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Making the transition to post-secondary education: opportunities and challenges experienced by students with ASD in the Republic of Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Internationally there are increasing numbers of young people on the ASD spectrum attending higher education. Early transition planning is essential and students with ASD often require support to articulate their post-school educational goals and actively participate in transition planning meetings. Services within higher education are primarily designed to provide academic supports however, non-academic supports may be an even more crucial factor in enabling successful transitions for young people on the ASD spectrum who often experience heightened anxiety within an unfamiliar environment. Within this paper, the results of a small-scale exploratory study of the transition experiences of six young people on the ASD spectrum to post-secondary education will be shared. There was limited evidence that transition planning had been initiated as a formal process for the six students. Accessing support in higher education proved to be a complex process for some students who required sustained input from parents to ensure that they would utilise the supports available. Encouraging the development of self-determination skills, a key predictor of success in higher education, needs to begin in secondary school. It is anticipated insights from this study can contribute to the development of an embedded infrastructure to support effective transitions for students with ASD to post-secondary education.

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Transition to post-secondary education; students who experience ASD; support services in higher education; social interaction and curriculum

Introduction

International and national policy initiatives have begun to focus on enabling people from traditionally marginalised groups to fully participate within society (DES 2001; OECD 2011). These initiatives are often designed to address inherent inequities such as economic and social disadvantage that are apparent within society. In particular, the historically poor educational outcomes for students with special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities have been highlighted (Lewis, Robertson, and Parsons 2005; Watson and Nolan 2011). Parallel systems of special and mainstream education combined with a heavy emphasis

on student assessments often resulted in negative labelling for the children and young people identified as having SEN (Hart, Grigal, and Weir 2010; McCoy, Banks, and Shevlin 2012). It has proved difficult to challenge these embedded approaches to the education of children classified as having SEN and many traditional features of special education have re-emerged and in some cases been strengthened. Thus, in spite of progressive policies and attempted school reforms, students with SEN are often relegated to being just another group that require special treatment apart from their peers (McCoy, Banks, and Shevlin 2012). This pattern has been replicated in the Republic of Ireland where there has been a concerted struggle by parents and advocates to ensure that children and young people identified on the autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) spectrum have access to and can progress through *all* levels of the education system. This paper shares the results of a small-scale study exploring the experiences of six young people on the ASD spectrum transitioning from secondary education. The findings are discussed in relation to the supports available to, and challenges experienced by, these young people during their transition to post-secondary education. This research is preliminary in nature given the limited experience within the Republic of Ireland in facilitating transition to post-secondary education for this cohort of students.

Background

Over the last 20 years, there has been a concerted effort by Irish legislators and policy-makers to address issues of inequality affecting people with disabilities and/or SEN within Irish society (Griffin and Shevlin 2011). Regulations facilitating access, transfer, and progression for all learners were provided in the Qualifications Act (1999) and it was anticipated that learners with disabilities and/or SEN would benefit from this initiative. Implementing these regulations within existing structures at the post-secondary education level has proved challenging. Implementation has required a number of measures including the adaptation of existing programmes and the design of flexible delivery systems combined with reasonable accommodations aimed 'to promote equality and combat discrimination' (NQAI 2003, 6). Under these regulations, universities were required to develop policies to support the access, transfer, and progression of students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, those with disabilities and/or SEN and those from traditionally marginalised communities (DES 2001).

Since the publication of the *Action Group on Access to Third Level* report (DES 2001) some progress has been made to address inequities in relation to access to higher education (18 years +) educational opportunities. However, this progress has been uneven across marginalised groups and young people who often continue to experience significant barriers (AHEAD 2016). National targets for participation of specific groups of students were established (HEA 2010) and steps were taken to support reaching these targets. The provision of the Fund for Students with Disabilities has had a significant impact on the capacity of higher education institutions to respond to the support needs of individuals experiencing disabilities and/or SEN (HEA 2015). The Fund for Students with Disabilities provides for a range of supports including assistive technology, sign language interpreters, note takers and extra tuition. It also facilitated the appointment of Disability Officers in the majority of higher education institutions. These Disability Officers have responsibility for establishing support services for students with disabilities and/or SEN within their institutions.

Access initiatives such as Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) were established by higher education institutions to provide reasonable accommodations in relation to admission to higher education for students with disabilities and/or SEN. Students who qualified for DARE could gain access to their chosen area of study with a reduced entry score in the Leaving Certificate examination (a terminal national examination for secondary education that determines entry to courses in higher education). The most recent participation figures (AHEAD 2016) indicate that a total of 10,773 students with disabilities and/or SEN comprise approximately 5.1% of total student population within higher education. The last decade has witnessed a steady increase in the participation rates of students with disabilities and/or SEN in higher education though it seems that relatively smaller numbers are undertaking postgraduate study (AHEAD 2016). While students with disabilities were more likely to be studying subjects within Arts and Humanities, students with ASD were marginally more likely to be studying in Science and Computing. On completion of secondary education, students can enrol in further education courses which are designed to cater to students who do not wish to enter or are not deemed eligible to enter higher education. Current figures for students with disabilities studying in further education are not readily available, although Trant (2011) reported that approximately 600 students accessed support from The Fund for Students with Disabilities in the academic year 2009–2010.

Access, transfer and progression

International data indicate that young people with disabilities and/or SEN were less likely to participate in higher education than their contemporaries without disabilities (OECD 2011). Irish data confirm the international trend and indicates that people with disabilities were much less likely to participate in higher education compared to their non-disabled peers (Watson and Nolan 2011). While several factors might explain the limited participation of individuals with disabilities in higher education, it is clear that secondary schools play a critical role in enabling young people with disabilities and/or SEN to access appropriate pathways to higher education (OECD 2011). The OECD international review, *Inclusion of students with disabilities in tertiary education and employment* (2011), examined access and transfer pathways for students with disabilities and/or SEN. The review indicated that there are major obstacles for students with disabilities, including the failure of many schools to begin transition planning early in secondary school (OECD 2011).

Internationally, there are increasing numbers of young people on the ASD spectrum attending higher education and this has become the focus of research designed to understand the transition process needed to support the success of this group of young people. Wei et al. (2016) reported that within the USA there is lower enrolment in higher education among this cohort compared to their peers without disabilities, a finding also evident internationally (Madriaga et al. 2008).

Several critical factors were identified as essential to successful transition planning for students with disabilities and/or SEN: (i) early transition planning allowing for informed choices based on accessible information and enabling full participation of students and parents/carers in the planning process (Griffin et al. 2014; Lewis, Robertson, and Parsons 2005); (ii) addressing financial, transport and accommodation issues (Marriott 2008); and (iii) social and academic issues arising from transition to higher education (Palmer, O'Kane, and Owens 2009).

Transition planning

Hendricks and Wehman (2009) point out that students with ASD comprise a heterogeneous group so individually tailored support programmes are required. Early transition planning (10–13 years) is considered essential with more intensive transition planning taking place when students are in the 14–16-year age range. School professionals and parents need to expand their expectations for these young people and not base their expectations on perceived student limitations. Transition planning needs to have an explicit focus on enabling these young people to improve their interpersonal skills so they can function in a variety of life environments (Hendricks and Wehman 2009).

There appears to be a significant gap between young students with disabilities and their parents and school professionals regarding expectations for post-secondary educational opportunities. Strong self-determination skills appear to be a critical factor in enabling young people within this cohort to make successful transitions to higher education (Getzel and Thoma 2008). Because self-determination is so important for success, Wei et al. (2016) recommended beginning transition planning early in the secondary years. They further suggest that providing support for setting post-school educational goals and for active participation in transition planning meetings is critical for students with ASD. Griffin et al. (2014) reported that young people on the ASD spectrum were less likely to attend transition meetings compared to their peers who had disabilities and/or difficulties in learning. Even when young people with ASD attended their transition meetings there was a discernible pattern of very limited engagement. Strong parental involvement in the education of the young person was positively correlated to active participation by the young person in the scheduled transition planning meetings. Within the US context where transition planning is mandated, the Individual Education Plan (IEP) becomes very useful. The student's strengths and limitations can be identified and the priorities outlined in the transition planning can form an integral element in the student's IEP (Roberts 2010; Wei et al. 2016).

Transfer to post-secondary education

VanBergeijk, Klin, and Volkmar (2008) commented that adapting to the complex demands of a higher education setting can present significant difficulties for students with ASD, who may rely on the rote application of social skills which may be inappropriate. Young people with ASD may also face a number of interpersonal challenges and parents can often help college practitioners gain a deeper understanding of barriers experienced by the student in their daily lives (Madriaga et al. 2008).

Student attrition and failure is most common during the first year and increasingly higher education institutions are developing programmes to enable first year students to adapt to the social and academic demands of college life. These programmes aim to ensure that students make 'meaningful connections' to higher education (Palmer, O' Kane, and Owens 2009) through addressing common needs of the student population including developing a sense of belonging, adapting to multiple life roles, availing of integrated support systems and dealing with practical issues such as accommodation and transportation. Palmer, O' Kane, and Owens (2009) conceptualise this initial phase of higher education as 'betwixt spaces' and emphasise that students need to learn to

persevere through this critical time and develop binding social ties through meaningful relationships.

Many young people on the ASD spectrum can experience social isolation in their secondary school lives. According to Madriaga et al. (2008) some young people on the ASD spectrum experienced a euphoric reaction to entry to higher education. The authors commented that for these young people a new beginning provided a welcome respite to the social isolation experienced during their lives in secondary school and an opportunity to recast themselves within a different environment. The majority of young people who chose not to disclose reported feeling uncomfortable at the prospect of sharing their disability with their lecturers and their peers (Beardon, Martin, and Woolsey 2009). The choice not to disclose is often influenced by the desire of young people to avoid being labelled according to their disability and have a 'fresh start' in this new academic environment (Getzel and Thoma 2008; Jacklin 2011).

Support services within higher education are primarily designed to provide academic supports and to ensure curricular access for students with disabilities and/or difficulties in learning. However, non-academic supports may be a crucial factor in enabling successful transitions for young people on the ASD spectrum who may experience heightened anxiety within an unfamiliar environment. Higher education supports can consist of explicit instruction in life skills and how to manage a challenging and complex environment. Self-determination skills are also considered crucial in negotiating a pathway through higher education and these skills can be practised and refined within this educational environment. Beardon, Martin, and Woolsey (2009) caution against adopting a deficit model in relation to the inclusion of young people on the ASD spectrum within higher education institutions. Their research very clearly indicates that successful transitions for these young people are highly dependent on the understanding of their unique needs within the higher education environment. Young people within this cohort reported difficulties in social interaction with their peers and with the academic staff. Extensive social demands are evident in higher education from induction to assessment procedures involving group work. Hart, Grigal, and Weir (2010) observed that students with ASD can face particular challenges with non-verbal communication, socialising and adapting to a very stimulating higher education environment. Yet, there appeared to be limited social supports available within higher education to enable these young people to navigate this complex social environment.

While there is an increasing emphasis on facilitating social interaction in college life, less attention has been given to social aspects of the classroom (Zager and Alpern 2010). Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014) observed that students with ASD can experience limited mental flexibility which can cause difficulties with long-term planning, time management and participating successfully in group work. Often, these types of supports involving explicit guidance on life skills are not readily available within higher education (Zager and Alpern 2010) and as a result students with ASD may struggle with social aspects of the classroom environment. Group work, for example, can present particular challenges for students with ASD and these students will probably require explicit guidance on how to negotiate and play a positive role within a group setting (Roberts 2010).

Jacklin and Robinson (2007) observed that support services needed to be flexible enough to provide varied supports that may include: material resources, focused guidance

and information, and encouragement from peers encountering similar issues in adapting to college life. Higher education structures must incorporate the interactional and relational aspects of support to facilitate successful adaptations for students on the ASD spectrum. Young people, with ASD, in Beardon, Martin, and Woolsey's (2009) study reported that support to understand the behaviour of their neuro-typical peers would have significantly reduced the social challenges they experienced on a daily basis. Mentoring programmes, for example, have been found to be effective (Beardon, Martin, and Woolsey 2009; Hart, Grigal, and Weir 2010). Also, facilitating informal interaction among students and between staff and students has been reported as beneficial for this student cohort.

Faculty and staff perceived that students with ASD can struggle with the social skills required for classroom and curricular engagement, critical thinking which entails generalising from specific examples, and evident anxiety that can inhibit learning (Gobbo and Shmulsky 2014). In spite of these challenges, they also identified strengths for these students including passionate interests and their acquisition of accurate detailed knowledge. Faculty and staff adapted their teaching to take account of the strengths and difficulties experienced by students with ASD: designing more structured approaches; making course demands very explicit; using very precise questioning and setting clear expectations about required answers; offering opportunities for students to follow their interests; and increasing their sensitivity and awareness of how increased anxiety can be manifested.

Transition from secondary to post-secondary education constitutes a complex process for students with ASD, their families and support services in post-secondary education settings. It is clear that transition planning needs to begin early in secondary school and to ensure a smooth transition process, students with ASD and their families need to be active participants along with school personnel. Individualised transition programmes taking account of student strengths and difficulties can emerge from this carefully designed collaborative process. Transfer to post-secondary education settings can be facilitated through the provision of supports that focus on both academic and social aspects of life in the new setting. Supports need to be viewed as individualised rather than generic, to ensure that students with ASD can fully participate academically and socially in the post-secondary setting.

Method

Purpose of the study and research questions

The purpose of this study was to explore how six young people with ASD experienced transition at two separate time points: (i) 'pre-transition' when they had the 'aspiration' of making the transition to higher education, and (ii) 'post-transition' when they had (or had not) made the transition to higher education. Our research questions included:

- (1) What are the experiences of students with ASD in accessing and progressing to post-secondary education settings?
- (2) What resources and supports are available to students with ASD to accommodate them making this progression?

- (3) What major issues and barriers arise with regards to access, progression and transition for students with ASD?

Participants

This study forms a subsection of a broader study examining transition experiences from secondary to post-secondary education settings for students with SEN in the Republic of Ireland. The general sampling process involved the following steps: (i) consulting the database of the funding body which contained a list of those students with SEN who were receiving support in secondary schools in the Republic of Ireland (No pupil identifying information was contained in the data given to the researchers.); (ii) from the database, the research team identified a sample of students with different forms of SEN; (iii) the research team subdivided the database into four approximated geographical areas, including urban and rural, representing north Ireland, south Ireland, east Ireland and west Ireland; (iv) the research team identified possible participants from a range of school types: secondary (traditional academically oriented schools usually with religious management and often single sex); vocational (state run schools often catering for socio-economically disadvantaged areas and mixed gender); community (state run schools, locally organised, multi-denominational and mixed gender).

From the 20 schools who agreed to participate in the pre-transition phase of data collection, 42 students with SEN (including seven with ASD) agreed to participate in the research. A total of 42 student interviews took place (including one parent who was interviewed as a proxy for one student who had severe and profound disability) at the pre-transition phase of the study. One of the students with ASD was unable to participate in the post-transition interviews and the research team decided not to include any data from this student in reporting study findings. Participant demographics for students with ASD is presented below in Table 1. For the purposes of reporting study results, the six students were assigned the following pseudonyms: John, Michael, Frank, Peter, Kieran, Conor. All post-secondary education courses offered in Further Education colleges and Higher Education are assigned a place on the national qualifications framework (levels 5–10).

Procedures

Students with ASD and their parents were contacted through their school and invited to participate in the research project. In all contact with participants and their parents, it was emphasised that participation was voluntary, and the option to withdraw from the study at

Table 1. Study participants.

Student	Region; context	School type	Age	Pre-transition choice	Accreditation level
John	East; urban	Secondary	18	Arts PLC	5
Michael	East; urban	Secondary	19	Science HE	9
Frank	South; urban	Vocational	18	Music Technology HE	8
Peter	East; rural	Community	18	Business PLC	5
Kieran	East; urban	Vocational	17	Information Technology	5
Conor	West; rural	Secondary	18	Humanities HE	8

Notes: PLC = Post Leaving Certificate Course (Further Education college); HE = Higher Education (University/Institute of Technology).

any time without providing a reason was available. The research team was conscious of the need to ensure the welfare of research participants; so on receipt of parental written consent, contact was made with the participant by telephone to establish rapport and address any concerns they might have about the research. Parents were also invited to participate in the study though the main emphasis was on ascertaining the experiences of the young people themselves. Two of the parents volunteered to be involved. The research team adopted an 'ethics as a process' (Ramcharan and Cutcliffe 2001) approach, which gave participants the opportunity to negotiate consent to participation at all stages of the research study.

The primary goal of these semi-structured interviews was to gain an understanding of participant experiences regarding the transition process to post-secondary education for students with ASD, and to identify key factors that facilitated or prevented access, transfer, and progression for these students. The pre-transition interviews with the research participants took place in the student's school during the spring term (approximately four months before taking the Leaving Certificate examination that marks the end of secondary education). The research team was anxious to cause the least disruption to the lives of the participants who were in the final stages of preparation for the examination that would determine opportunities available to them in post-secondary education, a time of already heightened stress. Conscious of this and in negotiation with the participants, it was agreed that the maximum amount of time available for the one-to-one semi-structured interview was approximately 30 minutes so that participants could return promptly to their subsequent classes.

All six student interviews at pre-transition phase lasted between 20 and 30 min (not including material addressing the purpose of the research and any clarifications required). The interview protocol was based on an extensive literature review of pertinent issues and included the following core themes: decision-making processes within the school; family involvement in decision-making; supports available within school and local community; levels of awareness of available supports; participant expectations of post-secondary education; participant hopes and fears for future. The two parent interviews focused, in particular, on their involvement in the decision-making process and their perception of supports and barriers to progression to post-secondary education.

Post-transition interviews took place in the participant's post-secondary education setting (four in Further Education colleges; two in Universities). Post-transition interviews were conducted in the autumn term approximately three months after the students commenced their studies in post-secondary education. The semi-structured interviews focused on the transition experiences of the participants: initial transition experience (college and programme inductions and introductions); academic engagement with post-secondary education setting; social engagement with post-secondary education setting; participant sense of belonging in the new setting; their own health and well-being; perceived effectiveness of supports provided; and perceived barriers to participation.

Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. In the first stage, the initial analytical framework, based on the review of the literature and on peer consultation emergent codes from the field was drawn up. These codes were compiled into themes through a process of lean coding (Creswell 2002). Analysis did not reveal major contradictions in

student responses and any inconsistencies in responses that emerged were examined within the findings. During the analytic research phase the research team ensured that data analysis was an ongoing process involving reviewing and comparing initial codes, establishing emergent themes and closely examining data interpretation.

The following key themes emerged at pre-transition: student perspectives about guidance and support received in decision-making processes around choice of post-school options; availability of resources and activities within schools; and student response to engaging in decision-making around post-school options, characterised as student well-being. Students at the pre-transition phase engaged with all of these themes and recounted their experiences in relation to these decision-making processes. At post-transition, these key themes emerged: the nature of the post-school destination was explored; student experience of transition and settling-in; academic and social challenges faced in the new context; how students accessed support and resources; student well-being and future plans.

Findings

As illustrated in Table 1 above, students had a variety of ambitions with regard to progression to post-secondary education. Three of the students (Conor, Michael, Frank) aimed to attend higher education while the remaining three (John, Peter, Kieran) wished to participate in a Post Leaving Certificate Course (PLC) in a local Further Education college. (PLCs have been designed to provide more practical programmes that build on secondary education and some programmes can lead to third-level education). The post-transition destinations for these students is shown in Table 2 below.

Two students (Michael, Conor) achieved their ambition to access their chosen course in higher education, another (Frank) is pursuing a PLC course with the aim of accessing higher education through this pathway, while two others (Kieran, Peter) managed to achieve their chosen PLC programme. John did not manage to access his chosen PLC course though he had achieved a place on another PLC programme.

Pre-transition phase

School support and knowledge of transition pathways

All six participants reported very positive relationships with support staff in their respective secondary schools. Career guidance professionals, in particular, were appreciated for their support and guidance in making career choices. Students reported being directed to websites giving details of courses and institutions. In the following example, this guidance clearly

Table 2. Post-transition destinations.

Student	Pre-transition choice	Achieved	Current placement
John	Arts PLC	No	PLC
Michael	Science HE	Yes	HE
Frank	Music Technology HE	No	PLC
Peter	Business PLC	Yes	PLC
Kieran	Information Technology PLC	Yes	PLC
Conor	Humanities HE	Yes	HE

Notes: PLC = Post Leaving Certificate Course (Further Education college); HE = Higher Education (University/Institute of Technology).

related to career progression as well as simply courses, or a choice of college: 'She helped us by checking them up on the computer. Seeing which one's the best one to go for and what subjects you would like and how much points do we need'(Peter). One student described making full use of the personal service provided by the school careers counsellor, accessing support over a number of years: 'Basically I was up and down to Miss [name of teacher] over the years with appointments, trying to figure out what I wanted to do in life' (Kieran).

However, despite these examples of personal support, there was also evidence that some career guidance personnel lacked the specific knowledge needed to support the transition pathways for students with ASD:

The school didn't even know about until my Dad said it (a community organization that offered transition support for students with ASD). So they then looked into and Miss [name of teacher], I'm on and off talking to her in the corridor and she said that's fantastic. If she'd known about it she would have told me straight away. (Kieran)

There was limited evidence that transition planning had been initiated as a formal process within the schools attended by the six students. While all students had an IEP there were no specific references to transition planning for post-secondary education and/or work.

Choices made early in the secondary school career of the students can have an impact on post-school destination. In the Irish context, the choice of course and final accreditation in school has a direct impact on accessing courses in further or higher education. For example students following a course for LCA (Leaving Certificate Applied) will not be able to be accepted directly onto a university course without further study. This student summarises the impact of doing an LCA:

There's no chance of me getting in to [name of college] from doing the Leaving Certificate Applied, so I'll have to do something, I'll just go to the foundation college first and try and work my way up so I can get in. (John)

Heightened pressures

Students with ASD in their final year of school reported facing heightened pressures related to working for high stakes examinations which would give them access to post-compulsory education:

This year I'm under a huge amount of pressure and the stress will get to me. Like one or two times in the evening I end up going across the road to me local (public house) for about an hour and then go home because it's just the stress. And sometimes I'd up going for hitting a wall or something with stress. (Kieran)

The unpredictability of his future was suddenly of paramount importance to the following student, causing additional stress and he contrasted himself to other students who were not taking the transition period 'too serious'. This feeling of experiencing the world in a different way from peers is a feature of ASD which can lead to feelings of isolation. He continued to explain that he was concerned: 'I think it's finally hit home with me that I had to figure out something to do quickly now ... I need to expect what's going to be coming to me. So, for huge anxiety then' (Frank).

Another source of stress can be feelings of apprehension as students anticipate leaving behind support through important personal relationships built up with key professionals over the years. The same student described how he would miss:

... the teachers and everyone now, because I've had a long time to form a bond with them. I can go into a room, I can talk with them all about personal matters and things like that, stuff 1st years can't do. It'll be strange moving to college and not having that any more now, I'll be trapped in myself again. (Conor)

In the pre-transition interview one student was already considering how much direct support he would need and trying to address a difficult dilemma:

On one hand I would prefer going through the same support, but on the other hand I would like to work by myself, because I feel like I can do this by myself, I don't want people overlooking my ability by looking at this. (Frank)

However, there were acknowledgements that this transition period was an important part of maturing and moving onto adult life. The following student had a resigned and possibly realistic approach to moving on: 'I'll probably miss the fun times we had, but I don't really care because you have to move on' (Michael).

Support for accommodation/transport issues

For certain students, an offer of accommodation, either official or unofficial, was definitely a positive incentive to choose a particular institution. For example, this student was attracted by the possibility of sharing a living space with a social contact: 'Because I've a friend up there and he said I could stay with him if I got in' (Kieran).

The opportunity to continue a previous relationship that the student was comfortable with was clearly a strong influence on his choice. For others, it was a combination of transport and the facilities available. The following student was concerned about the distance of a recommended college from his home territory, where both transport and accommodation would be easier:

They all wanted me to go to [name of college 1] which is a bit of a kip (not very suitable), so I didn't really want to go there. The facilities are kind of good there, but I just wouldn't be interested in going there. [name of college 2, preferred choice] It's kind of close to my house. (John)

Post-transition phase

As noted earlier two of the six participants made a transition to higher education; the other four participants were enrolled in PLC courses at local Further Education colleges.

Disclosure of disability and accessing support

In post-compulsory settings, students who had been accustomed to accessing support at school now found themselves in the position of having to take an active role in disclosing their disability in order to access support.

Accessing support in higher education proved to be a complex process for some students with ASD who required sustained input from parents to ensure that they could avail the support available. Michael, who was studying Science in third-level education, was reluctant to initiate accessing support and his parent had to broker an initial personal contact with the support professional: 'Initially it was an absolute nightmare to get him to meet her, to meet, either of them because I think he was deliberately avoiding' [Michael's parent].

His mother explained to the support personnel that her son required explicit guidance in ensuring that a meeting could take place: the support professional told him that 'I will have a red bag on the floor beside me' and so the contact was initiated. Michael confirmed

that the support was available: 'They [The support professionals] contacted us. They just interview you and ask what you need. I get tutors and help with stuff. Study skills and exam skills' (Michael).

In another situation, a parent encouraged her son Conor, who was studying Humanities in third-level education, to seek support and she was proactive in contacting the college support service herself: 'I said, "I'm not interfering". I said, "I just want to, you know, make it known that, or make sure that you knew he was there"' (Conor's parent). However, in this case, the support professional waited until the student himself came forward for help (it is possible that this support service only dealt with students, who were regarded as adults, rather than their parents), which eventually happened. At this point, prompt and timely support was offered, as Conor described:

I had to approach her.... I just had to explain to her that I have borderline Aspergers. She said she'd do anything to help me out. All I had to do was book an appointment so I booked an appointment – well last week I booked an appointment for tomorrow to help me with the finishing touches on my assignments, for this Thursday and Friday. (Conor)

Finally, in contrast, Frank describes how he had embraced the possibility of leaving his disability label behind by making a conscious decision not to disclose ASD and access support: 'They gave me the choice, whether to tick it and then go into details. I decided to leave that part blank' (Frank). This has enabled him to make a fresh start and develop his own self-confidence: 'It's just good to finally, actually, [have] people having confidence in you, that you can do this yourself' (Frank).

This has had a positive effect on developing self-determination skills and it was clear that he had applied himself and achieved his own targets. In this case, positive feedback in the form of good marks for his work has reinforced his growing self-reliance, as he reported: 'It was a bit hard at first, but seeing that I, seeing my results back and seeing how well I'm actually doing by myself, it's grown confidence in me' (Frank). In a sense, he appeared to have made a transition, not only from school to post-secondary education, but also from dependence to independence.

Effectiveness of supports

The novel demands of higher/further education seems to require a more wide reaching form of support than was perhaps needed in the narrower environment of early school. Kieran highlighted the need for a variety of supporters whilst he was at school, including medical and religious practitioners and demonstrates the complex support needs of some students with ASD:

It's helped me in a number of ways with Dr [name supplied] has helped me through a lot of personal issues and that. Father [name supplied] has helped me through grieving and Mr [name supplied] has helped me through learning and stuff. Different people ... (Kieran)

Peter required support in social communication as his PLC Business course required interaction with customers as part of a work placement:

I got a lot of 'very goods', I got four 'very goods' and about ten 'goods' and one 'unsatisfactory' because, one unsatisfactory because I've got a problem with communicating with the customers. (Peter)

Peter felt able to cope with the course intellectually; nevertheless, he experienced difficulties in relation to meeting the expectations for academic writing: 'It's just how to write them and how to write them perfectly and all that's a ... problem and how to lay it out. Some people can be ... can lay out their answers but I can't' (Peter).

All three higher education students recognised that they had the responsibility of managing their schedules and that participation in higher education required significant skills in self-determination: 'Basically it's not like school where you're being bossed around. Here you own your thing in your own time basically' [Conor].

In this post-transition phase, the availability of public transport to institutions away from the students' home area was identified as a particular barrier. The location and timing of services did not always match the needs of students, forming an additional challenge for some students.

Discussion

This study was exploratory in nature and designed to enable policy-makers and practitioners to gain an increased understanding of how students with ASD experienced the transition to the world of post-compulsory education. Despite the study's limited scope a number of important insights have emerged which can enable policy-makers and practitioners provide appropriate support for students with ASD in their transition to post-compulsory education settings. While it is generally recognised that all students can experience difficulties in making this transition (Mc Coy, Smyth, Watson, and Darmody 2014), it is equally evident that students with ASD encounter specific challenges that require nuanced and sensitive responses from policy-makers and practitioners (Getzel and Thoma 2008).

Early transition planning is considered to be advisable for all students (Mc Coy et al. 2014), however, it is essential for students with ASD (Wei et al. 2016). Within this study it was apparent that while very positive relationships had been established with career guidance practitioners, there was limited evidence that focused transition planning was an established component of school provision. In fact, there appeared to be serious gaps in the knowledge of these practitioners that could have serious consequences for the success of the transition process for students with ASD. While transition planning for students with disabilities is mandatory in the USA and usually folded into an IEP, there is no such compulsion for Irish schools and so there is a real risk that this essential element of individual planning can be neglected (Rose, Shevlin, Winter, O'Raw, and Zhao 2012). Furthermore, choices of subject and level of study made early in their secondary career can have a profound impact on post-school career trajectories. Many students with ASD can experience social isolation during their secondary school careers (Madriaga et al. 2008) and it became evident in this study that these students experienced heightened anxiety at the prospect of transition and leaving behind the predictability of trusted school professionals who provided high levels of support.

Disclosure of ASD in order to obtain requisite support has been reported to be problematic for many students (Beardon, Martin, and Woolsey 2009; Getzel and Thoma 2008). This study supported these findings indicating that students with ASD struggled with the whole process of disclosure. Proactive parental involvement was necessary to initiate the process of engagement with the higher education support services, though once this had been addressed, the students reported being more comfortable with accessing support. While technically these students are adults there appears to be a powerful argument for support staff to be willing to engage with parents, particularly in initiating the support process. It appears that the basic social interaction skills required for these types of exchanges may be limited for these students and may require explicit guidance to foster appropriate social

interaction skills with support services staff. Developing trusting relationships in a new environment to replace those established in secondary school will require time and patience and this needs to be taken into account by support services staff in designing their support interventions. In this study, one student with ASD may wish to shed the disability label and engage in a 'fresh start' as reported in other studies (Getzel and Thoma 2008; Jacklin 2011). The decision not to disclose has to be respected and the support services staff need to be flexible enough to offer support when the student may encounter difficulties at whatever stage of the academic year.

While there is an awareness of how students with ASD may struggle with aspects of social interaction in higher education (Hart, Grigal, and Weir 2010) less attention has been given to the implicit social demands embedded in curriculum and assessment processes (Zager and Alpern 2010). Though this study was limited to the very early stages of transition into higher/further education, there was emerging evidence that when social interaction is an integral course expectation students with ASD can struggle. Post-secondary education institutions need to be made aware of these possibilities and perhaps incorporate support opportunities into coursework for students with ASD to demonstrate their strengths such as pursuing areas of passionate interest (Gobbo and Shmulsky 2014).

While this study represents a limited snapshot of the transition experiences for students with ASD within the Republic of Ireland, a few insights can be documented. Four of the six students managed to access their first choice course (2 in HE/2 in FE) and another achieved his second choice in higher education. All five students, who achieved their first or second choices, appeared to be content with their choices though it is difficult to know whether the PLC choices were the result of limited ambition or the appropriate level of study for the students concerned. The student who failed to achieve his course choice had limited his choices to a PLC course near home as he was concerned about the prospects of moving away. All students appeared to value the pre-transition support and the availability of school support professionals. At post-transition, students appeared to have settled into their courses despite some initial difficulties in accessing support. Tracking these students through their post-secondary education would yield further valuable insights regarding the quality of the transition process, the appropriateness of the available supports and whether these students become socially integrated within their new educational settings.

Concluding comments

Students with ASD, like their peers, form a heterogeneous group and require individualised attention and support in order to make successful transitions to post-secondary education within the Republic of Ireland. The importance of early transition planning needs to be made visible and operational through the legislative mandating of IEPs incorporating a transition component. In addition, career guidance professionals require regular updated information about access pathways for students with ASD and opportunities for focused transition planning. Parental support may need to extend into the post-transition phase, in particular with the facilitation of initial contact between the student and the support service. Research studies have indicated that curricular and assessment processes embedded in higher education courses need to be reviewed to ensure that implicit social interaction demands are made explicit and appropriate guidance provided for students with ASD. We, in institutes of higher education, should not underestimate the challenges faced by students with ASD

as they leave behind familiar environments and negotiate a pathway through higher and further education. Encouraging the development of self-determination skills, a key predictor of success in post-secondary education, needs to begin in secondary school. It is clear that there is a strong commitment to enabling greater student diversity in post-secondary education in the Republic of Ireland and insights from this study can contribute to the development of an embedded infrastructure to support effective transitions for students with ASD to post-secondary education.

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