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# Saying it out loud: how Rights theory frames and shapes practice for Students with ID in a University setting.

*This paper tells the story of the development of a rights-based education programme for students with intellectual disability (ID) in one Irish university, the University College Cork (UCC). It explores how the philosophy underpinning the programme has emerged from an instinctive response to the segregation and isolation of people with ID into a more clearly articulated commitment to a model of provision based on a commitment to human rights. This represents a paradigm shift in how we view and work with people with ID and marks a break from traditional paternalistic and charity -based approaches to provision. Articulating what we are doing and why we are doing it, is vital for developing communities of inclusive practice who are sustained by an ongoing process of reflection, disruption, and reimagining*

## Introduction

When persons with intellectual disabilities (ID) reach adulthood in Ireland they do not enjoy the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers. Their options are often limited to accessing specialist ID provision while their peers may avail of opportunities in further and higher education (Maxwell and Leane, 2021). This inequity of opportunity is increasingly being challenged by higher education institutes who provide post-secondary education opportunities for students with ID in higher education (Aston, Leane and Slattery, 2021). One of the institutions in which this work started, developed, and has progressed is University College Cork (UCC). The evolution of programmes in UCC for students with ID has been accompanied by increased focus on human rights and how the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of human rights have, and continue to, suffuse, contour and shape educational opportunities for students with ID in UCC.

## The Beginnings

The Certificate in Contemporary Living (CCL) began in 2009 as a part-time campus based (UCC) programme providing post-secondary education for students with intellectual disabilities in the Cork and wider Munster area. The CCL programme began as a pilot initiative funded by €3,000 from the HEA Strategic Innovation Fund and €3,000 from three service providers in the Cork area. In 2010 it was developed into a two-year part-time NUI Certificate Programme offered through the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education.

The CCL was a special purpose programme 2 days per week of 2 years duration. It was not a fully inclusive programme, the students were a cohort group who engaged with other students in structured learning contexts which occur throughout the programme.

The admission criteria were that students needed to be 18 years and older and have an ID. There was not an official quota though the optimal intake was approximately 15 students to facilitate an appropriate staff: student ratio and room size/availability. Over 100 students completed the programme.

As UCC, like every Irish university, can only confer level 6 programmes and above, an NUI Certificate (Special Purpose) was awarded to the students. The assessment framework was continuously developing towards formalised formative assessment. Students were not graded on work but provided with continuous constructive feedback throughout the two years of the programme. This permitted experimentation and creativity within modules, particularly important for recognition of the talent and diversity of learning for students with ID and the emergence of the discussion and framing of issues through the lens of human rights.

The CCL had no sustainable funding model. Student fees and extensive pro-bono contributions from academic and other staff allowed the programme to be delivered. The CCL had no funding stream from the University or from the Department of Education and Skills. Academic development and administration of the programme had been undertaken by the Course Director in addition to her normal academic workload. In-class supports were available to students. In addition to the lecturer, there were three Learning Support Staff who support students in their work and provided 1:1 support as and when necessary. Fees for the course covered hourly teaching costs and hourly education support worker costs. In addition to this the programme draws heavily on good will contributions from a range of UCC staff. This model of funding was precarious and unsustainable and completely inhibited the huge potential for growth and development of the programme.

The potential of the programme was evident from the outset and became increasingly apparent during its evolution. Students reported feeling confident and being included in a setting where they could engage with their peers. In-class discussions led to students taking the initiative and engaging with the University. Those discussions focused on being heard and included. This focused attention on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and rights to be self-determining and to be included and participate in communities and society. Students in two successive programmes undertook audits of the University physical and inclusive environment presenting the results to decision-makers within the University resulting in changes within the University, for example, more wheelchair ramps, automatic doors, and other accessibility measures.

The CCL came to an end in 2020 with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic as the final cohort were coming to the end of their two-year programme.



## New opportunities

The CCL was profiled in an Impact Case Study submitted by UCC to the Higher Education Authority in 2021. Funding of €1million was awarded to support a new project developing rights-based, inclusive education programmes which:

a) Provide mutually beneficial learning synergies between students with and without disabilities

b) Enable PWID to develop skills for future learning and employment

c) Build capacity in inclusive education for PWID across the higher education sector.

This funding provided an opportunity to hire key staff to develop the id+ Project which started in January 2022. Id+ is being delivered through four inter-related workstreams:




Key to the workstreams and the entirety of the project's work is its values base. This is articulated as a rights-based approach based on the UNCRPD and the basis for practice. The UNCRPD rejects the medical model of disability and embraces the social model of disability (Kayess and French, 2008). Degener (2016:2) asserts the UNCRPD goes further and 'is based on the human rights model of disability'; the UNCRPD is increasingly, viewed as 'a tool that can be used effectively to advocate for the realisation of the rights of persons with disabilities' (O'Mahony and Quinlivan, 2020: 246).

For persons with ID, the 'paradigm shift' of the UNCRPD is significant. The rights to self-determination and community inclusion in Articles 12 and 19, respectively, are considered of critical importance in themselves and have 'enormous intersectional Implications' (National Federation of Voluntary Bodies, 2021:13) for other articles including Article 24 (Education) and Article 27 (Work and Employment).

The basic ideas of the UNCRPD are expressed in Article 3:

- Freedom to make own decisions and choices.
- Non-discrimination.
- Having the same rights to be included in society as anybody else.
- People with disabilities should be respected.

- Equality of opportunity.
- Equal Access.
- Equality between men and women.
- Respect for children with disabilities and as they grow up.

These ideas have provided the bedrock for the principles and are informing the practices of the id+ Project

- Students' Voices lead the way.
- Inclusion is the way to go.
- Making it possible for students to decide what they are interested in learning.
- Giving students choices about what they learn and how they learn.
- Equality between all students.
- Making UCC accessible, physically, socially, and culturally.

Id+ has two new programmes which began in September 2022: the Certificate in Social Citizenship (CSC) for new entrants and the Certificate in Disability Inclusive Practice (CDIP) for CCL graduates interested in career in education/consultancy as 'Experts by Experience'. Central to both programmes are the opportunities students have to choose modules from degree programmes and to work with educators and learners on those programmes. The id+ Project has recruited 11 Fellows who have opened their modules to CSC or CDIP students. The Fellows are drawn from the four colleges in UCC. Additionally, 37 Peer Buddies, have stepped forward to work with id+ students to ensure their academic and social inclusion in their selected modules.

Early indications (November 2022) suggest that CSC and CDIP students are enjoying their experiences of co-learning with students in their chosen modules. Fellows have started to adapt their teaching methodologies and practices in ways that, to date anecdotally, all students are finding more accessible. Peer Buddies have started developing skills in making information accessible and are working with and challenged by opportunities for co-learning and co-producing learning outputs with id+ students.

There is much more to do. Students are the leaders in this process. Embedding the ideals of co-learning and co-producing needs iterative attention. Moving from ideals to practice requires constant reflection, discussion and willingness to embrace disruption, some chaos and, above all, creativity.

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