# School Completion for Children in a Special Class from the Perspective of Resilience: A Case Study

**This study examined the school completion outcomes for children from a special class in a mainstream primary, junior school. As an exploratory case study, it sought firstly to ascertain how many children completed to Junior Certificate level. Secondly, it explored the factors that enabled completion from the perspective of resilience. This article focuses on the years 1997-2001.**

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## INTRODUCTION

In this study, the author sought to identify the school completion outcomes for pupils from a special class in a junior school and to explore these outcomes from the perspective of resilience. The school is located in a large urban area of mainly council houses and high-rise flats and is designated Band One within the scheme Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (Department of Education and Science (DES), 2005a). While the main study extends from the years 1980 until 2001, this article focuses on the years 1997-2001. Two reasons motivate this decision. Firstly, most of the records for this period were identified and therefore provide a reliable basis for discussion. Secondly, the time being more recent is, arguably, more relevant to current provision. Fundamental changes have occurred in educational policy and provision for children with special educational needs (SEN) since 1997 and these are reflected in the availability of programmes such as the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) (http://jcsp.slss.ie) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) (http://lca.slss.ie).

The theory of resilience, which is the study of success despite adversity, was considered an appropriate framework within which to examine these outcomes. Given that pupils, with multiple risk factors, who completed their schooling would have had to overcome "a raft of barriers" (DES, 2005b) in order to do so, such

children who did succeed were deemed to be resilient. By interviewing a number of these students and teachers, the authors sought to identify factors which enabled children to achieve successful outcomes.

## LITERATURE

With reference to school completion, current literature would suggest a pessimistic outlook for these pupils. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) (2007) in its survey on school leavers concluded, when referring to the problem of early school leaving and socio-economic disadvantage, that there "were no improvements in levels of school completion, which continue to remain at levels found in the early 1990s despite much policy focus and considerable resources allocated towards early school leaving and educational underachievement" (p.ix). In a comparative study in 2000, the Northside Project (National Economic and Social Forum (NESF), 2002) investigated school completion outcomes for students from three special classes during the years 1995-2000. From a total of fifty-seven students, none had, by the year 2000, been recorded as having completed a Junior Certificate. Inferring from the literature, the probability was that most of the children from the special class would leave school early. The first objective was to substantiate, in as far as possible, the actual outcomes for these children.

In framing school completion as a successful outcome against the odds, factors which contribute both to school completion and resilience will, essentially, be the same. The difference between school completion and resilience is that the theory of resilience has a broader application and can be extended to all human situations. In this regard the theory of resilience, over many years of research, has consistently identified a common core of constitutional and environmental factors that contribute to positive outcomes. Werner and Smith (1988) tabulate these as:

- **The dispositional attitudes of the individual**
- **Affectional ties within the family that provide emotional support**
- **External support systems, whether in school, at work or in the church, that reward the individual and provide a belief system by which to live.**

With specific reference to education, and focusing on school factors, Wang and Haertel (1995), in drawing from the research literature on resilience, present risk and protective factors as companion concepts. They tabulate the factors and those which contribute to positive outcomes i.e. protective factors, can be identified and contrasted with their companion risk factors (Table 1).

**Table 1: Risk and protective factors in schools**

| Risk factors | Protective factors |
| --- | --- |
| Negative pupil-teacher interaction | Positive pupil-teacher relations |
| Negative school climate | Safe and affirmative school climate |
| Too many disruptives in class | Few, if any disruptives in class |
| Streamed groupings | Mixed ability groupings |
| Low teacher expectations | High teacher expectation of all pupils |
| Passive learning | Active learning |
| Reliance on traditional pedagogy | Technologies to enhance learning |
| Large classes | Small educational units |

By inspecting the table, it can be seen whether aspects of a school environment can be described as a risk or a protective factor. With reference to schools being protective influences for students, the Schools Completion Programme (DES, 2005b) states that "the quality of schooling, the expectation of teachers and peers and good student-teacher relationships have been identified as significant protective factors" (p.10).

## METHODOLOGY

The objective of the quantitative phase of the study was to ascertain the numerical facts of the situation. This part of the research sought to discover how many of the children, who had been enrolled in the special class during the period 1980 – 2001, went on to complete their schooling. This article focuses on the student outcomes for the years 1997 – 2001.

By inspecting the primary school roll books, a list of the pupils enrolled in the classes was constructed. These lists were inspected by teachers in the school in order to assist in identifying what second level school the pupils may have attended. Also, children who transferred to special schools were identified and listed. These schools were written to and assisted in providing the school outcomes for these children.

In the local comprehensive school, to which most of the children transferred, the second level histories were identified by inspecting records and consulting with a senior teacher with responsibility in the area of special needs. For a number of

reasons, the records for the earlier cohort of students proved difficult to locate. However, the records for the majority of students for the period 1997-2001 were identified and provide a reliable base for analysis and discussion. The study adopted completion of the Junior Certificate Programme as a base line criterion for having completed schooling. Given the difficulties these children face in staying on in school (Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), 2004) attaining the level of Junior Certificate was deemed a reasonable criteria and is in keeping with the recommendation by the NESF (2002) for flexibility in evaluating the successes of students at risk for early school leaving.

The objectives of the qualitative phase of the study were to identify and explore factors which enabled students to complete their schooling. The interviews with students and teachers were semi-structured and questions were informed by key concepts of resilience which are linked to school completion. Furthermore, it followed the recommendation of Howard, Dryden and Johnson (1999) that resilience studies take account of children's understanding of the key concepts. The qualitative analysis was thematic as described by Miles and Huberman (1994) and by Braun and Clarke (2006).

## FINDINGS

### Students who Transferred to the Mainstream Comprehensive School

Despite the pessimistic forecast associated with the literature on school completion, the study revealed some surprising findings. From the years 1997-2001, a total of twenty-three pupils who had been enrolled in the special class in the primary school, transferred to the local comprehensive school. Table 2 below presents a summary of these findings.

**Table 2: All students from the special class who transferred to the mainstream comprehensive school 1997–2001**

| Total | Completed | Not complete | Untraced |
|-------|-----------|--------------|----------|
| 8 girls | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| 15 boys | 10 | 3 | 2 |
| 23 | 15 | 4 | 4 |

Of the students whose records were traced, fifteen out of nineteen completed their schooling up to at least Junior Certificate level. Even including those who were untraced, the findings show that most of the students continued to this level and

thus, it can be reasonably stated the majority of the children "overturned assumptions" (Masten, 2001) and achieved successful outcomes.

Research in this area shows that most students on completion of their Junior Certificate leave school. This is in keeping with cultural trends (Breen (1984) cited in Boldt, Devine, MacDevitt and Morgan, 1998). When asked his opinion of these findings, the teacher at second level, stated that students who had left school in the past did so, "because there was nowhere for them to go. Nowadays there is the LCA". The presence of three students from the special classes who are currently completing the LCA course is a significant finding in this study and, perhaps, indicates a change of direction for this group.

**Students who Transferred to the Special School**
The outcomes for the students from the special class who had transferred to the special school for pupils with a mild general learning disability were equally significant. During this period, a total of seven children, two girls and five boys, transferred to the school. These children transferred to this school during their primary school years and all completed their schooling in accordance with the criteria of this study. Moreover, with the exception of one student, all remained on to Leaving Certificate level.

Considering that students who transfer to the school generally have more serious learning difficulties (Gannon, 2000), the fact that most remained on to the Leaving Certificate level is a substantial and notable finding.

**Support Factors**
From analysing the interviews, a number of major support factors contributing to completion of the Junior Certificate were identified.

Firstly, the influence of the JCSP provision emerged as a strong supportive factor. Both teachers and students expressed positive approval of the programme. Students repeatedly conveyed a belief and a confidence in their ability to complete the course. When I expressed concerns to one student that the number of credits might be difficult to obtain, he shrugged it off saying, "sure I have half of them already…I'll get there eventually" (Ger)[1]. Another student (Sam) had calculated the number of credits needed and how and when he would obtain them, "…ten for attendance and twelve for tasks. To pass is 120…from this September to the next". He also acknowledged that obtaining credits encouraged him to attend regularly.

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

Teachers also praised the JCSP and one teacher attributed the school completion of two of his students to the new arrangements [JCSP] "because the various modules were do-able" (James, Transcript 7:52).

Secondly, family support emerged as an important factor. In particular, the continuous, positive, support of at least one parent echoed the assertion by Rutter (1985) that "a secure relationship" develops resilience. In the case of one student (Phil) he stated that he was going on to do the Leaving Certificate Applied. When asked why he replied, "have to. Me ma doesn't want me out of school". The supportive role played by at least one parent was supported by the knowledge of the researcher and the teachers involved. Although the parents were not participants in this study, they were known to the researcher, and one of the recommendations emerging would be to include the voice of parents in future resilience studies.

Finally, from the perspective of within-child, a strategy of distancing oneself from trouble was identified from students' responses. In a community environment where aggression is commonplace the students had long term strategies for staying safe. Their responses seemed to echo a parental injunction of maintaining a safe distance. When asked what they would do if they saw trouble, the replies included, "let it sort it out themselves" (Phil), "walk away if you see one (a fight)" (Ger), "put your head down…don't get into trouble" (Sam). These describe the students' practical understanding of a key resilient concept. When peers were considered "troublemakers" or situations considered to be unsafe, the simple response was "to stay away".

## IMPLICATIONS

### Tracking Students with Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD)
A primary implication from this study is the need to identify children with a MGLD as a separate group, and track their progress through schooling. Having an accessible database with tracking records would facilitate research, inform policy and focus provision. This echoes the recommendation of the NESF (2002) report which stated that "the lack of tracking mechanisms is still a major weakness in the elimination of early school leaving" (p. 105).

### The Role of Parents
What consistently emerged from the study was the contribution of at least one parent in enabling the student to succeed. This was directly emphasised in the teachers' interviews and clearly evident from the students' interviews. Again this

is supported by the resilience research which highlights the importance of "a secure relationship" (Rutter, 1985). For schools the implication is to recognise this factor and to develop and maintain positive parent-teacher relationships, particularly for students with SEN.

## JCSP

Both students and teachers expressed satisfaction with the JCSP programme. The students conveyed a confidence in their ability to complete the tasks and achieve a successful outcome. This finding is in keeping with those of a similar study carried out by Howard and Johnson (2000). Students in that study were asked what made the difference in enabling the children to succeed and Howard and Johnson state that, "important as the social/emotional supports were, however, the single most important category of response among the children concerned the school's ability to provide special help in learning achievements" (p. 331). In this study, with reference to the JCSP programme, the increase in the number of schools offering this programme (139 in 2002, 200 in 2008 (JCSP, 2008)) is an overall positive development for students with SEN. Moreover, the presence of three students in the LCA classes is testament to the efficacy and relevance of the new programmes.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the likelihood of successful school outcomes for children with SEN when certain support factors are in place. Such factors include appropriate programmes and certification options, the support of at least one adult and a positive student disposition toward school. Given that socio-economic disadvantage combined with a learning disability presented well established barriers to successful outcomes, the study revealed some positive findings. Current provision would appear to be having a positive effect for this vulnerable school population and concluding that such provision be continued and even expanded would appear to be appropriate.

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