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An Exploration of the Transition from Post-primary to Third Level Education Settings for Students with Special Educational Needs

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Abstract

Transition from post-primary to third level education can be a complicated and confusing period for all students, but for students with special educational needs (SEN) it can be a sea of emotion as they embark on their voyage to adulthood and new identities. This research was undertaken with a view to contributing to post-school transition related research in the Irish context. It seeks to achieve this by exploring the student voice and presenting the experiences and feelings of students with SEN on their transition from post-primary to third level education.

A qualitative research orientation is used to enter the world of the participants and, through interaction with them, collect and analyse empirical data to explore and understand students with SEN perspectives on their transition. It is rooted in the constructivist paradigm, where micro-ethnographic case studies are carried out in two research sites over a short period of time (one year). Empirical data was collected using field notes, a research diary, qualitative questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

The findings confirmed that transition for these students is not straightforward and is indeed a turbulent time in their lives. The research highlighted the necessity of providing supports for students' during this period, as they are influenced by their SEN at a personal level, impacting, not only on their academic and social lives, but also their identity. Findings also suggest that post-primary schools do not have adequate structured strategies in place to support students with SEN in their transition to third level education. Recommendations and future research directions are discussed.

Introduction

We are in an era of continuous educational change where there is a renewed and justified focus on inclusion and as a result the number of students with special educational needs (SEN) enrolling in third level institutions has increased dramatically. The introduction of the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme in 2008 was established to provide equity of access to higher education for students with SEN/disabilities. Subsequently, the number of students with SEN accessing courses at third level has increased significantly. The report of the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) recorded that students with SEN made up 0.7% of the student body and in its corresponding report in 2016/17 the percentage has risen to 5.7% (AHEAD 2018). Transition from post-primary education for these students can be a sea of emotions as they embark on their voyage to third level education, adulthood and new identities.

To this end, this research was undertaken with a view to adding to the body of research on transition in Ireland by listening to students', parents' and teachers' voices and examining transition in a holistic way. The study aimed at exploring the students' perspectives on transition and how they give it meaning. The data reflected the perspectives of student case studies (n=3); teacher interviews (n=2); parent interview (n=1) qualitative student questionnaires (n=8); qualitative parent questionnaires (n=8) and qualitative teacher questionnaires (n=13).

The research questions that guided the study were:

Main Research Question:

What is the experience of students with SEN of transition from post-primary to third level education and how do they give transition meaning?

This question was supported by two subsidiary questions:

1. How do family and friends support students with SEN in their transition?
2. How do post-primary schools support students with SEN in their transition?

Perspectives from the literature on transition

Transition has been defined as "any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles" (Schlossberg *et al* 1995, p.27). Their transition theory describes education as "an anticipated transition" made up of three phases: "moving in", "moving through" and "moving out" of transition (cited in Evans *et al* 1998, p.40). Schlossberg *et al* (1995) also devised the 4 S system: Situation, Self, Support and Strategies which acts as a means of determining how individuals cope with transition.

The importance of effective transition preparation for all students is stressed in international research "in order to ensure student retention and progression" (Tinto 1987, Edward 2003 cited in Wingate 2007, p.392). Walker *et al* (2004) highlight the importance of study skills, preparation for independent learning at university is suggested by Brown *et al* (1986), while Rhodes *et al* (2002) claim that students' lack of awareness about the difference between their own learning and what is required at university can be a barrier to their transition. But for students with SEN, this transition "can raise a whole host of additional difficulties" (Ward *et al* 2003, p.132). Tinto (1987) indicated that students with SEN are more likely to experience difficulties during transition, while Getzel (2005) made a stronger claim, that students with disabilities often enter third level education unprepared for the educational demands at this level.

The OECD (2011) stresses that access to tertiary education for students with SEN depends on post-primary schools as they "play a critical role in preparing students with SEN for passage to adulthood and helping these young people to acquire the necessary life skills to make a

successful transition" (OECD 2011, cited in McGuckin *et al* 2013, p.101). Patrick and Wessel (2013, p.105) place the responsibility for preparing students with SEN on schools, to teach them "to navigate the transition", while Florian (2013, p.9) acknowledges the challenges faced by schools in reimagining traditional concepts of schooling and suggests "a reimagining of diversity in education".

Internationally, the provision of "appropriate individualised support in further and higher education for students with SEN has been demonstrated to support an effective transition process and progression" (Dee 2006, OECD 2011, cited in Mc Guckin *et al* 2013, p.1). The OECD (2011) suggests early planning to help students and their parents to make informed decisions for the future. This planning should be "person-centred…with goal identification...and initiated at the conclusion of the junior cycle of post-primary education" (Doyle 2016, p.9). Developing self-advocacy skills is suggested as part of transition planning to ensure a successful transition (Joyce and Grapin 2012, Barber 2012, Novakovic and Ross 2015). Wehmeyer (2014) also claims that students with SEN foster positive transition outcomes from participating in evidence-based programmes of self-determination. Doyle (2016, p.10) likewise advises the students with SEN need "to be self-aware, self-determined and self-advocating". Self-advocating is also a big part of disclosure of disability as students with SEN "fear the consequences of disclosure" and don't want to be labelled "disabled" (OECD 2011, p.22). Similarly, Marriott (2008) asserts that students have a major fear of disclosing their disability.

In the US, it is mandatory for transition planning to begin in the year the child turns fourteen (IDEA 2004). In Ireland, the new guidelines for post-primary schools (DES 2017) acknowledges the importance of transition planning to prepare students for further education and for students with "enduring needs, it is essential to engage in this planning process well

in advance of transfer…will usually involve consultation with the students, their parents and relevant external professionals" (pp.31-32). Nevertheless, there are still "no task or goal-orientated planning frameworks for students with SEND" (Doyle 2016, p.11). Also, while the DARE scheme has increased the number of students with SEN progressing to third level, some research has suggested that the scheme has also posed difficulties and stress for students as the application process itself has become a barrier to access (McGurkin *et al* 2013).

Supports from parents and extended family also play "a crucial role in supporting students with SEN in decision making regarding post-school options" (Aspel *et al* 1999, Blalock and Patton 1996, Cameto *et al* 2004, cited in Mc Guckin *et al* 2013, p.103). Unfortunately, parents of students with SEN are less likely to expect their child to obtain a third level degree (Cosgrove *et al* 2014). Also, it is often harder for students with SEN to form and maintain friendships in times of transition (Cosgrove *et al* 2014). This is particularly true for students with ASD and consequently, high functioning students on the autism spectrum may be at greater risk of anxiety problems (Bellini 2006, White *et al* 2010, cited in Alexander and Inch, 2013).

International research identifies transition from post-primary to further and higher education as a serious challenge for students with SEN (Shandra and Hogan 2008, Wehman 2006, cited in Curry 2012). Karpur *et al* (2014) emphasise that an effective transition programme is essential for students with SEN, while Ward *et al* (2003) claim that's students with SEN find decision making and planning more challenging. Furthermore, Carroll (2015) states that they experience more problems and have poorer educational outcomes than their peers. He recommends that future studies use research approaches that provide a holistic and real account of these students' experiences. In an Irish study, Denny (2015) also suggests that

there should be more research done on examining students' views on transition and what would help prepare them for the challenges of third level education.

Research Methodology

This study was rooted in the constructivist paradigm, where "knowledge is socially constructed" (Mertens 2014, p.16) and where this knowledge is interpreted and given meaning. Bassey (1996) describes the constructivist paradigm as "a search for deep perspectives on particular events and for theoretical insights" (cited in Pollard 1996, p.38). This enabled an in-depth perspective on transition for students with SEN.

The research was carried out in two educational settings to reflect the reality of the experiences of students with SEN in their transition to third level education. The sample chosen was made up of various partners in education; teachers, management, parents and senior students with SEN. Three senior students with SEN were chosen as case studies, a design which allows a more in-depth understanding of participants' situations and meaning (Merriam 1998). The three case studies were; two boys with SEN who were transitioning from a small town, all-boys' post- primary school to third level education and a female student with SEN from a rural co-educational post-primary school, who was in her first year of third level education. The students were observed as part of fieldwork and they completed a qualitative questionnaire and participated in individual semi-structured interviews. They were asked to review the analysis of their data which added to the validity of the research.

Further data were generated through three semi-structured interviews; one with a parent, a career guidance teacher and a principal. They also completed a qualitative questionnaire. The questionnaire was also completed by an English teacher, a Maths teacher, eight senior students with SEN from the all-boys school and their parents. Data were also generated

through administering the qualitative questionnaire to eleven SEN teachers from various types of post-primary schools within the Munster region. Ethical considerations were addressed in line with the *Code of Research Conduct*, University College Cork (2017).

Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyse and report patterns or themes within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). This involved a process of reading for familiarisation, reading for coding, and then developing categories and themes from across the data. Three of these thematic areas will be discussed below.

Findings and Analysis

The three significant thematic areas that emerged were: Student identity, Support from Friends and Family, and School Supports. Many findings agree with Schlossberg's 4 S system which is used to determine students' coping skills in relation to transition (Schlossberg *et al* 1995). A sociocultural lens was also placed on the findings to explore how students can be agentic in creating new identities during this period of "moving in" to transition (Schlossberg *et al* 1995, cited in Evans *et al* 1998, p.40).

Student Identity

Data analysis revealed that students experienced mixed emotions in relation to their transition. Overall, students ascribed more negative than positive feelings to transition which contrasts with McGuckin *et al* (2013) where students generally felt positively about their transition. Their negative feelings seemed to be linked to how some students viewed themselves in terms of their disability;

I see myself as being a bit slower than everyone else (Alex)

and that disclosure can be a frightening experience,

I really didn't want to tell people cause in secondary school a guy asked me how was I finding the Irish and I said I don't do Irish and I had to tell him. I hated that sooo much!! (Sarah)

It's not really something you talk about but to some degree there's the fear of rejection as well (John).

Students' negative feelings were also linked with feelings of stress and anxiety about all aspects of preparing and applying for college.

On the other hand, the findings also revealed that separation from home was seen by students as liberating, allowing them independence, room to grow, to be themselves and develop new identities. Students felt positively about, and appreciated, the natural supports provided by friends and family, as was also reflected in Schlossberg *et al* (1995). The data also depicted how students gave transition meaning through their interpretation of it and how they felt it emotionally. Students looked forward to becoming independent at college and developing new identities and it is refreshing to see that students can and do develop new identities when they experience success in their lives:

I'm more independent and more confident now (Sarah).

These findings add further support to the importance of giving students voice on transition, as suggested by Denny (2015).

Support from friends and family

All three case study participants identified the importance of friendship in helping them cope with their transition: "*it's great to have my friends"* while maternal support, "*Mom and myself" (Sarah),* and support from members of the extended family was also evident. As with

previous research (Luecking and Luecking 2015, Denny 2015, Doyle 2016), family involvement and support is very important for helping students cope with their transition.

The parents' questionnaires and interview revealed that parents have high expectations and aspirations for their children as they all assumed that their children would transition to third level education: "*of course he will be going to university"* (*John's mother*). This contrasts with current Irish research that found that parents of students with SEN were less likely to expect their children to obtain a third level degree (Cosgrove *et al* 2014). This of course, may be due to the limitations of my sample as it is drawn from an all-boys school, which is predominantly middle-class and has a ninety-nine percent transfer rate to third level and further education.

Student wellbeing is obviously of paramount importance to parents and the data revealed that parents tried to support their children during transition by providing emotional support, filling DARE forms and organising accommodation. The data revealed that stress levels were increased for the students as they had to move away from home and find accommodation to attend third level institutes, "*I think the whole finding accommodation was beyond stressful!" (Sarah).* This echoes Denny (2015) that distance from college and arranging accommodation causes an extra challenge for students with SEN.

It was obvious from the data that students with SEN consider the natural supports of friends and family as a positive thing and that this support lessens their stress levels, as espoused by Schlossberg *et al* (1995).

School Supports

This research highlighted that the current provision of support for transition for students with SEN in the post-primary schools is "*informal and unstructured* "*(Principal*). As with previous research (Doyle 2016, Lopez 2016, Novakovic and Ross 2015, Luecking and

Luecking 2015, Denny 2015, McCoy 2014, McGuckin *et al* 2014, Cosgrove *et al* 2014, Patrick and Wessel 2013, Joyce and Grapin 2012, Barber 2012; OECD 2011) all participants in this research agreed that students with SEN lacked preparation for third level. The findings exposed that the lack of time allocated to career guidance impacts negatively on clear communication pathways being established between schools and parents. Likewise, the lack of access to appropriate information on career choices and application processes added to the challenges of transition for students with SEN (OECD 2011).

However, the findings did reveal that these two schools had an awareness of their responsibilities. Teachers no longer felt that *"once students have finished with us, we wash our hands of them and are not responsible anymore* "(*SEN teacher questionnaire).* There was an acknowledgement by management of the need for individualised planning for students with SEN (Rose *et al* 2015, Doyle 2016, DES 2017). Also, teachers had high expectations of their students with SEN and some requested CPD in SEN. It is therefore imperative that post-primary schools introduce a range of strategies (Cosgrove *et al* 2014) at least three years before leaving school that will support and enable students with SEN to be agentic in developing new identities as they "move in" to transition.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has shed a light on the perspectives of students with SEN as they transition from post-primary to third level education. It focused on the student voice to gain an insight into how students feel about transition. The findings confirmed that transition for students with SEN is not straightforward and is indeed a turbulent time in their lives. Findings suggest that students' feelings about transition are a mixture of stress and confusion (negative feelings) on the one hand and excitement and anticipation (positive feelings) on the other. The research highlighted the necessity of providing supports for students' during this period and that

supports from friends and family and strategies employed by post-primary schools determine to what extent students cope with their transition, as espoused by Schlossberg *et al* (1995).

Students' negative feelings were inextricably linked with the lack of structured support they received at post-primary school regarding their transition. Students felt stress in relation to; the lack of access to career guidance and clear information, making career choices, the DARE application procedure and the inability to manage deadlines. The findings also suggested that most of the students were unaware of the academic demands of third level education which unfortunately leaves them ill-prepared for their imminent transition. It is evident that post-primary schools do not have adequate structured strategies in place to support students with SEN in their transition to third level education. The research also revealed that students define themselves in terms of their disability and the withdrawal of students with SEN from class inadvertently exposes students' disabilities.

Students' positive feelings were ascribed to the support provided by friends and family. The students' relied heavily upon parental support in the "moving in" to transition stage but they looked forward to their independence and separating from their parents when they leave for college. The support of friends is also important before and after leaving post-primary school as friendship is a necessary part of the figured world of college life.

Students are influenced by their SEN at a personal level, impacting not only on their academic and social lives but also their identity during this period of transition. In terms of developing practice, post-primary schools will have to identify transition and preparation for third level as a need worth addressing.

Recommendations:

The following recommendations are suggested in line with NEPS' Continuum of Support (2007):

A Whole School Approach to Transition – Support for All

Post-primary schools could:

- Reimagine and re-organise the provision of SEN to provide socially inclusive school communities.
- Put strategies in place to introduce and develop the skills required by all students for third level education. These strategies should include:
    - ✓ Developing students' self-determination and self-advocacy skills explicitly through extra-curricular and co-curricular activities. These skills should also be modelled by teachers.
    - ✓ Project work with the purpose of explicitly teaching the skills of working independently and managing deadlines.
- Establish an evidence-based transition programme as a transition year (TY) unit to help develop the academic skills required for third level education. Including; ICT skills, research skills and critical thinking skills.
- Ensure that all students are:
    - ✓ Explicitly made aware, from first year onwards, of the existing programmes, subjects, project work and extra-curricular activities that help prepare them for third level education.
    - ✓ Afforded opportunities to learn about SEN which will provide an informed understanding and awareness of disabilities.
- Provide CPD for mainstream teachers on the impact of transition with a view to providing a whole school approach to SEN. Provide CPD for SEN and Career

Guidance teachers on the skills that students with SEN require for a successful transition.

Small group/Individualised Plans - Support for Some & Support for a Few

<u>The SEN Team in collaboration with Career Guidance Teacher(s) could ensure that:</u>

- Transition planning for small groups and individuals with SEN will commence at the end of Junior Cycle.
- Individual plans and Student Support Files for students with enduring disabilities will be goal-orientated and based on the students' individual needs. They should:
    - ✓ Incorporate life skills, vocational skills and academic skills. Social and communication skills should be part of the preparation for transition, particularly for students with ASD.
    - ✓ Be developed and managed in collaboration with students, parents and outside agencies (as required), stating clearly who has responsibility for each target. Timelines should also be established to plan for deadlines.
- Roles are defined, particularly in relation to who has responsibility for DARE applications.
- Clear pathways of communication are established between schools and parents and information be provided in a "one stop" information portal.

<u>The DES could:</u>

- Allocate extra student contact time for students with SEN to Career Guidance Counsellors to facilitate transition planning.
- Issue clear guidelines in relation to planning for students with SEN transition to further education.

- DARE should consider reviewing their application process and their criteria for attainment scores and align them with RACE.

Final thoughts

Further research could be carried out to investigate the student voice during the "moving through" and "moving out" stages of transition. Also, further research could identify best practice in evidence-based programmes for transition for students with SEN to third level education. Such research could then be used to provide guidelines or programmes for transition at a whole school level as well as individual and small group levels.

This research gives some insight into the difficulties experienced by students with SEN as they enter their first phase of transition to third level education. Positive transition experiences are possible for all students, including those with SEN if post-primary schools put strategies in place to support them. Post-primary schools must recognise the experience of transitioning to third level for **all** students, put strategies in place for **some** and address the specific needs of a **few.** We have a responsibility to calm the seas of student emotion through developing socially inclusive learning environments that will allow student agency, competency and diversity, while equipping them with the skills and determination to navigate towards their next educational destination.

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