

RECONCEPTUALISING WORK EXPERIENCE AS AN ACTIVITY FOR ALL LEARNERS

This article discusses findings from recent Irish research which focused on the experiences of key stakeholders involved in transition preparation and transition planning for students leaving special schools in the Republic of Ireland. Employing a mixed-method study, the voices and perspectives of a number of stakeholders (students, parents, teachers and principals) were harnessed. The Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) was used to specifically situate the students as the expert in their own lives and aimed to capture their experience of preparation for transition through mapping their vision for life post-school.

A key finding was the unequal access to work experience for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), within and across special school settings. As Ireland has one of the lowest disability employment rates in the EU, supporting students with SEND to develop employment skills is essential to address this. This paper proposes that work experience be reconceptualised as a key employment preparation activity that should be accessible to all students with SEND, irrespective of the curricula they are accessing.

Keywords: Transition; work experience; human rights; social inclusion; employment

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INTRODUCTION

Similarly to the often-marginalised students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), special schools occupy a unique dual-identity between primary and post-primary schools. They are officially recognised as primary schools under the Rules for National Schools (Department of Education, 1965) yet support students from 4-18 years of age (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2011). Increasing numbers of students are transferring from mainstream primary to special schools at the post-primary age (McConkey et al., 2016), with data from the Department of Education (DE) demonstrating that 52% of students attending special schools were of post-primary age in 2023/2024 school year (DE, 2025).

For many years, the historical designation of special schools as primary schools resulted in the curriculum being taught by primary-qualified teachers. Resulting barriers to entry for teachers with post-primary qualifications lead to a “scarcity of teachers with relevant knowledge for the delivery of post-primary programmes in some special schools” (Ware et al., 2009, p. 189). This historical designation continues to impact upon special schools today, with principals in recent Irish research indicating that they could not offer appropriate post-primary curricula due “to a lack of specialist teachers” (McCoy et al., 2025, p.71). These limitations of a predominantly primary-trained teaching population resulted in special schools experiencing high levels of autonomy regarding the curricular programmes on offer at post-primary level (Ware et al., 2009).

An additional issue arising from the designation of special schools as primary schools is the “anomaly that students in special schools are at present only entitled to statutory education to the age of eighteen, whereas this limit does not apply to students in mainstream schools” (Department of Education & Youth [DEY], 2025, p.95). Highlighted as a rights-based issue in the recent review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004), current exemptions to Rule 64 of the Rules for National Schools (DE, 1965), permitting an additional year of schooling beyond 18, are only considered under specified criteria, including a requirement to access curricula at a minimum of level three on the National Framework of Qualifications.

With recent progressive developments in curricula and certification for students at varying qualification levels, Ireland’s education system has made some progress in facilitating access to second level education for students with SEND (Connolly, 2023). Special schools now offer a range of post-primary specific curricula leading to certification

from levels one to five on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), including Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) programmes and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). Given recent advances in the provision of curricula for students with intellectual disabilities at level 1 and level 2 of the NFQ at Junior and Senior Cycle, the rationale for the exemption at level three achievement does not reflect the current educational landscape at post-primary curricular level.

Despite recent progress for special schools, further disparities exist between the post-primary curricula on offer in mainstream and special schools. In 2024, the DEY reported that over 60,500 students in more than 700 post-primary schools were accessing the Transition Year (TY) Programme (DEY, 2024), which aims to foster personal growth, leadership, civic and community engagement, and career exploration. A core feature of the TY Programme is work experience, enabling students to “explore diverse future pathways in a guided and coordinated manner, gaining first-hand workplace experience, and developing career-related competencies” (DE, 2024a, p.11).

Work experience is frequently cited in the literature as a practical and essential support for students with SEND transitioning into the workplace and for the development of employability skills (Scanlon and Doyle, 2021). Despite this, work experience is not universally established or accessible in special schools in Ireland as the TY programme is not available to special schools (O’Brien et al., 2011) and work experience is only embedded in certain curricula, such as QQI level 3 and Leaving Certificate Applied.

Research continues to demonstrate low participation rates in employment for people with SEND, with Ireland ranked as having the lowest disability employment rates in the EU (European Disability Forum, 2023), with people with intellectual disabilities experiencing even more barriers (National Disability Authority, 2025). Without access to core career exploration and development of employability skills through a universally accessible work experience programme, students with SEND in special schools will be continually disadvantaged. This paper reports on the role of work experience in supporting post-school transition and realising students’ rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006).

Conceptual Framework

This research was contextualised within the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of human rights and social participation (Figure 1.). Underpinned by the UNCRPD (2006), the right to education (Article 24 (5)), employment (Article 27) and to enjoy full and equal participation in society (Article 1) were central. Supported by the Simpican et al. (2015) ecological model of social networks and community participation, this research understood disability as a product of social, individual and environmental factors.

In aiming to employ a combination of tools to “construct a composite picture or ‘mosaic’ of children’s lives” (Clark, 2011, p.117), the Mosaic approach is a “multi-method, polyvocal approach” which combines a variety of perspectives using both traditional and participatory tools, which are brought together “create with children an image of their worlds” (Moss in Clark, 2017, p.9). Finally, the Kohler et al. (2016) Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 was employed as a transition framework to promote successful post-school outcomes for young people with SEND.

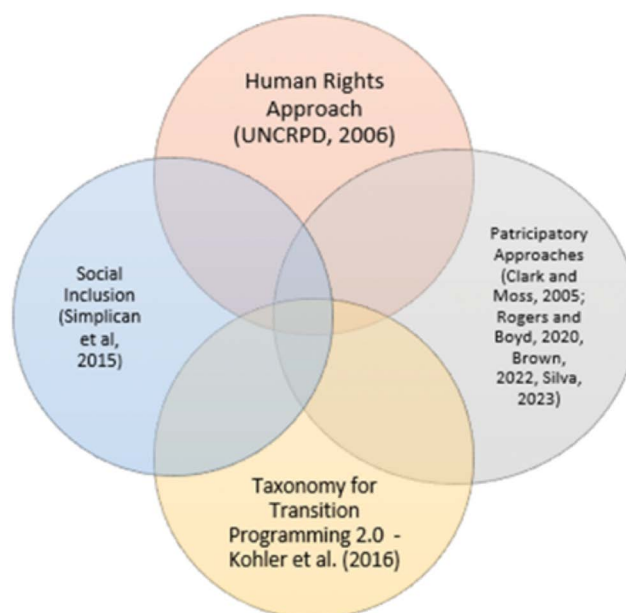


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

The overarching research questions underpinning this study were:

- A) What are the views and experiences of students, parents, teachers, and principals in Irish Special schools of transition preparation and transition planning?
- B) How can the teacher support the development of autonomous postschool choices?

This research aimed to capture the views of teachers and principals from a broad national perspective through an online survey, then sought to explore these views in more detail with a smaller number of participants. It also aimed to broaden and facilitate a range of participant voices that are less often included in research, by capturing experiences of students and their parents in transition preparation and transition planning and by exploring the questions examined in the survey in more detail. To address the research aims and questions and aligning with the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of human rights and social participation, the mixed methods participatory-social justice design framed this study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

PHASE ONE

Phase one was a predominantly quantitative online survey of principals and teachers in special schools teaching learners aged 15 years and above and was gathered in May - June 2022. This captured a national perspective on transition preparation & transition planning practices.

PRINCIPALS

The survey was issued to 122 special schools in Ireland with an overall response rate of 33 principals (27%), representing schools with nine different special educational needs designations. One third of responses were from schools with a designation for Autism and Complex Needs as observed in Table 1. The responding schools were predominantly urban based (81.8%) (n=27).

Table 1: Principal's Responses - School Designation

School Designation	Response rate (n=33)
Autism & Complex Needs	33.3% (n=11)
Mild General Learning Disabilities	18.2% (n=6)
Moderate General Learning Disabilities	15.2% (n=5)
Severe/Profound General Learning Disabilities	15.2% (n=5)
Other:	18.2% (n=6)

TEACHERS

There was an overall response rate of 43 teachers representing eight types of special schools.

Just over a quarter of responses (27.3%) (n=12) were from schools for students with Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD) as identified in Table 2. Most of the schools were based in an urban area (90.2%) (n=37).

Table 2: Teachers' Responses - School Designation

School Designation	Response rate (n=44)
Mild General Learning Disabilities	27.3% (n=12)
Autism & Complex Needs	20.5% (n=9)
Moderate General Learning Disabilities	18.2% (n=8)
Community Special Schools	11.4% (n=5)
High Support Units	4.5% (n=2)
Other	7.7% (n=3)
Missing response	11.4% (n=5)

PHASE TWO

School Recruitment

Following Phase One, a small number of schools expressed their interest by email in being involved in further phases. In June 2023, one school was contacted to enquire if they would be interested in progressing to Phase Two of the research. Following a presentation to all staff, Board of Management approval was granted in late June 2023.

Participant Recruitment

Phase Two of this study included data generation with six groups of participants across students, parents and teachers. A link teacher in the school was provided with the relevant plain language statement and informed consent forms for parents and teachers. Following receipt of parent and teacher consent forms, a visit to the school was scheduled to meet the relevant students to explain the research and seek participation.

An 'Ethics as Process' approach (Cutcliffe & Ramcharan, 2002) was adopted which ensured that all participants were provided with ongoing opportunities to negotiate assent. Student recruitment included accessible plain language statements, aided by an animated video overview of the project. Following parental consent, student assent was provided and visual aids were available to students during each data collection session. Upon ethical approval from the university ethics committee (DCU REC/2023/150), data were generated over 30 hours across eleven days from late 2023 to early 2024.

Two student focus groups were conducted in order to capture student perspectives from different transition timepoints, a school leaver focus group (n=3) and students with two school years remaining (n=3). A focus group was held with the Senior Cycle class teachers (n=4) within the school to provide a broader school context.

The Mosaic approach included gathering the perspectives of three stakeholder groups – students, parents and teachers. A criterion for participation in this phase of the research was that collective assent to participate was required. That is, assent/consent must have been provided by the student; their teacher; and their parent. Four students, their parent/s (n=5), and their class teachers (n=3) agreed to participate in the Mosaic approach.

School Characteristics

The research site for Phase two was a special school in the Republic of Ireland. The school was a large, urban, co-educational Catholic special school which catered for students with an intellectual disability that fell within a designated intelligence quotient (IQ) range from the age of 4 - 18 years. The school served students residing both in the immediate community and students that travelled up to ninety minutes from surrounding rural areas. The school offered a range of curricula including the Junior Cycle level three, Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) at Junior Cycle. It offered level two and three of the Quality & Qualifications Ireland (QQI) programmes, and the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCA) to senior cycle students.

FINDINGS

Phase One

Supporting earlier findings from Ware et al. (2009), the responding schools offered a wide range of post-primary curricula. The results indicated that 71.9% (n=23) of schools (n=32) offered the Junior Cycle Level One Learning Programme, 65.6% (n=21) offered the Level Two Learning Programme and 43.8% (n=14) provided a school-based curricula. Only three schools indicated that they offered QQI programmes and two schools offered Leaving Certificate Applied.

Just over half of principals indicated that a school-based transition programme was established (51.7%) (n=15) with only 34.5% (n=10) of principals reporting that work experience was available to their students. Two additional schools identified that work experience was facilitated within the school setting.

Principals expressed the need for "additional dedicated staff to support work placements and travel training" (Principal #6, Moderate GLD School), "to facilitate work experience placements" and "enough staff and resources to support students on trips out, attending events and experiencing the outside world" (Principal #11, Moderate GLD School).

A principal of a Mild GLD School indicated that:

"We can't organise work experience as students would need a lot of support and teachers are working on QQI programmes etc. Added to that our students now tend to have more than just a Mild General Learning disability or a Moderate Learning Disability, so their needs vary a lot when we think of them transitioning to work or training"

centres. Walk [PEER] and other agencies seem to be developing programmes which would be of value to our students." (Principal #20, Mild GLD School)

Teachers described that students in their school settings aspire of being employed yet generally do not have knowledge of their rights to do so under the UNCRPD (2006). Teachers also described the challenges they encounter when supporting students in identifying a work experience setting, particularly with regards to barriers caused by insurance concerns:

"Before the Covid 19 Pandemic, students attended work experience placements as part of the programme. Over the years I have built up a network of contacts with some local businesses who take students on work experience. Work experience is a brilliant introduction to the community and for helping the student to think about their own independence and sense of self beyond the setting of the school. I find there are huge challenges getting placements with employers and this is due to insurance reasons, there being no such structure provided by the education authorities and in many cases small traders are not in a position to put in place the type of public liability insurance required." (Teacher #5)

PHASE TWO:

Opportunities:

Work experience was seen as being advantageous to the students who were given an opportunity to engage with it, as noted by Teacher D, who stated that "I suppose in QQI, with different levels, so the level three students are more, I suppose they are at an advantage in that they cover work experience" (Teacher D).

For students who had undertaken it, they outlined how it positively impacted upon them. Kit, a school leaver, spoke about the many work experiences that he had engaged with since Junior Cycle and stated that they acted as a support in deciding on a post-school path, "because it makes your mind up to see what you want to do" (Kit, School Leaver). He spoke about how he felt valued during one particular work experience in a nursing home and that he would choose it again in the future:

"[A care home], because its literally like being inside a school, you feel like you are an SNA inside a school, helping the older people and you are making conversations with them and it's just really nice to see them... I'd say, I'd say I'd go back to [care home] again because it's really nice because you are helping everyone the whole time. We have art, horticulture, the old women love horticulture, they loved talking about their flowers, you know like, they love the art, they loved the painting, like they can paint whatever they want. They use their own head like, ya. We just have a laugh there you know." (Kit, School Leaver)

Many students and teachers provided examples of how the work experience opened doors for potential part time employment. For example, Will, a Pre-School Leaver, indicated that he "actually really enjoyed" his placement in a Hyundai Dealership. While the mechanic element of the role was not aligned with his interests, he found a role within the work placement that aligned with his strengths of being organised:

"From my work experience I had to work as a mechanic and do some filing also... I preferred the filing for sure, it's more cleaner, it's not as dirty to do, and you can sit down or stand up to do it..." (Will, Pre-School Leaver)

Teacher F provided an example of a student that had successfully gained part time employment directly from their work experience, explaining:

"...like one of the students in my class, you know, he got a job, his work placement in a cafe, and then he ended up getting weekend work out of it so it can be really successful for them." (Teacher F, Focus Group Teacher)

Parents also spoke about how it could help their child to "get into all these places, and get a feel for them, might help her make her decision" about a post-school pathway (Lisa's mother). Ben's mother supported this stating that if he had an opportunity to access a specific type of work experience that "it would also tell us if he was cut out for doing the course or not" (Ben's mother). She added that as long as it was aligned with his interests, it would be very valuable to him.

Tim had engaged in a work experience in the weeks prior to data generation and his mother described what a positive and affirming experience it was for him stating that "he's had work experience, and to be honest, I think it was great for him, because it gives him that bit of independence." She further explained that he did such a thorough job at the cleaning tasks he was given, that the existing employees were spoken to by the owner about their cleaning standards. She added that this gave Tim "confidence", and she told him "you've done this right, and you've shown up the other people. I think that that really stuck with him" (Tim's mother).

Tim also spoke very positively about that work experience and his sense of achievement stating the “best thing was, they couldn’t get over. They couldn’t get over how, how I got the whole place clean for them” and that “if I pick another work experience, I’d go to the same place” (Tim, Mosaic Participating Student). He also indicated that he would be open to a part time job in that setting.

Tim’s teacher spoke about the importance for Tim, that the work experience was aligned with his strengths and it was a realistic post-school option that could be further explored, stating “they were working him hard, but I think that was, I think she [Tim’s mother] liked the idea of that, because it was just, it was realistic. You know what I mean.” (Tim’s teacher)

Tim’s teacher spoke about how for some students who access work experience, it might not be as valuable to them if it isn’t aligned with their interests stating that “I think the challenge, then, is with work experience is getting them something that’s actually relevant, you know, because if they do go on to source it themselves, they’re just taking the first thing that they can get” (Tim’s teacher). This was reiterated by teachers, parents and students when discussing the potential value of work experience as a transition preparation activity.

BARRIERS

A challenge presented by the current practice in the Phase Two school, is that access to work experience is determined based on the curriculum the student is accessing. Therefore, students undertaking LCA access work experience through the Vocational Preparation and Guidance module, but the students in QQI only access it if the teacher has chosen to include a relevant work experience module for the whole class, typically at level three. This has resulted in some students engaging in multiple work experiences by the time they graduate and for others, they may never have engaged in one. This issue was highlighted by two of the students in the School Leaver Focus Group. Kit, an LCA student, had accessed approximately five work experiences, while Sam, a QQI student have never accessed one:

“But there is a problem there that the LCA’s get to do it, but we never get to do work experience... You see, if, if, if I can get, if I can get the work experience, because like my mother really wants me to do, I think it’s better for me.” (Sam, School Leaver)

The teachers confirmed these comments when this conversation between Sam and Kit had been relayed to them during the Focus Group, with Teacher D stating that:

“And that goes back to the, to the levels and what [Lisa’ teacher] said about having it written in, that no matter what your level, you get to experience it. Because, I suppose Kit came through the QQI setup, and onto LCA he has got three, three years of work, experience... and I suppose Sam then coming in at his level of ability, never got to experience the work experience module and I suppose it was a thing that was kind of here, that if we’re doing the work experience module, you go on work experience. If we’re not, you don’t.” (Teacher D, Focus Group Teacher)

Lisa’s father, a self-employed business owner, spoke about the barriers to employment and work experience for people with disabilities from an employer perspective:

“It’s going to be hard to find people that do that [part time work]. We’re self-employed and the biggest problem with small companies is insurance, they are going to go ‘no way’. I know, I know how hard it is, so, the risk is too big... But the problem is, then you’re looking at smaller companies. And now we’re hitting insurance again, because I, we’d be the same. Somebody came to me with a child with special needs or whatever, and said, ‘Would you take them on?’ I’d have to say I’d love to, but I can’t, insurance. My insurance would go through the roof, or if anything happens or anything happens to that person while they are working for me, it’s just it’s a, it’s a massive risk for a small company.” (Lisa’s father)

Teacher E also cited this barrier when he recalled previous school practices regarding work experience, stating that companies used to reach out to the school annually to source students who would work with them:

“Like I remember years ago, when I first came into QQI, or FETAC when it was like, we had people ringing that have had people on work experience here before, and even car valets saying ‘Can you send more? Do you have anyone who can come down this year?’, and it was easy and then it became harder to get work.” (Teacher E, Focus Group teacher)

Students also noted the challenge of sourcing a work experience, for example, for Lisa, who was yet to access work experience stating that “it’s very hard to get places to go, it’s a place that you like to go” (Lisa, Mosaic Participating Student).

DISCUSSION

Progress has been made in the consideration of work experience within post-primary curricula, aligning with government policy to “seek to support all individuals including those who are marginalised or have disabilities to access person-centred opportunities such as work-shadowing or work-experience” (Government of Ireland, 2023, p.5). Building on the foundation of learning units “preparing for work” and “being part of a community” at Junior Cycle L1L2, the new Senior Cycle L1L2 Programme Statement (DE, 2024b) outlines that:

“Work experience is an important aspect of Senior Cycle education as it supports many students on their progression pathways after Senior Cycle. Work experience is encouraged for students but is most beneficial when it is appropriate and meaningful for the student’s needs, interests and ambitions.” (p.14)

This statement provides schools with a solid foundation upon which to establish their own work experience practices that are suitable for their cohort of students, supported by members of their school and wider community. While it may be a central feature of transition preparation in some schools (McCoy et al., 2025), it was noted in Phase One of this study that only 35% of principals and 21% of teachers who responded to the survey indicated that it was embedded within their school.

BARRIERS

In the Phase Two school, work experience was facilitated but only for those students accessing QQI level 3 or LCA, therefore it is not accessible to all students. This demonstrates the unequal opportunities being afforded to students, even within the same school. Teachers in Phase Two cited the pressure within their school culture to achieve certification for students was a barrier to accessing work experience. Even for students who accessed work experience, the teacher’s role was minimal, citing lack of time and opportunity to visit potential workplace settings, build relationships and connections with local businesses.

Parental social capital (Simplican et al., 2015) is viewed as a major contributing factor in the success or failure of accessing work experience. While the responsibility for organising a work experience typically fell on the parents for the students in this study, teachers saw low parental motivation, lack of personal resources and contacts as barriers to successful work experience outcomes. As a result, teachers provided some additional support to a small number of students in sourcing work experiences if their parents were unwilling or unable. However, this results in unequal access to skill development opportunities which support students to enter into and retain employment (Article 27, UNCRPD, 2006) and enjoy full participation in society (Article 1, UNCRPD, 2006).

INEQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

This study demonstrated that the participating students all shared an aspiration to be employed, however, they experienced varying levels of preparation to achieve this aspiration through work experience within the one school setting. Students, parents and teachers noted their dissatisfaction with this current practice which was embedded in their school culture. They provided multiple examples of the benefits of work experience from gaining independence, self-advocacy skills and some gaining part-time employment as a result. However, without sufficient guidelines or policies in place to support a more inclusive system of work experience for all students, teachers in the Phase Two school failed to see a way forward.

Students too cited the inequality of opportunity available to them and felt aggrieved by the selectivity of access to work experience, something that was not unique to this study (Davies and Beamish, 2009). Some students that had attended the school for many years described examples of historical practice of work experience being facilitated within the school setting, for example, working alongside a school caretaker and longed for such an opportunity. However, in-school work experiences were no longer facilitated.

VALUE OF WORK EXPERIENCE

Teachers, students and parents unanimously agreed that for those that accessed it, work experience was most valuable when aligned with the students’ interest areas and were critical of its value when it is sourced for reasons of convenience rather than preference. While it is positive that work experience has been noted as an important practice in the recent Senior Cycle Programme Statement (DE, 2024b), guidance or practical support have not been provided to schools on how best to facilitate this nor is there any current evidence that this will be advanced or developed in the very near future.

Current indications from the DEY suggest that schools will have the autonomy to choose to offer the Senior Cycle Programme at level one and level two. While this autonomy may be welcomed, it may further exacerbate the variation in practice within and between special schools. This may result in students receiving different levels of preparation for life beyond school and impact negatively upon their ability to access their rights to further education and employment, as well as participation in society.

Limitations

This article reports on one aspect of the findings from a PhD research study. The low response rate to Phase One and single site for Phase Two must be noted as limitations. While findings from the one single site cannot be generalised, they did illustrate a strong similarity and consistency between the findings from schools partaking in Phase One. Additionally, while a single site was used for Phase Two, the methodological triangulation of the voice of students, teachers and parents ensured a broad voice and geographic characteristics.

Future research should expand of the transition preparation practice of work experience and Transition Year accessibility for students in special and mainstream post-primary schools. Research could also expand on existing Irish research (Scanlon & Doyle, 2018; 2026) to examine employer attitudes to facilitating work experience for students with SEND in Ireland.

CONCLUSION

Special schools require support to ensure equitable access to work experience for all students with SEND. Work experience was one aspect in which the participants in Phase Two expressed the need for a more coherent approach to be taken by schools to ensure that equitable opportunities were afforded to *all* students, irrespective of the type and level of curricula they were accessing.

One of the outcomes of this research has been the development of a set of practical work experience guidelines and accompanying website for special schools and special classes in mainstream schools to support the equal access to work experience for *all* students (Appendix 1 (see pages 53 and 54). The purpose of these guidelines is to encourage schools to consider how work experience might best align with students identified areas of strength, interests and priority learning goals. The guidelines should also be a support to students, their parents and to hosts of work experience in understanding the purpose, remit and learning opportunities that it can provide.

The document includes some policy and legislative background and context to support schools in understanding Ireland's obligations under Article 27 of the UNCRPD (2006) along with current national policy commitments. It provides guidance on situating work experience within the context of Senior Cycle curricula, best practice guidelines, supports for recruiting host settings along with a range of templates for student profiling, goal setting for work experience, reflection on work experience and sample letters to host settings for Student Showcase/Recruitment Fairs.

This research demonstrated that while students and their parents hold high aspirations for life post-school, schools continue to face significant challenges in implementing effective transition planning practices including facilitating equality of access to work experience, without adequate policy guidance, legislation and resources. Given Ireland's commitments to the implementation of the UNCRPD (2006), it is necessary to support all students to develop relevant skills so they can transition successfully into employment.

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