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Students With Moderate General Learning Disabilities Speak of Their Experiences in Mainstream Schools.

This paper considers the experiences shared by male and female students with moderate general learning disabilities (GLD) who attend mainstream schools. Students from both primary and post-primary schools ranging in age from twelve to eighteen participated in this study and their ‘voice’ was privileged throughout. This is a ‘voice’ that remained largely absent from research until this study was undertaken. Five of the participants were young people with Down syndrome. Case studies were developed where observation and interviews were used to collect data. This study also explored which additional research methods enabled students with moderate GLD to express their views and to have their ‘voices’ heard.

DR. MICHAEL O’KEEFFE is a lecturer in special education at St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra.

INTRODUCTION

The numbers of students with moderate general learning disabilities (GLD) who avail of special school provision continues to dwindle, a trend not envisaged by the Special Education Review Committee who reviewed special education (Ireland, 1993). Many students with this form of disability are now remaining in their local school. The most recent data available from the National Council for Special Education (NCSE, 2011) indicate a year-on-year increase in the number of young persons with moderate GLD enrolled in mainstream schools, both primary and post-primary, rising from 685 students in 2009 to 755 in 2010.

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (Ireland, 2004) presented government policy regarding inclusion, stating school provision was to be inclusive and informed by rights and equality principles. According to the 1998 Education Act (Ireland, 1998), children with special educational needs (SEN) have a legal entitlement to an appropriate education, as do all other children in this country. The terms of the Education Act apply equally to primary and post-primary schools.

Thomas, Walker and Webb (1998) argue that part of the inclusive ideal is that young people should be enabled to have a say in how their schooling proceeds. However, structures that permit this 'voice' to be heard are frequently not in place in schools. Many young people with GLD are treated with a mixture of benevolence and concern. It is usually adults who speak on their behalf. Their 'voice' is therefore rarely expressed or acknowledged (Shevlin and Rose, 2003). The significance of this 'voice' is considered in the following section.

GIVING 'VOICE' TO YOUNG PEOPLE WITH A LEARNING DISABILITY

The voice of people with disabilities has been excluded from research until recently. According to Swain and French (2000) research has historically concerned itself with the psychological and medical needs of individuals and paid little attention to the disabling aspects of the environment. The lived reality of daily experience for those with disabilities is only recently featuring in reports. Another reason cited for excluding this group of students from research is that traditional research tools are inappropriate for gathering information from them (Morris, 2003).

Recognising the child's voice in education is part of a wider movement across various areas of social provision. The Education Act (Ireland, 1998), the National Children's Strategy (Ireland, 2000) and the EPSEN Act (Ireland, 2004) all favour and promote the consultation of children and students on issues that are important in their lives. The acceptance that people with GLD are capable of insight into and analysis of their experiences is a comparatively recent development (Chappell, 2000). Recent Irish studies that focused on the inclusion of students with moderate GLD have omitted the voice and perspective of students (Kenny, McNeela and Walsh, 2005) hearing instead parents' voices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The student's self-concept, now viewed as being multi-dimensional (Zelege, 2004) is constructed from social experiences in the family and in the school. Research suggests that the self-concept or self-perceptions remain stable at least in primary school for students with GLD (Zelege) and while students with GLD have a positive self-concept it is significantly lower than that of other students (Cambra and Silvestre, 2003).

Evidence exists which shows that students with GLD are capable of making distinctions about self-perceptions of competence in different academic areas

(Renick and Harter, 1989). The results of the Renick and Harter research show that students with GLD had lower perceptions of their academic self-concept when they were in regular classes and that they compared themselves to their non-disabled peers. Renick and Harter (1989) believe that the self-concept of students with GLD lowers with age especially if the students attend mainstream classes. However, Cambra and Silvestre (2003) contest that it is possible to enhance the self-concept of students with SEN if teaching styles, school climate, peer relations and group-work are all considered in terms of their impact on these students.

Renick and Harter (1989) demonstrate how the perceptions of those with learning disabilities concerning their social acceptance, athletic competence and global self-esteem do not differ significantly from their peers. One hypothesis presented is that students with GLD emphasise other important areas of strength rather than relying on academic achievement (Bear, Minke, Griffin and Deemer, 1998) thus protecting their self-concept.

Being Labelled as Having a Learning Disability

Students with moderate GLD have been assessed by a psychologist and given a “dominant identifying label” which will remain with them for the rest of their lives (Beart, Hardy and Buchan, 2005, p. 49). Labelling people as disabled can confer negative identities on them and also create additional stigmatisation for a group that already experience a lot of negativity in society (Link and Phelan, 2001). There is also research which indicates that these students are particularly vulnerable to being isolated and rejected by their peers in mainstream settings (Schepstra, Han Nakken and Pijl, 1999; Frostad and Pijl, 2007; Mand, 2007; Matheson, Olsen and Weisner, 2007). When this occurs for students with GLD, their sense of belonging is limited and their exposure to social opportunities becomes restricted. This can impact seriously on their self-esteem, motivation and school performance (Frostad and Pijl).

The curriculum on offer in schools should have breadth, balance, relevance and differentiation (Carpenter and Ashdown, 1997). Students with moderate GLD are likely to benefit more from mainstream schools if teachers are prepared to differentiate work and if different modes of learning are accommodated and allowed for. However, second level schools are still dominated by examinations and results and there is an expectation that students will succeed in examinations.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Six students assessed as having moderate GLD participated in this study where the focus was their social and educational experience. They attended a range of

primary and post-primary mainstream schools in both urban and rural settings. Data was collected over the school year 2008-2009. Details of the six participants follow.

Aaron was fourteen years of age and had Prader Willi Syndrome. He was in sixth class in a mainstream primary school where he spent periods during the day in a special class. There were four hundred students in his school. A special needs assistant (SNA) supported Aaron throughout the day.

Shelly, who was fifteen years old and had Down syndrome, was in second year in a large community college that had over six hundred students enrolled. She was in the lowest stream in her year and was following the Junior Certificate Schools Programme. She had access to a resource teacher at intervals during the day and also received assistance from a learning support teacher. For the majority of classes she joined a larger mainstream class alongside nine other students and had her own SNA who remained with her throughout the day.

Alice was fourteen years of age and had Down syndrome. She lived in a rural town, was in sixth class in a twelve-teacher school and received one-to-one tuition each day for an hour from a resource teacher. In addition she was withdrawn for one hour each evening when an SNA did specific schoolwork with her. For the rest of the school day she participated in a class of thirty students with one teacher and without an SNA.

Kevin was eighteen and **Noel** was seventeen years of age. Both had Down syndrome and were best friends. They attended a large community college that had over one thousand pupils enrolled. They participated in mixed-ability classes and were currently in third year. The school operated a reduced timetable for students with SEN. This resulted in both Kevin and Noel spending study periods in other rooms apart from their mainstream peers and with their two SNAs, for a considerable portion of each day. They were not doing the Junior Certificate like the other students in their year. The school had just introduced an alternative curriculum for them.

Nathan was thirteen years of age and had Down syndrome. He was enrolled in a special class specifically for students with moderate GLD that formed part of a mainstream primary school. There were nine other young people in the special class aged from nine to thirteen. Two SNAs provided support for all students in the class.

METHODS

This was a qualitative study in which interviews and observations were the main sources of data and resulted in five in-depth case studies on the experiences of six students with moderate GLD in five separate schools. As a methodology, case studies allow for a glimpse into the world of learning disabilities (Porter and Lacey, 2005). For the purpose of this study an ‘explanatory’ form was used which considered a number of case studies jointly in order to inquire into a particular phenomenon. The school experiences of the participants were examined through their eyes resulting in five case studies for six students, which focused on “contextual factors, processes and experiences”, encountered in schools (Robson, 2006, p. 181). In analysing the case studies, common threads were selected.

A strength associated with case study research is that it allows the researcher to use a variety of sources, types of data and research methods when carrying out in-depth studies (Denzin, 1978; Denscombe, 2003). Observations of events in each case setting can be combined with formal and informal interviews. Table 1 provides an overview of the methods and sources used to collect the data.

Table 1: Methods used to collect data

Observation	Five consecutive days spent in each student’s school.
Interviews with Students	Four semi-structured interviews with each student, lasting no more than forty-five minutes. Games, puppets and photographs were incorporated.
Camera	Students kept a digital camera for a week and captured photos of people and events that were important to them in school.
Photovoice Interview	In one of the four interviews students talked about the photos that they had captured with a digital camera over a period of a week. Interviews lasted no longer than forty-five minutes.
Interviews with Significant People	Parents, resource teachers, principals, mainstream teachers, SNAs.
Field Notes	These were written during and after every school visit.

Reflections

Written in a research diary – thoughts, questions and impressions that surfaced in the course of this research study.

Observation

At the heart of every case study there should be a period of observation (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2005). In the course of data collection each participating student was observed in his/her school on five consecutive days. Semi-structured methods of observation meant that the observer became the “instrument” that provided data for analysis (Robson, 2006). Being with students provides the researcher with first hand experience of the context in which participants live and work (Morris, 2003). Field notes were made during observational visits and more extensive accounts were written up immediately afterwards. Critical incidents that were “non-routine but very revealing” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2005, p. 310) were included providing an important insight into practice and happenings in the five schools.

Interviews

Periods of observation do not reveal all that is happening, making it essential to gain the views and interpretations of those who dwell in the case or context. Qualitative researchers use interviews as a means of discovering the “multiple realities” that may not be apparent from observation (Stake, 1995, p. 64). Data collected from periods of observation was complemented by semi-structured interviews where all students had an individual face-to-face meeting with me. Two exceptions to this were two students in one school who participated in joint interviews. Open-ended questioning, favoured when interviewing students with moderate GLD as it prevents “acquiescence” (Porter and Lacey, 2005, p. 98), was flexible and allowed the interviewer to probe where necessary. It also encouraged a sense of rapport and cooperation between both parties engaging in the interview process.

In this study a compendium of methods was incorporated in interviews that suited the interests, age, maturity and communication ability of the interviewee. The following strategies made the interview process more suitable for students with moderate GLD:

Significant People

Rodgers (1999) recommended having carers or significant others to articulate the views of those who have limited powers of communication. As this study was

about hearing the personal views of students themselves, I tried not to rely on adults to interpret what participants said. However, on a few occasions I looked for clarification from SNAs and teachers to confirm the views of a student.

Photovoice

Booth and Booth (2003) encouraged participants to take photographs and allowed students to talk on their photographs. Similarly in this study, a digital camera was given to each student and they were asked to record happenings in school over a period of five days. These photographs were used as a stimulus for conversation at interviews.

While observing Nathan I photographed his involvement in school activities. These photographs were arranged in rows of four on the table. The student was given two bundles of 'smiley' and 'grumpy' faces. He placed the 'grumpy' face on photographs of activities that he disliked and 'smiley' face on photographs of activities that he liked. The completed activity was digitally photographed.

Games

In a research study, Begley (2000) used three post-boxes with clock faces with graduated shading affixed. The clocks indicated; 'all of the time', 'some of the time' and 'none of the time'. Pupils were shown pictures of children in various school situations for example: reading, playing and painting and were asked to place the picture in the correct post-box to indicate their perception of each activity. Clear statements were used as prompts for example: "You like reading 'all of the time', 'some of the time' or 'none of the time'". A game similar to this was incorporated in this study.

Puppet

In this study I made use of 'Toby' (a hand-held tortoise puppet) when interviewing Nathan. I pretended that Toby was asking me questions that he wanted me to put to Nathan. The following statements described how this worked: "Toby says he hates running out in the field! How do you feel about running out in the field? Toby says he loves writing in his book! How do you feel about writing in your book?"

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

One of the aims of this study was to allow the students to share their experiences of mainstream school. The six participants were a vulnerable group with a "dominant identifying label" which immediately set them apart from the majority

of other students (Beart, Hardy and Buchan, 2005, p. 49). Cambra and Silvestre (2003) suggested that students with SEN have a positive self-concept but one that is relatively lower than that of their peers.

Sense of Self

In this instance the data collected supports the view that these students had a good perception of their own self-worth in school. When asked about the things they were best at in school most of them selected sports as an area where they excelled and had opportunities to show that they were equal to their peers. Alice participated in team sports on a regular basis and she explained how this made her feel:

- Researcher: *Alice, what are you the best at in school?*
 Alice: *I'm the best at football.*
 Researcher: *Anything else?*
 Alice: *Basketball.*

One month after this initial interview Alice again chose to emphasise her achievements and the sense of well being that she derived from her sporting pursuits:

- Researcher: *What nice things did you do with teacher?*
 Alice: *am..... Rounders.*
 Researcher: *....., you like rounders?*
 Alice: *Yes.*
 Researcher: *Did you do any more nice things?*
 Alice: *Yes, basketball.*
 Researcher: *Did you score any baskets?*
 Alice: *Yes.*
 Researcher: *How many?*
 Alice: *About one hundred.*

The school celebrated Alice's achievements on winning medals in Special Olympics. She was allowed to show these in every classroom. The principal believed that: "She possibly saw these victories as indicators of her enhanced standing in comparison to her peers". However, she received acclaim for her sporting achievements and this was good for her sense of self.

Similarly, Nathan selected sports as activities that made him feel good about himself. In his second interview he took great pride in producing a medal that he

had won two days previously in the annual school sports. He appeared to be extremely proud as he told Toby the tortoise about his victory:

Researcher: *Toby wants to know how you felt when you won the medal.*

Nathan: *Happy.*

Nathan demonstrated his confidence in sports when I observed him participating in football training with the mainstream pupils. He also told me that he was eagerly looking forward to participating in a summer camp where he would be the only participant with SEN. It was never a consideration for him that he would not be as able to participate as all of the others. Five students selected sports to demonstrate areas where they could show that they were succeeding in school in ways equal to or better than their peers. This was a similar finding to Bear, Mink, Griffin and Deemer, (1998) when their research participants with GLD emphasised areas of strength other than academic subjects.

Of the six participants, Aaron was the only one who did not select an area of sports to demonstrate his standing in comparison with his peers. Due to his particular syndrome he was unable to participate in physical team sports with his mainstream peers. He possibly understood this and therefore selected an area apart from sports. In all of his interviews he continuously repeated 'penmanship' as the subject where he felt extremely capable and proud. Renick and Harter (1989) concluded that students with GLD were capable of making distinctions concerning their capabilities in various subject areas. The contributions given by participants in this study would confirm this. Aaron demonstrated this when he selected 'penmanship' along with colouring and reading. He realised that his ability in sporting activities was not a strength.

Kevin and Noel had outgoing personalities and they were able to express their likes and dislikes concerning school. They were both very active in Special Olympic clubs outside school but they valued the fact that they participated in sporting activities within school. Kevin said that one of the reasons behind his love for school was: "I do a lot of sports" and Noel shared this view: "I like this school because I like PE, as well".

Students' Experience of Being Different

Findings in this study support those of Connors and Stalker (2007) in that participants considered themselves as being no different from their peers. This was despite the fact that a number were in special classes and all of them, apart from Alice, were constantly supervised by SNAs. At no time did any of the students

mention the fact that they had Down syndrome or a learning disability. For Noel and Kevin, I sensed that there was a clear understanding on their part that they occupied a different position in their large community college compared to their peers. They were aware that they were the only ones not taking Junior Certificate exams and they were certainly aware that their timetable was completely different to that followed by everyone else in the school. I remained unsure whether or not they associated their learning disability with this sense of difference. Kevin explained how this notion of difference prevented him from making contributions in class:

- Researcher: *Do you ask questions in class?*
Kevin: *Ah no, not really.*
Researcher: *Why don't you ask questions in class?*
Kevin: *Because I'm afraid.*
Researcher: *Why would you be afraid?*
Kevin: *Because I'm a quiet person.*
Researcher: *I think you'd be well able to ask questions.*
Kevin: *Yeah.*
Researcher: *Did you ever ask a question in class?*
Kevin: *No.*
Researcher: *Never?*
Kevin: *Never, because I expect other people to ask the questions.*
Researcher: *You expect others to ask the questions?*
Kevin: *Yes, out of respect.*

I suspected that Kevin had internalised a belief that he was different to and less capable than the other students in his class. There was also the possibility that this led him to retreat from offering any form of spontaneous involvement or comment on what was going on in the class.

I have indicated previously that I believed that three participating students, for most of the time, appeared not to see any difference between themselves and their peers. Kevin, Noel and Aaron were exceptions in this regard, though in two different schools. Kevin made his realisation known concerning difference when we spoke of curriculum and teaching. From what was said in interviews, I felt that Kevin and Noel were totally aware that they were different from the other boys in their mainstream classes. They had developed awareness that the two of them possessed an identity that set them apart from their peers. Certain practices in the school brought them to this realisation, for example, being the only boys who attended home economics classes. I observed that they attended physical education classes together but they always joined in activities with the girls. We talked about this as follows in an interview:

- Researcher: *You don't play with the boys?*
 Kevin: *No way.*
 Researcher: *Why?*
 Kevin: *Girls are pretty.*
 Researcher: *Ok, but why would you not play on the boys' team?*
 Kevin: *Because we don't play with boys anymore.*
 Researcher: *Why?*
 Kevin: *Because the boys are all so rough.*
 Researcher: *How do you know this?*
 Noel: *They run very fast and they kick the ball very strong.*
 Researcher: *And did they ever kick the ball at you?*
 Kevin: *No.*
 Noel: *No.*
 Researcher: *But would you like to play on the boys' team?*
 Kevin: *Yea.*
 Noel: *Yea.*
 Researcher: *Next week will you try and play on the boys' team?*
 Kevin: *No, not really. Girls are safer.*

There is a definitive 'voice' here regarding the perceptions of Noel and Kevin. They no longer want to play with the boys. They appear not to mind being the only boys in home economics classes. However, the practice sets them apart and gives them a different identity to all of the other male students in the school. Here the school has been the principal agent in constructing an identity of difference, which is in fact played out in exclusionary practice. Yet, the students are clear that they like and want this situation.

Friendship

The six students in this study appeared to be accepted by their mainstream peers in the five separate schools. However, in certain cases this was as superficial as 'mere salutations'.

'Regular friends' refers to times spent with others in mutually enjoyable shared activities and may be specific to particular contexts. This form of friendship was observed among participants in this study. Nathan drew my attention to this fact when he participated in an interview in which I made use of the tortoise puppet immediately correcting the puppet when he suggested that he had no friends in school:

- Researcher: *[Pretends Toby whispered something] He says he thinks that you have no friends in school?*

- Nathan: *Yes I do.*
Researcher: *[Again Toby whispered something in the Researcher's ear] He wants to know who are your friends?*
Nathan: *Ian, Ciaran and Kim [other children from a special class].*

Nathan went on to state that he enjoyed playing football and tennis with those friends and when 'Toby' (puppet) suggested that Nathan would have no one to play with over the summer period, Nathan told him that he had no such predicament:

- Researcher: *[Pretended Toby was whispering something]*
Toby said that he's really sad now because he has no school for the summer.
Nathan: *Me too.*
Researcher: *But he said he'd have no friends to play with when he's at home!*
Nathan: *Yes I will.*
Researcher: *Who?*
Nathan: *My friends like Tom [mainstream child].*
Researcher: *Toby wants to know where you'll meet them?*
Nathan: *In the playground.*

When asked, the six students readily listed mainstream children that they considered to be their friends. Shelly, for example, made a list of the people she wanted to come to her fifteenth birthday party. Most on her list were in her mainstream class and there was also a boy from a class in a higher year. The students in her class entered into the excitement of her birthday. Her friend Fiona, for example, asked, "Will you be having a rave?" On the fifth day during my week as an observer in her class she was busy making a list of those who were going to her party. Fiona shouted across the class, "Shelly, can I go?" and Shelly replied, "Yeah, your name is on the list".

Shelly was aware that if it were not for school she would be without the company of people her own age. For her and others with GLD the school setting was the primary or indeed, the only access to social experiences. This emerged in an interview when I asked about her friends at home and she informed me: "I don't have friends...I don't...I've got brothers and nieces". School was possibly viewed as the place where there were lots of young people similar to her and mostly she experienced the warmth of friendship from them.

In this study I observed no friendships among participants and mainstream peers that typified the category of 'best friend'. However, I was not convinced that

friends were always judged using this classification. Alice, for example, appeared to consider everyone in her school as falling within the ‘best friend’ category and that there were no ‘regular’ friends or maybe some who needed to be avoided. Similar to Shelly, she informed me in an interview that her best friends were in school. She went on to state that her main reason for going to school was to be with her friends. She readily listed off the names of her friends in school when asked and stated that there were no individual children whom she disliked, “They’re all my friends”. In another interview, where we discussed the many images that she captured with the digital camera as part of the ‘photovoice’ research method she also spoke highly of her friends in school. In one photo, for example, she had captured a boy making a funny face and I asked her about this person:

- Researcher: *Who’s that?*
 Alice: *That’s Mark.*
 Researcher: *And what’s he doing?*
 Alice: *Am... a...*
 Researcher: *Is he making faces?*
 Alice: *No, he’s just making me happy.*
 Researcher: *And how’s he making you happy?*
 Alice: *Because he’s friendly.*

We spoke about another photo that she had taken and I suggested that we put it in the bin, as it was unimportant. She laughed and immediately disagreed with my interpretation:

- Researcher: *Oh look here, you hate these children?*
 Alice: *No [laughs], they’re my best friends.*
 Researcher: *I better tear it up and put it in the bin? [joking]*
 Alice: *No, [laughs] they’re my best friends.*

In a ‘photovoice’ discussion I drew her attention to another photo that she had taken, this time of another girl in her class: “There’s Patricia – my best friend”. Patricia sat near Alice in class and they both played basketball and football together. Patricia affirmed Alice’s efforts at times and this also appeared to boost her self-esteem:

- Researcher: *Does she [Patricia] say nice things to you?*
 Alice: *Yeah.*
 Researcher: *What nice things?*
 Alice: *A..... a.....a.....she says I’m very good at basketball and football.*

Curricular Access

From observations it appeared that Nathan and Aaron, who had access to a special class, were exposed to a curriculum that had breadth, balance, relevance and differentiation (Carpenter and Ashdown, 1997). The other participants appeared to receive a curriculum that lacked these qualities. Alice for example undertook schoolwork usually covered in first and second classes in primary school though now in sixth class. However, she appeared to be unaware of this difference between herself and her peers. She even considered herself to be among the top students in the class in terms of her performance in maths and English. However, it is possible that Alice might like more teacher contact and to be less engaged in solitary individualised work:

Researcher: *What would you like more help with in school?*

Alice: *With my work ah.....with maths and English.*

Researcher: *Would you like more help with maths and English?*

Alice: *Yeah.*

Researcher: *Whom would you like to help you?*

Alice: *Teacher.*

This might suggest that there was awareness there for Alice that her teacher spent more time with the other students. From observations in her busy class this was in fact the reality as the teacher prepared the other students for second level transfer, Confirmation and placement tests.

I felt that the other primary school participants in this study experienced a sense of belonging to their class and that they also enjoyed what they were doing and learning. One reason for this was, in my opinion, that Nathan and Aaron had the benefit of having a special class where they could spend part of the day and were engaged in appropriate activities and work.

Of the six participants, Kevin and Noel were the two students who were doing work that was totally outside of the general curriculum. From observations it became noticeable that the boys were not fully included in the life of their school. Most of their days were spent in the learning support room and in the company of SNAs. The study would suggest that school administration arrangements leading to students being placed predominantly under the supervision of SNAs result in restricted learning opportunities for those students. On the limited number of times when they joined mainstream classes there was an immediate realisation that the boys were not fully participating and sharing in the classes. I was in their school as an observer at a time in the year when the other students and teachers

were trying to meet deadlines in relation to the Junior Certificate. The boys were aware that they were not doing Junior Certificate and possibly felt that the work that was ongoing in mainstream classes was therefore of little relevance to them. In an interview Noel was asked to give his experience of an art lesson that week, to which he replied: “They [other students] were getting ready their posters for Junior Certificate”. Kevin had a similar experience at home economics where all of the other students were revising for their exams. He explained how he loved the subject but he no longer cooked: “because my home economics class was getting ready for exams. I just had to listen”. The boys were fully aware that they were doing a different programme of work to everyone else in third year. They made this realisation clear in an interview:

Researcher: *And would you not like to be in the room with all the other boys and girls?*

Kevin: *Look, they are doing different exams and different subjects. Noel and me are doing the same.*

Researcher: *Oh, now I understand.*

Kevin: *Because Noel and I, we've got the learning support timetable.*

From observations I felt that the boys received a curriculum that was extremely restricted. Having reduced access to mainstream classes meant that they now spent a significant amount of time doing functional literacy and maths assignments with SNAs. However, when asked, they both said that they would have liked to be doing the Junior Cert. Noel stated: “I wish I will do history, geography and English”. Kevin said that he had a similar desire to participate in this exam. He stated, “I’d do art, home economics, English, history”. Was this ‘voice’ listened to when it was decided to reorganise the boys’ timetable? I suspect not.

How Schools Value Students

From observations in the five schools it was apparent that the schools took initiatives that allowed students with moderate GLD to achieve success in front of their peers. Shelly had constant charge of the register and would always present this to the various teachers at the start of each lesson. She welcomed this sense of responsibility and took this job seriously. During the course of my research in Shelly’s school the President of Ireland visited the school and Shelly had photos of her presenting flowers on the occasion. Her SNA had captured this happening in a photo and we used the photo as a stimulus for discussion regarding her subjective experience on the day:

- Researcher: *How did you feel when you were presenting the flowers?*
Shelley: *Happy.*
Researcher: *What did the other boys and girls do as you were giving the flowers to the President?*
Shelley: *So proud.*
Researcher: *They were so proud? And what did they do?*
Shelley: *What did they do?*
Researcher: *Did they say anything?*
Shelley: *Hurray, Hurray.*

Another occasion when she was part of a high profile event in the life of the school was when she participated as an orphan in the school production of the musical “Annie”. Here her efforts received the acclaim of her peers and this had to be good for her sense of well-being. The school was ensuring that Shelly was involved in school activities and she spoke of these events warmly in interviews. Having various roles to play, Shelly felt that she was no different to all of the other students in the school.

In a similar way Kevin’s and Noel’s achievements were acknowledged and supported with the school providing opportunities for the boys to feel ‘proud’ of themselves and of their achievements. The school acknowledged their successes in Special Olympics and presented them with a trophy at an award ceremony in a packed hall of parents and students. The boys claimed that this was an occasion in which they felt extremely proud sharing this in an interview:

- Kevin: *That was a long time ago, in our past. That was my first trophy.*
Researcher: *What happened when the principal gave you the trophy?*
Kevin: *They do cheering and clapping.*
Noel: *They were noisy, ‘Well done Kevin, Well done Noel’.*
Researcher: *And how did that make you feel?*
Noel: *I feel happy, great and famous.*
Researcher: *And you Kevin?*
Kevin: *I felt famous and proud.*

CONCLUSION

This study would suggest that students with moderate GLD are extremely capable of articulating their ‘voice’ on topics of concern. The six participants spoke openly on their experiences in schools.

School experiences have a fundamental impact on the development of self-concept (Zelege, 2004). The participants in this study reported having positive, satisfying social and educational experiences in their schools. In a similar way to the findings of Connors and Stalker (2007) the students saw themselves as being no different to their peers. Apart from the two oldest participants, having moderate GLD was not viewed as an indicator of their identity. Organisational structures at school level had a significant part to play in bringing students to this realisation.

Previous studies suggest that students with GLD rate themselves lower than their peers in terms of their academic self-concept (Chapman, 1988; Zelege, 2004). Some of the students in the current study saw themselves as good as or better than their peers in terms of academic achievements. The participants took pride in talking about their academic and sporting abilities. A key discovery in this study is that students with moderate GLD can focus on other areas apart from the academic ones, such as sporting and practical subjects. Their perceived ability in terms of competence in these areas possibly helps to boost their self-concept in mainstream schools.

Renick and Harter (1989) indicate that the self-concept of students with GLD lowers with age especially if they are in mainstream classes. The evidence in this study possibly supports this claim but in order to form a definitive view, further research is required in this area. This would suggest a need for schools to be proactive in putting strategies in place that would help to sustain the self-concept and self-esteem of these students as they continue with their studies in mainstream schools. This further supports the importance of student 'voice' and the importance of putting structures in place that enable this 'voice' to be heard.

A positive finding emerges in this study concerning the nature of friendship of students with moderate GLD. Previous studies suggested that students with GLD remained isolated in mainstream schools (Frostad and Pijl, 2007; Mand, 2007; Matheson, Olsen and Weisner, 2007). However, the students in this study agreed that they had friends in their mainstream schools with a clear 'voice' emerging that they experienced several forms of friendship. They also appeared to enjoy the proximity of other students, even when not interacting with them. The participants spoke of having positive interactions with their peers and again this contradicts the findings in a similar study carried out by Scheepstra, Nakken and Pijl (1999) which claimed that students with Down syndrome remained isolated from their peers. There were occasions in this study when the participants remained apart from their peers but they appeared to do this by choice and it was not a source of concern or anxiety for them.

The evidence that emerged from this study suggested that certain students with moderate GLD did not have access to a broadly based curriculum (Carpenter and Ashdown, 1997). The curricular demands of sixth class and those at second level proved to be immensely challenging. This study illustrated how certain students with moderate GLD can receive a very restricted curriculum compared to their peers. Noel and Kevin's situation depicted the vulnerability of students with GLD. Both students expressed the view that they would like to be reinstated in their mainstream classes and to have access to the full range of subjects including formal assessments. However, it appeared that there was no opportunity afforded to them to 'voice' this desire to the school authorities.

What can other researchers who want to listen to the 'voice' of young people with moderate GLD learn from this study? There is a necessity on the part of the researcher to match research techniques and tools to the individual, based on their communicative ability, interest and maturity. Of the variety of methods used in this study it is not possible to say that one method was more effective than another. Supplementing interviews with photographs, games and puppets provided a concrete frame of reference for participants. Spending a lengthy period of time as an observer in schools was fundamental.

It is important that students with moderate GLD are afforded an opportunity to 'voice' their experiences of mainstream schools. In the past this 'voice' was denied. I have demonstrated how the provision of time and appropriate research methods enable these traditionally 'silent voices' to be heard.

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