Post-School Outcomes and Social Experiences of Past Pupils of a Special School for Mild General Learning Disabilities: How they Inform Transition Curricula

In this article the author outlines the findings of a study investigating the school experiences of, and post-school outcomes for, graduates of a special school. The participants were very positive about their school experiences and the support provided to them at transition. The author uses a range of indicators to evaluate the vocational, social and personal outcomes for the school leavers and makes a number of recommendations for transition curricula.

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INTRODUCTION

Research strongly indicates that students with mild general learning disabilities (GLD) do not fare as well as their peers without learning disabilities with regard to adjustment to adult life. They tend to experience poorer integration into their communities, more restricted social lives, greater rates of unemployment and lower wages. Studies consistently find that only a minority of adults with mild GLD achieve independent living status and most continue to live in the family home (O' Callaghan and Toomey, 1980; Mitchell, 2000). They also tend to have fewer opportunities to engage in social activities and spend more time in solitary leisure activities (Richardson, Koller and Katz, 1993) or in segregated social settings in the company of their peers with mild GLD (Beart, Hawkins, Stenfort-Kroese, Smithson and Tolosa, 2001). Studies also report a high rate of unemployment amongst adults with mild GLD (Richardson, Koller and Katz, 1988a; O'Carroll, 1981; O'Callaghan and Toomey, 1980).

These research findings clearly indicate that the efficacy of transition programmes is crucial in enabling pupils with mild GLD participate fully and purposefully in their communities. The literature outlines a number of issues including the lack of appropriate transition curricular guidelines (Dee, 2000), the inappropriateness of overly academic curricula at transition phase (Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer and Park, 2003; Wehmeyer and Schalock, 2001) and the demands of official bureaucratic procedures (Dee, 2000; Wood and Trickey, 1996; Tisdall, 1996). Self-determination is viewed as an essential aspect of transition planning and an effective means by which to achieve a higher quality of life (Wehmeyer and Palmer, 2003; Wehmeyer and Schalock, 2001; Wehmeyer and Schwartz, 1997; 1998). Work experience and vocational skills (Frank and Sitlington, 2000) and academic skills (Benz, Yovanoff and Doren, 1997) have also been found to be good predictors of better school outcomes. Students have been found to value individualized planning, student-identified transition goals and personal attention from teachers as the most valued components of transition programmes (Benz, Lindstrom and Yovanoff, 2000).

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Over the years, special schools in Ireland have developed transition curricula that emphasise functional academic, vocational, personal and social skills. In recent years these programmes have been reconceptualised to incorporate certification programmes in line with a recommendation contained in the Report of Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (Ireland, 1993). These programmes include Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP), Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) programmes. Whilst research suggests that students with mild GLD in special schools are highly motivated by such programmes (Farrell, 1998), their actual benefit to them in their post-school lives has not been evaluated to date.

THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to evaluate transition curricula for students with mild GLD and inform future provision. Past pupils of a special school for pupils with mild GLD participated as informants, as people with intellectual disabilities have been found to be reliable informants on issues of concern to themselves (Atkinson, 1997). The findings presented in this article represent a summary of the findings of the full study that was undertaken by the author.

Methodology
Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed in the study. The quantitative strategies facilitated the statistical analysis of group data as well as comparison with findings of other available studies. The qualitative research however provided participants with an opportunity to describe personal experiences and opinions. This helps us to facilitate the human dimension in education and reminds us of the impact that education has on daily living.

The Sample
A purposive sample of 120 past pupils from a special school for pupils with mild GLD was selected for this study. There was a 45% response rate with the final participant sample being similar to the original purposive sample in gender composition - twenty nine (53%) were men and twenty-six (47%), women. Each participant had spent all or some of their school years in a special school but all had completed their formal education there and at the time of this study were aged between eighteen and thirty years.

The study was divided into two phases. In Phase I the full cohort of participants was surveyed to obtain information on their demographic background, employment/training outcomes, social and community activities and experiences. Due to geographical limitations, face-to-face interviews, as recommended by Halpern (1990) and cited in Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003), were not feasible. Therefore, participants were given a choice of either a telephone interview or a postal questionnaire with similar questionnaire schedules used in each. Twenty-four participants (44%) chose telephone interviews while thirty-one (56%) completed written questionnaires.

Phase II of the study involved a theoretical sample of two men and three women in their twenties, who were interviewed at length to obtain personal accounts of their post-school lives and retrospective perceptions of their school lives. Two (Louise and Aidan)[1] were working in open employment whilst two others (Deirdre and John) were based in sheltered/segregated training centres. Another (Teresa) was undertaking a course in a mainstream setting.

The Quality of Life Conceptual Framework
The Quality of Life conceptual framework (Halpern, 1993) helped structure and evaluate quality of life outcomes for students with special educational needs (SEN) in transition from school to adulthood. Both the quantitative and qualitative data was conceptually organised using selected indicators of adult adjustment from the domain of 'Performance of Adult Roles'. These indicators were:

(a) **Personal and Social Networks**
(b) **Leisure and Recreation**
(c) **Vocation, Career and Employment**
(d) **Educational Attainment**

This mix of vocational and personal/social domains enables a broader focus that reflects the complexity of quality of life.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

(a) Personal and Social Networks
Of the fifty-five participants, none was married. One woman and two men were parents, with one child each. None of them lived with their child's co-parent. Eighty-seven per cent lived in the family home, half of these being the only child living with their parents. Five men (9%) lived independently; two rented with friends while three lived alone. All these were in full-time employment. Two lived in supported accommodation and returned to the family home each weekend. Participants were overwhelmingly satisfied (95%) with their living arrangements. John, Teresa, Louise and Deirdre spoke about how they regarded their families as an important support in their lives. Nevertheless, they each held an aspiration to have their own place in the future believing that they would have more independence, privacy, a better social life and more opportunities to meet new friends. However, none of them was proactively working towards independent residential status. Aidan, on the other hand, lived on his own close to the family home. This arrangement gave him much cherished independence – "it would give you a chance to do your own thing and you have your own time". He was responsible for all his own personal and financial needs.

(b) Leisure and Recreation
Similar to other research, findings from this study strongly suggest that the social networks of the participants were mainly focused around their families and their peers with mild GLD and they had limited social interaction with people without disabilities. Over 40% of all participants identified family members as their most regular social companions. Just 12% socialized most frequently with their boyfriend/girlfriend. Only 20% of employed participants said that their social life

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[1] Student names used in this article have been changed.

involved their work colleagues while one third of them socialized mostly with family members.

Shopping was the most popular social activity. Home-based and/or family-oriented activities such as watching TV, listening to music and walking were the other frequently cited social activities. Approximately one third of participants never used leisure facilities such as gyms and discos. Disability service users were less likely to go to a pub or a nightclub on a regular basis than their employed/unemployed counterparts. Although there was a high rate of satisfaction amongst participants with their social life, 13% were dissatisfied. Factors such as lack of friends in their communities and lack of transport were the main reasons for their dissatisfaction. Deirdre lamented:

> I don't mix with me friends as often as me sisters do. Their friends do come up to them. Mine don't come up to me. They could be out enjoying themselves and I could be sitting at home…. When I don't be brought places, I don't feel happy. I like to get out and about instead of sitting at home.

The highlight of her social life was when she stayed in supported accommodation every few weeks with her friends from the sheltered workshop and went to the social club for people with disabilities.

Evidence from the qualitative data strongly suggests that lack of self-confidence and poor self-concept with regard to their disability impacted greatly on the ability of a young person with mild GLD to interact with people without intellectual disabilities. Louise described how she found social interaction with her peers in her first job difficult – " I was just very quiet" which was her parlance for her lack of confidence. She admitted that the other girls did try talking to her at first but finally gave up and eventually "they just ignored me". She found making friends with her peers in the special school and in the training centre much easier because "everyone had something in common, you know. I got on very well with everyone there". Whilst John felt that he got on well with his workmates in his supported employment placement, the friendships had never extended to social outings though he would have enjoyed that. However, he was cautious:

> The lads would be alright. They're used to me. Their friends don't understand me…they might be afraid of you, no, I'd be embarrassed. I might say the wrong thing…they would judge you differently…It does make me feel bad. They might react, oh, he's different and all that, yea.

John felt that there were many social activities that he could not do. "I would like to go with my friends to the _____ or something or a disco". However, he believed that his lack of confidence and his disability made it both socially and practically difficult for him. In contrast Aidan "definitely always has something to do" and spent most of his free time in the company of others. He was confident and chatty, had a wide circle of friends and engaged in a wide variety of social activities such as bowling, soccer, going to the pub and weekends away.

(c) Vocation, Career and Employment
Training

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Half of the participants were involved in training programmes with the disability services whilst the others were either in open employment or unemployed. The majority (87%) had continued on to some form of full-time training immediately after graduation from the special school. Three quarters of them went to disability-related training centres whilst the remainder accessed training opportunities in mainstream settings. Seven respondents did not pursue training opportunities after school. Of these, four secured open employment whilst the others (one man, two women) have been unemployed since leaving school.

Most participants felt that it was essential to undertake further training after school in order to obtain qualifications and job skills. Both Aidan and Teresa had completed courses in mainstream settings. These presented significant academic challenges for them. Aidan described how he was "embarrassed" reading in front of his work colleagues during a compulsory on-site course:

> *It was a lot to take in and a lot of writing and a lot of reading. That was my hardest in my four years there… I was nervous but I ploughed through it myself. I put confidence into it and I done it.*

 Similarly, Teresa found the theory classes on her full-time course difficult but was reluctant to ask for help in front of her classmates. She said, "I don't want to (ask for help). Like…I don't know what other people think about disability. None of them know…I'm not comfortable, like".

Employment
Twenty-one people (fifteen men and six women) were in open employment. This represents almost half of the men and one quarter of the women who responded to the survey. Twelve of these (ten men and two women) had full-time employment whilst nine (five men and four women) worked part-time. Of the seven unemployed persons, six were women. Two had been unemployed for over a year while three (including a single parent) had been unemployed for over three years. Two other women held qualifications and had previously been unemployed but were currently doing part-time computer courses to enhance future career opportunities. Three of the women and one man expressed a desire to procure employment.

The unemployment figure in this study is 12%. This was three times the national unemployment rate of 4% at the time of the study (www.cso.ie). Allowing for the fact that this is a very small sample, these results reflect previous research findings that report a higher than average rate of unemployment for persons with mild GLD (Richardson et al., 1988a; O'Callaghan, 1981; O'Carroll, 1981). The women participating in this study were less likely to be in full time employment and more likely to be in part-time employment or to be unemployed. Women with intellectual disabilities, in general, experience poorer vocational outcomes than men with intellectual disabilities (Doren and Benz, 1998; Fulton and Sabornie, 1994; Richardson et al; 1988a). Parenting and homemaking responsibilities, often cited as reasons for this (Doren and Benz, 1998), were not factors in this study as there was only one mother in the sample.

The qualitative data provides some insights into the various employment experiences of the participants. Louise told about some boring jobs she had held. She told of how

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she found it difficult to interact with staff and was a victim of bullying in one job. A female colleague would make "smart comments" like, "I wasn't working well, or you know, that I was too slow and stuff like that. I think that she was trying to get me out of the job, like". However, she did not communicate her grievances to her bosses fearing that they would not believe her. Aidan, on the other hand, had always been able to secure long-term satisfactory employment. He had also had the confidence to seek a totally different type of job requiring a whole new range of skills as a forecourt attendant when he had tired of farm work. He attributed his promotion to manager in this job to the initiative that he had demonstrated, "I done everything right… and I took serious into me job, like I wouldn't be messing at a job or anything like that". Aidan said of himself, "I have the confidence, yea. When I try something new I will go for it. I am not afraid. I will go for it. If it takes me months to get through it, I will go for it". Deirdre was in sheltered employment within the disability services. She complained, "I am doing the same kind of work for the last years and I am getting fed up with it, doing classes and everything". Her ambition was to get a "proper job" saying, "A young lass like me should be outside working".

(d) Educational Attainment
Respondents were asked to nominate the three most useful things that they had learnt in the special school. Functional skills – most specifically, functional literacy skills – emerged from the data as a key requirement for positive employment outcomes and positive self-concept. Aidan noted, "I got good at reading when I was there…I use reading a bit on the job and a good bit of money handling". Other comments such as "we did a good bit of reading but we could have done more if we had the opportunity" illustrate the desire of individuals with mild GLD to feel fully competent and confident in these skills.

Participants also viewed social skills development as a vital part of their educational experience. Teresa felt "yea… I learnt confidence in that school… that was good… and how to get on with people". Activities such as sport and school trips were particularly remembered by participants as "great experiences" for helping them to develop communication and social skills. Aidan commented "you were mixing with people. You were talking to people. You were getting on with people. You were doing things". Teresa viewed vocational skills development as useful to her saying that these gave her confidence in applying for courses and jobs:

> *Going for an interview, walking into an interview, dressing good…just setting up straight…writing out application forms as well. That was very good…how to do it properly…what letters, writing down information and CVs and that…because that's a major part of life.*

Certification
Fourteen participants had completed FETAC certification in the special school. Eleven people felt that it was useful. Three believed that it had enabled them to access mainstream courses. Comments included, "You have your qualifications. Always with you all your life" and "They have given me the confidence to go and do something else from here". Certification was also regarded as an important form of social identity. Teresa spoke about when her school principal announced that they would be doing national certification:

> *To me, it felt like, God, I fit in at last. You know the way, you think, like, me brother and sister. Yes, I can go on to other things……that I can do what other students do…….. I'm doing something the same as me sister and me brother.*

Participants were asked their opinions on Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations, this being the certification model that would be most socially familiar to them. Each individual expressed regret that they had not done these examinations in school and felt that it was both socially and educationally desirable to have completed them. Deirdre suggested, "they probably would have helped me to learn more. Everybody else did them in my family. I'm the only one who didn't". However, they also expressed the belief that their learning difficulties meant that these exams posed enormous challenges for them. Aidan felt that, "I just know that I wouldn't be able to do it" though he would have "jumped at the chance". Teresa also felt, "It's like study, study, study even harder, like, books, books, books, you know. I would have enjoyed doing that but you know, I wouldn't be able to". Similar to past pupils interviewed by Drislane (1991), these past-pupils favoured certification programmes that would not impose the excessive stress of exams on students.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE SPECIAL SCHOOL

The young adults with mild GLD in this study were unequivocally positive about the special school and believed it had contributed favourably to their quality of life. Aidan stated, "in _____I got my chance to climb the ladder…with reading…and all that". Whilst the initial transfer to the special school was traumatic for them all, it nevertheless, brought relief. Louise considered that "it was easier to learn. There weren't so many people in the class". Each participant identified smaller classes, successful learning experiences and teachers who had a personal interest in students and who took time to individually tutor and support students as the distinct advantages of the special school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Conceptualisation of Transition Planning

Co-ordinated, comprehensive transition planning is necessary if adult adjustment is to be successful. Many students with mild GLD may need an extended period beyond the teenage years to properly explore their interests and aspirations and prepare for adult life (Dee, 2000; Field and Hoffman, 1997). As the majority of students with mild GLD from special schools progress to rehabilitative and vocational training (Minogue, 2004), liaison and co-ordination between special schools for mild GLD and post-school learning centres is necessary to ensure continuous and effective planning to meet the transitional needs of students. Providers of transition curricula must endeavour to commit to, implement and evaluate programmes that address the individual needs of persons with mild GLD and in particular the needs of young women who have been shown to have a less favourable work status.

Given that this study employed a relatively small sample drawn from past pupils of one special school, caution is necessary in generalising these results to other contexts. Nevertheless, the results are consistent with other research findings in relation to the vocational outcomes and social experiences of adults with mild GLD (Buttimer and

Tierney, 2005; Mitchell, 2000; Richardson et al., 1988a, 1988b; O'Callaghan, 1981). The evidence derived from this study identifies the need for broadly balanced curricula that will promote and develop the following skills:

- **personal and social skills that will enable students to work, socialise and establish relationships in social and work situations, particularly with non-intellectually disabled peers;**
- **self-determination skills that will enable individuals with mild GLD to become "causal agents" (Wehmeyer, 1996, p. 24) with the ability to manage and control their own lives and to have an active role in the decisions that impact on their lives; (student involvement in their Individual Educational Plan (IEP), particularly in relation to setting post-school transition goals, could provide a meaningful and relevant context in which to develop self-determination skills);**
- **functional academic skills that will allow individuals to participate in employment and social opportunities in adult life.**

The correct balance of each of these components has yet to be identified. Conventional wisdom supports a focus on academic skills. Yet these skills are insufficient if emphasised at the expense of the development of social and vocational skills. The specific type of vocational experiences that lead to meaningful employment opportunities and how these may be facilitated in special schools, post-primary schools and post-school centres requires further investigation.

The Significance of the Educational Environment
The research highlights the central role of the teacher and the importance of the organisational structure of the learning environment, with participants identifying small classes, individualised learning and personal attention as conducive to their learning. In the light of the recent revision of allocation of special educational resources to students with high incidence disabilities, including mild GLD, in primary schools (Department of Education and Science [DES], 2004) and given the increasing numbers of students with SEN entering post-primary schools (IATSE, 2004), these mainstream educational settings must consider how they can most effectively use their available resources to create learning environments that will enable pupils with mild GLD to experience successful learning opportunities. Participants held very positive perceptions about the special school believing that it had enabled their successful learning which previously they had found difficult in mainstream settings. The study's findings echo those of Farrell (1998) and Drislane (1991) who endorse the position of the special school as an appropriate educational setting on the continuum of provision for many pupils with mild GLD in Ireland.

CONCLUSION

The study outlined here was perhaps premature in its endeavour to measure the value of certification in the special school on the vocational outcomes of past pupils. Certification in the form of modified versions of post-primary and/or FETAC programmes are now a major feature of transition curricula in both special schools and post-primary schools for pupils with SEN. The findings stress the need for the development of a broad range of functional academic, vocational, personal and social skills. Therefore, it is important that certification programmes do not come to be

considered the totality of the transition curricular experience for students with mild GLD. These programmes must be monitored in the coming years to assess their relevance to the transitional needs of pupils with mild GLD and to establish their contribution to their post-school social status and vocational outcomes.

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