Transition to the Post-Primary Section of a Special School for Students with Mild General Learning Disabilities

This article is based on the findings of Coogan's (2013) study on transition to the secondary section of a special school for students with mild general learning disabilities; while the full study focused on the perspectives of students and teachers involved, this article reports on the perspectives of students only. Data were collected using in-depth focus group interviews with the students. Analysis of the data highlighted a number of issues including the sense of security students felt in the special setting compared to that experienced in mainstream schools; the importance of the special school explicitly providing opportunities for students to form bonds of friendship; the role of the special school teachers in providing access to the curriculum and in easing the transition itself; and, the importance of a smooth transition for students moving from the junior to the senior section of the school itself. Above all, students proved to be experts in their own setting. The students in this study were clear in their views, beliefs and experiences. It is important that policy makers and those implementing policy consider the views of the young people most impacted by that policy.

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INTRODUCTION

Transitions within the educational system have been examined and discussed in recent years but mainly in relation to mainstream schools, with little attention being paid to the transitioning of students to and within the special school system

(Kelly and Devitt, 2010; Pillay and Di Terlizzi, 2009). Given the legislative requirement to plan for students with special educational needs (SEN) when transitioning within the educational system (Government of Ireland, 2004) and the policy advice arising (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2006), it is important that transition issues for special schools are examined and addressed. The purpose of this study was to investigate the transition into the post-primary section of a special school for students with mild general learning disabilities (MGLD) from the perspectives of students and teachers (Coogan, 2013). It was intended that this study (a) supply an information base on this transition for the school in question, (b) highlight transition difficulties which existed for students, (c) increase awareness about how best to support students during this transition, and (d) determine the effectiveness of school policies and practices currently in place. Finally, it was anticipated that some of the findings might prove useful for the wider special school community.

This study retrospectively examined transition into a special school from the perspectives of a number of students who had already made the transition and from the perspective of teachers in both the special and mainstream schools involved (Coogan, 2013); this article reports on the *student perspective only*. The students made the transition from three avenues - mainstream primary school, mainstream post-primary school and from the primary section of the special school in question.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students undergo a triple passage as they make the move from primary to post-primary school - the formal passage between two different types of establishments; the informal passage between and within peer cultures and friendship groups; and, the physical and cultural passage of adolescence (Hargreaves, Earl & Ryan, 1996). From the literature, two distinct issues appear - social discontinuities and organisational discontinuities - the latter of which consists of both environmental and academic concerns.

Social Discontinuities
It has been found that students with and without SEN share similar worries when making the transition from primary to post-primary, such as, fitting in and making new friends (Irish National Teacher's Organisation [INTO], 2008). A further concern is that just when friendships increase in importance, students with learning difficulties may find themselves unable to make friends (Geisthardt & Munsch, 1996). Additional concerns for students include the fear of losing contact

with friends in their local area and letting their friends know that they have made the transition to a special school (INTO) which may be perceived as a stigmatising educational context.

There is, however, evidence to show that the 'within school' stigmatisation of students with learning difficulties may actually lessen upon enrolment in a special school. A study on the stigmatisation of students with general learning disabilities (GLD) both in mainstream post-primary and special schools found that students attending special schools did not report frequent jeering or isolation in school, while ridicule and exclusion was reported as common among their counterparts in mainstream schools (Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley & Knott, 2006). Sometimes, students can feel that they are now in an environment where they are accepted and included, where they meet other students who have had similar experiences, and where they have more friends (Jacklin, 1998). Barnes-Holmes, Scanlon, Desmond, Shevlin and Vahey (2013) also report that students who have transitioned to the post-primary section of a special school generally appear to be happier than their mainstream peers.

Organisational Discontinuities
In addition to the social concerns, students also have environmental concerns when making the transition to a mainstream post-primary school. These include "getting to class on time, finding lockers, keeping up with 'materials', finding lunchrooms and bathrooms, getting on the right bus to go home, getting through the crowded halls, remembering which class to go to next" (Schumacher, 1998, p. 1). Moreover, the length of the school day, the numbers of teachers and the variety of subjects can pose difficulties during the transition period (Smyth, McCoy and Darmody, 2004). For students with SEN, similar concerns apply, with students also mentioning a more complicated timetable, arranging the books to bring to and from school, and minding loose papers rather than using a copy (Maras & Aveling, 2006). Given that MGLD is partly characterised by difficulties in social adaptive behaviour, the issues above are particularly challenging for this group of students. It must be acknowledged that the studies above refer to mainstream post-primary schools; while there is very little research published on transition to the post-primary section of special schools, given their structure, it might be assumed that such settings are less complex than their mainstream counterparts.

In special schools for students with MGLD, the majority of students (91%) gave academic reasons for leaving mainstream post-primary schools (Kelly and Devitt, 2010). The lack of continuity between primary and post-primary schools in matters of teaching and learning is a further issue which appears in the literature (Huggins

& Knight, 1997; INTO, 2008; Smyth et al., 2004) with teaching methods mentioned as a contributing factor to students making the transition from mainstream post-primary to a special school (Kelly & Devitt).

Role of Teachers/Schools in Preparing for Transition
Murdoch (1986) highlights the dilemma faced by teachers as whether to "emphasise the distinctiveness of different institutional levels, highlight the process of transition, mark it with a degree of ceremony so as to help the child manage a status passage, or, whether it should soften the divide, blur the boundaries and ease the transition so as to reduce the strain of adjustment" (p. 52). It seems this celebration and acknowledgement of the transition is important, with the Special Education Support Service (SESS) (n.d) and NCSE (2006; 2016a) highlighting the importance of preparing students for transition. The aforementioned dilemma is particularly pertinent for teachers preparing students for transition from a mainstream to special school. This is because adolescents are very aware of their learning difficulty, and the fact that they are, or will be attending a special school, and therefore they are more sensitive to the potential stigma (Kelly & Norwich, 2004; Motherway, 2009).

METHODOLOGY
A case study design was chosen for this study as it (a) supplied a grounded assessment of content by imparting contextual data that was grounded in the specific environment being investigated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and (b) was suitable for use with students with SEN as it took the unique character of the individual into consideration (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004).

Data sources and methods of collection were triangulated to ensure that the issue was explored from more than one perspective (Denscombe, 2010). Nine students who were in first year of the post-primary section of 'St. Xavier's' special school (pseudonym) were interviewed using a focus group approach. Three students had come from mainstream post-primary schools; two from mainstream primary school; and, four had transitioned from the primary section of St. Xavier's. Focus groups were carried out with the students as they are a suitable means of gathering information from students who may be non-literate and it was also felt that students would be more comfortable discussing transition with their peers present.

In an effort to ensure reliability, a single interviewer carried out all interviews. Question wording and sequence was similar for each participant (Oppenheim, 2000). Interview schedules were piloted to increase reliability. Measures such as peer debriefing and member checking were used to validate the accuracy of

findings (Creswell, 2003). Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using codes which were then grouped into categories and thereafter into major themes (Denscombe, 2010; Robson, 2002). To avoid bias, efforts were made to be reflective and retain impartiality during the research process (Bell, 2010; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; Robson, 2002).

FINDINGS

All of the students interviewed referred to *social issues* when making the transition to the senior section of the special school. Friendship was a key theme emerging from the data. Students moving across from the junior section of St. Xavier's referred to the importance of friends making the transition with them. One student stated it only took him a "*few minutes"* to settle in "*because like we still had the same friends and all so it was alright" (Graham)*. However, those moving from mainstream primary and post-primary identified the reality of leaving their friends behind as a big fear in the transition process. Furthermore, students who moved to the special school during the academic year described difficulties in breaking into already established friendship groups in the special school. Two students acknowledged their limited social skills and difficulty in making friends.

> *When I came to this school I was scared I wouldn't talk or wouldn't say anything to anybody (John)*
> *[I was worried about] making friends because I'm not good at that (Sinead)*

Having said that, all of the students coming from mainstream schools stated that once there, it was easier to make friends than it had been previously in the mainstream setting and they felt a much greater sense of belonging, more accepted and more included in the special school.

> *It feels good because everyone treats each other the same, like we've all gone through the same (Sinéad).*
> *Everyone had the same problem as we all did and I felt very comfortable (John).*

Given that students transitioning from mainstream schools to the senior section of a special school will most likely be making that move on their own, it is very important that the issue of friendship is explicitly dealt with by the special school. Some of the students interviewed identified strategies put in place by the teaching staff which aided the development of new friendships such as playing games,

organising group work tasks, facilitating introductions to other students and organised lunchtime activities.

> *The work, the group work, when we get put in groups it's like we bond more (Sinead).*

The students transferring from mainstream post-primary schools spoke at length about being bullied in their previous schools and stated that they felt 'safe' in the special school setting.

> *In my old school they used to call me names and say "Go away! Here he comes again" (Richard).*
> *You just sit down all alone (Sinead).*
> *And the people they just make fun of you or throw stuff at you (John).*
> *Walking around your old school you'd be so nervous because you don't know what people are going to say to you (Sinéad).*

It is important to note that the issue of bullying did not form an explicit line of questioning in the interviews but rather, emerged because the students raised it themselves. What is interesting is that the students transferring from the junior section of St. Xavier's expressed mixed views about being in the post-primary section, perceiving some intimidation from older students and a general feeling of being less 'safe' than they had been previously.

Students also spoke about the *structure* of the special school. The students transferring from post-primary schools constantly compared the teachers there to those in the special school setting.

> *You explain it a lot more (Sinead).*
> *You don't just shout at you for no reason (Richard).*

They perceived the teachers to be much stricter than those in their previous schools and viewed this positively because it prevented bullying. Students also liked the predominant one class-one teacher structure of the special school albeit that they had some other teachers for particular subjects. They also perceived the school rules as much simpler and easier to follow than those in the mainstream post-primary setting, whereas the students transitioning from the junior section of St. Xavier's thought the rules were a bit more complex and harder to follow successfully, while the students transferring from mainstream primary schools identified no difference in rules.

The students from both types of primary settings found the navigation of the second level section of the special school a little difficult at first. However, those coming from mainstream post-primary settings seemed to have no difficulty with the geography of the new setting and when comparing it to their old secondary school one stated:

> *It was like a maze, you had to look for the classroom number (John).*

Throughout, all students referred to the helpfulness of teachers in helping them settle in to their new surroundings by showing them around and allowing more freedom of expression which the students viewed as greater staff acceptance of them as individuals.

> *You're allowed wear piercing, earrings and rings and charms, we weren't allowed any of them in my old school (Richard).*

Students also spoke about *curricular issues*. Most of them identified maths as being the most interesting subject with many referring positively to practical subjects such as home economics and woodwork also.

> *In maths, like in algebra today, it's fun and I used to hate it, now it's good (Richard)*
> *It's deadly [with regard to woodwork] (Shane)*

In particular, students who came from mainstream schools talked about the importance of team sports and how much they valued being able to play on teams. When questioned a little more they revealed that they would rarely, if ever, be able to play on a team in their old school because they were never chosen.

> *J: I like basketball because I just wanted to play for a basketball team because I thought it would be good instead of like just..*
> *S: Just randomly sitting there*
> *J: Yea*
> *I: Did you play any of those things in your last school?*
> *J: No, they didn't have any teams or, well they did, they only had a football team and I wasn't allowed to join because I wasn't good enough.*

> (I – Interviewer, J – John, S – Sinead)

The students from the junior section of St. Xavier's expressed mixed feelings about homework and workload, with some anxiety evident in relation to their

own perceptions of their ability to cope with the demands of the post-primary curriculum. Conversely, all those who transferred from mainstream schools spoke positively of their ability to engage with the workload; some attributed this to their own growing maturity while others believed that the help provided by the teachers in the special school enabled them to access the curriculum more effectively.

> *You explain it a lot more (Sinead).*

All students reported greater levels of self-confidence, self-belief and portrayed a positive academic self-concept.

Overall, students were very positive about their move to the post-primary section of St. Xavier's. They felt that visits to the school prior to enrolment helped them when they actually arrived, with the students coming from the junior section further commenting on the usefulness of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) systems that were in place in helping them to access the curriculum and to settle into the school. Students were generally happy to be in the new school; in some cases, happy to have left their old schools. Some aspects of the transition were viewed in a different light depending on where the students are transferring from. The students from the junior section of the school seemed to settle in quicker than their mainstream peers and the physical move from one building to another also seemed to be important for this group.

DISCUSSION

It was apparent that the students transferring from mainstream post-primary schools had experienced bullying and isolation in those settings. This corresponds with findings by Kelly and Devitt (2010) who found the majority of students with MGLD who made the transition to a special school reported incidences of upsetting behaviour by others in their mainstream school. It also supports the findings of other studies which highlight the social difficulties and isolation, experienced by students with SEN in mainstream education (Cooney et al., 2006; Jacklin, 1998; Kelly & Devitt). The perceived absence of bullying in the post-primary section of the special school may be due to the different structure therein in terms of range of teachers, day-to-day procedures and processes and possibly, the fact that the peer group context is different and perceived as less hierarchical than that in the mainstream context. Furthermore, the fact that the biggest group of students transitioning to special schools for pupils with MGLD are those aged 12 years or more, indicates that many of these students are not having their needs met in the mainstream post-primary environment. On the one hand, it could be

viewed that the existence of the special school provides choice for this group of students and their parents in terms of educational settings. Alternatively, it might be concluded that the very existence of this choice alleviates the onus on and responsibility of mainstream post-primary schools to adequately provide for this cohort of students. Further, since the introduction of the General Allocation Model (GAM) of resourcing in mainstream primary schools (Department of Education and Science, 2005), many students with MGLD are not being formally identified and while the structure of the mainstream primary system may allow for effective inclusion of these students it would appear that the complexity of the post-primary system provides challenges that particularly impact on the cognitive and social skills of this cohort of students; an issue that may not be adequately addressed by schools and teachers who are unaware of the existence of MGLD and therefore, the particular learning difficulties this group of students may experience.

The primary, 'one class-one teacher' structure of St. Xavier's was found to be a factor in facilitating transition, along with the provision of a low teacher-pupil ratio and teachers' understanding of the needs of students with MGLD. This correlates with Kelly and Norwich (2004) who found that students possibly receive more positive support from teachers in special schools than mainstream schools. This pivotal role of the teacher was also noted by Ganeson and Ehrich (2009) and O'Brien (2004) who viewed this facilitation of interaction as vital during the transition process. In this study, students who made the transition from the primary section of the special school found the transition significant. There was a sense that they were moving on because they were moving 'across the road' to the post-primary building. The perceived importance of the distinction between the primary and post-primary section of the school for students is noteworthy. Furthermore, the marking of the transition by means of a graduation ceremony was seen as significant in acknowledging students' rite of passage. Many special schools are different to St. Xavier's School in that they are confined to a single building. However, the school building notwithstanding, it is important that special schools provide a clear divide between the primary and post-primary sections so as to provide students with a sense of transition. Furthermore, in line with recommendations from Murdoch (1986), the SESS (nd) and the NCSE (2006), it is important that schools recognise and celebrate the transition with a graduation ceremony, acknowledging the process of transition and preparing the students.

This study also found that students with MGLD experienced academic difficulties in mainstream post-primary education. While much of the literature (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009; O'Mara et al., 2012) has attributed this to the exam-centred curriculum, it must be acknowledged that these

students successfully complete some Junior Certificate examinations in the special school as part of the JCSP, therefore, raising the question of whether it was the curriculum that these students could not cope with or rather, the manner in which it was delivered. Griffin and Shevlin (2007) maintain that teachers in special education settings will access the curriculum for the students by utilising suitable methodology, materials and resources and also by developing an important and empowering relationship with the student. Barnes-Holmes et al. (2013) also found that special school staff provide a strong supportive environment which is accepting for students with SEN and attributed this as to why students attending special schools appear happier than their mainstream counterparts. Furthermore, the role of the special school in providing students with an opportunity to take part in team sports is something which students in this study undoubtedly valued. Students who had attended mainstream post-primary schools and had experienced exclusion from team sports particularly valued this opportunity.

There are a number of limitations with this study. Most obviously, the study focuses on a relatively small number of participants and was based in just one special school for students with MGLD. Therefore, the results may not be generalisable to other special school settings. On the other hand, the use of in-depth interviews and particularly the resultant views of the students, have provided a collection of rich data which successfully illuminated issues in St. Xavier's School. While the perspectives of students and teachers were sought in this study, it is acknowledged that other groups, namely parents and Special Need Assistants (SNAs) could have made a valuable contribution to the data but given the timescale of this study it was not possible.

CONCLUSION

One of the main findings highlighted by this study was the role of the special school in contributing to the child's well-being and happiness, as recognised by Ware et al. (2009). The unconditional inclusion of students in sport in special schools is an issue which warrants further research and could, perhaps, be yet another role of the special school, one which was not acknowledged by Ware et al. It is also necessary that the efficiency of current educational models of support for students with SEN in mainstream education be investigated. With specific reference to students with MGLD, there should be an examination of the GAM at primary level and existing supports for students with MGLD at post-primary level should be evaluated.

Since this study was completed, the NCSE has produced a series of documents intended to provide support for teachers, parents and students in relation to transition between a range of contexts. One publication focuses particularly on transition from mainstream to special settings (NCSE, 2016b) and incorporates many of the recommendations arising from the findings of this study. Interestingly, while it does refer to transition planning, it does not explicitly refer to the role of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) in transition planning as outlined in IEP Guidelines (NCSE, 2006). While this article has reported upon findings of this study from the perspective of the students, it should be noted that there were a number of other findings arising from interviews with teachers in all three settings. One of the key findings arising from that part of the study was the lack of IEPs in place for this cohort of students whether focusing on transition or not. This may have been because most of these students probably did not have a formal diagnosis of MGLD while in primary school, only accessing the relevant assessment procedure when seeking to gain entry to the special school and therefore, they were not in receipt of an IEP. Whatever the reason, this is an aspect of practice which would benefit from further research especially as reference to the IEP appears to be absent in the new transition guidelines.

As recognised by the INTO (2008) "educational transition is an adaptive process for children". This study sought to identify aspects of this process of adaptation for students transitioning into the post-primary section of a special school from three avenues with a view to informing and improving practice. Above all, students proved to be experts in their own setting. The students in this study were clear in their views, beliefs and experiences. It is important that policy makers and those implementing policy consider the views of the young people most impacted by that policy. Their expertise in this area should be valued and given due respect.

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