Transition for Students with Special Educational Needs from a Mainstream Post-Primary School in a Disadvantaged Urban Area to the Post-School Environment: An Exploratory Case Study

In this article the author outlines the findings of a case study investigating the issue of transition from a mainstream second level school to post-school options for students with a diagnosed special educational need (SEN). The author uses interviews and a small scale telephone follow-up study to track the outcomes and to gain an insight into the reality of transition for the entire cohort of forty-four students with SEN who left the school in the period from 2004 to 2008.

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INTRODUCTION

Making plans and decisions about what to do after school can be challenging for any young person, but is particularly so for those with special educational needs (SEN) (Ward, Mallet, Heslop and Simons, 2003). Research suggests that students with SEN are less likely to enrol in post-secondary education and more likely to be unemployed (Blackorby and Wagner, 1996; Benz, Lindstrom and Yovanoff, 2000).

The policy of inclusion is possibly one of the driving forces behind the increased international focus on transition. The 1990 and 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the US and the SEN Code of Practice 1994 and 2001 in the UK, legislate for individual transition planning for all students with SEN. In Ireland, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (Ireland, 2004) sets out post-primary schools'

legal obligation to address students' transition needs. Unfortunately, with the current suspension of the roll out of the Act, Ireland will continue to lag behind other countries in its provision of transition planning. Moreover, the current economic recession may limit employment and vocational training opportunities for all students. While recent Irish research by Fahey (2005) and Gilligan (2007) explored the issue of transition and post-school outcomes for students with a mild general learning disability (GLD) in a special school setting, the current study attempts to address the issue of transition for students with various SEN from an inclusive mainstream post-primary school perspective.

The present study took place in a mainstream post-primary community school in a disadvantaged urban area, but without Delivering Equality in Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) status. The school population is approximately 800 with over 100 students currently with an assessed SEN. The school's ethos is both inclusive and holistic with a pastoral tradition that has remained strong since the school's foundation and meeting the needs of the students with SEN is viewed as a priority by the management. The school offers the traditional Junior Certificate (JC), Leaving Certificate (LC), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and a Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) course in Business. The students with SEN in this particular study comprise of all students with a diagnosed difficulty for which the school had a written report from the relevant professional and included mild GLD, borderline mild GLD, specific learning difficulty (SLD), emotional behavioural disturbance (EBD) and dyspraxia.

Four distinct research questions are addressed in this study:

- What do the students with SEN do when they leave school?
- Why do some students with SEN leave school early?
- What are the factors that contribute to a successful transition?
- How can the school improve the transition process for students with SEN?

A predominantly qualitative exploratory case study research strategy was employed with a small scale telephone follow-up to investigate the post-school outcomes of forty-four past students with documented SEN who left the school in the period 2004 to 2008.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusion/Transition

Transition outcomes for students with SEN are considerably less favourable than their peers in general education classrooms (Scanlon, 2008). Scanlon maintains they are less likely than many of their peers to finish secondary education, more likely to end up in the 'corrections systems, less likely to participate in and complete post-secondary education, they hold lower status and more transient employment and have less independence, security and satisfaction in their adult lives. It is no longer enough that the physical aspect of including the student in the general classroom is achieved. The development of suitable curricula to meet their needs, including their transitional needs has to be addressed. It would seem that special schools are traditionally.more adept at delivering careers education and guidance than mainstream schools and special school teachers have a better understanding of their role as careers educators than their mainstream colleagues (CERI, 1986; OFSTED, 1995; Derrignton, 1997; Bowers et al., 1998 as cited in Dee, 2000). Dee warns that as more young people are included in general provision, "due regard must be paid to ensuring the access of all pupils to a comprehensive and supportive careers education programme" (p. 144).

In the United States, the rate of students with SEN in either employment, training or further/higher education in 2003 was seventy-five per cent, a five per cent increase on 1985 figures (Wagner, Newman, Cameto and Levine, 2005). The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) demonstrated that the drop-out rate of young people with SEN in 2003 was 30% (Wagner et al., 2005). While this had decreased by 17% between 1987 and 2003, the differences between those with SEN who did and did not complete school highlight the challenges early school leavers face (Wagner et al.). For example, early school leavers did not share in the significant increase in post-secondary education enrolment experienced by youth with SEN, with fewer than one in ten attending any post-secondary education since leaving school (Wagner et al.). Arrest rates for students with SEN who drop-out of school are alarming, estimated at seventy-three per cent for students with an EBD and at for sixty-two per cent students with learning disabilities (Thurlow, Sinclair and Johnson, 2002). It is reported that over eighty per cent of individuals incarcerated in the US are high school drop-outs (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1995 as cited in Thurlow et al.).

In Ireland, there is unfortunately a paucity of longitudinal data on retention rates and post-school outcomes specifically for students with SEN. Fahey's 2005 study

which evaluated transition curricula for students with mild GLD found that eighty-seven per cent of the participants had continued on to some form of full-time training immediately after graduation from the special school with three quarters of them going to disability related training centres. The unemployment figure in this study was twelve per cent which was three times the national unemployment rate of four per cent at the time of the study. Interestingly, the drop-out rates from the NLTS are relatively favourable when compared with the drop-out rates for the general Irish population. The latest figures reveal that approximately twenty per cent of students drop-out before the Leaving Certificate (LC) exam, with this increasing to almost thirty per cent in the Dublin area (Central Statistics Office, 2008). Pertinent to this study is research in the US which found that students with SEN typically represent a greater proportion of the school population in low socio-economic and underachieving urban communities (Orfielf, Losen, Wald and Swanson, 2004 cited in Scanlon, Saxon, Cowell, Kenny, Perez-Gualdron and Jernigan, 2008).

It is possible to argue that students with SEN will probably always lag behind their regular education peers to a certain degree, and that transition is in the best state it has ever been (Scanlon et al., 2008). However, Scanlon et al., maintain that the intention of transition planning is that we do *more*, "Without successful transition, special education has not failed merely to attain high standards for achievement; it has failed" (p. 131).

METHODOLOGY

This exploratory case study investigated issues of transition and post-school outcomes for students with SEN in a mainstream post-primary school. This has not been examined in the Irish context previously. A strategy of purposive sampling was employed with the criterion of maximum variation influencing the sampling strategy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002). In an effort to elicit multiple varying viewpoints, past students were invited to participate based on their gender, the nature of their SEN and the point of exit from school. Current students and parents were selected based on the degree of success they or their son/daughter is experiencing or has experienced. The perspectives of the key stakeholders were central to this predominantly qualitative study. To elicit a detailed description of the reality of transition for students with SEN ten semi-structured interviews and two focus groups were conducted (see Tables 1-4 below).

Table 1: Present student interviewee profiles

Laura

Laura is sixteen years old. She has a general learning difficulty. She completed her JC in 2007 and is currently in fifth year in school. She is doing well in school and has plans to become an air-hostess on completion of her LC. She has a part-time job since last year in the local shopping centre.

Sarah

Sarah is sixteen years old. She has a general learning difficulty. She completed her JC in 2007 with a high level of support and intervention. She is currently in Transition Year which she is not enjoying. She does not know what she will do after school.

Table 2: Past student interviewee profiles

Phillip

Phillip is twenty-one years old. He has a specific learning difficultly. He reveals in his interview that he suspects he also has ADHD. He completed his JC in 2004 and progressed to Transition Year. However he left school at the beginning of fifth year in 2005. He began an apprenticeship as a mechanic but was let go due to, according to him, his poor concentration skills. Since then he has done various jobs including working with his father, barman, and a period in the army. However, he is currently unemployed and planning on starting a college course in security this autumn. He is currently banned from driving.

Martin

Martin is twenty-two years old. He has a general learning difficulty. He completed his JC in 2003 and progressed to Transition Year. He left school in 2004 before starting fifth year after securing an apprenticeship as a plasterer. However he felt it was "a dirty messy job" and left that and got a job as a welder. He was working as a welder for the past few years until he decided to go travelling in Australia. While he is at home at present for a few months he is returning there shortly to continue working in a fruit farm there. He intends to stay there for another year or so and then return to Ireland to work again as welder.

Conor

Conor is twenty years old. He has a general learning difficulty. He passed his LC and graduated from school in 2007. He secured an apprenticeship as an electrician through his father's contacts in the business immediately after school. However, he left this when he was half way through it as he felt he was treated like "a piece of dirt on the end of a shoe." Since then he worked in a clothes shop, but that was only for the Christmas period. Conor is currently unemployed but is planning on doing a PLC course in sports/physiotherapy in the autumn.

Barry

Barry is nineteen years old. He has a general learning difficulty. He passed his LC and graduated from school in 2008: He has just completed his first year in Electrical Engineering in the local Institute of Technology. After a further four years he will receive a degree. He also has a part-time job in a shop in the local shopping centre which he has maintained for the past two years.

Table 3: Staff focus groups

Breakdown of Participants in the Staff Focus Groups	
Focus Group 1:	**Focus Group 2:**
Art Teacher	Career Guidance Teacher
English and Geography Teacher	Learning Support/Resource Teacher
English and History Teacher	Learning Support/Resource Teacher
English and Religion Teacher	Senior Year-Head
Maths and Science Teacher	

Table 4: Representatives from post-school settings

> The Manager of the Centre of Teaching and Learning (previously known as the Education and Learning Support Unit) from the local Institute of Technology (IT).
>
> The Senior Career Guidance Counsellor from a local College of Further Education.
>
> *Note: These institutes were selected as it had emerged from the data collected on past students that those who pursued further/third level education attended these particular settings.*

The predominantly qualitative data from the twelve interviews was further reinforced and verified through a small scale telephone follow-up study. Attempts were made to contact a total of forty-four students (thirty-one who graduated and thirteen who left school early between the years of 2004-2008) and thirty-two were successfully contacted, resulting in a credible response rate of seventy-three per cent. In addition, archival psychological reports, Department of Education and Science (DES) documents detailing the allocation of SEN hours, school records detailing graduation year groups, guidance department records and Junior Certificate (JC) and LC statements of results were analysed and cross-checked to provide detailed information on transition in the school.

Analysis of Data/Ethical Issues
All the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. To analyse the interview data, thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was implemented. Both methodological and data triangulation were employed to enhance the study's dependability. Researcher reflexivity was maintained through continuous reflection in a research journal and respondent validation was used to reduce researcher bias in the interview process (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; Robson 2008). All participants were informed about the purpose of the investigation, their right to withdraw from the study, and the possible risks or benefits from participation in the research. Plain language statements were read aloud to all participants and consent forms obtained. Participants were informed that every effort would be made to protect their anonymity. The researcher's close involvement with the school, the students and the parents was both a strength and limitation of the study. Access and consent were achieved with relative ease, however established relationships with the

participants may have given rise to respondent acquiescence (Robson, 2008). While the findings from the study are both valuable and relevant because they are based on data from one school, generalisability to other settings is restricted. The study was further limited by time constraints and the small scale nature of the research project.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The themes that emerged from the data were organised and grouped in relation to the four research questions outlined above.

What do Students with SEN do Initially on Leaving School?
First, the initial post-school outcomes and the current status of students with SEN in the study were examined. A total of thirty-one students with a documented SEN (Table 5) graduated from the school between the years from 2004 to 2008.

Table 5: Gender and SEN details of graduate group 2004-2008 (n=31)

Category	Male	Female	Total
Mild General Learning Disability	5	2	7
Borderline Mild General Learning Disability	5	3	8
Specific Learning Difficulty	9	4	13
Specific Learning Difficulty and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	1	0	1
Specific Learning Difficulty and Dyspraxia	0	1	1
Specific Learning Difficulty and Emotional Behavioural Disorder	1	0	1
GROUP TOTAL	21	10	31

Only four of the thirty-one students who graduated in the period 2004-2008 failed to secure five passes in their LC exam. The findings suggest that in the past five years the majority of the students with SEN had positive initial transitions to post-school options with seventy per cent progressing to further/higher studies or training. Three went to University, three to an Institute of Technology, eleven to a College of Further Education, four to FÁS Training, seven into employment, two were unemployed and one was unknown. These findings compare favourably to

statistics from the US NLTS-2 where it was reported that only thirty-two per cent of students with SEN had enrolled in further/higher education and training (Wagner et al., 2005). Recent US statistics also reported that only approximately twenty-five per cent of students with learning difficulties (seemingly of a specific nature) go on to post-secondary education (Edgar cited in Scanlon et al., 2008).

The three students (one male and two females) who progressed to university all had an SLD. Of the two students (both male) who had made the most unsuccessful transition and were unemployed, one had a GLD and the other had an EBD and a SLD. In relation to the seven students who were in employment, two of those were working with their fathers in the family business and this finding is consistent with literature which documents the reliance of students with SEN on family members to secure employment (Frank, Sitlington, Cooper and Cool, 1990; Heal and Rusch, 1996). A small scale follow-up study was conducted via telephone in order to ascertain whether the initial success of these students' transfers had been sustained. It was found that almost seventy-five per cent were in higher/further education, training or employment, a finding that is consistent with results of the US NLTS-2.

Why do Some Students with SEN Leave School Early?
In the period 2004 to 2008, thirteen students with SEN (almost thirty per cent of the cohort with SEN) left school early (Table 6). However, all of these early school-leavers attained a JC qualification before opting to leave school.

Table 6: Gender and SEN details of early school-leavers group 2004-2008 (n=13)

Category	Male	Female	Total
Mild General Learning Disability	4	0	4
Borderline Mild General Learning Disability	3	1	4
Specific Learning Difficulty	4	0	4
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	1	0	1
GROUP TOTAL	12	1	13

Interestingly, the most recent figures from the NLTS-2 report that the drop-out rate for students with SEN in the US was also thirty per cent. Encouragingly for the school, the Central Statistics Office reported in 2008 that the drop-out rate in the

general population was twenty per cent but that increased to thirty per cent in the Dublin area. While a drop-out rate of almost thirty per cent seems high, the last student with documented SEN to leave the school before completing their LC was in December 2006. This would suggest that there has been a significant increase in the retention rate of students with SEN in the academic years 2006-07 and 2007-08. Comments from Staff Focus Group 2 seem to suggest that the formation of the National Education Welfare Board to monitor attendance, and the recent global downturn in the economy, could be possible factors influencing students' intentions to remain in school. Precursory approximated updated figures for the subsequent years 2008-2011 reveal that the number of students with SEN who left without graduating was nineteen. While this figure shows a marked increase, interestingly six of these students are members of the travelling community, a minority group in our school who we find difficult to retain until graduation. None of the early school leavers in this study in 2004-2008 years were of the travelling community, which would suggest that the figures are therefore relatively similar and that the significant increase in retention rates in 2007-08 was unfortunately not sustained.

Scant information was available in the school on the initial post-school outcomes for these thirteen students who left school early in the period 2004-2008. It was only known that one of them left to pursue an apprenticeship training course. Interestingly, all of the group were male except for one. The telephone follow-up revealed that three were unemployed; one was employed; one was undergoing FÁS training; one was a full-time parent, one was travelling abroad and six were uncontactable.

School Related Factors
Data from Staff Focus Group 1 revealed that many teachers were of the opinion that the demanding nature of the LC Syllabus was a factor in students with SEN leaving school early. It was also felt that absenteeism in the senior classes (which is a serious problem), is often a result of the student's inability to cope with the demands of the curriculum. However, this was not reflected in the interviews with two past students who were early school-leavers. Phillip claimed he *"just got fed up"* in school and when questioned further replied *"just a teacher ... I hate that teacher."* Martin pinpoints a conflict in third year with a particular teacher as the starting point to his disillusionment with school, *"we had a run in, me and her like and that was it ... then when I came back the next year, I didn't get on with the Year-Head so like it just all spiralled downhill from there like. "* These findings are consistent with the Irish literature that reports school factors and student/teacher relations as the primary reasons for leaving school (Boldt, Devine, MacDevitt and Morgan, 1998; Nugent, 2003).

Family Factors

Family involvement emerged as a crucial factor in determining whether students with SEN complete their second level education and experience successful transitions (Morningstar, Turnbull and Turnbull, 1995; Grigal and Neubert, 2004; Wehman, 2008). As mentioned above, Phillip cites his reason for leaving school as being primarily due to a particular teacher, however when questioned on whether his parents ever came to the school to discuss the issue with management, he replied *"Nah, I think they were fed up of me at the same time as well ... "* In contrast Kevin's mother clearly acted as advocate for her son, *"I said over my dead body, I have struggled so far with this child, there was no way I was letting him walk out of anywhere. "* When Barry was questioned on why he was so focused on completing his LC he replied *"It was probably me Mam, actually more or less me brothers cause I knew I'd get the slaggings if I didn't finish school and go on to college or whatever else but!"* Similar findings are reported in reviews of follow-up studies in the USA where it is argued that post-secondary attendance is strongly associated with family background (Levine and Norse, 1998). Teacher I emphasised the importance of the role of the parents, *"So much depends on the parents ... that is the bottom line, it's the parents. What do the parents expect? What do the parents hope for? And then you work with them. "*

Self-Determination

A possible link between self-determination and a completion of post-primary education and successful transitions was noted. Kevin's mother, when asked if Kevin knew what he wanted to do after school, replied, *"Well, he always wanted to be a nurse so ... from when he was very young ... that was always his first choice".* Kevin's self-belief and self-determination however, are not reflected in the replies of Phillip and Martin, the two early school-leavers. When asked if he knew what he wanted to do when he left school, Martin replied *"No, never. I didn't know what I was going to do when I left school, like. "* Similarly, Philip stated, *"I'd just keep on changing and changing and changing ... there was never one positive thing I wanted to do ... cause my mind just kept ... something to do with me concentration. "*

Sarah, a present senior student in the school who is at risk of leaving early, seemed to lack a sense of realism about her future as the only thing she would like to be is a singer. This is consistent with research by Scanlon et al. (2008) where statuses such as urban, disadvantaged and low level of achievements predicted that the students' aspirations were unrealistic for them. When probed if she would be disappointed if her singing career didn't work out, she simply replied, *"Yeah, but what can I do? "* It would seem from these comments that Sarah does not feel as if she is in control of her own destiny. Her views are also in stark contrast to those

of Laura, another senior student who is doing very well in school and has achievable goals of becoming an air hostess or a make-up artist. When asked the question of where she saw herself in ten years time she answered with resolve and determination, *"just like, to achieve what I want."* The representative from the local IT suggested that *"I think we need to someway try and instil in them that the way you're viewed when you go to third level is slightly different ... you'll have access to things but the idea then is you need to then take on board and control your own destiny."*

Transition Year
A sub-theme related to the suitability of Transition Year (TY) also emerged from the data. Martin claimed that *"once I finished the Junior Cert, when I went into transition year, that's when it all went haywire like ... you know they didn't give you any extra help in there, ... I got so worked up about school in fourth year, I was like, this isn't for me like."* Similarly, Sarah's mother regrets the decision she made for her daughter to do transition year, *"we thought that for the extra year it would be better for her ... that's what we thought but it didn't, it was actually the wrong idea I think for her to go into transitional year. I wouldn't recommend it for a child that has a learning difficulty you know."* Sarah's mother felt that her daughter had *"found it very hard to settle in with the group"* and remarked, *"I don't know what happened in fourth year, she's just gone straight back."*

These views were countered somewhat by the teachers' perspectives on the benefits of transition year for a student with SEN, *"Ironically transition year is the only year that they don't get learning support and they blossom because there isn't an academic focus and there's a huge emphasis on the holistic child and socialising"* (Teacher G). Teacher F was of the opinion that transition year was beneficial due to the amount of *"confidence building in that year."* Therefore, it would seem that transition year can be a great experience for certain students, but both parents and students should be well informed when making the decision regarding the provision of learning support and the structure of the year.

A Sense of Regret
Irrespective of the factors that caused students with SEN to exit post-primary prematurely, there was a resounding sense of regret felt by the past students. Phillip, when asked about his time in school remarked, *"I wish I never had left ... I wish I had done my Leaving ... I just wanted to go, get out, but now I regret it, I regret it something terrible"*. Similarly, in the course of his interview Martin spoke of his regret at not completing his education *"I could've had the opportunity to go to college like after, if I had of done my Leaving Cert ... cause I got so wound up about*

school like, I made a stupid decision. " Both past students also express their desire to do their LC in the future, as Martin says, *"I always think to meself, Jesus I'd love to go back and do me Leaving Cert but ... ".*

What Factors Contribute to Successful Transitioning?
The third research question referred to the elements that the participants identified as key to a successful transition.

Learning Support
The findings suggest that both parents and students strongly value the extra help that is provided through the learning support withdrawal classes. Phillip suggested that learning support was responsible for exam success in the JC, *"If I didn't get the help I wouldn't have passed, I know that. "* Sarah's mother was of a similar opinion, *"Third year she did good, she got help and that helped her ... she got learning support and that helped her to get through her Junior Cert. "* When asked if she thought her daughter would be able to cope with the LC, she was adamant that *"if she got the proper help she would".*

Self-Identification/Disclosure
An important finding concerned the issue of self-identification and the wider disclosure by students and parents of disability or learning difficulties. The representative from the College of Further Education commented that *"the students who fair worst and tend to drop out are the ones who would prefer to go unidentified and would leave their difficulties unrecognised. "* She suggested that it would be beneficial if post-primary schools discussed with students *"the positive benefits of revealing the disability going on to third level or to a Post Leaving Cert course. "* To tackle the self-identification issue with a student, it is first necessary to ensure that the student is aware of their particular needs. The evidence would suggest that overall there is a distinct lack of self awareness regarding the student's knowledge of their precise SEN. Phillip claimed that he only became aware of his SLD since leaving school *"And I'm dyslexic, I only found that out as well. "* Sarah's mother relays her reluctance to discuss with her daughter her learning difficulties, *"I don't want Sarah to feel different.. and I think if I try and tell her that, tell her that she's really behind now, I don't know what effect that would have on her life. "*

Someone To Talk To
Linked to this issue of self-identification and disability disclosure, it emerged from the data that parents thought it important for students to have somebody in the school with whom they had developed good relationship and with whom they

could talk if they needed. While this issue is discussed infrequently in the transition literature, the importance for students with SEN to have an emotional support base throughout their lives is acknowledged (Skinner and Lindstrom, 2003).

How Can Schools Improve the Transition Process?
The fourth and final research question investigated how the school can help the students with SEN to have the best possible transitions from the school to post-school options.

Provision/Structure of Learning Support
While the provision of learning support was valued very highly by both students and parents, the data revealed improvements could be made to both its structure and format. An inequity in the provision of support between the junior and senior cycle with a lack of help for senior cycle students was reported. Conor commented that *"I didn't get as much help as I'd like, ... once you go past like Junior Cert stage, it's like it's down to yourself now like.* It was also suggested by the staff that the copious amounts of help students receive for the JC serves to make their adjustment to senior cycle more difficult. The evidence also indicates that the format of learning support provided for senior students should be restructured and that the SEN department should run intensive programmes for 4-6 weeks on a topic and then stop and review. The view was also expressed that learning support for senior students should involve negotiation with the students regarding the focus of the help offered.

Barry admitted that he was embarrassed about availing of learning support during the senior cycle and that he *"felt a bit, stupid"* and that he *"wasn't maybe as smart as everyone else."* It may be more appropriate to offer extra help to all students who need it in senior cycle, along with the provision of more team-teaching to improve this situation. Barry also alluded to the fact that the benefit of the help provided deepened dependence on the relationship between the teacher and student, *"I had a teacher I didn't really like and I didn't go to her and the help wasn't really appreciated from me, but in sixth year I got a teacher I liked and that helped out a lot."* Greater consideration should be given to matching teachers with students and action taken swiftly yet discreetly to resolve mismatches so as to ensure the student does not lose out.

Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)
There were very conflicting views on the issue of whether the school should offer the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). One teacher felt that when the issue was

raised in previous years it was decided that it was better to have high expectations for young people, *"we have students who are in the low category getting a pass Leaving Cert ... and that's amazing. The delight for a young person to get their Leaving Cert, the same as everyone else, it puts them at a level playing pitch, you know? It would be very easy to lower the expectations you see, and what we're doing is we're raising the expectations of, of a lot of people who have learning difficulties in this place and they seem to be, you know, getting there"* (Teacher F). However, other teachers openly expressed their convictions that the school must reassess the issue of introducing the LCA. Teacher C commented that *"I really think they're weaker and weaker and the Leaving Cert doesn't suit some of our students that we have now and we can keep going around this and around this but really at the end of the day, they're not coping. "* The data suggests that it was subject teachers, and not the specialised members of the staff who were strongly in favour of its introduction. Interestingly, the representative from The College of Further Education felt there was a correlation between the LCA and success at PLC courses, *"the students who have done the LCA actually do very well on FETAC because it's project based and continuous assessment. "* This finding is significant due to the fact that over thirty per cent of students with SEN who completed their LC in the last four years transferred to a PLC course.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study suggests that there has been a significant improvement in the retention rate of students with SEN in the senior cycle in the years from 2004 and 2008 and that the majority of the students attending this school have relatively positive transition experiences with successful outcomes.

School Issues
At a school level, it would seem that the balance of learning support provision may need to be shifted to ensure that students receive equal assistance in both junior and senior cycles. The structure of the provision at senior cycle should also involve more negotiation with the student and include intensive specific programmes that run for a limited duration. It is imperative that potential conflicts or student staff mismatches are addressed and resolved at the earliest of opportunities. It may be beneficial to arrange in-service training for the staff highlighting the needs of students with EBD to increase levels of understanding. As regards curriculum, it would seem that the decision for a student with SEN to enter TY should entail detailed discussion and consideration of the individual. Despite the fact that the majority of our students with SEN attain a pass level LC, the LCA might be the most beneficial curriculum especially for those who are

intending to pursue a PLC/FETAC course. The school may wish to consider developing its provision of PLC courses due to the large number of students with SEN who opt for such courses in other settings.

Wider Issues
On a wider level, the findings indicate the need for the issue of self-identification and the explicit disclosure of SEN to be tackled by post-primary schools. As this is a sensitive and deeply personal topic, professional training and instruction for teachers, possibly provided by the Department of Education and Science (DES) or the Special Education Support Service (SESS) would be of benefit. Confronting the issue of self-identification would also serve to increase student levels of self-awareness which may lead to improved self-advocacy and self-determination skills. It was suggested by Kevin's mother that the achievements of students like her son should be acknowledged by perhaps the DES or the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and supported by a scholarship fund. With more and more students with SEN accessing mainstream post-primary education it would be an encouraging gesture for both inclusion at large and for individual accomplishments. The need to forge closer links between the learning support staff in post-primary schools in the area and local third level institutes was highlighted. However for this to occur there would first need to be increased contact between the SEN staff in different schools at post-primary level with the possible establishment of a community of practice (as espoused by Lave and Wenger in their 1991 publication "Situated Learning Legitimate Peripheral Participation") involving the SEN teachers in the local area.

Further Research
Following on from this research it would be interesting to compare the post-school outcomes of the students with SEN with the cohort of students who did not have SEN in a mainstream setting. Further research into the impact for students with SEN opting for the LC Established in favour of the LCA would be valuable for mainstream post-primary schools. It would also be worthwhile investigating the extent to which disadvantage influences the post-school outcomes of students with SEN compared to the post-school outcomes for students with SEN in contrasting socio-economic areas in Ireland.

In Conclusion
The difficulty of transition from second level schooling for any student, but particularly a student with SEN, cannot be underestimated. While this research paints a generally positive picture of these students' transitions, there will always be the student whose transition will require a greater degree of planning and

preparation. With the growing number of students with more severe and varied SEN attending mainstream second level schools, this cohort of student will increase in years to come. Therefore, it is imperative that second level schools address this critical issue of transition planning immediately by implementing suitable transition planning programmes to meet the individual needs of their students.

The poignant sense of regret with which students such as Martin and Phillip will always be burdened is sufficient motivation to ensure schools do everything possible to enhance all our students' futures. Our commitment to students with SEN needs to be unfaltering, constant and underpinned with the utmost optimism. As Kevin's mother advises *"...never give up, there's hope there, there's something there for everybody."*

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