the cancellation of the Leaving Certificate (LC) exam. Given the high stakes associated with the LC exam in Ireland, students who were taking an alternative pathway to the Central Applications Office (CAO) entry to university were overlooked. Although efforts were made to keep students with intellectual disabilities actively engaged in online teaching and learning, there was little focus on their post-school

transition preparation, with a general acceptance that students with intellectual disabilities would simply transition to a local disability support provider.

Ensure continuity of provision at Senior Cycle

The report shows the importance of L1L2 programmes at Junior Cycle for students with intellectual disabilities but highlights the need for continuity of programme provision as students progress into Senior Cycle. Given the ongoing Senior Cycle review, it is imperative that students with intellectual disabilities can access suitable programmes and gain appropriate qualifications. For example, a Level 4 qualification while in school would provide a clear pathway to Level 5 and 6 qualifications when students leave school.

Improve Access and Retention in Further and Higher Education

The findings of this report highlight concerns expressed by teachers and parents of students with disabilities around a loss of supports if these students were to move to a new educational setting. The report calls for funding and policy to guide further and higher education providers as they adapt and change in response to the existence of greater student diversity in recent years. Formal linkages between schools and colleges, for example, could improve awareness and knowledge among teachers, Guidance Counsellors, students, and their families. In order to improve inclusive teaching, learning and assessment, as well as student enrolment and induction, the report calls for national and individual education provider policies to ensure student retention and progression.

1 Introduction

Critical transition points throughout the life course can prove stressful for young people with or without disabilities. In the Republic of Ireland, a person's transition to adult life typically begins as early as 16 years of age, when their level of responsibility for their own actions and their civic engagement increases. The majority of young Irish people at the end of their post-primary education start to consider their post-school options, which often depend primarily on the results of the high-stakes LC examination (DES, 2017). This exam is a determinant of entry into third-level education and of people's future life chances more generally (Smyth et al., 2011; McNamara et al., 2020). Research has shown, however, that high stakes tests such as the LC have consequences for social differentiation with results often varying by students' socio-economic status and other minority group differentiation (Smyth and Banks, 2012; Rose and Harrison, 2010). Research shows that the outcomes for students with disabilities are worse than those of their non-disabled peers when they leave school. They are more likely to be unemployed and dependent on social welfare; and they have an increased risk of living in poverty (Watson et al., 2017). People with intellectual disabilities are significantly underrepresented in the workforce, with just 6 per cent in paid employment in the Republic of Ireland (Watson et al., 2015). However, over the past two decades, there has been a dramatic shift in education policy, which has led to a significant increase in students with disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, attending mainstream primary and post-primary education in the Republic of Ireland. Despite this change in the student population, little is known about the extent to which students with intellectual disabilities make a successful transition to training, further and higher education and/or employment (with the exception of studies by McGuckin et al., 2013 and Scanlon and Doyle, 2018). Moreover, there is a lack of understanding of the type of transition planning or guidance counselling that is required to ensure successful transitions for these students.

This report provides a unique insight into transitions for students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. It investigates the types of transition planning and supports available to these students within the context of Ireland's commitment to inclusive education (Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, 2004; United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), 2007). It explores the barriers to successful transition for students with intellectual disabilities and identifies the ways in which schools can address these barriers. Using a mixed methods approach, the study is based on data from a national survey of Irish post-primary school principals and qualitative interviews with school personnel responsible for the transition planning and guidance provision for students with disabilities in their school.

This chapter firstly provides the research and policy context for this study. It examines existing research on the post-school outcomes for students with disabilities and provides an overview of policy and legislation that have impacted students with disabilities in Ireland over the past two decades. This section also highlights existing mainstream school programmes aimed at students with disabilities at Junior and Senior Cycle. The final section examines transition planning and guidance provision in Irish mainstream schools, with a focus on provision for students with intellectual disabilities.

1.1 Transitions and Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

Transition is defined as the process of moving from the protected life of a child to the autonomous and independent life as an adult (Leonard et al., 2016). Critical transition periods, such as leaving post-primary education, can prove stressful for people with intellectual disabilities and their families. Despite the increasing number of students with intellectual disabilities attending mainstream post-primary education over the past two decades, little is known about the nature and quality of guidance or support that is offered to this cohort, in comparison to their non-disabled peers – or the extent to which students with intellectual disabilities are academically and socially prepared for life after school in the Irish context.

Students with intellectual disabilities often face limited post-school options, other than Department of Health- [Health Service Executive (HSE)]-funded disability support services, and many of this cohort struggle to make a successful transition from compulsory schooling to third-level education, that is, further or higher education. The transition from school to what is viewed as “adult life” can be impacted by many factors, such as socio-economic status, race and gender. However, intellectual disability consistently remains the most underrepresented minority group within the higher education sector (NIDD, 2017; NASS, 2019). Although there is currently no formal system for mapping where students with intellectual disabilities progress to after school, several studies have sought to identify their post-school pathways. In Ireland, WALK (2015) argues that students with intellectual disabilities “miss out” on acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge required to gain meaningful employment and progressive career opportunities, and are often deprived of the social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977 as cited in Bourdieu and Nice, 2013) that is associated with accessing a further and higher education certificate or degree. Other research shows that many school leavers with an intellectual disability face very limited choices when they complete compulsory schooling. Many of this cohort transition from school to adult day centres or localised vocational training centres, where they are often enrolled on courses in which they have little or no interest, but for which they meet the entry criteria (National Platform of Self Advocates, 2018). Some studies show that there have been efforts within the tertiary and voluntary sector to establish alternative access routes to education, training, and employment opportunities (Aston, 2019; Grigal and Hart, 2010, Shevlin et al., 2020). However, bridging the gap between post-primary school and these atypical education/employment initiatives has traditionally fallen to families and parents to carry the burden (Beresford, 2004; Hughes and Carter, 2004; Wehman, cited in Gibson, 2015). Students with intellectual disabilities, and their families, often struggle to gain the requisite information about the appropriateness of courses on offer in further and higher education, causing them a great deal of stress and anxiety (Griffin et al., 2010; Marriott, 2008). It is at this stage that young people are compelled to make important life decisions; and typically, education and career goals are

guided by school Guidance Counsellors. However, for those who have an intellectual disability, employment opportunities are not always considered, as individuals typically enter adult services based on eligibility and a clinical diagnosis (Foley et al., 2016). After more than a decade since Gillian and Coughlan (2010) conducted a review of the literature, there still appears to be little coordinated development of structured pathways to enable people with disabilities to progress towards post-school education or employment (Gillan and Coughlan, 2010; Murphy and Conroy, 2007; Scanlon et al., 2020). People with intellectual disabilities still struggle to find meaningful employment opportunities, with 6 per cent of the population in paid employment in the Republic of Ireland (Make Work Pay, 2017); they are at an increased risk of living in poverty (Watson et al., 2017); and have little expectation of progressing to higher education (NIDD, 2017; NASS, 2019).

1.2 Inclusive Education Policy in Ireland

Ireland's education system has undergone a dramatic change in the past two decades. Although a latecomer to inclusive education, relative to other European countries, the system, since the mid-2000s, has seen significant changes in policy for students with disabilities wishing to attend mainstream education. While the right to education is embedded in Article 42 of the Irish Constitution, it was not until the publication of the EPSEN Act (2004) and The Disability Act (2005) that major changes began to take place in mainstream education, allowing students with disabilities to attend their local school alongside their peers without disabilities. The EPSEN Act, for example, meant that the boards of management and school principals in Irish schools now have an obligation by law, to implement inclusive practices for students with special educational needs (SEN). However, the Act only caters for people with SEN aged 0-18, after which formal education is no longer recognised as a right within the State.

Other, earlier, legislation is also relevant to people with disabilities, such as the Equal Status Act (2000), which protects the rights of people with disabilities from discrimination. In doing so, the Equal Status Act requires education providers (and other providers of

goods and services) to accommodate the needs of people with disabilities by making reasonable accommodations, or by offering specific supports or facilities. Under the EPSEN Act (2004), and the ratification of the UNCRPD in 2018, Ireland now has a legal responsibility to ensure that people with disabilities are offered the same rights as their non-disabled peers to access education and lifelong learning at all levels (UN General Assembly, 2007).

The timing of this research report is significant. The authors note that, at the time of writing (i.e., 2021), the EPSEN Act is 17 years old. Children with intellectual disabilities who entered mainstream education system at the time of enactment are now reaching the age at which they will be transitioning out of the compulsory school system. Despite these changes to the profile of the mainstream school population, research suggests that there are insufficient pathways to tertiary education and/or employment opportunities for young people with intellectual disabilities (O'Brien, 2009; WALK, 2015; Scanlon and Doyle, 2018).

The on-going review of the Senior Cycle, and the report entitled *Interim Report of Review of Senior Cycle Education* (NCCA, 2019) are also significant. The findings of the review highlight a number of common concerns among educators, students, and parents/guardians, particularly around the role of the Senior Cycle in fostering a rote learning environment, in order to allow the content of the course and exam preparation to be covered, at the expense of social and emotional intelligence and transferable life skills (Smyth et al., 2019). There is evidence that the current system, which has a heavy academic focus, favours particular ways of learning and limits pathways to success for students with diverse learning styles and abilities (Smyth et al., 2019). Changes to the Senior Cycle and LC exam, particularly around the types of pedagogy and assessment methods used, will therefore significantly impact transition planning and progressions for all students who experience barriers to accessing the curriculum, including those with intellectual disabilities.

Recent changes to the Junior Cycle Curriculum have also impacted on provision for students with intellectual disabilities. A major aspect of these changes has been the gap in provision in the curriculum, modes of assessment, and certification at Junior Cycle for students with SENs highlighted by a stakeholder consultation. Despite students with disabilities having access to supports and teachers using sophisticated teaching approaches such as “differentiation”, there remains a cohort of students unable to access the mainstream Junior Cycle Curriculum. There is evidence at school level to illustrate how schools have been adapting non-recognised curricula (within the Irish education system), such as the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN), as a response to the lack of formally recognised alternatives (National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2019). The introduction of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* in 2015 aimed to make the curriculum more accessible to students with SENs and to provide recognition of their learning through certification of achievement (DES, 2015). The framework initially introduced the concept of Level 2 Learning Programmes (L2LPs), which were not present in the existing Junior Cycle Curriculum. At a later stage of the phased introduction of the framework, the need for Level 1 Learning Programmes (L1LPLPs) was also identified, to include learners of all abilities within the curriculum (DES, 2015; NCCA, 2018). The core principles of the L1L2LP are to assist schools and teachers in designing learning programmes appropriate to the needs of their students. Through the introduction of the L1L2LP, students will experience “some or all of the statements of learning and develop their skills through engagement with Priority Learning Units (PLUs), Short Courses and other curriculum and learning experiences” (NABMSE and NCCA, 2019). Despite these positive developments, concerns have been raised about the issue of discontinuity for students with SENs who finish Junior Cycle and enter Senior Cycle where no such programme exists (Smyth et al., 2019).

One programme that is targeted at students who are “not adequately catered for by other Leaving Certificate programmes” (Dept. Education and Skills, 2000, cited in Banks et al., 2011, p.2) is the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). This two-year programme is available to

students who wish to follow a practical or vocationally orientated programme, and do not wish to progress directly to higher education. The LCA is made up of a range of courses structured around three elements: vocational preparation; vocational education; and general education (NCCA, 2020). The overall percentage of students following the LCA programme was as low as 5.1 per cent in 2019 (DES, 2020). Students who take up the LCA programme typically come from working-class families. However, students from higher social class backgrounds who are enrolled on the LCA programme often present evidence of a specific learning disability and/or an intellectual disability (Banks et al., 2010). Despite the fact that the LCA programme helps to prevent early school dropouts, it has a societal stigma that affects post-school employment outcomes (Banks et al., 2011). Often the LCA class, much like a special class/unit, is segregated from the mainstream LC students, which means that students can experience stigma and isolation from their non-disabled peers (Banks et al., 2011; McCoy and Banks, 2016).

1.3 Transition Planning and Guidance in Irish Mainstream Schools

The Education Act (1998) stipulates that schools are obliged to “ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choice”. In doing so, the policy framework for post-primary schools is based on a whole-school approach. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) indicates that a “whole-school approach” should outline the school’s “approach to guidance generally and how students can be supported and assisted in making choices and successful transitions in the personal and social, education and career areas” (DES, 2017; NCGE, 2017). The *Whole School Guidance Framework* (2017) adopts a continuum of support model, already being employed in schools to support students’ learning and development (NEPS, 2010) and has a similar philosophy to the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) model that is being rolled out across further and higher education in the Republic of Ireland (AHEAD, 2017; Quirk and McCarthy, 2020). The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) provide detailed guidelines for establishing student support teams (Dept. Education and Skills, 2014), which are intended to encompass a range of supports that cater for the learning, social, emotional, and

behavioural needs of students. A strong student support team emphasises an equity-focused approach to student supports and includes a multidisciplinary team, including a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), a Guidance Counsellor, a year-head and/or a principal/deputy.

A recent evaluation of guidance provision in Ireland notes that significant progress has been made in terms of developing a holistic approach to guidance provision in recent years, which encompasses the four areas of “social and personal counselling, vocational guidance counselling and educational guidance counselling” (Indecon, 2019). The report states that “for students with special educational needs in post-primary schools, access [to career guidance] is available through the support of the guidance counsellor” (p.12). The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) recently published a series of pamphlets to help students with disabilities, and their parents, with their decision-making, as they prepare to leave school. The three pamphlets provide information on further education, higher education, rehabilitative training, and adult day services for school leavers (NCSE, 2020).

Prior to the introduction of the *Programme Recognition Framework: Guidance Counselling* (PRF) in 2016 (Dept. Education and Skills, 2016), the role of guidance in education had several interpretations that stemmed from a combination of different school patronage and differing schools of thought among universities providing professional qualifications for guidance in education. The PRF document clearly defines the role of guidance in education and sets out parameters “for providers of initial education programmes in guidance counselling who intend that their programme graduates will work in guidance services under the remit of the Department of Education and Skills” (p.5). A key area outlined in section 2.9, Table 1, of the guidelines highlights the boundaries and competencies for working as a Guidance Counsellor. This includes, but is not limited to, “meeting diverse service-user needs; combatting exclusion and marginalisation; guidance context to individuals and groups with complex needs and those at risk of marginalisation; as well as Theoretical frameworks relating to mental health and disability

and Special Educational Needs (SEN) (within a guidance context)” (p.16-20). The PRF document explicitly states the role of guidance and its contribution to society, as being “Lifelong learning and employment” (p.18) and “Economic development and social inclusion, financial supports” (p.18).

In addition to formal guidance structures, research consistently shows that career guidance for young people is often sought from a variety of people, such as parents, family and friends (Smyth et al., 2011; McNamara et al., 2020). While parents play the most influential role in supporting their child’s post-school decision making, Guidance Counsellors are considered to be the second most important source of advice at this crucial transition point. It is estimated that 77 per cent of mainstream students look to a career guidance professional for advice within a formal classroom setting, and as high as 65 per cent of mainstream students seek further advice via individual appointments with their Guidance Counsellor (McNamara et al., 2020). Irish research on guidance provision has highlighted a number of issues around the role of the Guidance Counsellor and the level of provision in schools. Some studies have highlighted the ambiguous nature of Guidance Counsellors, with different emphases on career guidance and pastoral care across different school settings – an issue that the work of the *Whole School Guidance Framework* (2017) and the PRF (2016) have attempted to formally address. Some studies have highlighted how students are generally dissatisfied with the level of guidance provision while at school (Smyth et al., 2011). Other findings show that the main focus of school guidance counselling in Senior Cycle is often on entry to third-level education and, in particular, the CAO application process (DES Inspectorate, 2006). Other research has highlighted how access to information for young people can be socially structured. Decision-making in the final year of school can often be heavily influenced by factors such as social class, gender, and disability, which in turn shape post-school expectations (Smyth et al., 2011). For students wishing to take alternative paths post-school, formal guidance at school is often unavailable. leaving them to access their own channels of information at home or among their non-disabled peers (Smyth et al., 2011; Smyth and Banks, 2012). Depending on individual or family-level supports for post-school planning

and guidance, further issues may arise around a student's cultural capital and whether access to adequate information and knowledge is socially structured. Research has also highlighted a degree of variability in guidance provision across schools, with evidence that the type of guidance varies depending on the social class intake of the schools. In their study of experiences of sixth-year students, Banks, Byrne, McCoy and Smyth (2010) found that schools with students from working-class backgrounds were more likely to provide guidance on programmes in further education and training than schools with students from more middle-class backgrounds, where the emphasis was on higher education entry. As already mentioned, there is little understanding on who is responsible for the post-school transition planning process for students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools (or students with disabilities generally), although recent research from Scanlon and Doyle (2018) demonstrates that parents of students with intellectual disabilities, who typically play a much more significant role in their child's decision-making, would prefer post-school options and information to be provided to their child via the guidance service within schools (Scanlon and Doyle, 2018). It is also important to highlight, although it is not the focus of this report, that there is no guidance provision for students in special schools in Ireland. This often means that staff working in special schools undertake guidance activities, including post-school transition planning and making significant life decisions, without any formal training in these areas. This lack of guidance provision in the special school sector was somewhat acknowledged in the Indecon *Review of Career Guidance* (2019) document, which called for "enhanced provision for career guidance training" in special schools (p.iv).

1.4 Methodology: A Mixed Methods Study

The authors of this study adopted a mixed method design, in order to gain a clear understanding of the nature and quality of career guidance and transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities in Irish mainstream schools. The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods allowed them to verify the findings of each approach. It also provided them with the opportunity to explore alternative ideas and challenge assumptions within the research. The authors chose to adopt a sequential

design (Creswell et al., 2006) by firstly collecting quantitative data and then undertaking an additional phase of collecting qualitative data, which aided them in interpreting the quantitative findings. By using a sequential design, they were able to identify cases for the qualitative strand, although they used a convergent design model, framed by a pragmatic theoretical framework, to describe and interpret the cases (Hinsliff-Smith and Spencer, 2016).

Both the qualitative and quantitative strands of the study consisted of separate analyses, which were then combined for interpretation and triangulation. Triangulation is used in an attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint (Cohen and Manion, 1986 as cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). In addition, triangulation offers the research more validity, as it controls for individual researchers' pre-existing assumptions (Bulsara, 2008).

School principals were identified as gatekeepers in negotiating access to individual school sites. However, because interviewing "elites", or people of "power" within educational research is well documented as providing a multitude of complications for formal researchers (Cohen et al., 2007; Gubrium and Holstein, 2002), the authors decided that it would be appropriate to conduct a national survey of school principals, to gather baseline data on post-school transitions for students with intellectual disabilities from an aggregate level, in order to give a macro social-structure description (Kelle, 2005). On the basis of the outcome of the consultation process with the NAPD and NCGE, the authors determined that a total population survey would help in identifying suitable schools to later investigate within the qualitative strand from a micro process perspective (Kelle, 2005).

1.4.1 Quantitative Stand: A National Survey of School Principals

In November 2019, the research team distributed the postal survey, with a prepaid return envelope, to n=722 post-primary school principals, nationally. A follow-up, online version of the survey was distributed to schools in March 2020. The survey received a total response rate of 15.25 per cent, which is considerably low, and so, the authors do not claim that the findings of the survey are representative of the second-level school population. The authors acknowledge the role of the Covid-19 school closures in impacting responses from school principals.

1.4.2 Qualitative Stand: Interviews with School Faculty

As part of this study was to understand the nature and quality of guidance and transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities in schools, the authors conducted qualitative interviews with key personnel in schools who were responsible for this role. This allowed the authors to investigate the unique perspectives of professionals on the ground, working directly with students with intellectual disabilities in Irish post-primary schools.

The authors then asked the principals of a select number of schools that had completed the survey to nominate a suitable candidate from within their school for interview. There was a total of nine respondents, including Guidance Counsellors (n=4) and SENCOs (n=5). Notably, all respondents were female, with no male respondents put forward for selection.

1.4.3 Ethical Considerations

The School of Education Research Ethics Committee at Trinity College Dublin granted Ethical approval to the research team for the mixed methods study. In addition, the School of Social Work and Social Policy Research Ethics Committee at Trinity College Dublin granted consent for the specific purpose of the virtual interviews. The primary ethical concerns addressed in both ethical approval applications were centred around informed consent and voluntary participation, safeguarding any perceived level of harm

to respondents, and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requirements, in terms of anonymity and confidentiality.

Additionally, the decision to conduct online interviews brought some contemporary ethical considerations and limitations to the forefront (Salmons, 2010; 2012). The researchers received a set of new guidance notes on using online video conferencing software for recording and transcribing qualitative research interviews from the Information Technology Department and the Data Protection Office at Trinity College Dublin, to assist them during the Covid-19 restrictions. They were guided, throughout, by the conditions set out for obtaining consent, collecting data, and retaining and storing the information.

1.5 Summary

This chapter has outlined the aims of this research project and an provided an overview of the literature on guidance and transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities. It has also detailed how people with intellectual disabilities are significantly underrepresented in the workforce, despite the fact that they are increasingly attending mainstream primary and post-primary education. The chapter has outlined the key policy developments shaping inclusive education in Ireland in the last two decades and provided an overview of national and international research that highlights much variability in the types of guidance provision and transition planning for this group of students.

Furthermore, this chapter has provided an overview of the school-level issues concerning a lack of accessible curricula for students with intellectual disabilities attending mainstream post-primary schools. It has outlined the programmes introduced by the DES and the NCCA, which ensure that students with intellectual disabilities can access the Junior Cycle Curriculum, as is their right. The introduction of the L1L2LPs recognises the various abilities of students of all backgrounds represented within a contemporary Irish classroom. Despite this, an ever-increasing difficulty for students with intellectual

disabilities is a lack of an appropriate, accredited, Senior Cycle/LC programme. The LCA programme has been proven to be unfit for purpose and needs to be reviewed, in order to allow increased participation across the country, otherwise, this group of students is at risk of falling through the cracks, where schools are implementing unrecognised, or school-level bespoke designed programmes with little quality control or consistency on a national scale. The lack of formal qualification or certification (other than an LCA statement of results) leaves students with an intellectual disability with very few post-school opportunities.

The final section of this chapter provides an overview of the research methodology used in this study and provides details of the national survey of post-primary level principals and the in-depth qualitative interviews carried out with school personnel from a sample of schools.

2 Transition Planning for Students with Intellectual Disabilities in Post-primary Schools

2.1 Introduction

As described in Chapter 1, the placement of students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream education in Ireland is relatively new, particularly at post-primary level. With greater diversity in the student population, school supports, such as guidance provision, have had to adapt to the different needs and challenges of the student population, around their post-school pathways.

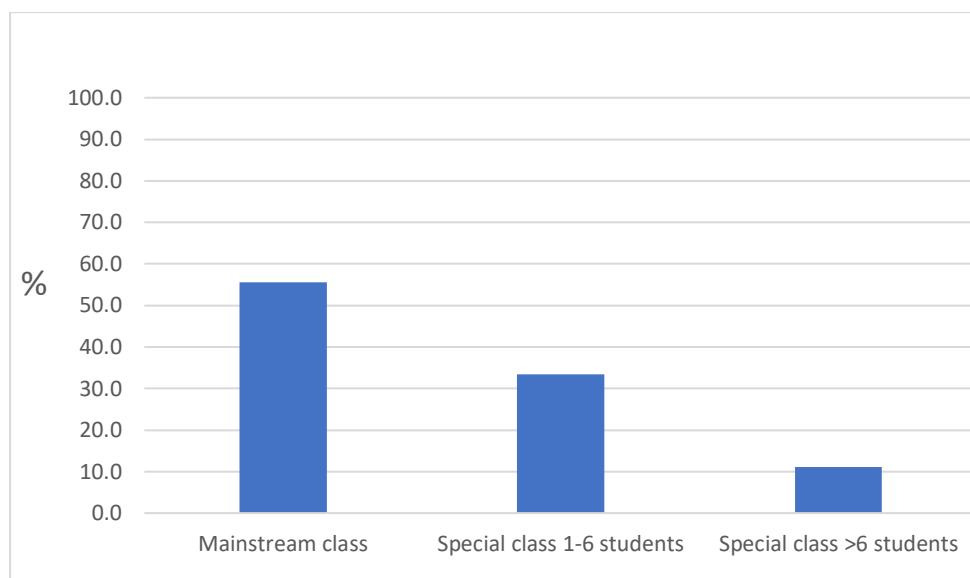
This chapter firstly examines class placement for students with intellectual disabilities and the Junior and Senior Cycle programmes taken by this group of students. It then focuses on the types of whole-school guidance available to students with and without intellectual difficulties. The final section explores how guidance and transition planning works for students with intellectual disabilities.

2.2 Placement and Programmes for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

According to the Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2016), people with intellectual disabilities account for 1.4 per cent of the Irish population. However, there is little understanding of the school experiences of students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream classes, special classes, and special schools; and there is a clear lack of knowledge about their transitions from school into further and higher education, training, and employment. One valuable source of information is the National Ability Supports System (NASS), previously known as the National Intellectual Disability Database (NIDD) which gathers information on more than 28,000 people with intellectual disabilities who are registered on the database. Data from the 2019 NASS database show that the majority of those registered are in rehabilitative training or supported employment, with just 0.4 per cent of people with an intellectual disability reported to be in third-level education (HRB, 2019).

As part of this study, the TCPID School Transitions Survey sought information about placement and, in particular, whether students with intellectual disabilities are placed in mainstream classes or in special class settings. Figure 2.1 shows that just over half of students (55 per cent) with intellectual disabilities were in mainstream classes. Thirty-four per cent were in special classes attached to mainstream schools (with six or fewer students). A further 12 per cent of these students were reported by their school principals to be in larger special classes (with more than six students).

Figure 2. 1 Class placement for students with intellectual disabilities



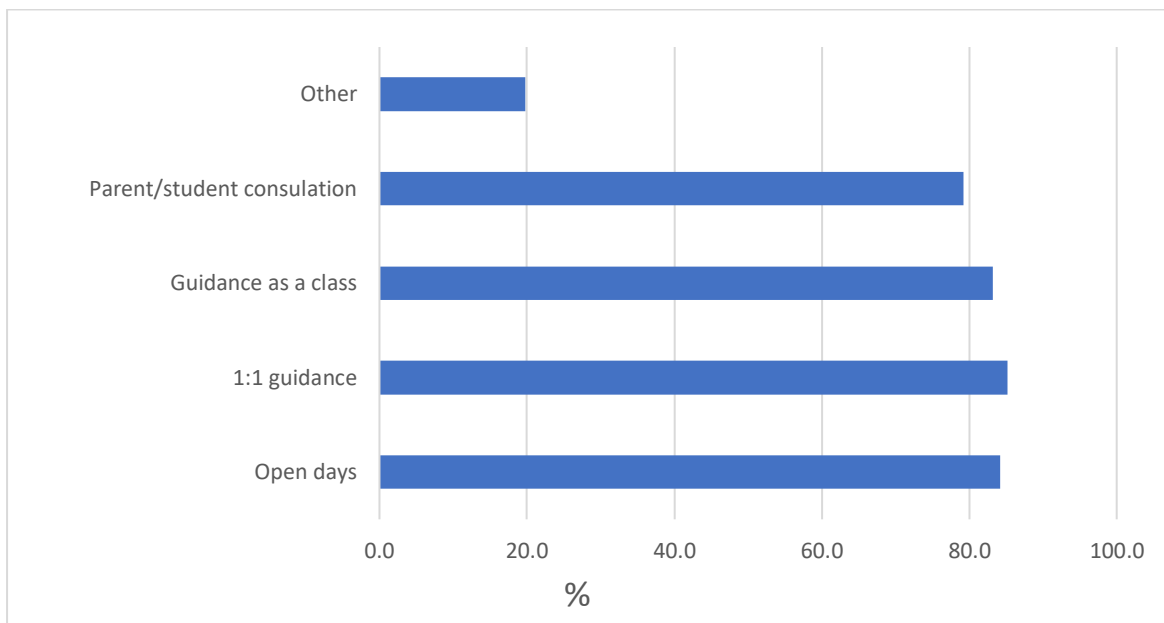
Source: TCPID School Transitions Survey

Principals were also asked which programmes were being taken by students with intellectual disabilities. These findings vary by the age of the students and whether they are in Junior or Senior Cycle education. The majority of students with intellectual disabilities in Junior Cycle are taking L1L2LPs and those in Senior Cycle are taking the LCA programme. This is particularly relevant, given that just 7 per cent of schools provide the LCA at Senior Cycle (Banks et al., 2011).

2.3 Guidance and Transition Planning for All Students

Given the level of variability in guidance provision across schools (Smyth et al., 2011), this chapter starts by examining guidance and transition planning with students in schools generally. The majority of principals surveyed reported that they provide a range of guidance for students, including one-to-one guidance, classroom guidance, opportunities to go to open days, and interaction with parents about post-school transition.

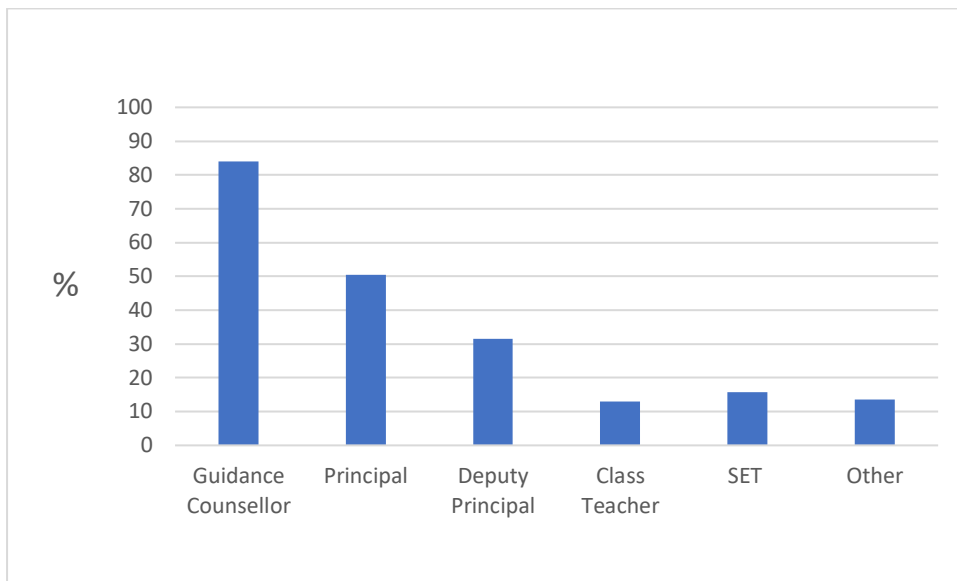
Figure 2. 2 Guidance options provided (all students)



Source: TCPID Transitions Survey

Principals also gave information about the individuals in the school who were primarily responsible for liaising with further and higher education providers, as part of guidance provision for students. Figure 2.3 shows that this is predominantly carried out by the Guidance Counsellor, followed by the school principal and deputy principal.

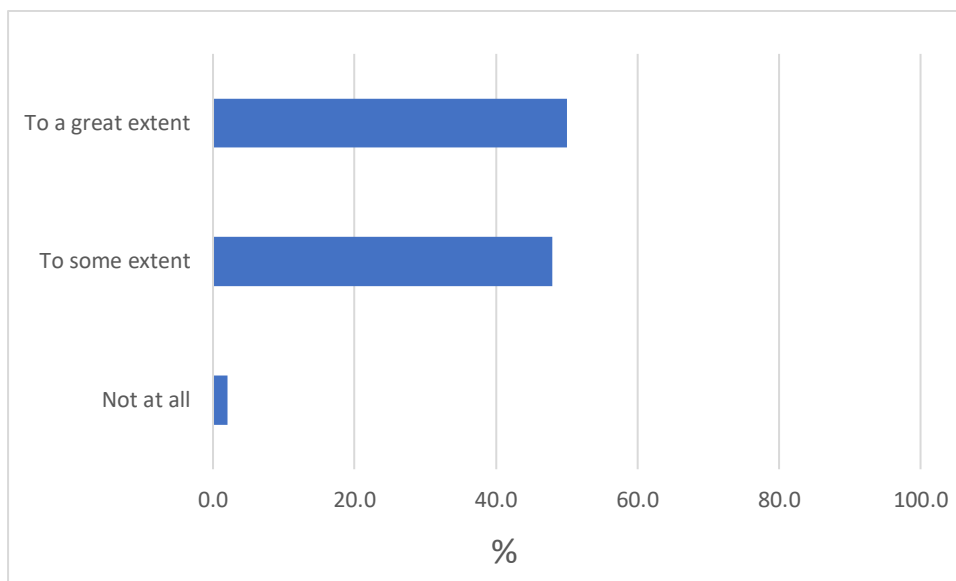
Figure 2. 3 Responsibility for engaging with further and higher education sectors



Source: TCPID Transitions Survey

The survey also examined the extent to which schools are engaging with further and higher education providers as part of their guidance provision. Figure 2.4 shows that the vast majority of principals reported that their school is engaging with further and higher education institutes “to a great extent” or “to some extent”.

Figure 2. 4 School engagement with further and higher education



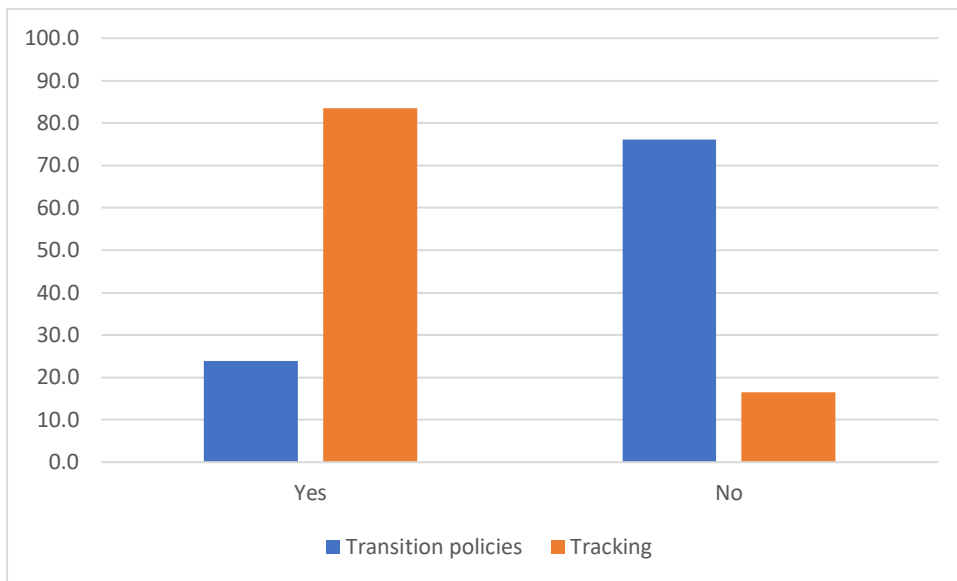
Source: TCPID Transitions Survey

The findings of the qualitative interviews also show that Guidance Counsellors are primarily responsible for engaging with further and higher education providers. The guidance professionals interviewed told how the engagement between their school and further and higher education providers was rather one-sided, in the sense that post-primary schools are invited to attend college/university open days. Other than this, there was little engagement. Despite national and international guidelines suggesting cross-agency/institution engagement as an enabler to successful post-school transitions (Hart et al., 2020; Wehman, 2010), it appears the links between the post-primary and further and higher education sectors are variable across schools.

The survey asked principals about their use of transition policies for students in their school, but the findings clearly show that these are not frequently used. While principals did report tracking students after they left school (see Fig. 2.5), the qualitative findings suggest that tracking systems are quite informal, though with no structured tracking mechanism in place. Guidance Counsellors tend to make one informal phone call, or email, to each school leaver in an effort to enquire about their post-school plans. Many spoke of the challenges they face in tracking and tracing past pupils after formally

completing their post-primary education. In many cases, Guidance Counsellors reported not having the time to conduct follow-up communications, due to an already stretched workload. One participant described how the introduction of the GDPR acts as a significant barrier to formally collecting, and storing, personal data of past pupils, once they have formally graduated.¹

Figure 2. 5 Transition policies and tracking



Source: TCPID Transitions Survey

Despite the school-level guidance supports, tracking systems and level of engagement with colleges of further and higher education, the findings of this report suggest the need for additional resources and supports on transition planning and guidance for students with intellectual disabilities. Principals surveyed stressed the need for improved guidance, in order to fully support students in their transition from school.

¹ The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) offers guidelines for collecting, storing and retaining personal data in [Developing a Confidentiality Policy for Post-Primary Schools](#) and [Data Protection for the Guidance Counsellor Compliant Data Management](#), however, NCGE does not advise schools directly on their record keeping policies. This is the responsibility of individual schools, and the Guidance related elements should fit within the overall school data protection protocols.

2.4 Guidance and Transition Planning for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Analysis of the survey data highlighted that there was little specific guidance provision or transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities in the schools surveyed. In the open-ended responses, principals described how planning for students with intellectual disabilities was often done on a case-by-case basis. In some cases, they noted that they did not have a specific policy on transition planning for these students. Other principals described how transition planning was mainly the responsibility of the special education committee or SENCO in the school who worked with the students with intellectual disabilities, and their parents:

This occurs on a 1-to-1 basis, rather than being [a] formal [service]. We work with the principal and deputy principal, SEN coordinator, and class teacher, with the individual student and her parent for the best individual fit for the student.

We have one student who has a transition plan as laid out between the school, parents and educational psychologist.

[The] Additional Educational Needs (AEN) team supports teachers in drafting learning programme for AEN students.

(Source: TCPID School Transitions Survey)

Some schools appeared to have a more formal approach to guidance and transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities, which began early in their post-primary education, and was directly linked to guidance in the school:

Planning begins in 4th year for progression through [the] school and beyond.

Linked with Guidance Counsellor to ensure progression.

(Source: TCPID School Transitions Survey)

In other schools, transition planning for these students involved linking in with “occupational guidance supports” and service providers:

[We] organise [a] meeting with [the] HSE occupational guidance service. They decide on the next steps.

[We] planned [a] meeting with [the] service providers, for example, NLN and Co-Action ...

[We have] contact with Gheel, National Learning Network, Trinity Access Programme.

(Source: TCPID School Transitions Survey)

2.4.1 SENCOs as Guidance Counsellors

In order to further explore transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities, the authors held in-depth qualitative interviews with school personnel in nine case study schools. They selected these schools from the national survey sample, with a view to interviewing school principals or their school Guidance Counsellor about guidance provision and transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities. However, many of the principals approached advised that guidance around students with intellectual disabilities was the responsibility of the school SENCO, and that they should be interviewed as part of the research study. This section provides an analysis of these interviews and an insight into the key issues facing school staff when preparing this group of students for the transition from school to further education or employment.

The findings show a clear ambiguity around whose responsibility it was in the school for undertaking transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities. In each of the interviews, respondents stressed that there was little consensus among school leaders and staff as to whose area this falls under. Analysis of the interview data suggests that this role is not part of school guidance counselling but, rather, is the responsibility of the

school SENCO. The findings also show variability in the extent to which this role is carried out by SENCOs, with many of those interviewed providing individualised transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities.

The findings suggest that some SENCOs find it difficult to relinquish some of the responsibility around guidance and transition planning to their colleagues, who may not know the individual as well as they do. The personal connection between the SENCO and students often involved providing supports to students in all aspect of their school life, from academic accommodations to social and emotional supports. One SENCO described how she found it difficult to “hand over” guidance responsibility to other staff in the school:

To be honest, I would find it difficult to hand over maybe some of that, like, in my mind to hand over some of that work to other people ...

(Olivia, SENCO)

The findings show that this ambiguity around career guidance and transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities may result in a gap in this type of support in schools. Some of those interviewed felt that responsibility fell between the school’s special education department and guidance counselling supports. One Guidance Counsellor interviewed described the overlap in the professional roles of the SENCO and the Guidance Counsellor. She had concerns about SENCOs carrying out guidance provision, as they are not professionally trained in this specific role, whereas Guidance Counsellors are:

Because the fact is, I think the Guidance Counsellor is qualified to do this career guidance and should perform it well for every student ... including those [who] are in [Special Education] units.

(Margaret, Guidance Counsellor)

One SENCO argued that greater collaboration between the special education department in the school and Guidance Counsellors was needed. She suggested that each of the roles needed professional within the other discipline (i.e., continuing professional development (CPD) for Guidance Counsellors in inclusive education and CPD for SENCOs in guidance counselling), a suggestion that is in line with the NCSE guidelines for creating an Individualised Education Plan (IEP) and post-school transitions (NCSE, 2006):

Well, it probably would be better if the Guidance Counsellors maybe had training in it [SEN], because it feels like they don't...

...or I don't even either [have training in guidance provision], but maybe a collaborative approach between us.

(Nicole, SENCO)

2.4.2 Uncertainty among Guidance Counsellors

Many Guidance Counsellors interviewed explained that students with intellectual disabilities tend to progress to a local disability support agency under the auspices of the HSE. Referral to the HSE disability service is based on an official diagnosis of an intellectual disability, the availability of places, and funding allocations from the HSE. However, some of the interviewees expressed uncertainty around what exactly they were supposed to do. In particular, it was not often clear to them whether the placements being sought were suitable for the students in question:

I find then trying to keep on top of all the different ... agencies and options that are out there can be a bit time consuming as well. Again, trying to figure out, as I was saying, what's the best option for this student? It all takes time.

(Aoife, Guidance Counsellor)

During the interviews, it was clear that some Guidance Counsellors were concerned about the level of responsibility they had in relation to individual students' post-school pathways. Much of this concern centred around a lack of specific training or knowledge of

specific placements available for this group of students. One Guidance Counsellor felt that she was inadequately trained in this area and that the SENCO is better placed to support students with intellectual disabilities in their transition from school:

I don't make the judgement, I just say, "These are the options." I don't feel qualified or equipped to... [the SENCO] is better at saying, "Absolutely not." Straightaway, she'd say, "Absolutely not. That won't work for that student." I don't have [the] confidence to be able to say that.

(Aoife, Guidance Counsellor)

Some Guidance Counsellors described frustration at the lack of time they had to do their job and how some school principals had the authority to decide how much time would be allocated to the role of guidance provision:

I'm always banging on about the lack of time. You're a standalone person in the school. We have a new principal, you see, for the last two years. He has decided to give me this guidance allocation.

(Emily, Guidance Counsellor)

Some of the respondents worked in schools with special education teams often composed of the SENCO, the Guidance Counsellor, the deputy and/or head principal, and sometimes year heads and/or other teachers. These teams would begin the process of transition planning as early as Junior Cycle, where they would discuss the possible post-school options for various students with disabilities in their school. Although this practice was time-consuming, one Guidance Counsellor described how it had proved to be beneficial when it came to post-school transition planning, as all involved would know the students well, by the time they entered senior cycle:

At each stage, we [the SEN team] would be thinking about where they might be going and meeting with their parents at different stages...

(Aoife, Guidance Counsellors).

Where Guidance Counsellors were skilled in the area of career guidance, it appears that participating SENCOs were more aware of the disability support agencies to which students with intellectual disabilities tended to be linked after school.

2.5 Summary

This chapter has focused on three main areas: class placement for students with intellectual disabilities; the types of programme on which students with intellectual disabilities are enrolled; and the types of transition planning and guidance available for students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools.

Based on the survey responses, the findings show that the majority of students with intellectual disabilities are in mainstream classes or special classes attached to mainstream schools. At Junior Cycle, students are taking the L112 programmes that are specifically aimed at students with SEN. At Senior Cycle, students are enrolled on the LCA programme.

The findings highlight a broad range of guidance provision in schools, ranging from whole-class guidance counselling to individualised or one-to-one guidance sessions with students. The schools surveyed appear to have a strong connection with further and higher education institutes, where students in their school can progress to after they leave school. However, guidance provision and transition planning appear to differ somewhat for students with intellectual disabilities. In-depth qualitative interviews with Guidance Counsellors and SENCOs highlight a lack of appropriate guidance provision and an ambiguity among staff as to who has the responsibility for supporting students with intellectual disabilities in their transition from school to further education, employment, and adult life more generally.

3 Barriers and Enablers to Post-school Transitions for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

3.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the barriers and enablers to successful post-school transitions for students with intellectual disabilities. Using open-ended survey questions and qualitative interview data, the chapter outlines what principals perceived to be the main barriers to, and enablers for, students with intellectual disabilities making successful transitions from school to work or further education.

3.2 Barriers to Post-school Transitions

Many of the barriers involved a lack of information and awareness by both schools and parents of students with intellectual disabilities and included a fear of a future lack of supports in education; a perceived lack of places available in appropriate settings for students with intellectual disabilities; and a lack of knowledge, information and awareness of what is available after school for this group of students. Qualitative interviews with school personnel also highlighted these barriers and the lack of support for these students in transition planning before they left school. The majority of those interviewed ranked their school as average, or below average, when it came to supporting post-school transitions.

3.2.1 Fear of Future Lack of Supports

Some principals described the fear among many young people with intellectual disabilities, and their parents, about a possible loss of supports or a “go to” person if they moved to other education providers after post-primary school. This fear was often coupled with apprehension about larger class sizes and a change in environment overall. One principal highlighted that transitions often fail for students with intellectual disabilities, due to the lack of “proactive support networks ... that have existed at secondary school”. There was a general consensus amongst interviewees that these particular students require follow-on support, to help bridge the gap between school and

wherever they choose to go from there. Guidance Counsellors felt that they were limited in the amount of follow-up support they can provide after the student leaves school:

I don't think there's any real follow-up. I suppose I contact some of the parents afterwards and see where they're at. If they need any little bit of help. That's there as well from the guidance teacher, anybody can come back at any time and she'd fill out any application forms and so will I – but really it's once they're off the books, they're gone.

(Frieda, SENCO)

Another principal felt that the “switch” to “independent learning” in further and higher education was too much for these students, who had had a more structured educational experience at post-primary level. Other noted the loss of other types of support, such as a special needs assistant (SNA) and school transport, when these students make the transition from school to further and higher education:

Depending on the diagnosis, [a] student can slip through an organisation for support ... [students] had SNA access in school ... but that ceases once school stops ... [and a lack of] transport to and from college/new course.

(Source: TCPID School Transitions Survey)

These views were mirrored in one SENCO interview, where the participant discussed how students with intellectual disabilities receive so much support in school, with the likes of an SNA, for example. She felt that a major barrier for parents and students was the perceived dearth in supports offered in third-level education. Others argued that some students with intellectual disabilities were over-supported in post-primary school, so much so, that it does students a disservice, when the same level of supports are not made available in further and higher education or the workforce:

You see a lot of kids don't need half the accommodation that it is perceived that they need.

(Margaret, Guidance Counsellor)

Another principal also noted the lack of mentors at third level to help these students cope with the change in learning environment and course content. Respondents placed a strong emphasis on peer support, and formal buddy systems at post-primary level, as one of the crucial enablers to ensuring academic and social inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in their school. Other principals felt that many of the barriers to successful transition could be overcome with a more coherent strategy of communication between the disability offices in third-level institutes and post-primary schools.

3.2.2 Perceived Lack of Places and Opportunities after School

Other barriers highlighted by survey respondents included the perceived lack of “places” or “opportunities” for students with intellectual disabilities when they leave school. Principals appeared to be referring to a “lack of appropriate or suitable settings” on courses specifically targeted at young people with intellectual disabilities such as Adult Day Services or the National Learning Network:

lack of confirmed place available to them as they leave school;

[lack of a] Good range of schemes available post-second level;

less opportunities available to them to meet their specific needs.

(Source: TCPID School Transitions Survey)

Others referred more explicitly to the lack of meaningful places in further education institutes, training centres, or employment for students with intellectual disabilities. One principal noted the lack of qualifications for some students with intellectual disabilities when leaving school, despite having completed post-primary education:

Perhaps, the stigma of not having an actual leaving Cert is a barrier.

(Source: TCPID School Transitions Survey)

Another principal simply highlighted the “lack of college courses aimed at these students’ ability level”. This, coupled with a possible “lack of confidence, poor self-esteem, and inadequate SEN support when they leave secondary”, meant that transitions were difficult for this group of students. Another also felt that there was “no space on college campus for them to enjoy the college experience and achieve at their own level”, and that this option was therefore not available to them.

Barriers for these students can also happen when they follow a reduced curriculum or a reduced timetable during their post-primary education. Similarly, as many students with intellectual disabilities operate on a reduced timetable (Brennan and Browne, 2019), they may have fewer exam subjects in their LC. One SENCO highlighted the focus on CAO points and progression to university in current school guidance counselling. Options for students not wishing, or unable, to take this path are therefore not as readily available for students with intellectual disabilities. They noted that for any student on a reduced timetable, who may only complete five subjects in their LC rather than seven, the CAO system is non-applicable.

3.2.3 Perceived Need to Manage Expectations of Parents and Students?

Interview respondents frequently mentioned “managing expectations” as one of the more difficult, unwritten tasks, within their professional role. The literature identifies educators who are supportive and who encourage students to have high expectations as a critical factor to successful post-school transition (Fleming et al., 2017). One respondent explained how some students with mild intellectual disabilities had set their mind on specific career goals that she perceived were unsuitable for them, and she felt wholeheartedly that they would be unhappy pursuing a career in that discipline. She described how the student would be supported academically within school and would likely achieve a high enough standard to access a PLC course that would put them on the

path to their chosen career but had concerns that the student would not be properly supported in that course. She also queried whose responsibility it was to manage unrealistic expectations:

Whose job is it to tell them really that course might not be for you or that career path isn't for you?

(Eileen, SENCO)

Managing the expectations of parents was equally paramount within the professional role of the respondents. Some SENCOs and Guidance Counsellors perceived that parents of students with intellectual disabilities were more embroiled in their child's school life than their peers in the mainstream. Despite their involvement, Guidance Counsellors, in particular, felt that parents were often confounded by the vast quantity of overly complex administrative tasks that are involved with applying for schemes such as the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) system. Some noted that parents' expectations of their child's academic ability is often confronted during the transition planning phase. They felt that from a parent's perspective, their son/daughter has been passing their exams and assessments. However, respondents felt that these parents often failed to grasp the level of additional support and accommodations automatically received by their child within the compulsory schooling system, and which they are entitled to up to the age of 18 years (EPSEN Act, 2004). Respondents described the shock of parents when they realised that the same supports were not an automatic right within adult services, third-level education, or the workforce (Keel et al., 2017):

I think that's a huge shock to parents when they realise in the sixth year that that's the case.

(Freida, SENCO)

One SENCO recounted a similar specific challenge of managing parental expectations in an appropriate and timely manner. She described a tension between the parental expectations of where their son/daughter might progress to after school, in comparison to

the educator's perceived expectations of the student's ability. The participant explained that the approach to managing parents' expectations was a team effort, including the SEN department, guidance, and the year head.

3.2.4 A Lack of Information

Post-school transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities is atypical and often requires knowledge and awareness, on the part of schools and parents, of alternative educational/training options that would be accessible to, and suitable for, students with intellectual disabilities (Aston, 2019; Doody 2015; Newman et al., 2009; Pallisera et al., 2018). While Guidance Counsellors involved in the study offered opportunities for individualised guidance to students with and without disabilities, there was little evidence that they were proactive in seeking alternative education/training options other than access to further and higher education via the CAO, DARE, and the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR), all of which require a full LC for application. One participant went some way to explain that these alternative routes may often be suitable every few years for one or two students, but by the time the same route is required again, the information may be lost or outdated. They explain that gathering the relevant information about these irregular post-school options is often due to chance:

We pick up contacts by chance – there are some other group maybe support students in finding employment – creating some kinds of career path. If I was to find out what I want to ... track to the back of my emails and find that's there someplace. We're not getting that information to our students. We aren't really prepared for that situation.

(Eileen, SENCO)

3.3 Enablers to Successful Transitions

This section investigates the respondents' views on improving post-school transitions for students with intellectual disabilities. Principals, SENCOs and guidance professionals

shared common opinions on the need for greater links between post-primary schools and third-level institutions. Respondents also perceived a lack of appropriate support services for students with complex needs at third-level institutes.

3.3.1 Greater Linkages between Second- and Third-level Education

Principals were also asked about ways in which we can improve transitions for young people with intellectual disabilities. Many of the responses focused on the need for greater linkages between post-primary education and further and higher education, the need for personnel in further and higher education to support these students, and the need for flexibility in further and higher education to accommodate students during and after their transition from school. Many respondents spoke of the need for a “continuum of support” for students as they leave school and transition into a new environment. This, they argued, could be done with “increased collaboration between [the post-primary] level and [the] higher education sector in preparing for transition”, so that “key personnel are aware of what is available for students”. These linkages could take place during Senior Cycle, as students begin to make decisions about their post-school pathways:

[We need] more engagements between schools and colleges and further education colleges during Senior Cycle.

(Source: TCPID School Transitions Survey)

One SENCO especially felt that they were limited in the amount of follow-up support they can provide after a student leaves school. There was a consensus among school faculty that these particular students require follow-on support, to help bridge the gap between school and wherever they choose to go afterwards:

You bring them to the point that we can get them accepted into the third-level courses. We support their academics, then they go, there's nothing. There's nobody to pick them up.

(Eileen, SENCO)

One principal suggested having a “liaison person in each region to link with [the] school and track needs [of students] before they are in 6th year”. This person could then be responsible for linking in with colleges/agencies for these students, gathering information and relaying it back to students and their parents.

Some principals suggested that, when students leave school, there is a need for greater sharing of information between post-primary and third level, to ensure “continued support” for students. Others felt that information about individual students could be shared using a passport system similar to that currently used for students as they transition between primary and post-primary education.

3.3.2 Greater Supports at Third Level

Many survey respondents raised the need for greater supports to be made available at third level, in order for students with intellectual disabilities to be fully supported in their education. Some felt that colleges and universities should make contact with students “immediately following offers (CAO)”, so that they have the opportunity to “meet them in advance of beginning a course”. Others thought that providers could “send the timetables out early to each student, so that they [could] become familiar with it”. However, many of the suggestions around additional supports focused on increased personnel to support students both before they start and when they begin their courses:

[Give the] opportunity for students to register early and meet with a support person prior to the beginning of the new term.

(Source: TCPID School Transitions Survey)

Freida (SENCO) mirrored the views of a number of her peers within the qualitative strand, elaborating on this issue. She discussed, for example, how students with intellectual disabilities receive a lot of support in school (e.g., through Special Needs Assistants), and noted the perceived dearth in supports offered at third level. Margaret (Guidance

Counsellor) claimed that some children are over-supported in post-primary school, so much so that it does students a disservice when the same level of supports are not available in further and higher education or in the workforce:

You see a lot of kids don't need half the accommodation that it is perceived that they need.

(Margaret, Guidance Counsellor).

A number of principals spoke of the need for a SENCO, a mentor or a dedicated support person at third level, “with whom vulnerable students could build a relationship ... and who[m] they could trust”. Others mentioned the need for students to be able to easily access “counselling supports” to help them “in managing anxiety/fear”, should these issues arise.

3.4 Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to identify the key barriers and enablers to successful transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities. Using qualitative data from open-ended questions in the survey of school principals, and interview data with school personnel, the chapter has highlighted the following barriers: a fear of a loss of supports; fear of a lack of suitable places; a mismatch in educational expectations between schools and parents; and a lack of information and awareness of post-school options.

Respondents also reported a number of factors that enable successful transitions, including greater formal linkages between schools and further and higher education providers, and greater supports for students with disabilities in further and higher education.

The findings also highlight the fear among schools, and parents of students with intellectual disabilities, about the potential loss of supports when the student completes school and progresses to further or higher educational settings. Additionally, the findings

highlight a fear and frustration at the lack of suitable or appropriate placements for students with intellectual disabilities after they leave school. This may be due to students not having adequate numbers of LC subjects, making them ineligible for CAO application or college entry.

Another barrier to successful transition reported by school Guidance Counsellors, principals and SENCOs was a mismatch in expectations between the school and parents around the most appropriate placement or setting for the students. This issue seemed to be exacerbated by other barriers highlighted in this chapter, such as the reduced supports in further and higher education, and the lack of suitable placements for students with intellectual disabilities.

The final section of this chapter has highlighted the findings around barriers to transition as a result of a lack of knowledge, information and awareness, among school personnel, on the types of education provision available to students with intellectual disabilities.

4 A Whole-school Approach to Transition Planning

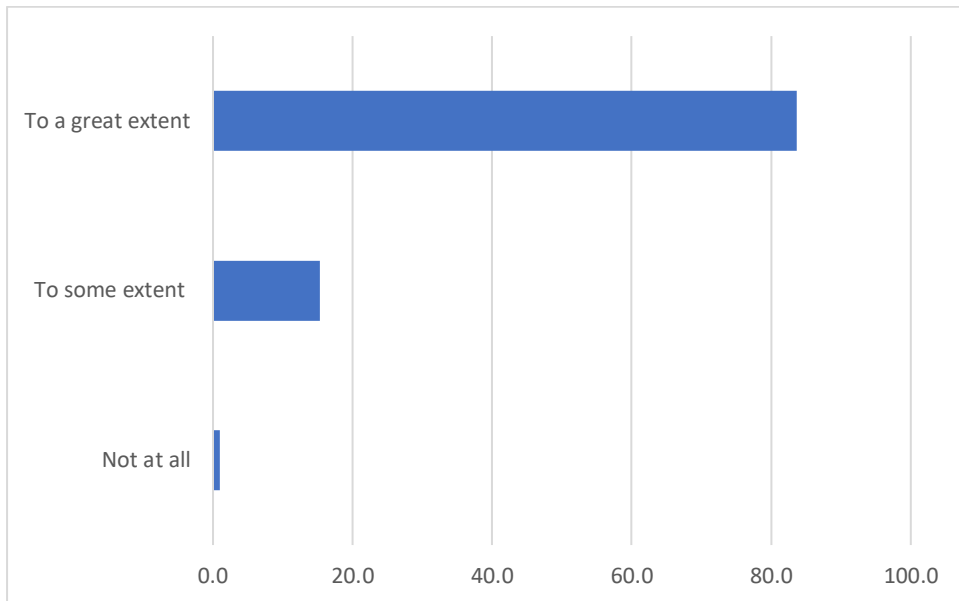
4.1 Introduction

The extent to which a school has an inclusive ethos or follows the principles of inclusive education are shown in the literature to impact of all aspects of the school, including school culture, teaching and learning, and student-teacher relationships. Schools with an inclusive philosophy value diversity in the school population and seek to ensure equity in how students access their learning. Transition planning and guidance provision are important elements of a student's school experience and, as school populations become more diverse, it is necessary to ensure that roles such as the school Guidance Counsellor respond to this diversity. This chapter firstly examines the findings around attitudes to inclusive education at a conceptual level among those surveyed. Using qualitative interviews, it then explores key issues around the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in schools.

4.2 Schools with an Inclusive Philosophy

The survey sought to understand whether school principals considered their schools to be inclusive, by asking them about whether they considered themselves to have “an inclusive philosophy”. Based on this conceptual understanding, the findings show that more than 80 per cent of school principals felt their school had an inclusive philosophy “to a great extent”.

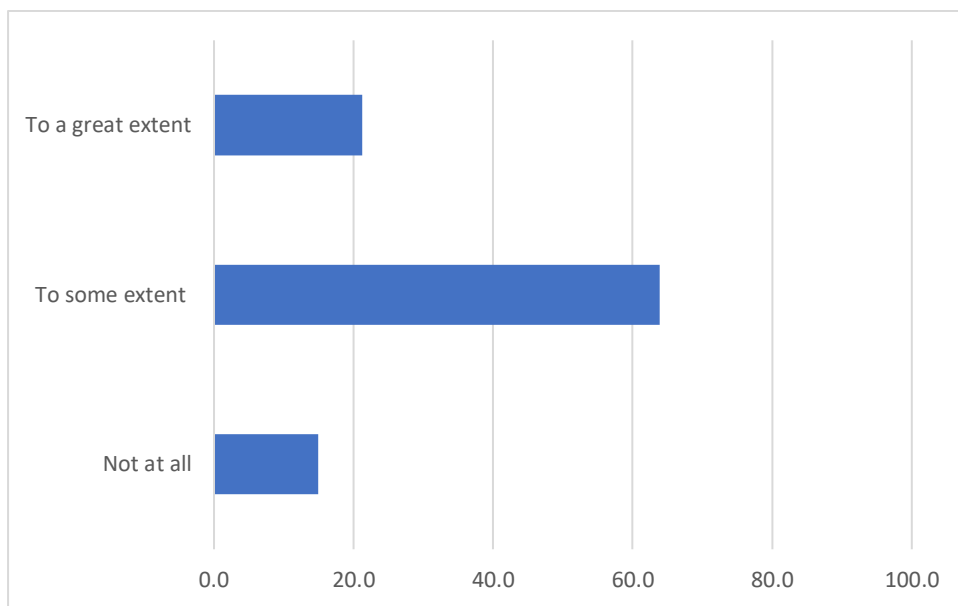
Figure 4. 1 The attitudes of principals to having an “inclusive philosophy” in their school



Source: TCPID Transitions Survey

A high proportion of schools use IEPs for their students (80 per cent of schools reporting using them), although fewer than half of the principal’s surveyed reported that IEPs are used for the purpose of transition planning for students. However, there was less understanding or use of UDL, with 65 per cent of respondents stating that they use it “to some extent”.

Figure 4. 2 Using Universal Design for Learning (UDL)



Source: TCPID Transitions Survey

The qualitative interviews also highlighted the importance of schools having a whole-school approach to inclusion and how this could impact on aspects of guidance such as transition planning. In schools where the principal had an inclusive ethos, respondents spoke positively about inclusion in their school. This was particularly evident to some respondents, who had witnessed a change in leadership and subsequent changes in school practices. One respondent explained how their school had improved their inclusive practice over the past six years, which coincided with a new deputy principal who had worked as a SENCO in their previous school:

I think it's just built up and built up with a couple of changes of staff and management. That's changed things ... She's [deputy principal] really, really pushed it as well ...

(Aoife, Guidance Counsellor)

With this change in leadership came increased attention to the concept of inclusion within the school.

Respondents considered inclusive teaching methodologies, and the introduction of an inclusive curriculum at Junior Cycle, such as the L1L2LPs, as enablers to a more inclusive school environment for students with intellectual disabilities. One SENCO outlined the importance of team teaching in inclusive education, in, for example, collaboration and communication between staff. This co-educational partnership is described as sharing the overall needs of the class:

The students could see both of the teachers as working together as this one team. It just means then you have two people who know the students, as well as each other, and who are able to identify and support the needs of the student there, too.

(Shauna, SENCO)

4.3 Schools Needing to Do More

However, there was a more mixed reaction around the extent to which the respondents' schools were inclusive. The importance of the school principals' attitudes towards inclusive education also arose during the qualitative interviews, where many stressed the importance of leadership in developing inclusive practices within their school. The allocation of SEN resources, programmes and guidance provision is often determined by the principal of a school, meaning that a school principal's personal view towards the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities is a determining factor in how the school works.

In terms of including students with intellectual disabilities within their schools, respondents discussed issues around social inclusion and making friends for students with intellectual disabilities. Respondents commonly felt that they, or their respective schools, could – and should – be doing more to ensure that students make meaningful connections with their peers in a mainstream educational environment. One Guidance

Counsellor described a particular student and her concerns regarding their isolation in school:

Their main concern is they struggle with making friends. We've tried lots of different things and it's a thing for them, because they'll say it ... the worst thing [is] that some of them don't notice it so much, or it doesn't bother them, but it bothers this student.

(Aoife, Guidance Counsellor)

Some respondents described feeling a disconnect between their personal vision for inclusion in the school and the understanding of the concept of inclusion held by their principal and the wider school staff. One interviewee felt that her principal has lost sight of the value of certain curricula, notably the LCA programme (which is suitable for students with intellectual disabilities), as a result of the growing concern for budgets and resource allocations:

We have LCA, which I would fight very hard to keep ... there is a negative perception of it, because, as my principal has said ... it eats away at the hours. It's very difficult to resource, but I would really value it.

(Nicole, SENCO)

Some of the SENCOs described how they felt their role was like that of an advocate for inclusive education within their school. She argued that without the full support from the upper levels of management, she believed her efforts were occasionally considered a burden by other colleagues:

I would rather someone professional came in, because teachers just see me and they're like, "Here she goes on again."

(Olivia, SENCO)

Some respondents acknowledged that the lack of support for an inclusive philosophy was often due to increased administrative demands on principals to attract, and protect, funding allocations and grants. One respondent described the principal's role as being viewed as less engaged with student issues and more of a business management role, concerned with funding and high-level strategic planning, rather than the day-to-day issues of running a school:

He's more like dealing with the board, or out dealing with finance meetings and things like that.

(Olivia, SENCO).

4.4 Summary

In order to focus in on the intricate barriers to successful post-school transitions, this chapter has addressed the theme of inclusive philosophies. The survey results show that school principals overwhelmingly asserted that their school had an inclusive ethos, “to a great extent”. This translated into the survey response for the use of IEPs with as high as 80 per cent of principals disclosing that they use these in their school. However, a worrying trend is identified where the use of IEP's is not being used for the purpose of post-school transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities.

When surveyed about the use of inclusive teaching methodologies, such as UDL, a majority of principals stated their school use UDL “to some extent”. The in-depth qualitative interviews confirmed this finding, with respondents identifying inclusive teaching methodologies that fit into the UDL framework. However, respondents did not explicitly name “UDL”. The interviewees expressed their personal views on the importance of a whole-school approach to inclusion, rather than having individual pockets of good practice scattered throughout the school. A whole-school approach to inclusion was viewed as achievable in settings where school leadership has an inclusive mantra,

stemming from a background in inclusive education and/or personal experience of disability, often within their extended family. In other settings, where school leaders were less concerned with “inclusion”, SENCOs, in particular, noted that there was an unwritten job specification for acting as a sole advocate for inclusion within their school.

The findings show that all the SENCO/guidance professionals expressed that their primary concern for students with intellectual disabilities was around “isolation”, “making friends” and “managing wellbeing and anxiety”. A majority of interviewees claimed that their school was “very good” at including students with intellectual disabilities, regardless of the wider politics within the school. However, there were significant concerns in terms of accessing the curriculum, especially at Senior Cycle, where school leaders viewed the LCA programme as too costly and resource-heavy.

5 Students with Intellectual Disabilities during the Covid-19 School Closures

5.1 Introduction

The timing of the qualitative strand of this study came at a unique and defining moment of societal change, worldwide. In March 2020, the then Taoiseach of Ireland, Leo Varadkar, announced the closure of all schools, pre-schools and further and higher educational settings. The authors decided to include in this report a stand-alone subsection to investigate the views of school personnel on how school closures impacted students with intellectual disabilities. This chapter examines the adverse impacts of school closures in three themed areas: school engagement for students with intellectual disabilities; transition planning for these students; and the future impact this would have on their pathways post-school.

5.2 School Engagement for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, research has consistently shown the adverse impact of remote learning on student engagement, with particular concerns for students in disadvantaged school contexts and students with additional needs (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020; Vignoles and Burgess, 2020; Devitt et al., 2020; Bray et al., 2020). Based on qualitative interviews with school personnel, this study highlights the use of different teaching approaches and methods during the first set of school closures between March and June 2020. Notably, four well-known online communication platforms were named by respondents, in conjunction with three separate methods of mobile communication that were being used in an attempt to keep the lines of communication between schools and their students/parents open. All those interviewed expressed the concerning low levels of student engagement with the move to online learning. Some respondents associated the lack of engagement to the ad-hoc and inconsistent approaches, together with the various platforms being used across the

system. In some cases, respondents expressed concern that students were receiving far too many communications from different teachers:

But the emails were a disaster, because everyone was emailing. They were getting about 20 emails and they weren't reading half of them, and they just gave up.

(Margaret, Guidance Counsellor)

Other barriers that were influential in low student engagement were the lack of appropriate technology (i.e., laptops and/or tablets) at home for students to use. There were examples of one laptop per family, which needed to be shared, as parents and siblings were all trying to work from home at the same time. In other cases, students were using smartphones and struggling to engage with online platforms that are primarily designed for desktop/laptop devices, rather than mobile devices.

Respondents described how, in the immediate period after school closures, academic content and full timetables were considered less of a priority, in favour of the overall wellbeing of students. Keeping regular communication with vulnerable students became the sole focus of many of the participating SENCOs:

Even if they just stayed in touch and did any bit at all, I was delighted because you just knew they were still there.

(Aoife, Guidance Counsellor)

In line with research findings both in Ireland and internationally, respondents working in disadvantaged school contexts raised concerns over possible child safety issues. Some voiced concerns of alcoholism, drug addiction and family illnesses having catastrophic effects on their vulnerable students, who could potentially have an increased exposure to abuse due to spending more time in the family home during school closures:

We had a care team meeting last week where I brought up, I'd say, 60 names that I can't contact.

(Nicole, SENCO)

Other respondents expressed concern about students' mental health more generally. Some were concerned that the reliance on non-verbal communication (i.e., text messages and emails) could be damaging to young people's social skills and mental wellbeing.

More practical issues, related to schoolwork, were centred around the m of revision and re-covering old ground in September 2020. This was a particular concern for students who did not engage well with the online learning platforms. Respondents did not appear to place blame on students who failed to engage well. However, they struggled with the idea of covering the normal curriculum and finding time to revise older content in light of the school closures:

You have all that to deal with, because teachers are concerned about next year, where kids haven't engaged at all for the last few months. They have to push on with the curriculum, but they [also] have to go back over things from [the] previous [year].

(Freida, SENCO)

While some respondents voiced concerns regarding low student engagement, they acknowledged the value of individualised supports, and a person-centred approach for students with intellectual disabilities, which could in this case, be facilitated online with parental support:

I had an LCA class last week, and one student turned up. He was the student in the class with additional needs, and he turned up with his mam. I gave him [a] one-to-one class and that was lovely. It was the most that I had communicated with him, because ... he has an SNA.

(Emily, Guidance Counsellor)

Similarly, this Guidance Counsellor described how the move to remote working and online classes had a positive impact on one student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This student suffers from social anxiety and finds attending school difficult:

I have a girl in my third-year class, and she's really enjoying not having to go to school. We had a virtual classroom, and we couldn't stop her talking. She never opens her mouth. She was loving the remote learning. She's not a people person, and she doesn't like interacting. She doesn't open her mouth, and she's always frowning. She was like a different person. She was loving the distance learning.

(Emily, Guidance Counsellor)

5.3 Impact of Post-school Transitions

Respondents were questioned about their opinion on the possible impact of the Covid-19 school closures in terms of post-school transitions for students with and without disabilities. Respondents were concerned with the level of uncertainty for students while awaiting government decisions regarding the LC examination, which was likely to have major effects on their post-school transitions:

The uncertainty of it, yes. Then, what's going to happen with the points? This year, I know some of the highflyers are all anxious now because [they are wondering] will their Leaving Cert all be marked off and will the points go through the roof, and what will that mean for them next year and all? We'll deal with it when we see it.

(Aoife, Guidance Counsellor)

Contrary to the uncertainty experienced by students in the mainstream, with aspirations of attending a higher education institution in September 2020, there was much less

concern for students with intellectual disabilities, who would be transitioning from school to disability support agencies or to other, non-higher educational learning environments:

I know some of our students with SEN have been in touch with some of the questions they have, but they haven't really changed. They're still on the same path [that] they were [on].

(Eileen, SENCO)

As the majority of the transition preparation had been done prior to the school closures, respondents noted that students with intellectual disabilities were less concerned with the outcome of the LC exam and it did not impact on their post-school placement.

5.4 Summary

This chapter has examined the impact of the Covid-19 school closures on students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools. Although this was not among the original aims of the study, it was possible to capture the views of school personnel on how remote learning would impact this group of students. In line with research published both in Ireland and internationally, these findings show how the move to remote learning for students with intellectual disabilities was difficult for some, due to a lack of access to devices in the home and due to the inconsistent use of different communication methods and platforms for learning across schools. The interviews highlight concerns at the school level about child safety issues for some children, as well as the impact that remote learning was having on students' mental health and wellbeing more generally. However, a number of respondents felt that remote learning enhanced the engagement of some students with disabilities, especially those who preferred individual or one-to-one instruction and feedback.

There were marked differences in how respondents viewed the post-school planning for students with and without intellectual disabilities. For students with intellectual disabilities, post-school plans had already decided and were not dependant on the results

of the Leaving Certificate examination. However, for students depending on their Leaving Certificate results, this was a period of uncertainty.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

Both national and international research consistently highlights challenges for some students, as they transition from school to work, further education, and adult life more generally (Smyth et al., 2011). In Ireland, people with intellectual disabilities are significantly underrepresented within the workforce and further and higher education. They are more likely to be unemployed/underemployed, at risk of poverty, and dependent on social welfare than their peers who do not have an intellectual disability (Watson et al., 2017). Disability can be just one of a number of factors impacting on successful transitions from schools, such as a student's social class background and gender or being part of an ethnic minority (McCoy and Banks, 2016). Furthermore, research has shown that a school's culture and the expectation it holds for students can shape or influence the educational decision-making regarding post-school pathways (Smyth and Banks, 2012). What is certain is that students require structured support and guidance in helping them to make decisions about what they would like to do when they leave school. It is generally accepted that formal career guidance and supported transition planning are vital elements for students to be able to make successful progression into post-school settings (McGuckin et al., 2013). For students with intellectual disabilities, this decision-making process requires specialised knowledge of suitable placements by guidance professionals (McGuckin, et al., 2013). However, little is known about the type of career guidance these students receive while at school and there is a limited understanding of the types of transition they make from school.

6.2 Discussion

This study set out to examine transition planning to post-school settings for students who have an intellectual disability within mainstream schools. It has investigated the extent to which current guidance provision in schools prepares these students for education, training, employment and adult life more generally.

While it is generally accepted that transition processes for all students can be complex, there is strong evidence from the current study that this process is particularly problematic for students who have an intellectual disability. Key themes that emerged from this study include: (i) existing transition planning; (ii) responsibility for transition planning; (iii) barriers to effective transition planning; and (iv) the presence (or not) of an inclusive school ethos.

Over the last decade, there has been a noticeable increase in the numbers of students with an intellectual disability attending mainstream schools (McConkey et al., 2016). This increase has been attributed to many factors, including a greater emphasis on educational inclusion within government policies, with the resulting significantly enhanced support provision within mainstream schools, combined with a desire from parents to have their children educated in mainstream settings.

Transition planning for students without an intellectual disability is very well established within mainstream schools. Transition pathways to post-school settings are visible and supported by expertise from guidance personnel, abundant information about post-school options, and a structured pathway designed to access the many options available. However, it is fair to say that this is not the case for students who have an intellectual disability. Very limited choices are available for this student cohort on leaving school. Though having completed their education in a mainstream setting, many find themselves attending adult day centres or local vocational training centres. These limited choices can be attributed to the parallel systems of special and mainstream education, which dictated that accessing mainstream options on leaving school was difficult, if not impossible. The situation was further complicated by the fact that post-school settings for this student cohort were mainly funded by health services.

There was little specific guidance provision or transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities in the schools surveyed in this study. A lack of coherent planning

was evident and often planning for these students took place on a case-by-case basis. It is generally recommended that transition planning for students who have a disability and/or special educational needs should start when they are aged 14. This is mandated by legislation in the United States, where up to three-quarters of students have begun transition planning by this age (Wagner et al., 2014; Newman et al., 2016). There appeared to be limited knowledge among school personnel about the need to begin the planning process in the Junior Cycle. International research has emphasised the importance of developing a personal transition plan for students who have an intellectual disability (Scanlon and Doyle, 2018). This personal transition plan would target key skills required by these students on leaving school, including developing self-awareness, self-determination, and self-advocacy (Newman et al., 2009). This personal transition plan is designed to guide decisions about Senior Cycle education and to ensure that the student who has an intellectual disability is centrally involved in the decision-making process. There was little evidence that school personnel were aware of the importance of developing personal transition plans for this student cohort.

The responsibility for post-school planning for this student cohort within schools was unclear. There appeared to be a blurring of professional roles, with the SENCO taking overall responsibility for transition planning for this cohort. While it is not possible to be definitive, given the study limitations, it is feasible to suggest that a parallel system of transition planning has emerged in schools where Guidance Counsellors take responsibility for non-disabled students and SENCOs address the transition requirements of students who have an intellectual disability. If this practice is widespread, it is of serious concern, as these students are missing out on guidance expertise when making critical life choices that will profoundly influence the future direction of their lives. Post-school transition for students with intellectual disabilities is atypical and it is not always a straightforward process for them to access the requisite knowledge of alternative educational/training options (Aston, 2019; Doody 2015). Many of the Guidance Counsellors interviewed assumed that students with intellectual disabilities usually progressed seamlessly into adult day services under the auspices of the HSE. While this has been the

traditional pathway for this student cohort, there is increasing evidence that these students and their families are less than satisfied with these limited options (Scanlon and Doyle, 2018). Also, parents of students with intellectual disabilities would prefer for transition planning to be provided by the guidance service within mainstream schools (Scanlon and Doyle, 2018). Guidance Counsellors in this study were concerned about their lack of specific training on transition planning for this student cohort and their limited knowledge about the availability of feasible post-school placements. Similar findings were reported by McGuckin et al. (2013), when Guidance Counsellors identified the need for CPD regarding viable options and structured supports available within further and higher education. By default, it appears that SENCOs assume responsibility for transition planning, along with the parents of those students who have an intellectual disability. There was little evidence of any formal tracking system to monitor the progression of students with an intellectual disability into post-school settings, though some enquiries were made on an informal basis.

Significant barriers to achieving successful post-school transitions were identified in this study, including a fear of a future lack of supports in education; a perceived lack of places available in appropriate settings for students with intellectual disabilities; and a lack of knowledge, information and awareness of what is available after school for this group of students. These barriers point to a lack of structured transition pathways for these students, in comparison to the experience of their non-disabled peers. Transition planning is often ad hoc and takes place too late in the school careers of this student cohort to make a significant difference to their post-school life trajectory. Transition planning appears to take place within the context of a lack of information about appropriate post-school settings, apart from adult day services and some vocational training. Great fear exists among school personnel and parents about the availability of adequate supports to enable successful transitions to post-school settings within further and higher educational settings. School personnel were very conscious that these students were receiving significant levels of support within schools and were very aware that bridging supports would be necessary for them to make progression into further and higher education.

Similar concerns were expressed in the study by Mc Guckin et al. (2013), which investigated progression pathways for students who have disabilities and/or SEN into further and higher education. Supported transition models for students who have an intellectual disability in special schools has emerged on a limited basis (Scanlon and Doyle, 2018) and these have proved to be very successful in bridging the gap between school and post-school settings, including employment.

School personnel were also concerned that a lack of academic qualifications could seriously impede the progression to further and higher education of students who have an intellectual disability. The limited level of academic qualifications was attributed to reduced curricula and the lack of follow-on accreditation from Junior Cycle levels 1 & 2 into Senior Cycle (apart from LCA, which is available in only 7 per cent of mainstream schools).

Expectations have been consistently identified as a critical factor in determining whether young people who have an intellectual disability can participate meaningfully within educational environments (Shevlin et al., 2020). Societal perceptions of people who have an intellectual disability have been dominated by stereotypical attitudes and limited expectations, based on judgements around capabilities that are often founded on an incomplete understanding of specific disabilities. Managing parental expectations for their children's post-school progression was frequently mentioned as a concern for school personnel. This judgement appeared to be based on an estimation by school personnel of student academic capability. It could be argued that the capability of this student cohort has been consistently underestimated which has influenced the type of progression pathways traditionally made available to them.

Within this study, an inclusive school ethos was regarded as a critical factor in how provision for students who have an intellectual disability was conceptualised and delivered within the school. School leaders generally described their schools as having an inclusive ethos, though some school personnel added caveats to this perception. Inclusive

schools are usually characterised by a school leader who takes a whole-school approach, promotes collaboration, and includes all marginalised students in all aspects of the school experience (Lyons et al., 2016). School leaders play a critical role in allocating resources, programmes and guidance provision that have a significant impact on the school experiences of students who have an intellectual disability. Schools that adopted a whole-school approach in this study tended to have higher levels of cooperation and coordination among staff in transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities. There was evidence of a shared responsibility among school staff in helping these students to plan for their future.

6.3 Summary of Findings

Whose Role is it Anyway?

The findings indicate that, although students with intellectual disabilities are in mainstream education alongside their peers without disabilities, they receive separate guidance provision. General guidance provision by school guidance counsellors includes guidance as a class; one-to-one guidance sessions; and further and higher education open-days or evenings. The findings show, however, that the role of guidance for students with intellectual disabilities appears to be the responsibility of the school's SENCO.

Barriers and Enablers

The main barriers to successful transitions from school for students with intellectual disabilities centre around a perceived loss of supports, as they move into different educational settings. Respondents also felt that students with intellectual disabilities and their parents often feared a lack of suitable places for students with intellectual disabilities. Some SENCOs reported an issue with parents of students with intellectual disabilities who assumed availability of appropriate places for their children. Respondents also acknowledged that they lacked relevant information about suitable post-school options for this group of students.

The findings suggest that many of these issues could be addressed through increased formal linkages between schools and further and higher education providers.

Furthermore, respondents emphasised the need to ensure that these education providers have adequate resources in place to support these students.

The Importance of an Inclusive Ethos

School leadership and attitudes towards inclusion appear to influence transition planning and guidance for students with intellectual disabilities. The findings show that in schools where the SENCO and Guidance Counsellors are supported by the school principal and encouraged to communicate frequently and share information, transition planning improves for students with intellectual disabilities. However, in schools where an inclusive

ethos is absent, guidance for this group of students is the responsibility of the school SENCO.

The Impact of the Covid-19 School Closures on Students with Intellectual Disabilities

The findings of this report highlight the extent to which the Covid-19 school closures impacted the lives of students with disabilities. School personnel raised concerns about vulnerable students and students with disabilities while learning at home. In particular, the respondents highlighted the impact of remote learning and a lack of face-to-face contact on students' mental health and wellbeing. School closures also appeared to impact on guidance and transition planning, though with much of the emphasis on students whose post-school pathways depended on the LC results. The findings suggest that students with intellectual disabilities, whose post-school placements had often been decided already, were overlooked during this time.

6.4 Recommendations for Policy

Implement a Whole School Approach to Guidance Provision

The findings suggest the need for a whole school approach towards guidance provision to be taken which involves greater communication and cooperation between the role of guidance counsellor and SENCO. The NCGE publication, *A Whole School Guidance Framework* (2017), aims to: “support schools in planning and delivering a comprehensive whole school guidance programme that meets the needs of all students” (p.6). Transition pathways need to be facilitated early in the post-primary school career of this student cohort, guided by knowledgeable professionals who can advise on and facilitate transition into available mainstream post-school education and training options. Employing a knowledgeable professional familiar with post-school educational/employment opportunities for this student cohort to support guidance personnel in facilitating transitions into further/higher education and employment is worth considering.

Expand Post-School Options Beyond Traditional Health-based settings for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Students who have an intellectual disability are in the unique position of traditionally making post-school transitions into health-based settings, rather than educational settings, like their non-disabled counterparts. Though increasing numbers of students who have an intellectual disability are attending mainstream schools, the majority of this cohort do not make post-school transitions into educational settings. More recently, there has been a recognition in official policy guidance that mainstream post-school educational options must become available for this student cohort. For example, the SOLAS Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy recommends that: “the FET system should adopt a more targeted approach to addressing barriers around participation, completion and progression for marginalised and prioritised cohorts” (p.40). Equally, The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (HEA, 2015) aims to ‘ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population’ (p.6). Despite evidence of their

extremely low participation in higher education, students with intellectual disabilities were not highlighted as a priority in the plan.’

Broaden the Scope of Guidance and Raise Expectations for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

The Covid-19 global pandemic has been repeatedly described as “unprecedented times”, which is reflected in the uncertainty of participants when discussing the response to school closures in March 2020, and the potential impact on students who were preparing to transition from compulsory schooling to post-school destinations. The biggest concern raised was that of low engagement of students via online platforms and the struggle to keep the lines of communication open with students considered at risk. While there was concern for students with intellectual disabilities, in terms of keeping them actively engaged in online teaching and learning, there was little focus on their post-school transition preparation, with a general acceptance that students with intellectual disabilities would simply transition to a local disability support provider. Participants expressed empathy towards the uncertainty of the Leaving Certificate process for their final-year students, as they did not know where they would be or what they would be doing after they finished school. This consternation was widespread across mainstream media at the time of data collection. It is difficult not to draw a likeness between the typical uncertainty of post-school outcomes that students with intellectual disabilities experience in a regular year, and the wide-spread experiences of the LC class of 2020, considering the impact of the pandemic (Devitt et al., 2020; Bray et al., 2020). Students with intellectual disabilities have historically faced limited post-school opportunities and this study has highlighted a continued legacy.

Ensure Continuity of Programmes for Students with Disabilities at Senior Cycle

The report highlights the importance of the L1L2 programmes at Junior Cycle for students with intellectual disabilities. The findings suggest the need for continued programme provision for students with intellectual disabilities as they progress through second level into Senior Cycle, however. In light of the ongoing Senior Cycle review, there is a need for

continuity of provision for these students. An accredited Level 4 qualification would, for example, ensure they have appropriate access to the curriculum while in school and have a clear pathway to Level 5 and 6 qualifications when they leave school.

Improving Access and Retention in Further and Higher Education

The nature and characteristics of students in further and higher education is changing. Given the increases in the number of students with disabilities and additional learning needs in compulsory education over the past two decades, it is perhaps not surprising that some of this cohort are making the transition to college or university. The findings of this report around the loss of supports when such students move from school to other educational settings suggests the need for a re-examination of access to, and the retention of, students with disabilities who successfully make the transition to further and higher education. From a policy perspective, there is growing awareness of this in recent years. In January 2021, the Higher Education Authority announced funding of €5.4 million for college campuses to assist students with disabilities, improve technology and physical access, and fund staff training to help students with additional learning needs. While funding for increased supports is welcome, a clear understanding of inclusive education is also essential. This begins before students with disabilities reach college, through the creation of formal linkages between colleges and schools. Inclusion should guide student enrolment, induction, and inclusive teaching, learning and assessment. While there have been individual efforts made by higher education providers to include students with intellectual disabilities within the sector, society has yet to foster a culture of normalising post-school education, training, and meaningful employment opportunities for those of our citizens with intellectual disabilities.

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