

Expectations You Encounter

The Educational Experiences and Transition Choices/Opportunities of Blind/Vision Impaired People in the Republic of Ireland

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work.

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Summary

This study was concerned with exploring the educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities of blind/vision impaired people in the Republic of Ireland. Until relatively recently the educational provision for blind/vision impaired children and young people occurred primarily within the special education system. Restructuring of the education system began in the 1990s leading to changes in special education including a language of inclusive education within policy initiatives. There has been a history of exclusion and missed opportunities among blind/vision impaired people within education and employment. Research has indicated a positive association between education and employment. The research questions examined in this study pertain to the educational experiences of blind/vision impaired people, the factors that impact on these experiences and, issues impacting on transition choices/opportunities.

The literature used began by considering how in modern society, social categories are often utilized to refer to people. Until the 1970s the individual/medical model of disability was dominant. This model excluded all social factors connected to disability and emphasised the individualised aspect of disability. This definition transformed a description of a condition into a description of a person. In the 1970s the social model of disability was developed in opposition to the individual/medical model and was concerned with disability and the societal barriers that are imposed on disabled people. The literature also considered other approaches including the capability approach, the social-relational model of disability and the life course approach which may be useful when considering aspects of disability. The literature concluded with an examination of literature pertinent to education and transition choices/opportunities that were germane to this study.

This research is qualitative in nature as the researcher considers that a worthwhile feature of some types of qualitative research can be its ability to give voice to those who previously were not heard within the research arena. There has been a paucity of research involving blind/vision impaired people as primary participants conducted in Ireland. This has resulted in research which does not represent the

true experiences of this section of the population. A life history approach was utilized for the purposes of this research. Participants are the key players in life history research as their life stories are the primary data. This approach allows the participant to be visible in the research process. My ontological position as a disabled researcher has been central to the development of this research. Methodological issues including sampling, bias reliability and validity, confidentiality and anonymity, gatekeepers and consent, rapport and disclosure and reflexivity are also considered.

Thematic analysis was utilized for analyzing the data collected as it offered a theoretically flexible way in which to analyze qualitative data. Transcripts of participants' interviews were read through carefully several times to identify emerging themes and sub-themes and this analysis is presented in chapters four and five. Chapter four contains four case studies that identify the themes and sub-themes that were pertinent to this study and these are further explored in chapter five with examples from other participants' transcripts.

The pertinent findings of this research concern: identity and the disparities that appear to exist between how blind/vision impaired people construct their identity positively and how this can contrast with more negative connotations which society can assign to disability. This can have significant implications in terms of how blind/vision impaired people are educated. Another key finding pertained to access and demonstrated how access issues are experienced at a variety of levels, and how appropriate access arrangements enables greater participation while inappropriate or inadequate access can impose unnecessary barriers to inclusion. The final key finding related to transitions and how transitions were experienced by blind/vision impaired people. It was evident that greater transition opportunities are now available to this section of the population. However, it was apparent that transition choices/opportunities can be thwarted through disabling environments and disabling attitudes.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

There has been a history of exclusion and missed opportunities among blind/vision impaired people within education and employment. Until comparatively recently the educational provision for blind/vision impaired children and young people occurred primarily within the special education system. Significant changes to the education system commenced in the 1990s leading to changes in special education including a language of inclusive education within policy initiatives. Watson (1998:151) states that “It is only through people’s stories and biographies that an understanding that unites the public and the private into a coherent entity can come into being”. This study explores educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities from the perspective of blind/vision impaired people.

This chapter begins with an examination of terminology as it relates to disability and disabled people. The chapter then focuses on placing this study within a broader research context and is followed by the rationale for this study. A brief discussion of this study is then presented. This is followed by an examination of relevant Irish policy and legislation and the chapter by outlining the structure of this thesis.

1.2 Terminology

Over the last number of decades there has been much written around definitions of disability and appropriate terminology. It is apparent that disability is a significant means of “social differentiation in modern societies” (Barton, 1996: 13). While proponents of the British social model of disability advocate for ‘disabled first language’, ‘people first language’ is often the preferred language for disabled people/people with disabilities for people in other countries including the United States. These terms can have different political and cultural meanings within countries and across the globe. It can be argued that both of these terms are the favoured self-identifiers of disabled people/people with disabilities and consequently it could be suggested that both terms are equally appropriate.

Goodley, & Tregaskis (2006: 631) argue that “the terms *disabled people*, *disabled children*, and *disabled families* (their italics) are chosen by proponents of the social

model, because it foregrounds the sociopolitical nature of disability". It is also argued that this terminology "places the emphasis on the social oppression they experience and does not confuse their 'impairments' with 'disability'" (Beresford, 2005:471). In contrast, proponents of 'people first language' assert that 'people with disabilities', places the emphasis on the person rather than the disability. Bolt (2005: 548) claimed that "The shift away from the individual model is reflected in person-first terminology, for people with impaired vision are not necessarily disabled, but when they are so, the society in which they live is necessarily disabling".

In the UK emphasis is placed on the political identity of 'disabled people' as Oliver (1996: 36) states "defining impairment or disability or illness or anything else for that matter is not simply a matter of language or science; it is also a matter of politics". Shakespeare & Watson (1997: 293) assert that "this ideological position should be properly located in British disability politics: the movement in other countries, while adopting a social or minority group approach, have not built their campaign and self-definition around the social model" and Shakespeare (2004) argues that American minority group approaches, the Nordic relational approach and other international perspectives have produced significant analysis and research without using the British social model or what he refers to as the "strong social model".

Abberley (1996: 63) argues that "we must talk more about impairment at the level of theory if we are to make sense of disability, since impairment is the material substratum upon which the oppressive social structures of disablement are erected" and Shakespeare (2004: 17) asserts that "Impairment and disability are on a continuum and that we should not think in terms of dichotomies. He also acknowledges that

Impairment and disability are not distinct social phenomena. In practice, it is difficult to know where impairment stops and disability starts, as anybody who has done qualitative research with disabled people rapidly realises: it is not a case of either/or but of both/and (2004: 17).

Abberley (1996: 65) argues that “To develop a theory of disability as oppression, then, involves concrete discussions of the ontological status of impairment, which is by no means exhausted by simply locating impairment within the individual and disability in society” and Crow (1996: 218) asserts that “It is critical that we recognise the ways in which disability and impairment work together”.

‘People with sight problems’, ‘people with sight difficulties’, ‘blind or partially sighted people’, people with ‘low vision’, ‘visual impairment’, ‘vision impaired’ “are all ways of referring to people whose vision falls below a ‘normal’ threshold” (Praat & Keil, 2003: 40). The struggle over definitions are “important in that terms and definitions carry with them material consequences” (Praat & Keil, 2003: 40). Bolt (2005: 549) stated “that while terms like people with impaired vision and visual impairment correspond with the Social Model of Disability, there is still room for improvement”.

Oliver argues that “definitions of disability, as with definitions of other social problems, are related both to economic and social structures and to the central values of particular societies” (1990: xii). Therefore, “simply changing terminology will not fundamentally alter the devalued status of disabled people within society” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 17). As noted by Griffin & Shevlin, (ibid) “A more radical approach is required. The term ‘disabled people’ is generally used throughout this study as the researcher believes that this terminology accentuates the social oppression that can be experience by blind/vision impaired people. However, the term ‘people with disabilities’ does appear on a number of occasions throughout the study, this occurs when the researcher quotes directly from either published work or participants transcripts.

Much of these debates around terminology emerged in the 1970s with the introduction of the UK social model of disability which was established in opposition the individual/medical model of disability which was the dominant lens through which disability was viewed prior to this and individualised the ‘problem’ of disability frequently turning a description of a condition into a description of people. Models of disabilities and their implications are explored in the next chapter.

1.3 Research context

Ireland has witnessed significant changes in how we think about and respond to disability as a public issue. In the past blind/vision impaired children and young people were often assigned to particular types of education based on their impairment. This type of provision led to baseless assumptions about the learning capabilities of this section of the population and implied that as a result of their impairment they inevitably had more apparent learning needs than their peers (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). In the past, special education was perceived as being the sole responsibility of dedicated professionals "...who looked after the needs of children and young people who had disabilities" (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007 : 1) but increasingly these children and young people are now educated within mainstream settings and "...have become the responsibility of everyone in the education system" (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007 : 3). As Armstrong (2005 : 49) acknowledged it is inconceivable to "...draw a boundary around something called 'the education system' and to treat it as separate from the broader landscapes of social life". Consequently, while the focus of this study is primarily concerned with the educational experiences of blind/vision impaired people, the study is also concerned with the factors that impact on life choices and opportunities. Watson & Nolan (2011: 50) stated that "The challenge for society and the educational system is to adapt to the needs of children and young people with a disability and to accept their differences, while enabling them to maximise their achievements".

Many including Ali, Fazil, Bywaters, Wallace & Singh (2001) and Educable (2000) have acknowledged that there has been a dearth of participation among disabled people in the area of research and they have either not been consulted at all or else remain on the periphery of the research process. The National Disability Authority (2002) assert that the inclusion of disabled people is essential in order that disability research correctly reflects their true experiences. Until comparatively recently most of the research undertaken in the area of disability was done either within the medical profession or by those caring for disabled people. Relatively little research involving blind/vision impaired people as primary participants, has been conducted in Ireland. Consequently, an important aim of this study is to attempt to legitimise and understand the educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities of blind/vision impaired people as it is my belief that they are the experts regarding their lives. As French, & Swain, (2006: 386) assert "The

official history of the major areas of legislation, policy, provision and practice that shaped the education of young visually impaired people tells us little of their experiences". They also affirm that insider viewpoints, from the past and the present, are necessary if inclusive educational policy and practice for vision impaired/blind people is to be successfully achieved.

1.4 Rationale for Study

My own interest in the area of education and disability arose from my personal experience of mobility and vision impairment. A large part of my own story was dominated by the segregationist and institutional education policies that were the norm in Ireland up to the 1980s and the subsequent adjustment to mainstream society. My experience led me to question the validity or otherwise of such policies. The study of sociology as a discipline honed this subjective interest into an objective and academic questioning regarding the educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities of blind/vision impaired children and young people.

1.5 This Study

Twenty three blind/vision impaired people in the Republic of Ireland participated in this research. A life history approach was used to examine in depth the educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities of participants. This methodology deeply values the perspectives of research participants. As Shah, & Priestley (2011: 45) acknowledge

When we look at individual lives, we find valuable evidence about the reality of the real choices available to people in their personal circumstances. Narrative accounts draw particular attention to the significant turning points that determine the course of subsequent biographical pathways. It is at these moments of opportunity that public institutions and policies often provide, or block, transitions.

This study was informed "...by a critical engagement with biographical narratives generated from life history interviews" (Shah & Priestley, 2011: 175). Life history research recognizes that there is "...a crucial interactive relationship between

individuals' lives, their perceptions and experiences, and historical and social contexts and events" (Goodson & Sikes, 2001: 2). Shah, & Priestley (2011: 16) acknowledge biographical accounts can "...provide a useful empirical lens through which to observe change in disabling societies". Thematic analysis was used in this research for analysis purposes and it was guided by Priestley's (2003: 4) life course approach as adopting this approach to "...disability means examining the ways in which disabled lives are understood, organized and governed within societies...". The life course approach can "...make biography more sociological by connecting individual lives with historical time and with other people's lives" (Shah & Priestley, 2011: 14).

Research including Shah, & Priestley (2011) and Gannon & Nolan (2005) indicate a positive connection between education and employment. While AHEAD (2008: 27) acknowledge that without actual equality of access to educational opportunities and qualifications we are in danger of losing accomplished individuals from the labour force. Therefore the researcher considered that the following research questions were appropriate for this study.

1. What are/have been the educational experiences of blind/vision impaired people?
2. What factors have impacted on these educational experiences?
3. What factors in their lives have impacted on their life choices/opportunities?

It is anticipated that the findings of this study could be used to provide an understanding of the impact of existing policy and practice on blind/vision impaired people's educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities and to inform the development of future policy and practice.

1.6 Irish Policy Context

This section will focus on relevant legislation and policy initiatives as they pertain to education and special educational need within an Irish context.

In Ireland special education has undergone substantial changes in recent decades. This has been influenced by "...international demands for a more equitable education system that recognises diversity and considers how schools might address the needs of pupils who have been previously marginalised" (Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O'Raw, 2010: 359). The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly "...incorporated the rights of children with disabilities to an appropriate high-quality education suited to their learning needs" (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 44) and Ireland signed up to this convention in 1992. The *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organisation, 1994) promoted a move from 'integrated' to 'inclusive' education and in June 1994, Ireland was one of ninety two governments that adopted this statement. The Salamanca Statement advocated the need to provide opportunities for equal participation for all students and called on governments to "...adopt as a matter of law or policy the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise" (United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organisation, 1994: ix). The International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) advances these underpinning principles by asserting that States shall guarantee that persons with disabilities receive the necessary supports within the general education system to promote their effective education and that effective individualized supports are available within settings that "...maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion" (United Nations, 2006: Article 24(e)). Part (3) of this article refers specifically to the education of blind and deaf children. Ireland is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities but has not ratified it and consequently this is not legally binding. As Wright, (2010: 153) asserted "Inclusive education is now established as part of a global agenda and as such national governments, and their agencies, strive to produce and implement policies to promote inclusion".

At a national level Ireland has seen a proliferation of legislation introduced since the 1990s that is pertinent to the education of children and young people with special educational needs. Within current policy and legislation, Ireland has adopted an inclusive position and the rights of disabled children and adults have been increasingly recognised in legislation. This policy and legislation promotes

the maximum possible level of inclusion for students with special educational needs within mainstream schools and to provide the required supports to facilitate this development. The policy and legislation that has been identified as significant for the purposes of this study include the Education Act (1998), the Equal Status Act (2000) Equality Act (2004b), the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004a) and the Disability Act (2005). A crucial development in this was the publication of the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) in 1993. Its brief was to consider “how the existing system could be resourced in order that the policy of integration could be effectively implemented” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 44). The recommendations included in this report provided a foundation for the future development of special education in Ireland and its influence is still apparent in current policy decisions (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). *The Special Education Review Committee Report (1993)* comprise the first determined efforts since the 1960s to address the complex issues involved in policy and practice and was “...a credible attempt to improve system capacity in relation to special educational provision” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 53). The SERC report (1993) articulated that provision should be determined by the child's individual needs and parents should be included in the decision-making process. This report also advocated a continuum of education provision for students with special educational needs ranging from full time placement in special schools to placement in mainstream schools with additional support. The SERC report defined ‘special education’ as

...any educational provision which is designed to cater for pupils with special educational needs, and is additional to or different from the provision which is generally made in ordinary classes for pupils of the same age’ (1993: 18).

The report defined students with ‘special educational needs’ as

...those whose disabilities and/or circumstances prevent or hinder them from benefiting adequately from the education which is normally provided for pupils of the same age or for whom the education which is generally provided in the ordinary classroom is not sufficiently challenging (1993: 18).

While this definition of 'special education need' is relatively encompassing, Griffin and Shevlin (2007) indicated that it focussed on within-child deficits which could be identified as a weakness of this report. Another shortcoming which was recognised by disability groups was that the SERC membership did not include disabled people and consequently reflected the dominant stance of service providers (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 52-53). The SERC Report (1993: 18-19) defined educational integration as the "participation of pupils with disabilities in school activities with other pupils, to the maximum extent which is consistent with the broader overall interests of both the pupils with disabilities and the other pupils in the class/group". While generally supportive of social integration this definition "allows room for the exclusion of children with disabilities if their inclusion in classroom activities disadvantages their peers" (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 50). This report also advocated for structural links to be developed between regular and special schools "to ensure that specialist expertise in the special school sector could be shared with mainstream counterparts" (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 52).

"The *Government White Paper on Education* (Department of Education, 1995: 24) asserted that "All students, regardless of their personal circumstances, have a right of access to and participation in the education system, according to their potential and ability". This paper also acknowledged that in order to promote this type of equality the allocation of "resources to those in greatest need, providing appropriate support systems, and changing the tangible and intangible qualities of the system itself to cater for the diverse educational needs and interests of the population" (Department of Education, 1995: 7) would be necessary. *The government White Paper on Education* stated objective was to

...ensure a continuum of provision for special educational needs, ranging from occasional help within the ordinary school to full-time education in a special school or unit, with students being enabled to move as necessary and practicable from one type of provision to another (Department of Education, 1995: 24).

In essence, "the recommendations of the Special Education Review Committee were endorsed and incorporated into the White Paper" (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 56).

The 1998 Education Act was significant in that this was the first piece of legislation in the history of the state that formalised “...the legal rights and responsibilities of the Irish Government relating to education” (Carey, 2005: 136). Within this legislation all schools and all teachers have to “...take responsibility for all children, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 1). The Education Act (1998) articulates the need to “promote equality of access to and participation in education...” (Government of Ireland, 1998) and within that legislation was a “...guarantee of 'automatic entitlement' of provision by right of any child who has special educational needs” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 45). This Act also proposed to enhance the educational environment for children experiencing challenges in learning by advancing “best practice in teaching methods with regard to the diverse needs of students and the development of the skills and competencies of teachers” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 58). Within this Act was contained the first legal definition of ‘disability’ but the definition was firmly rooted within a medical model of disability and “...located the source of educational difficulties within the child who has a special educational need and ignored critical environmental and contextual issues” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 58). Within this legislation the Minister for Education and Science is required to ensure that there is made available to each person resident in the State, including a person with a disability or who has other special educational needs, “support services and a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities of that person” (Government of Ireland, 1998: Section 7.1).

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 represents an important landmark in education legislation provision for pupils with special educational needs. The fundamental purpose of the Act is articulated in the preamble as

...to provide that the education of people with such needs shall, wherever possible, take place in an inclusive environment with those who do not have such needs, to provide that people with special educational needs shall have the same right to avail of, and benefit from, appropriate education as do their peers who do not have such needs, to assist children with special educational needs to leave school with the skills necessary to participate, to the level of their capacity, in

an inclusive way in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent and fulfilled lives. (Government of Ireland, 2004a).

It is apparent from this that “Inclusion represents a core value in the Act” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 59). The definition of disability adopted in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 contrasts significantly with the medical definition of disability that was utilised in the Education Act 1998. The definition used in the EPSEN Act (2004) “...does not focus exclusively on within-child deficits and recognises that difficulties in learning are relative rather than all-embracing” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 59). The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was formally established under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Government of Ireland, 2004a). Its task was to improve the delivery of education services to persons with special educational needs arising from disabilities. Their local services are delivered through, a national network of Special Needs Education Organizers (SENOs) who are in responsible for co-ordinating and facilitating the delivery of educational services to children with disabilities.

To date only parts of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) have been implemented. This is due to economic constraints, and has meant that the full enactment of this legislation was deferred in 2008.

Consequently, the statutory obligation on schools to introduce a system of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) which was a significant component of this Act has not been implemented and Rose et al (2012: 111) state that the “...failure to enact the provisions regarding individual education planning has lessened the impact...” of this Act.

The Equal Status Act 2000 and 2004 have relevance for special education as it has implications for guaranteeing “...equitable access to and delivery of special educational provision” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 57). Section 7 of this Act broadly defines ‘educational establishment’ in a manner which ensures that all educational establishments both public and private from preschool facilities through to Third Level institutions are included within the definition of an ‘educational establishment’. Kinsella, & Senior, (2008: 53) commented that under this legislation educational establishments are required

...to make reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities in their education, examination and accreditation systems in order to facilitate equality of participation in the education system for these persons and to ensure that they achieve appropriate learning outcomes.

The primary purpose of the Disability Act 2005 is to “enable provision to be made for the assessment of health and education needs” of disabled people which indicates the relevance of this Act to students with disabilities and special needs education. Part 2 of this Act pertains to the legal right to access an assessment for children of school age but to date, this legal entitlement is only available for children aged five and under. This is because in 2008, full implementation of Part 2 of the Disability Act (2005) was postponed as a consequence of the decision not to commence similar components of the EPSEN Act (2004), which also pertain to assessment.

This section considered legislation and policy initiatives that are pertinent to the education of disabled people. It is evident that “Nationally, the last decade of the twentieth century witnessed the unfolding of major educational initiatives that shaped the organisation and delivery of educational provision” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 47). Shevlin et al (2012: 2) acknowledge “...educational provision for children and young people with special educational needs is in a transition phase as inclusion policy and practice has yet to become firmly embedded in Irish schools”. While the legislation and policy in Ireland that is pertinent to the education of students with disabilities advocates and affirms inclusive educational settings it is apparent that these Acts are not truly rights-based as they are subject to budgetary constraints and include the caveat implicit in phrases such as “having regard to the resources available” or “as resources permit” (Drudy & Kinsella, 2009; Shevlin & Rose, 2008). So while education is recognised as a human right and this human right is acknowledged within national policy Griffin, & Shevlin, (2007: 3) acknowledge that “...serious issues remain around what constitutes an appropriate education for children and young people with special educational needs”.

1.7 Layout of Thesis

Chapter two begins by reviewing literature relating to the dominant models of disability that shape societal thinking and other relevant theoretical approaches. The chapter then focuses on literature that is pertinent to education, transitions and employment. Chapter three focuses on the qualitative methodology that was utilized for the purposes of this study and discusses the pertinent aspects of this research. The research findings are presented in chapters four and five. In chapter four, four case studies identify many of the key themes and sub-themes that are further developed in chapter five. The focus of chapter six is the discussion of the study's findings in relation to relevant published research. Chapter seven is the conclusion chapter in which the implications of the research findings are discussed in relation to policy and practice. This chapter also considers some possible areas of further research and the advantages and disadvantages of the methodology used in this research and the position of the researcher as insider.

The following chapter will begin by considering the medical and social models of disability and some of the germane criticisms that have emerged regarding these models will be presented. The chapter will then focus on some approaches that may be useful when considering impairment and disability and may offer more encompassing ways of thinking about disability. The chapter will conclude with a focus on aspects of education, transitions and employment that are pertinent to this research.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will begin by focusing on the individual/medical and social models of disability and some of the pertinent criticisms that have emerged regarding these two models will be presented. The chapter will then consider some approaches that may be of use when considering impairment and disability and may offer more encompassing ways of thinking about disability. It will then focus on aspects of education, inclusive education, special educational needs, transition stages, employment and citizenship that are pertinent to this research.

In modern society, social categories are often used to refer to people. Thus, it is salient to recognize that the definitions and models of disability that are used in society reflect how disability and disabled people are perceived within that society. Best (2007: 163) has argued that normalization permits “members of society, to categorize and measure people, place people in hierarchies on the basis of widely accepted rules”. Griffin, & Shevlin, (2007: 14) assert that the labels attributed “to individuals and groups reflect their relative position within society”. Furthermore, it is recognised that “Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories” (Goffman, 1990: 11). Minow (1991) states that dilemmas of difference emerged as a result of society assigning individuals to particular categories which results in exclusion from political, social and economic activities (cited in Norwich, 2008:). Foucault (1980) asserts that a significant amount of the categorization of individuals within society emerged from medicine which took on added importance in many areas of society throughout the eighteenth century. Norwich (2008: 137) acknowledges that

...the ways we perceive the phenomenon of disability influence the classification systems that underpin special educational practices. However negative one can be regarding classification systems, it is difficult to abolish them altogether in the school setting, because the consequence is denying rather than being able to abolish the need for differentiation.

It is recognised that the way in which difference is constructed is pivotal. Riddell (1996: 92) argues that “Within an essentialist framework, the task of professionals is regarded to be that of identifying and thereafter providing services to meet the needs of individuals with particular categories of difficulty”. It has been acknowledged by Barton that “Disability is a significant means of social differentiation in modern societies” (1996: 13). Michalko (2009: 66) states that “Disability is here; it is in our societies, in our cultures; it is in our organizations, our institutions and in our everyday lives; disability is in our world; it can be nowhere else”. Furthermore, he acknowledges that “How disability is made to appear to and for us influences greatly how disability will participate in our individual and collective lives” (Michalko, 2009: 66). Thus, it is essential to scrutinize how disability is viewed within society and therefore necessary to begin this chapter with an examination of the models of disability.

2.2 The Medical Model of Disability

It has been argued that “The medical model of disability has been the legitimate conceptual paradigm for understanding disability throughout the history of modernity...” (Donoghue, 2003: 207). Oliver (1996a: 31) asserts that for him “...there is no such thing as the medical model of disability, there is instead, an individual model of disability of which medicalisation is one significant component”. However, the term “medical model” is used extensively throughout the literature when referring to what Oliver (1996) identifies as the “individual model”. The medical model of disability was dominant until the 1970s and therefore powerful particularly as professionals developed and advocated this paradigm. Foucault states “Knowledge and power are integrated with one another...” (1980: 52). Thomas (2004: 23) asserts that:

...those who wield power through the authority conferred upon them by the status and legitimacy of their knowledge – doctors, state administrators and legislators – can impose the category “disabled” upon individuals in their purview.

Foucault (1979) argues that the power associated with medicine arose as a response to particular societal needs. Historically, the individual/medical model

has excluded all societal factors in relation to disability. Within the medical model, disabled people were defined by their “medical condition” and both their loss and the need for medical intervention were emphasised; thus, disability was individualised. Medical intervention was often undertaken in order to try and ‘normalise’ the individual and Foucault (1979: 184) argues that “...normalization becomes one of the great instruments of power at the end of the classical age”. Drake (1996: 148) states that “In advanced western societies the predominant view of disability is one informed overwhelmingly by medicine.

It is recognised that mainstream sociology has historically shown scant attention to the issue of disability (Barton, 1996: 6). It has been noted that when they have considered disability they “tended to accept the dominant hegemony with regard to viewing disability in medical and psychological terms. Thus the issue was perceived as “pre- or non-sociological” (Barton, 1996: 6). Many of these sociological accounts were influenced by Parsons’ idea of the ‘sick role’ and his work was considered to be the authority on disability research (Donoghue, 2003). Parsons asserts that “By institutional definition of the sick role the sick person is helpless and therefore in need of help” (1991: 440). Furthermore, Parsons argues that “Illness is predominantly a withdrawal into a dependent relation, it is asking to be ‘taken care of’. It uses disability as the basis of ‘legitimation of this claim” (Parsons, 1991: 285). Barnes, Oliver, & Barton, (2002: 3) state that “For Parsons sickness, whether short or long term, is a deviation from the norm”.

Medical definitions individualise the ‘problem’ of disability and can transform a description of a condition into a description of people. The individual/medical model of disability is often the only one used in policy documents. Consequently, only individualised supports have been provided for disabled people and thus, have had a limited effect in regard to the broader practice and provision for disabled people. Oliver argues that:

Not only do these definitions medicalise and individualise the problems of disability but they do the same to the solutions (policies) that are applied. Thus services too are based upon an individualised and medicalised view of disability and are designed by able-bodied people

through a process over which disabled people have had little or no control” (1990: 6).

Furthermore, Shakespeare, & Watson, (1998: 14) maintain that the implementation of this individual/medical model of disability “results in services and research aimed at the individual level; the emphasis is placed on altering the individual rather than social processes”.

In the World Health Organisations’ (WHOs) *International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps* (ICIDH), impairment, disability and handicap are defined as follows:

Impairment is any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function.

Disability is any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.

Handicap is a disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from impairment or a disability that limits or prevents the fulfillment of a role that is normal (depending on the age, sex, social and cultural factors) for that individual (Wood, 1981: 28-29).

These definitions were strongly criticized by many including Oliver (1990) and as Barton (1996: 59) asserts, “What is common to all these classifications is that the ‘problem’ is located within the individual, necessitating the intervention of various professional agencies”. Later the WHO (2001) introduced a revised classification system entitled the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* (ICF). Within this classification system impairment, activity limitations and participation restrictions were defined as follows:

Impairment is a loss or abnormality in body structure or psychological function (including mental functions). Abnormality here is used strictly to refer to a significant variation from established statistical norms (i.e. as

a deviation from a standard population mean...) (World Health Organisation, 2001: 190)

Activity limitations are difficulties an individual may have in executing activities. An activity limitation may range from a slight to a severe deviation in terms of quality or quantity in executing the activity in a manner or to the extent that is expected of people without the health condition (World Health Organisation, 2001: 191)

Participation restrictions are problems an individual may experience in involvement in life situations. The presence of a participation restriction is determined by comparing an individual's participation to that which is expected of an individual without disability in that culture or society (World Health Organisation, 2001: 191).

The ICF classification system has also been criticized by many including Barnes and Mercer (2004). It has been suggested that the ICF model concludes that "disability has its genesis in a health condition that gives rise to impairments, and then to activity limitations and participation restrictions within contextual factors" (Mitra, 2006: 238). It has also been argued that "Conceptually, the ICF is presented as an integration of the medical and the social models" (Mitra, 2006: 238).

Priestley (1998: 79) argued the medical model of disability "...cannot accommodate what we understand by the term 'disability', it deals only in impairment". The medical model has resulted in disabled people being labeled; these labels are socially constructed and are imposed rather than chosen. In addition, the medical model leads to disabled people being viewed as a homogeneous group (Bolt, 2005).

Many including (Michalko, 2009; Priestley, 1998) has criticized the medical model of disability and the main criticism is that:

...disability is located within individual human bodies that do not match the standards set by the normalcy of non-disabled relations. Thus,

defining and treating disability by techno-scientific and medical means (e.g. assistive and rehabilitating technologies) promotes a model of human impairment that individualises, naturalises and anormalises matters of disability (Schillmeier, 2008: 611-612).

This paradigm focuses on the individual's loss and inabilities. It also individualises disability resulting in disabled people being "viewed as 'other' or negatively different" (Barton, 1998: 56). Within this conceptualization "...a person's functional limitations (impairments) are the root cause of any disadvantages experienced and these disadvantages can therefore only be rectified by treatment or cure" (Crow, 1996: 208).

An offshoot of the medical model is the personal tragedy paradigm which again individualizes the 'problem' of disability and frequently implies a notion of dependency in relation to the disabled person. This type of definition portrays "disabled people either as pathetic victims of some appalling tragedy or as superheroes struggling to overcome a tremendous burden" (Oliver, 1990: 61). Furthermore, this theory "...suggests that disability is some terrible chance event which occurs at random to unfortunate individuals. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth" (Michael Oliver, 1996: 32). This viewpoint of disability can "...be translated into social policies which will attempt to compensate these victims for the tragedies that have befallen them" (Oliver, 1990: 2). It has also been suggested that this approach "has promoted attitudes of paternalism and mechanisms of dependency at various macro levels within society" (Reindal, 2008: 141).

It is accepted that in order to be assessed as having a need, the need must be identified and recognised. Beckett & Wrighton, (2000: 997) argue that "In many ways, the medical model of disability is a particularly strong tool here". So while many aspects of the individual/medical model of disability have rightly been strongly criticized and rejected it must be recognised that some facets of the model may serve a useful purpose in particular circumstances if utilized appropriately. The following section will focus on what has been identified as the social model of disability which is seen as "...an effective ideological rejoinder to the established medical model" (Donoghue, 2003: 204).

2.3 The Social Model of Disability

In the 1970's the social model of disability emerged in which "The denial of a causal link between impairment and disability...become the hallmark of the social model" (Thomas, 2004: 25). The social model of disability was built on a negation of the medical model. Social model theorists argue that the medical model over-emphasizes impairment, cure and rehabilitation. The social model theorists assert that "...disability is seen solely as an artificial creation of society, which would vanish almost over-night if social organisation and social attitudes were transformed" (Borsay, 2006: 154). It involves "...an analysis of a process of marginalisation, oppression, discrimination, exclusion, or in other words disablement, that affects people with impairments" (Sapey, 2004: 273). In contrast, the social model is concerned with disability and the societal barriers that are placed on disabled people (Söder, 2009). In the late 1970s, the social model emerged and was advanced by disabled people, primarily those with physical disabilities; it argues that the attitudes towards disabled people are historically, culturally and situationally determined (Bolt, 2005). UPIAS and Oliver were the principal players in introducing the social model of disability. "The UPIAS document sought to shift the conception of disablement from that of a medical concept to a social concept" (Edwards, 2005: 20). UPIAS defines impairment as "...lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body" (1975: 3) and disability as:

...the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities (UPIAS, 1975: 3-4).

The social model perspective suggests that "disabled people would experience better quality of life and more equality of opportunity if society were organized in ways that took the needs of all its citizens into account" (Goodley & Tregaskis, 2006: 631). Furthermore Oliver (1996: 32) argues that "It is not individual limitations, of whatever kind, which are the cause of the problem but society's failure to provide appropriate services and adequately ensure the needs of disabled people are fully taken into account in its social organization".

It has been acknowledged that “It is important to remember that models may help to generate an explanation in some way, but they do not themselves constitute an explanation” (Llewellyn & Hogan, 2000: 157). In recent decades criticisms have emerged regarding the social model of disability and some of these will be critiqued below.

2.3.1 It is Not a Social Theory

A criticism of the social model of disability is that it is not a social theory (Söder, 2009). Oliver argues that those who developed the social model never “...claimed that it was a theory, and indeed most of us have explicitly said that the social model is not a theory of disability” (2004: 9). Furthermore, he argued that

Firstly we must not assume that models in general and the social model in particular can do everything; that it can explain disability in totality. It is not a social theory of disability and it cannot do the work of social theory. Secondly, because it cannot explain everything, we should neither seek to expose inadequacies, which are more a product of the way we use it, nor abandon it before its usefulness has been fully exploited (Oliver, 1996: 41).

While the concept of the social model of disability was first advanced in the 1970’s by the Union of Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS), many have acknowledged that the idea of the social model of disability was brought to prominence within the academic arena due to the work of Oliver. Thus, as Oliver has been involved in the social model of disability from its conception his viewpoint is a valid one. Oliver argues that criticising the social model on the grounds of not being a theory is unfair and states that: “It seems unnecessary to criticise the social model for not being something it has never claimed to be” (2004: 9).

In contrast to Oliver’s viewpoint, Terzi suggests that “...the social model provides a definition of disability inscribed in a sociological perspective informed by historical materialism...” (2004: 143). Similarly, Thomas states that “This perspective draws upon, and sits comfortably within, a Marxist and materialist interpretation of the world” (2004: 22). According to Söder (2009: 69)

The social model can...be said to have a double purpose: to produce a scientifically valid sociological explanation of the situation and experiences of disabled people and to guide them in their actions for political change. This is not a unique ambition of the social model, rather something it shares with other pragmatic and Marxist theories.

Sapey (2004: 273) argues that “A significant feature of the social model is that disability is considered to be a product of industrialisation.” However, Oliver has emphasised that “The social model was a way of getting us all to think about the things we had in common, the barriers we all faced” (2004: 11).

The social model is often identified as a theory which was implemented in direct opposition to, the medical model of disability which is recognised by many, including social model theorists, as a theory. An important issue to consider, as noted by Corker (2006: 109), is that: “Theories are often designed from within particular perspectives conceived at particular times in history which do not reflect ‘disability’ or ‘society’ as we understand it today”. Theories come from an ideal viewpoint, thus, shortcomings, at some level, can be identified in all theories.

Shakespeare and Watson (1997) have argued the incorporation of feminist and postmodernist perspectives of disability into the social model is both possible and desirable and would ensure its renewal and continued relevance. Debate on the issue of whether the social model of disability is a theory will continue. It is important to recognise that all of those who critique the social model on these grounds, both disabled people and able-bodied people, all have a particular perspective which can have an influence on their opinions. It can be argued that all social theories have drawbacks as “All are based on particular assumptions about such matters as the nature of knowledge, the nature of people and the nature of ‘reality’ itself” (Corker, 1999: 627).

2.3.2 The Realities of Impairment are Ignored

Another criticism of the social model of disability is that it obscures or excludes the realities of impairment (Priestley, 1998). Söder (2009: 73) notes that:

The debate about the distinction between impairment and disability relates to the question of whether the individual and his/her characteristics or environment and its characteristics should be the focus in disability studies.

Advocates of the social model of disability state that “if we allow physical impairment to be seen as the foundation upon which our conception of 'disability' is based this opens the door for the medicalization of the lives of disabled people” (Best, 2007: 161). Criticisms of the social model of disability have come from both disabled people and by able-bodied academics. It is important to note that the social model was first introduced when the medical model of disability was dominant; the medical model was “...rooted in an undue emphasis on clinical diagnosis, the very nature of which is destined to lead to a partial and inhibiting view of the disabled individual” (Brisenden, 1998: 20) and focused exclusively on a person’s impairment to the exclusion of any social or cultural effects. Many disabled people have felt that the medical model of disability labelled them, consequently stigmatising them as they were only recognised by their impairment. Morris argues that

...one of the reasons we developed the social model of disability was to protect ourselves from the feelings of pity directed at us by non-disabled people who felt they had the right to tell us how we should feel about our experiences (1996: 13).

She goes on to suggest that:

In the process of defending ourselves from these onslaughts which undermined and disempowered us, which defined our lives as not worth living, there was little room for anything other than an assertion that it is external barriers, society’s prejudice and discrimination, which disabled us (1996: 13-14).

Crow’s (1996) analysis of the social model of disability is particularly valuable as she is a person with a disability and an advocate of the social model, yet she

accepts that there are flaws within the social model. A primary concern of Crow is the lack of emphasis placed on the significance of impairment; she argues that:

Many think that this has been done to the exclusion of impairment.

Sometimes it feels as if this focus is so absolute that we are in danger of assuming that impairment has no part at all in determining our experiences (1996: 208).

Crow goes on to suggest that “As a result of this those who advocate the social model of disability have focused almost entirely on the disabling barriers imposed by society” (1996: 208). According to Thomas (2004: 23) “In severing any causal link between impairment and disability, social modellers of a Marxist/materialist hue relegated impairment to a devalued “other” of little theoretical concern.” Crow questions the representation of impairment which has been put forward by social model theorists “...to present impairment as irrelevant, neutral and, sometimes, positive, but never, ever as the quandary it really is...” (1996: 208). She goes on to state that impairment is often an ongoing fact of life for many disabled people. I agree with her that impairment is a quandary, as a person with impairment, I regularly experience pain and fatigue and while the removal of external social barriers may reduce some of the effects that my impairment has on my daily life they will not remove the pain and fatigue which are a consequence of my impairment. Furthermore, the eradication of environmental and social barriers will not enable me to read body language and non-verbal cues, the only thing that would allow me to read such cues are if I were no longer vision impaired. Terzi has asserted that “...It is difficult to see, in fact, how the inability of a blind person to read non-verbal cues can be ascribed to a social condition” (2005: 201). As Crow has acknowledged: “As individuals, most of us simply cannot pretend with any conviction that our impairments are irrelevant because they influence so much of our lives” (1996: 210). Therefore, it must be recognised that there is a relational nature between impairment, disability and society (Terzi, 2004: 152). While Crow critiqued the social model and argued that the lack of emphasis on impairment within this perspective was a significant flaw she acknowledged that:

The social model has never suggested that disability represents the total explanation or that impairment doesn't count – that has simply

been the impression we have given by keeping our experiences of impairment private and failing to incorporate them into our public political analysis (1996: 218).

Consequently, while the social model has been criticised for not paying sufficient attention to the relevance of impairment in the lives of some disabled people, it is apparent that this may be an unwarranted appraisal of the social model of disability. It must be remembered that the social model of disability was developed in opposition to the individual/medical model of disability which was “rooted in an undue emphasis on clinical diagnosis, the very nature of which is destined to lead to a partial and inhibiting view of the disabled individual” (Brisenden, 1998: 20). In contrast the social model “...redefines disabled people’s position and status, by framing the causes of disability in social terms rather than viewing the person’s impairment or pathology as the problem...” (Carmichael, 2004: 192).

2.3.3 Normality is Questioned and Difference is Downplayed

Another factor which is related to underplaying the importance of impairment is that “...disability studies remains divided on the question of whether impairment constitutes *legitimate* difference and on the relationship between impairment (the individual) and identity (the social)” (Scott-Hill, 2004: 87). Often in Western societies, anything that is different is viewed as an attack on the social order and therefore, must be controlled. Minow (1991) argues that the categorization of individuals as different results in them being excluded from economic, social and political activities. The social model theorists argue that control is what the medical model of disability is trying to achieve. Advocates of the social model play down the significance of difference which appears to be done in an effort to counter argue the medical model’s overemphasis on ‘impairment’ and ‘normality’. “The relationship between them is assumed to be one of *dependence*: impairment is a source of “problems” and depends upon “normality” to provide the solution” (Scott-Hill, 2004:88). Many social model theorists reject the medical model of disability due to its overemphasis on medical interventions in order to reduce difference and return the person with impairment to an acceptable level of normality. As Goble notes, “Success is achieved when the professional expert judges that the performance of the individual has moved significantly in the desired direction”

(2004: 42-43). Goble goes on to argue that this type of intervention assumes that "...the problem lies within the individual, and the response is technical intervention by skilled "expert" professionals to help the person overcome it and return to an approximation of "normality"" (2004: 43). This rejection of the medical model of disability by advocates of the social model appears to arise from the negative connotations which are associated with the terms 'normality' and 'abnormality'. It must be recognised that definitions of normality and abnormality are socially created and consequently, can be value-laden. As Terzi notes:

Paradoxically, the social model of disability could be brought to its knees by saying that if there is no normal functioning, there is no non-normal functioning, and therefore impairment and disability do not exist (2004: 155).

2.3.4 Fails to Consider Personal Experiences

Another criticism which has emerged in the literature and which is often advanced is that the social model does not take into consideration the personal experiences of all disabled people. Morris (1991), Crow (1996), and Simmons and Bayliss (2008) are among a growing number of scholars who believe that the social model of disability needs to be developed to make it more relevant and inclusive of all disabled people. Disabled feminists have argued that the social model "...is unable to incorporate other social divisions, that is race, gender, aging, sexuality and so on" (Oliver, 2004: 9). Corker (2006: 109) states that

...social theories that are grounded in some notion of "real" experience or which do their work by dichotomising experience and promoting some notion of a "real" society outside of this experience, inevitably exclude other kinds of experience which are labelled as "subjective" or "ideal".

Many feminists with disabilities argue that their experiences are not reflected within the social model of disability and, therefore, it is discriminatory. Within disability studies, both feminists and post-modernists have argued that the social model perspective fails to take account of "...the role of culture and cultural

processes in shaping society and ultimately disabled people's position within it" (Terzi, 2004: 146). It has also been argued that "...while the social model emphasizes economic structures, a post-modern approach is focusing on cultural processes" (Danermark & Gellerstedt, 2004: 340). Priestley (1998: 85) asserts that "...while the personal experience of impairment is a critical element in the construction of personal identity, it does not negate the fact that people of difference may be discriminated against collectively". In making the previous statement, Priestley acknowledged that he may be criticized by both feminist and postmodernist theorists who may perceive that he is suggesting that their viewpoints are incompatible with the social model of disability and he goes on to state:

That would of course be patent and rather dangerous nonsense. A proper understanding of structural barriers and oppressive cultural representations...is only possible when it is informed by the personal experience of disabled people (Priestley, 1998: 85).

The above sections examined the individual/medical model of disability and the social model of disability and identified a number of shortcomings with both perspectives. It is evident that these two perspectives of disability have emerged from very different positions and have contradictory opinions in relation to the root cause of disability. The following section will analyse some alternative approaches that may enable a greater understanding of disability.

2.4 Useful Approaches for a More Encompassing Understanding of Disability

While many critics of the social model are not suggesting that the social model should be abandoned and Thomas (2004: 34) argues that it "...should continue to occupy a central position in disability studies, but for specific purposes, serving more as a disciplinary figurehead than as an explanatory tool". Shakespeare (2004: 14) asserts that "...the 1976 version of the social model is not adequate to capture the complexities of every impairment and the social relationships and identities which arise from it". Bolt (2005: 549) acknowledged "The ongoing power and profundity of insights gained from the Social Model of Disability cannot be

denied, but nor can the fact that limitation is intrinsic to the structure of any model". Therefore, this section will consider the capability approach, the social-relational model of disability and the life course approach which may be useful when considering aspects of disability.

2.5 The Capability Approach

In this section, the capability approach will be discussed briefly, as it may be relevant and may enhance aspects of the social model of disability. Malhotra (2008: 86) has noted that:

...the capabilities approach parallels the scholarship of disability rights theorists who maintain that one must critically examine the structural barriers in society – such as lack of wheelchair ramps, or of informational materials accessible to those with visual impairments – that handicap people with disabilities and leave many of them living in poverty and unemployment.

Furthermore, Terzi (2005: 203) argues that the capability approach "...is well suited to assessing the relevance of impairment and disability in designing just and inclusive institutional and social arrangements." The capability approach views human diversity as central and consists of four aspects: "...personal characteristics, external circumstances, inter-individual variations in conversion factors, and inter-end variations related to the plurality of conceptions of the good" (Terzi, 2005: 205). Malhotra (2008: 90) argues that a primary advantage of the capabilities approach is that it allows us to consider the barriers and discrimination experienced by disabled people as it focuses:

...on central human capabilities that each person is entitled to develop it gives activists and policy-makers alike an easy and verifiable way to measure whether an individual's capabilities are being maximized across key human categories.

Sen is considered to be the founder of this approach and he argues that:

A functioning is an achievement, whereas a capability is the ability to achieve. Functionings are, in a sense, more directly related to living conditions, since they are different aspects of living conditions. Capabilities, in contrast, are notions of freedom, in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead (1987: 36).

The capabilities approach can be used in "...the assessment of individual advantage or disadvantage in social schemes..." (Terzi, 2005: 205) and "...provides an egalitarian framework in which entitlement does not depend upon the causal origins of disability" (Terzi, 2005: 208). Therefore, unlike the social model of disability, the capabilities approach "...opens the way to considerations of impairment and disability as multidimensional and relational" (Terzi, 2005: 208). Furthermore, as Malhotra (2008: 91) claims, the capabilities approach would: "...mark an advance in understanding how to theorize equality for people with disabilities".

As the capabilities perspective places a significant emphasis on diversity, feminists may feel that their experiences are reflected more accurately within this type of framework. According to Reindal (2009), a main advantage of the capability approach is its understanding of difference as a specific variable of human diversity; she argues that "This understanding is crucial because it addresses the issue of empowerment and the enhancement of human agency" (Reindal, 2009: 158). Reindal goes on to state that "Within the capability approach, impairment is but one among many differences that interact together with social, economic, and physical environments and produces a profile of advantage or disadvantage for individuals" (Reindal, 2009: 161).

It has been argued that within this perspective:

...disability may be understood as being the result of a combination of different factors. It may result from (a) the nature of an impairment and other personal characteristics (e.g., age, gender, race), (b) the resources available to the individual, and (c) the environment (Mitra, 2006: 241).

Furthermore, “This approach allows researchers to analyze how disability results from the interaction between the individual’s personal characteristics, available resources, and environment (physical, social, economic, political)” (Mitra, 2006: 246). Consequently, the capabilities approach may offer a more encompassing perspective of disability and may be a worthwhile approach to consider within disability studies.

2.6 Social-relational Model of Disability

Thomas (2004) and Reindal (2008) advocate the development of a social-relational model of disability. This perspective identifies both the personal and social effects of impairment and recognises that disability is something imposed on top of the restrictions caused by impairment. As Thomas (2004: 29) asserts

...the social relational perspective understands *disability* to be those restrictions of activity that result from the exercise of the power to exclude: disability only comes into being when restrictions of activity are socially imposed, that is, when they are wholly social in origin. It can then be accepted as self-evident that other restrictions of activity in the lives of people with impairment do arise directly from their impairments.

This approach could be utilized “...as a platform for the enterprise of special needs education, where additionality and inclusivity are not split as a basis for SEN and where the issue of oppression is not obliterated from an understanding of disability” (Reindal, 2008: 138). As Thomas (2004: 31) argues a social-relational model of disability “...could direct attention to the impacts and effects of the social behaviours enacted between the non-impaired and the impaired – in familial relationships, in communal interactions, and in encounters with health, welfare and education services”. The development of a social-relational model would also “...give weight to the personal experience of living with reduced function, both socially and individually, without embracing an individual approach” (Reindal, 2008: 144).

While it is recognised that “One of the strengths of the current social model definition of disability is that of its relative simplicity as a concept in helping

disabled people see disability as a social, rather than individual construction” (Reeve, 2004: 94), it has been argued that:

...the social *relational* model is better aligned to the morality of inclusion as it is able to distinguish between personal restrictions in social settings versus social hindrances that are imposed on top of these and which hinder the individual in achieving vital goals (Reindal, 2008: 144-145).

Therefore, “...as disabled people experience their own different degrees of structural and psycho-emotional disablism, it would be more accurate for a model to include both dimensions of disability rather than focus on structural disability alone” (Reeve, 2004: 89). Consequently, the social relational model may be a worthwhile perspective within which to analyse disability.

2.7 The Life Course Approach

The life course approach “...is important because it highlights how disabling societies affects people of different generations in different ways...” (Priestley, 2004: 94). While the collective representation of disabled people as an oppressed group within society has proved productive, Priestley claims that a life course approach to disability would help “...us to avoid an over-simplification of disabled people’s collective experiences and redresses the marginalisation of under-represented groups (especially disabled children and older people)” (2004: 94). Priestley suggests that:

Thinking about disability in terms of generation helps us to understand more clearly how disability and impairment are produced, how they are socially constructed, and how they are regulated in significantly different ways across the life course (2004: 94).

He goes on to state that:

Generation,...is about more than just age. It involves thinking about the ways that important generational categories (like childhood, youth,

adulthood or old age) are constructed, and how transitions between them are governed through social institutions (Priestley, 2004: 94).

Therefore, the life course perspective may also help in redressing the imbalance in the social model of disability due to its under emphasis on the role of culture and cultural processes in producing disability within society. Finally, Priestley argues that age and generation "...are also important, since generational identities and cultures (especially youth cultures) are a significant aspect of personal biography and identity" (2004: 96). Consequently, the life course framework may also provide those who argue that their identities are not being represented adequately within the social model of disability with a perspective in which their viewpoint is acknowledged. This approach is also beneficial when conducting life history research, which was the methodology used in this study, as it allows the researcher make the connections between individual lives and changes in disabling societies (Shah & Priestley, 2011).

This chapter has thus far considered the medical model of disability which completely excludes any societal factors in relation to disability and defined disabled people by their 'medical condition' and the focus was placed on their loss and the need for medical intervention. This ideology also individualises disability. The chapter then focused on the social model of disability which states that "...disablement lies in the construction of society, not in the physical condition of the individual" (Brisenden, 1998: 24). The chapter then discussed the capabilities approach, the social-relational approach and the life course approach which it was argued may be advantageous when considering aspects of disability. The remainder of this chapter will focus on issues that are pertinent to this research including education, inclusive education, special educational needs, transition stages, employment and citizenship.

2.8 Education

In mainstream society, the visibility of disabled people has increased significantly in recent decades. This change is reflected within the Irish education system where, since the late 1980s the numbers of students with various disabilities entering mainstream education has also increased. Until recently, in Ireland, as in

many other European countries, the educational provision for disabled children and young people occurred primarily within the special education system as it was perceived that this system was viewed as the most appropriate setting. Barton (1998: 80) has noted, "...many societies have and continue to experience a radical restructuring of their education systems". In Ireland, the restructuring of the education system began in the 1990s and led to many changes in special education including a language of inclusive education within policy initiatives. However, as stated by Thomas and Loxley (2001: 89), "...policy is not neutral It is very much a signifier for underlying social relations of power". Education issues are "...complex and contentious and often involve passionately held beliefs and values" (Barton, 2003: 58). Barton (1998: 78) argued that "...Irish educational discourse, maintains that an essentialist view of the individual has been a pervasive ideology within education". In Ireland the right to education is recognised under article 42 of the Constitution. Education is accepted as a human right and is acknowledged within national policy. The pertinent legislation and policy initiatives which is relevant to the education of children and young people with special educational needs is discussed elsewhere in this thesis (including chapter one and chapter seven).

Educational performance is an important indicator of lifelong choices and as McDougall (2007) argues to be young should mean having a future of possibilities. It is widely acknowledged that equitable access to education is a crucial component of future outcomes for members of society and that, in many countries, the rationale for providing education has been directly linked to economic and social development (Armstrong, 1998: 31). Shah, & Priestley, (2011: 93) state that, "Successful participation in education is also an important enabler of social and economic inclusion for adult life". Gannon and Nolan (2005) have recognised that a significant relationship exists between education levels and earning potential and that when disabled people lose out on education, they may also experience a lifelong reduction in earning capacity. As, AHEAD (2008: 27) assert "Unless there is real equality of access to educational opportunities and qualifications then we risk losing highly skilled individuals from the workforce". Therefore, access to the education system at all levels is essential to increase future opportunities for blind/vision impaired people. Consequently, it is necessary to consider the impact of policy changes on the lives of this section of the population.

It is apparent that a range of factors are significant in relation to access to the education system for blind/vision impaired children and young people as vision plays a crucial function in education and learning (Khadka, Ryan, Margrain, Woodhouse, & Davies, 2012). Further literature that is pertinent to a range of access issues are examined in chapter six.

2.9 Inclusive Education

In recent decades, much has been written about inclusive education (Ainscow, 2005; Barton, 1998; French & Swain, 2004; Gibson, 2006; Meegan & MacPhail, 2006; Rodney, 2003; Trehaskis, 2004). Gibson (2006: 316) has noted that "...throughout the UK and arguably the globe, inclusive thinking, particularly with regards to the education of children labelled with disability, has become prominent". Similarly, Barton (2003: 59) has emphasised that "...inclusive education is part of a human rights approach to social relations and conditions" and "...needs to be part of a whole-school equal opportunities policy" (Barton, 2003: 60). According to French and Swain (2004: 169), inclusive education:

...means more than simply placing a disabled young person in a mainstream school and providing extra support. Inclusion demands major changes within society itself and should not be viewed in a vacuum.

Similarly, Rieser has proposed that inclusion:

...is about valuing all children irrespective of their type or degree of impairment; of restructuring the institution to remove barriers so teaching and learning takes place so all children can be valued for who they are... (2003: 175).

Griffin & Shevlin (2007) and Kinsella, & Senior, (2008: 654) among others have asserted that an inclusive school is one that meets the diverse needs of all students "regardless of the nature or source of that diversity" and that in "the case of pupils with additional needs, this involves making appropriate accommodations to ensure that such pupils can access, and participate in, the school experience in

its broadest context” (Kinsella & Senior, 2008: 654). Despite the fact that the language of inclusive education has become the norm within policy initiatives, its implementation within the school setting continues to be painfully slow. It is important to emphasise that equality of access should not stop once the student with a disability has gained entry to the mainstream setting; these students also require equality of condition and equality of outcome in order to achieve equal opportunities and experiences. As (Barton, 1998; Brickell, 2003; Clough & Nutbrown, 2005; French & Swain, 2004; Kenny, McNeela, Shevlin, & Daly, 2000; Rioux & Pinto, 2010; Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2010) acknowledge inclusion should not simply be about location. Ferguson (2008: 113) ascertained “What happens in those classrooms is equally critical to achieving genuine inclusive education”. As Ashby (2010: 355) acknowledged

If school communities are to move beyond mere access to school and towards active and meaningful engagement for students who do not conform to socially constructed norms school personnel must first acknowledge how unexamined norms work to exclude certain students and move towards a broader and more inclusive conceptualization of performance.

Various definitions of ‘inclusive education’ are used throughout the literature. The diversity of definitions has resulted in confusion regarding the concepts of ‘integration’ and ‘inclusion’. Originally, the term integration was used to refer to “...the movement of disabled students from segregated educational settings to the regular classroom” (Slee, 1996: 111); the emphasis on the perceived abilities and disabilities of these students was “...root[ed] in an individual deficit model of disability and difference and is the antithesis to inclusive education” (Armstrong, 1998: 53). More recently it has been argued that “...inclusion is about much more than location – it is more than simply “being” in a setting...” (Clough & Nutbrown, 2005: 100) and that “...for some ‘inclusion’ is synonymous with integration and that once a pupil is in a mainstream classroom ‘inclusion’, perhaps by some process of osmosis, has taken place” (Brickell, 2003: 84). If such perspectives reflect how those working within the education system view inclusion, then it is questionable whether full inclusion is occurring for all pupils within the school community. So while current Government policy in Ireland encourages the

maximum level of inclusion for students that are categorised as having special education needs, whether it always happens in practice is debatable as there does not appear to be a definitive understanding of inclusion.

In line with Barton's argument that "All children are entitled to have a quality education" (1998: 86), Shaw (1998: 83) has proposed that arrangements and equipment to support students with disabilities need to be seen as central and extensive, rather than intensive and exceptional additions for 'special' pupils". Trehaskis (2004: 79) suggests that a fully inclusive education system would enable "...all children to grow up learning to take each other's needs into account as a matter of course". Similarly, Shaw (1998: 82-83) claims that "...putting learning support at the heart of school development and aiming to tackle the full range of needs in ordinary settings has been shown to improve the learning environment for everybody". A determination to implement a fully inclusive education for all pupils, irrespective of their abilities or disabilities, should have positive implications for all individuals including those with a disability. However, "...inclusive education is not an end in itself, it is a means to an end, that of establishing an Inclusive society" (Barton, 1998: 84). A positive impact of inclusive education for society as a whole is that:

...young people who leave school having seen and experienced those who are different and those with difficulties included in the common life of the school will be more likely to form part of a society with a conscience (Thomas & Loxley, 2001: 117).

The concept of 'inclusion' is associated "...with formal ideas of citizenship and participation in community life" (Bruce et al., 2007: 68) and "...is a matter of social justice for and recognition of people with disabilities" (Bruce et al., 2007: 70). It is apparent that inclusivity is not always a guiding ethos (Hopkins, 2011) within all educational institutions rather it is something that is affixed to a "disablist curriculum" (Hopkins, 2011) as a response to an excluded student. Therefore, there needs to be a commitment to inclusive practices at all levels of the education system to ensure greater participation of disabled students.

2.10 Special Educational Needs

Although the mainstreaming of children with various disabilities is now the norm “...nowhere in the literature of disability is the discourse of ‘special’ so dominant as in education” (Adams, 2003: 125). As Thomas and Loxley (2001: 89) assert, “The social categorization of children and young adults as somehow being ‘special’ is constructed in and legitimized through the kind of policies which ‘speak’ about them”. It is important to recognise that “...disabled people do not have “special needs”, but have the same needs as everyone else; the difference is that these ordinary needs are not normally met” (Shakespeare & Watson, 1998: 16-17). It has often been mistakenly assumed that “...once a child has a disability, s/he automatically has a special educational need” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 6) and they acknowledged that

Essentially, 'special educational needs' is a school-focused term that refers to difficulties in learning experienced by a number of children. A child with a disability may require technical support to access the curriculum and/or reasonable accommodation in taking examinations. This is clearly not a learning need, but rather highlights an access deficit.

Finkelstein and Stuart (1996: 172) note that “...the *common* in the lives of disabled people is perceived as *special* in the lives of non-disabled people ...and reflects the absence of disabled people’s real impact on the way society is structured”. In Ireland, as in many other countries, an increasingly common practice is to mainstream children and young people with a variety of disabilities. It is important to recognise that “...disabled people – do have certain needs which it is right to think of as special. Indeed it would be wrong and certainly impractical not to do so” (Low, 1997: 77). However, it is important to recognise that a prominent theme that has emerged in research on young disabled people and their experiences within mainstream education “...is the embarrassment they feel at being “different” and how this can impact on their relationships with other children” (French & Swain, 2004: 170) and being perceived as having ‘special educational needs’ can be a significant in this respect.

Reindal (2008: 137) recognises that "...the ways we perceive the phenomenon of disability influence the classification systems that underpin special educational practices". Reindal also acknowledges the need to identify "pupils' needs without contributing to the negative effects that often have come about in the wake of classification, categorisation and labelling in education" (Reindal, 2008: 135). Furthermore, it is argued that "However negative one can be regarding classification systems, it is difficult to abolish them altogether in the school setting, because the consequence is denying rather than being able to abolish the need for differentiation" (Reindal, 2008: 137). Consequently, while there can be valid reasons for identifying children or young people with having 'special educational need' it must also be recognised that if their access requirements are appropriately met they may no longer have a 'special educational need'.

2.11 Transition Stages

People experience various transition stages throughout the life course (McGinty & Fish, 1992; Swain, French, & Cameron, 2003; Williams & Young, 1992). The most significant transitions tend to occur in adolescence and early adulthood as the individual moves between schools and from school to further education and employment. In this challenging stage of life a 'tyranny' of choices have to be made (Williams & Young, 1992: vii). The transition from childhood to adulthood, one of the most significant transitions, is both a time phase and a process (McGinty & Fish, 1992).

There are changes in responsibilities from those of a child to those of an adult, from attending a school to attending further or higher education or of getting a job, and from childhood dependence to adult responsibility. It is a process by which the individual grows through adolescence to adulthood and hopefully achieves the balanced state of dependence and independence which a particular community expects of its adult members (McGinty & Fish, 1992: 6).

It is acknowledged that "It is often more difficult for disabled young people to make the transition from childhood to adulthood and to take control of their lives" (Swain et al., 2003: 80) and a significant factor in this transition is dependence versus

independence. Independence is often defined narrowly as self-sufficiency, thus, focusing on the individual. Linked to this concept of individuality has been a growth in the ideal of self-reliance, for independence. It is only by being independent that we can truly forge our own sense of self, our own identity. People who are not seen as being independent are in some way lacking; independence is seen as integral to our acceptance as responsible adults.

The meaning of independence, and the ways in which it is manifested, is "...determined by a wide range of cultural, historical, political, social and economic factors which are volatile and vary both within and among cultures" (Swain et al., 2003: 78-79). Shaw et. al. (2007: 8) has argued that "Youths who are visually impaired may face a number of barriers in their efforts to make the transition from school to employment and community life". As McGinty and Fish (1992) have noted, in secondary school, the transition to adulthood takes on added importance. A proposal articulated by McDonnall, and Crudden (2009: 337) is that "...youths who are visually impaired should be given the opportunity for multiple and varied work experiences while in secondary school" in order to benefit those who have difficulties obtaining and retaining employment on their own. In addition, they argue that teaching young people the job-seeking skills required for obtaining employment should be an important component of transition programmes. It is important to remember that transitions are experienced differently by each person; "...transitions are not always ordered or pre-planned..." (Mitchell, 1999: 766) and may be guided by numerous factors including the opportunities that are available to an individual. Leaving school to enter the labour market is no longer viewed as the norm, the contemporary expectation is that "...young people will pursue further training or education to prepare them for entering the knowledge economy" (Christie, 2009: 127). For many students, including those with disabilities, pursuing further training and education involves navigating a variety of barriers, including financial, social and cultural, in order to gain access to third level education and become full members while there. For these students:

...the transition to university is an intensely emotional process, because it brings with it conflicting and paradoxical feelings of ambivalence and contradiction about 'fitting in' to student life ... (Christie, 2009: 125).

Government policies can create disincentives and dependency for those wishing to seek paid employment (Shaw et al., 2007; Swain et al., 2003) by "...limiting the number of hours a recipient of disability benefits and retracting medical benefits when a person finds work" (Shaw et al., 2007: 8). In Ireland, the government's role in creating disincentives and dependency is an important factor particularly for people with vision impairment, who from the age of eighteen years, are entitled to claim the Blind Pension. As Smith (1996: 146) has noted, "In spite of the social pressures on us to work, the decision about whether or not to seek paid work may not be as easy as political policy makers would have us believe". Thus, it is important to recognise that government policies may add significant pressures for young disabled people who are trying to make important transition choices.

In terms of post-school choices, "...the principle of autonomy in particular emerges as a fundamental element" (Wong, 2004: 38). A social model of independence is one that "...involves the individual feeling in control of their own life rather than being controlled by others" (Mitchell, 1999: 755). Thus, a social model of independence requires that disabled people participate fully in decision making at all levels of their lives including those involving service providers. Adolescence may be the first time when the person with a disability engages with service providers on behalf of themselves. The experience of engaging with service providers can be difficult for young people with a disability as "...there is a dilemma in accepting a need for assistance when instincts are to fiercely protect personal autonomy" (Percival & Hanson, 2007: 55). As noted by Percival and Hanson (2007: 55):

...people whose disability is not necessarily noticeable, such as those with vision impairment, may have to draw attention to their disability in order to 'justify' entitlement to support services, an added dilemma that profoundly affects proud, self-conscious, sometimes reticent younger people.

Finkelstein and Stuart (1996: 173) have argued that

The role of the service provider should be just that – to *provide* services and allocate resources which would enable the attainment of life-style

goals which the user has identified as most appropriate to his or her personal circumstances.

In relation to transitions, things like autonomy and involvement in decision making are important factors to consider. In particular, engaging with a variety of service providers may be an essential component for a successful transition from school to further training and education or from school to employment. McGinty and Fish (1992: 6) argue that both the phase and process of transition "...can be helped or hindered by the interventions of all the services and agencies who can, or do, make a contribution as well as by families". Whilst:

...over the last decade or so our understanding of disability has shifted dramatically, the majority of individuals with visual impairments, as with disabled people generally, are still confronted by a range of social and environmental barriers – which restricts to a greater or lesser extent our choice of life-style (Barnes, 1996: 43).

It is apparent that people experience a number of transition stages throughout their life course. Policy and practice can either enable or disable these transitions and it must be recognised that transition processes for young vision impaired/blind people can be complex and problematic.

2.12 Employment

While it is recognized that work is a basic human right, traditionally, disabled people have been excluded "...from the world of socially appreciated work, due to the patriarchal and 'ableist' social organisation" (González, 2009: 447). However, in the current economic climate, obtaining and maintaining employment can be problematic and, in relation to gaining employment, some groups in society encounter more difficulties than others; disabled people are particularly vulnerable in this situation (Leach, 1996). "Most disabled young people see work as vital to their life as it gives them status, independence and choice" (McGinty & Fish, 1992: 69). For disabled people "...full-time employment is a cherished goal, and one which may never be attained" (Gillies, Knight, & Baglioni, 1998: 398). As Finkelstein and Stuart (1996: 183) note, "In market economies adulthood and

status are endorsed by access to employment". Thus, "...obtaining work and earning money are powerful social indicators of an adult status" (McGinty & Fish, 1992: 7).

"The overall aim of transition for young people is to achieve adult status" (McGinty & Fish, 1992: 11), as noted by Smith (1996: 145) "...we expect and are expected to make a contribution to society through the work we do". However, it is widely recognized that disabled people encounter many barriers when trying to access the world of work (Gillies et al., 1998; González, 2009; Pavey, Douglas, & Corcoran, 2008; Priestley, 2004; Robin, 2002; Sapey, 2004; Shier, Graham, & Jones, 2009). In particular,

...employers continue to express concerns about the complexity and expense of providing accommodations, worries about inordinate delays in newly hired visually impaired employees reaching full productivity, and expectations that it will be difficult to terminate a visually impaired employee whose productivity does not reach the desired level. Logistical questions about dog guides, safety issues, and the impact of hiring such workers on insurance rates continue to thwart the efforts of many job seekers with visual impairments and contribute to high rates of unemployment among them (Wolffe & Candela, 2002: 622).

Disabled people often encounter procedural and attitudinal barriers when seeking employment; attitudinal barriers are "...often based on fear, ignorance or misconception, may be the most pervasive, influencing behaviour directly but also underpinning other types of employment barriers" (Smith, 1996: 148). In a study conducted by Shier, Graham, and Jones (2009), discrimination and labeling were identified as significant factors for disabled people when it came to obtaining and retaining employment. The findings of their research indicated that "...perceptions of disability have a greater impact on their inability to maintain and secure employment than does the lack of accommodative practices and measures in the workplace" (Shier et al., 2009: 63). Dominant perceptions of disability can result in reluctance of disabled people disclosing that they have a disability. This is particularly difficult for those whose disability is not immediately evident. Thus, disabled people can encounter obstacles at many levels. For many disabled

people, the negative experiences encountered in seeking employment has resulted in them developing an association between work and failure, whereby, they expect to fail when obtaining and/or retaining employment. Consequently, the choice becomes one between "...work as failure, or non-work as failure. The decision of whether or not to work has become a 'no win' situation" (Smith, 1996: 147).

Research has indicated a positive association between education and employment (McDonnall & Crudden, 2009; Pavey et al., 2008), however, people with vision impairments have relatively few career options. The employment rates amongst people with vision impairment "...are substantially lower than are those of the general population, as well as of people with disabilities in general" (Robin, 2002: 635). Many people with vision impairment who have obtained employment feel forced "...to come to terms with their job, even if they do not feel happy in it" (Keller, Schretzmann, & Stegie, 1999: 34). Other research has revealed that "...the participants with low vision were significantly more likely than were those who were blind to have worked and to be currently working for pay" (Shaw et al., 2007: 16). In addition, people who were blind and in employment were more likely than those with low vision to take work home with them. A number of reasons were put forward to explain this discrepancy including the need to "...compensate for their blindness or for the slowness of adaptive technology or to be perceived as competent" (Shaw et al., 2007: 18). As Barnes (1996: 43) has argued, "...because of the time and effort involved, trying to work harder than everyone else often results in social isolation among working colleagues". Although the relatively recent research of Shaw, Gold, and Wolffe, (2007:18) revealed that those who were blind and in employment reported that they received assistance from others with their work, previous research by Keller, Schretzmann, and Stegie (1999: 33) found that "...the partially sighted said that their impairment was often not thought of and necessary help was not therefore forthcoming and so they felt themselves to be over-taxed".

Pagán (2009: 217) has argued that "...the levels of satisfaction with job, type of job and working conditions of self-employed disabled people are higher than those reported by disabled people who are wage and salary earners". In addition, it was noted that "...in recent years an increase in self-employment has been one of the

most significant changes in European labour markets” (Pagán, 2009: 217). Although Pagán (2009: 222) has recognized that a clear relationship between disability status and self-employment exists in most of the European countries, he stressed that:

...it is very important to know whether this concentration of disabled people in self-employment is the result of employer discrimination or a voluntary choice as a means to achieve a better balance between disability status and working life.

While Pagán's study indicated that self-employment may be a valid option for many disabled people, it was argued that self-employment may be an advantageous way for “...people who have been out of the labour market for a long time or have never been employed can use this non-standard employment to make the transition from inactivity to employment” (Pagán, 2009: 224). In addition, as Pagán's study indicated that disabled people were more likely to be self-employed than non-disabled people, he suggests that:

...policy-makers should encourage self-employment among disabled people in order to improve their employment opportunities. This would help to prevent their social and labour exclusion and reduce the employment gap between the disabled and non-disabled populations (Pagán, 2009: 227)

As Carr (2004: 183-184) has noted “As well as money, status and a social identity, paid employment provides an important source of social activity”. Being actively engaged in paid employment “...is a source of emotional welfare and self-esteem. Moreover, it confers a certain social status” (González, 2009: 447). Employment “...provides opportunities for social contact, personal satisfaction and self-realization” (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh, 2004: 30) and is often the only opportunity for disabled people to have “...regular social interaction outside the home” (McGinty & Fish, 1992: 14). The literature also suggests that “People's ability to enjoy leisure is closely related to their employment status” (Carr, 2004: 183) and that “...it is thought the exercising of choice that we explore, express and define our identity” (Carr, 2004: 188). Thus, it is argued that exclusion from one

area of society can result in exclusion from many levels of society which may explain why European programmes have put entry to the work-force "...at the core of their strategies to combat social exclusion" (Abberley, 2002: 130).

It is apparent that transition to employment is perceived as an important indicator of adult status (McGinty & Fish, 1992; Shah, 2006; Shah & Priestley, 2011; Smith, 1996; Turmusani, 2001). However, it is evident that for disabled people generally and blind/vision impaired people in particular this transition can be complex and problematic. Some of these issues are examined further in later chapters.

2.13 Citizenship

In her discussion of citizenship, D'Arcy (1999: 196) refers to 'civic republicanism', a form of citizenship that is connected with work, whereby, active citizens are willing to work. In contemporary society, the concept of citizenship is often used at both national and European levels in addressing issues related to the social status of disabled people (Abberley, 2002: 121). "The concept of the enhancement of citizenship is used to focus on the social exclusion of disabled people from the mainstream of European social life" (Abberley, 2002: 121). Within the European Union, the concept of citizenship "...attained formal constitutional status following the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht" (Morgan & Stalford, 2005: 99). Within the Maastricht Treaty, it is suggested that "...our rights as citizens of the Union are only really meaningful in the context of intra-union mobility..." (Morgan & Stalford, 2005: 99-100) and requires being able to fulfil several criteria in order to "...obtain access to the panoply of social rights in another Member State" (Morgan & Stalford, 2005: 100). Morgan and Stalford (2005) have argued that such limitations impose barriers for disabled people, particularly in relation to the interpretation attached to the notion of 'worker' and 'dependent family member', both of which are key elements when accessing free movement rights and are quite apart from the physical barriers to migration and the impact of the disparity between disability related supports available in different Member States'. The strong emphasis on paid employment, as a necessary component for full citizenship rights, is very narrow and in order to engage disabled people more fully within the European Union

...active citizenship requires a departure from traditional free movement-based interpretations which, through their elevation of formal employment, inevitably and consistently exclude a large proportion of them (Morgan & Stalford, 2005: 110-111).

Citizens require both the right and the capacity to participate and "...disabled people tend to lack both" (Rioux, 2002: 217). The concept of citizenship must be reconsidered in order to meet "...the needs of individuals for access to the necessary conditions and resources to enable them to achieve autonomy and self-determination must be addressed" (D'Arcy, 1999: 207). It is evident that the connection between paid employment and citizenship is problematic for disabled people particularly as research indicates the challenges that disabled people experience when trying to obtain employment. Therefore, the emphasis on paid employment to ensure full citizenship rights could be seen as an impediment for disabled people.

2.14 Conclusion

This chapter began with an examination of some of the more salient issues that have emerged regarding the medical individual/model of disability. Until relatively recently, the medical model of disability, was the perspective put forward in policy documents. This resulted in the individualised provision of supports for disabled people and had a limited effect, within the broader context, in terms of practices and provisions made for disabled people. The chapter then focused on the social model of disability which has become increasingly significant within current policy and "...has provided a direction for...commitment to social change" (Crow, 1996: 207). This is essential if disabled people are to have the opportunity to participate on an equal basis with their able-bodied peers. Shakespeare and Watson (1997: 293) have asserted that:

While its details and implications may be contested within the disability movement, there is a broad and vigorous consensus around the social model which should be translated into a renewed attempt to achieve understanding and win acceptance and application of the model within wider society.

While Shakespeare and Watson's statement is a valid one, the contribution of the social model of disability "...now and in the future, to achieving equal rights for disabled people is incalculable" (Crow, 1996: 207). The social model of disability must be examined and expanded in certain areas in order to become a theory of disability which all disabled people can relate to. As with other social theories:

...the test of a social theory of disability's strength will come from a rigorous analytical base and its ability to deal constructively with criticism, whether it be from disabled people themselves or from our self-interested oppressors and censors (Corker, 2006: 122).

While it has been acknowledged that "The question about whether or not the social model of disability needs extending is complex and there is no obvious answer" (Reeve, 2004: 95) the chapter then considered the capabilities approach, the social-relational perspective and the life course approach and it was argued that these may prove effective when considering aspects of disability.

The chapter then focused on aspects of education, inclusive education, special educational needs, transition stages, employment and citizenship that are pertinent to this research. While the inclusion issues discussed in this chapter are significant factors for all people in society, the literature indicates that such issues are of particular concern for disabled people. The literature demonstrates that missing out on opportunities in education and employment has widespread implications for both individuals and groups within society. Consequently, the topics discussed are important when considering the educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities of blind/vision impaired people. Following analysis of data it was determined that a further exploration of literature was necessary. This germane research is examined in chapter six.

The following chapter focuses on the qualitative methodology utilized in this study and in particular the life history approach which the researcher perceived was the appropriate methodology for this research. This chapter also considers some of the issues that were most pertinent to this study including sampling, bias reliability and validity, confidentiality and anonymity, gatekeepers and consent, rapport and

disclosure and reflexivity. The final section of this chapter considers the data analysis method used in this research.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines a number of methodological issues that were pertinent to this research. Goodson, & Sikes, (2001: 48) assert that

Fundamentally, research is about furthering understanding, increasing the universal sum of knowledge, and making 'better' sense of whatever it is that is being studied. Thus, researchers are seeking to interpret and then re-present an aspect of the world, whether that be of physical, objective world or of subjective, lived experience.

The chapter begins with an examination of the rationale for this study. Then the justifications for using qualitative research and in particular a life history approach are explored. The chapter then discusses the research questions which are the focus of this research and some of the underlying reasons for these questions. Following this, issues that are pertinent to this study including sampling, research design, procedure, participant meetings, bias reliability and validity, confidentiality and anonymity, gatekeepers and consent, rapport and disclosure and reflexivity are considered. The chapter concludes with a discussion around data analysis and the method of analysis used for the purposes of this study.

3.2 Rationale for the Study

The purpose of this thesis is to try and identify the significant factors associated with the educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities of blind/vision impaired people in the Republic of Ireland. This study will examine this from the personal perspectives of people who are vision impaired/blind. I myself am vision impaired since childhood and therefore I am acutely aware of issues relating to both the educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities of blind/vision impaired people. It is recognised that while disabled children are increasingly more likely to be educated within the mainstream education system "...the integration and inclusion of disabled children is far from complete" (Davis & Watson, 2001: 672). Shah (2006: 208) argues that "Where young people have disabilities and require additional support to their peers, the choices available to them, in relation to academic subjects and future careers, may be severely

truncated". AHEAD (2008: 10) indicate that "There are myths, mindsets and cultural assumptions about Blindness which collectively have a very negative impact on both the education and achievement of Blind and Vision Impaired students". It has been acknowledged by many including French, & Swain, (2006: 392) that "The education system, of course, shapes people's lives". Therefore, examining the educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities of blind/vision impaired people can provide useful insights into how educational experiences have shaped the lives of blind and vision impaired people.

The National Disability Authority (2002: 4) states that the inclusion of disabled people in research "...is an essential element of ensuring that disability research accurately reflects the perspectives of people with disabilities...". It is widely acknowledged that until relatively recently most of the research carried out in the area of disability was done either within the medical profession or by those caring for disabled people. This has resulted in research which does not accurately represent the true experiences of disabled people. It has been widely acknowledged by (Ali et al., 2001; Educable et al., 2000) among others that there is a dearth of participation among disabled people within the area of research. They are frequently either not consulted at all or else remain on the periphery of the research process. French & Swain (2006: 385) assert that a "...paucity of oral history reverberates through the development of disability policy and practice" and this includes the oral history of blind/vision impaired people. The researcher believes that to date, there is a paucity of Irish research in this area and as a result legislation has not been informed by the lived experience of vision impaired/blind people. This research seeks to give a voice to blind/vision impaired people regarding their education, employment and unemployment experiences. French and Swain (2006: 395) suggests that "...insider perspectives, from the past and the present, are essential if inclusive educational policy and practice for visually impaired people is to succeed". I believe that this research will add to the general knowledge based on the experience of blind/vision impaired people in Ireland in the 21st century.

This section considered issues that the researcher believes are pertinent to the need for this study. The literature indicates that there are on-going challenges for disabled children and young people within the education system and in their

transitions from education. For the purpose of this study the researcher considers it important to examine the educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities of blind/vision impaired people. This is done from their personal perspective in an effort to identify the significant factors that impact on their educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities. The rationale for the research questions which is discussed later in this chapter will also indicate the relevance of undertaking this study.

3.3 Rationale for Qualitative Research

The type of research being undertaken will in part determine the selection of methodologies used. Methodologies have both advantages and limitations in their implementation. It has been suggested that from a sociological perspective “qualitative research methods are particularly relevant because they can offer a more precise analysis of the connections between structural change and attitude change” (Segert & Zierke, 2000: 230). As this study is aiming to identify the significant factors associated with the educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities of blind/vision impaired people the researcher considered a qualitative approach most suitable. It has been argued by O’Day & Killeen (2002: 10) that “One of the great strengths of qualitative methodology is its capacity to explain “what is going on” in complex situations involving interdependent individuals, institutions, groups, and systems”. It has been argued that

Qualitative research provides us with sanctioned, scholarly methods for understanding those who, on account of their disabilities, struggle to achieve equitable treatment both within the educational system and in the community at large (Pugach, 2001: 449).

Walmsley & Johnson (2003) suggest that qualitative research views the individual research participant within the context of their lives and they argue that this is one of the most meaningful aspects of qualitative research. O’Day & Killeen (2002: 9) argue that “In the field of disability research, qualitative methodologies have emerged as some of our most important tools in understanding the complexities of disability in its social context”. It has been suggested that as a result of the underlying beliefs of “qualitative research as well as its methods of data collection

and analysis, it is highly conducive to illuminating the often hidden interactions of cultural attitudes, institutional processes, public policies, and individual lives” (O'Day & Killeen, 2002: 10).

The theoretical foundations of qualitative research are framed by the

...philosophy that underpins it. All research is based on philosophical assumptions about what is real (ontology) and how we know (epistemology). Qualitative research is underpinned by a subjectivist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology... (Wicks & Whiteford, 2006: 94-95).

Many including (Pugach, 2001; Ragin, 1994; Walmsley & Johnson, 2003) suggest that one of the most worthwhile features of qualitative research is its ability to give voice to those who previously were not heard within the research arena. Shah (2006: 210) asserts “Qualitative techniques provide those involved in the research with a more direct voice than is possible through participation in quantitative research, such as experiments and surveys”. While Pugach (2001: 443) concluded that “...one of the primary characteristics of contemporary, postmodern qualitative research is the commitment to bring to the surface stories of those whose voices have not been heard, those who have been oppressed or disenfranchised in schools”. The increased utilization of qualitative research means that; “...the personal or the everyday have become important foci of study in their own right” (Daly, 2000: 66). A qualitative approach provides an insider’s perspective which is “...crucial in understanding the meaning constructions of an individual, group, or community in relation to a specific phenomenon” (Wicks & Whiteford, 2006: 95). Consequently, I believe that a qualitative method of research is the most appropriate methodology to use in this study.

3.4 Rationale for Life History Research

In this research it is intended to use a life history/autobiographical approach as the principal means of data collection. The primary reason for using any research method is that it is considered to be the most appropriate one to obtain the

information being sought (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Erben (1998: 4) acknowledges that:

...biographical research has both *general* and *specific* purposes. The *general* purpose is to provide greater insight than hitherto into the nature and meaning of individual lives or groups of lives. Given that individual lives are part of a cultural network, information gained through biographical research will relate to an understanding of the wider society. The *specific* purpose of the research will be the analysis of a particular life or lives for some designated reason...

It has been argued that one of the most salient aspects of a life history approach is its recognition of the importance of insider perspectives (Atkinson & Walmsley, 1999). A pertinent reason given as to why researchers decide to use a life history approach is that "...they believe that detailed, personal information about how people have perceived and experienced things that have happened in their lives will enable them to better understand whatever it is that they are studying" (Goodson & Sikes, 2001: 91). Plummer is of the opinion that life history research is "...most helpful when what you want to understand are people's direct understandings of the social worlds in which they live..." (2001: 130). Consequently, the study of narrative "is therefore the study of the ways in which humans experience the world" (Dhunpath, 2000: 546).

A life history approach enables one to make connections between individuals' life events and social events and this is what differentiates life history from other forms of narrative. As Hatch and Wisniewski (1995: 116) assert a life history approach "...places narrative accounts and interpretations in a broader context – personal, historical, social, institutional, and/or political". While Shah, & Priestley, (2011: 177) assert that "Connecting biography with history, the core of the 'sociological imagination', means ensuring that accounts of disability are not read as accounts of 'personal troubles' but as evidence of 'public issues'". Furthermore, Goodley (1996: 338) indicated that:

As a method for eliciting both individual and social worlds, the life history provides a bridge between the informant's own life and the

general culture of his or her social group. To do so in such a direct and personal manner allows the reader to feel and think of the person's story and the society against which it stands.

This approach also provides a means through which to explore "...the impact of public policies on private lives in the context of change over time" (Shah & Priestley, 2011: 93). Therefore, I believe that a life history approach is most suitable for exploring the lived experiences of blind/vision impaired people as it enables the researcher to illustrate a range of experiences from the personal perspectives of the participants.

Life history research acknowledges the integrity of the individual and recognises their experiences as valid. This approach acknowledges that participants are the experts about their own lives. "Participants are key players in life-history research because their life stories are the primary data" (Wicks & Whiteford, 2006: 98). Furthermore, a life history approach places significant emphasis on participants' perspectives and how they make sense of their lived experience (Del Rosario, 2006). It is hoped that a life history approach would ensure the voices of participants in this study "...were captured by the research process in ways that reflect their views and recognize them as active social agents who are able to make decisions about their own futures" (Shah, 2006: 207). Clarke, (1998: 67) asserts that this approach can offer "...those who have been silenced...the platform...to speak in their own words about their experiences".

In conclusion, Armstrong (2003: 20) acknowledges that "Histories of education have rarely moved far beyond the voice of official policy makers in their analysis of policy development in the field of special education". While Plummer asserts that "All voices need hearing: it is just that some are heard less often than others" (1983: 82). Therefore, as it is recognised that "Life history and narrative offer exciting alternatives for connecting the lives and stories of individuals to the understanding of larger human and social phenomena" (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995: 113) and this approach offers possibilities for making visible (and central) those whose lives have been erased from the landscape the researcher perceives a life history approach an appropriate methodology with which to undertake this research.

3.5 Rationale for Research Questions

Until relatively recently in Ireland as in many other European countries the educational provision of disabled people occurred primarily within the special educational system. Children who were blind and vision impaired were amongst the first in Ireland to be provided for within this system. Segregationist and institutional education policies were the norm in Ireland up until the 1980s. While the language of inclusive education is now the norm within policy initiatives its implementation within the school setting remains painfully slow. AHEAD (2008: 10) recognise that while blind/vision impaired students “have been included in mainstream education for some time now, the challenge is to change the system to meet their needs.” This presents significant cultural, structural and practical challenges to all those involved in the education system. Furthermore, it has been noted that “To consider disability in the absence of a full consideration of the socioculture within which it exists is to fail to understand the dynamics of an individual’s educational or community experience – the full context of their lives” (Pugach, 2001: 447).

It is widely accepted that educational success is an important indication of future status. Shah (2006: 208) argued that “the individual school, coupled with the legislative climate at the time, inevitably has significant influence on the young people’s transitions. Policy and practice, particularly within the school arena, can either support young people’s subjective realities or constrain them”. It has been acknowledged by many including Shah (2006), Shaw et al. (2007) and Swain, French, & Cameron, (2003) that transitions can be problematic for disabled people and AHEAD (2008: 20) acknowledge that “schoolchildren who are Blind or Vision Impaired are not making progress into and through Third Level education at the pace which might have been expected from a mainstream educational process”. AHEAD (2008: 13) have reported that “Children with sensory disabilities are less likely to progress on to Third Level by a factor of five than their non-disabled peers”. This low level of entry to Third Level education “is not about the ability of Blind and Vision Impaired children, but a consequence of a lack of learning opportunity and supports” (AHEAD, 2008: 13-14). Therefore, the researcher perceived that the following research questions are pertinent for the purpose of this study.

3.6 Research Questions

This study will focus on three main questions which are as follows:

- What are/have been the educational experiences of people who are blind/vision impaired?
- What factors have impacted on these educational experiences?
- What factors in their lives have impacted on their life choices/opportunities?

3.7 Aims

- To explore the life choices of blind/vision impaired people in relation to their educational and career opportunities.
- To give a voice to blind/vision impaired people in relation to their educational and employment experiences.
- To explore issues faced by blind/vision impaired people in education and employment.
- To explore the economic, social and political factors which influence their life choices

3.8 Objectives

- To explore and understand the issues which impede/support blind/vision impaired people in relation to accessing education and career opportunities.
- To understand the issues faced by blind/vision impaired people in education and employment.
- To give voice to the views of blind/vision impaired people.

3.9 Sampling

Sampling can be undertaken in a variety of ways. It has been argued that “Life history research rarely involves a random sample of informants. For a start, the sole aim is seldom to make generalizations and so therefore, such a group is not required” (Goodson & Sikes, 2001: 24). A number of sampling techniques were

used in this research including purposive, personal contacts and snowballing. Goodson & Sikes (2001: 24) state that “Sampling can be *purposive* in that the research is concerned with some specific characteristic or attribute or experience and consequently the informants are ‘selected’ as a result of this”. In relation to the size of the sample used, Goodson & Sikes (2001: 23) argue that so much depends “...on the topic, and on what is actually possible” and they go on to claim that “...adequacy is dependent not upon quantity but upon the richness of the data and the nature of the aspect of life being investigated”. Furthermore, Erben (1998: 5) acknowledges that “The exact size of any sample in qualitative research cannot be ascertained through quantitative methods. It is for this reason that it is all the more important that the consciously chosen sample must correspond to the overall aims of the study”.

Twenty three people participated in this research ranging in age from late teens to early forties when first contact was made with them regarding this research. Watson & Nolan (2011) state that there are roughly equal numbers of male and female blind/vision impaired children and young people. While there are more male than female participants in this study the researcher believes that this is not indicative of actual numbers of blind/vision impaired males and females in society but reflects the participants the researcher could locate. These and other demographic details are set out in Table 3.1 below.

GENDER		ORIGIN	
Male	14	Urban	15
Female	9	Rural	8
AGE		EDUCATION/EMPLOYMENT	
17 - 20	6	Secondary	5
21 – 25	7	Tertiary	11
2 – 33	4	Employed	5
34 - 44	6	Unemployed	2

Table 3.1 Participant Demographics

Walmsley (1997) asserts that locating participants is perhaps the most difficult task when undertaking research. This was an area of concern prior to commencement of this research and proved very difficult particularly in the initial stage of trying to identify and locate possible participants. The researcher wanted the participants to be in a position where they could self-select in order to participate in the research. The primary criterion for participation in this research was that those interested in participating were blind/vision impaired. Originally a number of different age groups were going to be utilized for the purposes of this research and this was going to be one of the principle criteria for inclusion in the research. Both males and females from rural and urban settings were also factors to consider when undertaking this research as it was the view of the researcher that these were important factors to consider and which would enrich the data collection. Shah, & Priestley, (2011: 12) acknowledge that there is evidence that "...significant life transitions (like leaving school, entering work, living independently or becoming a parent) can be delayed or displaced for disabled people when compared to trends in the general population." The researcher identified that this was relevant for blind/vision impaired people particularly those that attended special schools or the resourced mainstream secondary school. Therefore, the emphasis on narrowly defined age groups was amended and finally included people in their teens, twenties, thirties and forties (see Table 3.1 for breakdown of age groups). The term 'participant' was used by the researcher when referring to those who contributed their stories for the purposes of this research. Goodson, & Sikes, (2001: 23) have argued that this type of terminology does "not have the same 'othering' and homogenizing implications that the traditional research designations do". Furthermore they suggest that "The fact that life history samples tend to be small, allied with the sort of philosophical and, therefore, epistemological stance that life historians often take, means that they will rarely talk in terms of samples or research populations, and almost never of subjects" (Goodson & Sikes, 2001: 22).

3.10 Research Design

Research interviews commenced in January 2009 and concluded in late 2010. Interviews occurred over a number of time periods and there was approximately twelve to fifteen months between interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded on

a digital recorder, which were later saved onto a computer. These recordings were transcribed by the researcher and will be destroyed when the study is completed.

3.11 Procedure

Recruitment of participants was largely through voluntary response to research publicity. During 2008 information regarding the research was disseminated to the Disability/Equality Offices of all the Universities in the Republic of Ireland, to six of the Institutes of Technology around the country, to a resourced mainstream secondary school, to all of the regional managers for the Visiting Teacher Service in the Republic of Ireland (which is under the remit of the Department of Education and Science), to the regional offices of an organization that provides education and training for disabled people, to a number of people within organizations that are service providers for blind/vision impaired people, to a number of people within two organizations whose membership is primarily made up of blind/vision impaired people and to media sources that provide information to blind/vision impaired people. I requested that my research information be circulated to all blind/vision impaired people known to them. This research information contained the contact details of the researcher to enable prospective participants to make contact directly if they were interested in participating in the study.

Most of the Universities and the Institutes of Technology acknowledged my correspondence and agreed to pass on my details to those blind/vision impaired people that availed of their services. (See Table 3.1 for education and employment details of participants). At a later stage contact was made with a resourced mainstream secondary school where about ten per cent of the student population are blind/vision impaired, consequently this is not typical of mainstream secondary schools throughout the country. The researcher believed engagement with this school was necessary as no one in the younger age group and who were still in secondary education had come forward from the previous round of correspondence that had been distributed. After this request was considered by the school and the care staff I was invited to meet with six blind/vision impaired students of which five agreed to participate. I contacted four people that were known to me personally and who were vision impaired/blind. All of these people agreed to participate in the study. Some of these contacts also distributed my

research information to others who were vision impaired/blind. This resulted in five more people indicating their interest and willingness to participate. Of those three were in employment, one was attending university and one was unemployed. It has been acknowledged that many qualitative researchers "...will continue the selection throughout the research" (Sarantakos, 1998: 97). This was the case with this research as the researcher recognized that her initial sample did not include any people that were neither in education or employment. The researcher considered that this could be identified as a significant gap in the study. In order to try and rectify this situation contact was made with two individuals who are involved in areas of the media that provide information to blind/vision impaired people. These two individuals both agreed to include a piece regarding my research. For the purposes of one of these I agreed to have a short piece recorded in which I spoke about my research and that I was interested in hearing from people who were either in further training or were unemployed and were vision impaired/blind. From this only one suitable participant showed an interest in participating in the research.

3.12 Participant Meetings

It is acknowledged by many including Ryan (2006: 157) that the choice of location for meeting is best left up to each participant. This was done to make the participant as "...comfortable and as safe as possible when telling their story". Some of the participants in this study chose the location where the meetings were conducted while others were happy to leave the selection of location to the researcher. A variety of locations were used including coffee shops, rooms in universities, meeting rooms in hotels and participants own homes. There were many reasons why these various locations were chosen both for the participants and the researcher. One of the primary considerations for the researcher was that the participant would at least be either familiar with the location itself or the general locality where the meeting was situated. On occasions when selection of location for meetings was left to the researcher I ensured that I met participants in locations that were familiar to them. This occasionally meant that the researcher met the participant at an agreed location known to them and walked with them from there to the location where the meeting was to take place. At the end of a meeting the researcher always ensured that the participant was walked back to a location that

was familiar to them. In advance of meetings the researcher always gave her mobile number to participants and requested that she had their mobile numbers. This was done as the researcher was mindful of the fact that all participants (and the researcher) were vision impaired/blind and may need to phone when at the destination to ensure location of participant and researcher. Some of these locations were more suitable than others. The most problematic locations were generally coffee shops as background noise made subsequent transcription of meetings more difficult.

As far as possible the format for the meetings was left up to each participant and the only guidelines that the researcher provided them with in advance of the initial meeting were as follows:

1. Background information, for example family information, where you grew up and started school.
2. Post-primary educational choices.
3. Post-secondary choices.
4. Experiences and expectations, for example your life-experiences to date and your hopes for the future.

In relation to these guidelines each participant was told that these were not absolutes and that it was entirely up to them what they chose to talk about and what they wished to omit. The main reason for this was that the researcher wished to hear about the participants own experiences in their own words with as little direction as possible. In general this format worked well but for a small number of those who participated in this research the researcher was obliged to ask a greater number of questions in order to encourage them to be more forthcoming with their experiences. This was in contrast to a number of participants who said on completion of a meeting "I can't believe how much I talked". The length of time each meeting lasted differed greatly depending on the participant the shortest lasting around thirty minutes and the longest around two and a half hours.

There were generally two participant meetings conducted. These happened over a period of about eighteen months. Travers (2001: 1) argued that "If you ask open-ended questions, follow up particular topics in a second interview, and give the

interviewee the opportunity to comment on your interpretation of the answers, you are likely to obtain some rich, original data". As far as possible this was the approach I took while undertaking this research. Three participants were not in a position to meet face-to-face with the researcher for follow-up meetings. In order to facilitate their continued participation, the decision was taken between the researcher and the participants concerned that they could continue participation via email. This enabled them to provide the researcher with additional information.

3.13 Bias Reliability and Validity

Bias, reliability and validity are issues of concern when undertaking any piece of research no matter which research method is used when collecting data. Any research method is only a way of collecting information pertinent to the research being conducted. Traditionally quantitative research was seen as the method of choice when undertaking research as it was believed to be a method which was most reliable and bias free. However, a problem that has been identified by many including Daly (2000: 64) is that there has been a "...tendency to assume that quantification is equivalent to objectivity". It has been suggested by many including Ryan, (2006) Shah, (2006) Maxwell, (2005), that no research is completely free from bias. Plummer identifies three main sources of bias within social science research "...those arising from the subject being interviewed, those arising from the researcher and those arising from the subject-researcher interaction" (1983: 102). He goes on to argue that to eradicate research of all these sources of bias is to rid research of human life. As Wicks & Whiteford (2006: 301) contend

The informant and the researcher are therefore actively engaged in interpreting and constructing their social worlds. This questions how far objectivity is attainable. This is because we have two individuals (the informant and researcher), each with different perceptions of their social worlds.

As a disabled researcher I believe that it is important to be cognizant of this throughout the research process as it has been recognized that the closer our research area of interest is to our own life the more we can anticipate that our own life experiences will "...enter into and shape our work, to influence the questions

we pose and the interpretations we generate from our findings” (Shah, 2006: 211). Armstrong (1987: 24) asserts that:

No researcher ever goes into any research situation with a completely open mind as to what they might expect to find. Indeed, the very choice of the research topic and how the research might be carried out is a reflection of such foreshadowed problems.

Furthermore, Sikes & Goodson (2003: 34) argue that “Research practice cannot be disembodied. It is impossible to take the researcher out of any type of research or of any stage of the research process”. Shah (2006) indicated the attainment of rich quality data was facilitated by the fact that both the researcher and participants had similar backgrounds. In this study that similar background was of vision impairment/blindness.

Reliability and validity are also factors which have to be considered when undertaking research. All participants were provided with copies of their transcribed interviews which they could read and add to at a later stage. The researcher believes that this increased reliability and validity of data.

Plummer (1983: 101) states that:

Reliability is primarily concerned with technique and consistency – with ensuring that if the study was conducted by someone else similar findings would be obtained; while validity is concerned with making sure that the technique is actually studying what it is supposed to.

He argues that “...validity should come first, reliability second. There is no point in being very precise about nothing!” (Plummer, 1983: 102). Furthermore, he acknowledges that “If the subjective story is what the researcher is after, the life history approach becomes the most valid method...” (Plummer, 1983: 102).

Plumber was also of the belief that the closer one was to the phenomenon one wanted to understand “the nearer one usually is to validity” (Plummer, 1983: 101).

Generalization is often identified as evidence of reliability and validity. As Maxwell (2005: 71) states the primary concern of this research is not with generalization,

but to put forward “an adequate description, interpretation, and explanation of” the experiences of those who participate in this study. Booth (1996: 237) states that “Generalization involves the loss of precisely the kind of detail that distinguishes personal experience”. Consequently, as this research is primarily interested in the personal experiences of blind/vision impaired people in relation to their educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities trying to make generalizations would be inappropriate.

Some have argued that giving voice is not a valid research objective but it has been argued that almost all research “...gives voice in the sense that it enhances the visibility of the thing studied and represents the viewpoint of some group or groups, even implicitly” (Ragin, 1994: 45). Giving voice is one of the primary aims and objectives of this research because it has been acknowledged by many including (Ali et al., 2001; Educable et al., 2000) that there has been a dearth of participation among disabled people either as researchers or as participants in their own right. It is anticipated that this research could redress this a little. A primary aim of life historians is to “explore how individuals or groups of people who share specific characteristics, personally and subjectively experience, make sense of, and account for the things that happen to them” (Goodson & Sikes, 2001: 39). Consequently, a life history approach was considered an appropriate methodology to utilize for the purposes of this study.

3.14 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity are major concerns in research. While being cognisant of this it has been argued that

...assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, basic tenets of most ethical codes, are by no means simple and straightforward when it comes to life history work because of the personal and idiosyncratic information that is involved and which ultimately will probably be recorded, reported and re-presented in some way (Goodson & Sikes, 2001: 92).

In relation to this for the purposes of this study pseudonyms were used for each of the participants. These pseudonyms were selected by the participants themselves in all cases. Also where possible all known identifiable characteristics of participants were omitted. Kvale & Brinkmann (2009: 72) asserts that “Confidentiality in research implies that private data identifying the participants will not be disclosed”. Most participants received an email (which for most was the preferred choice of correspondence) detailing the use of pseudonyms, how the meetings would be recorded, who would have access to these recordings, how long these recordings would be retained, and issues around transcription of these recordings. In this correspondence each participant was also informed that they would receive a copy of their transcript. This correspondence also acknowledged the importance of anonymity but stated that due to the nature of the research this may not be entirely possible. A small number of participants did not receive this email but the researcher met with them before commencing these meetings at which time all these issues were discussed. Furthermore, at the start of each initial meeting with participants these issues were further discussed to ensure that they were fully aware of these issues.

The researcher believed that issues around confidentiality may be exacerbated due to the fact that the researcher was known to some of the organisations where research information was distributed and to the personnel who worked within them. I made every attempt to ensure that participants were aware of the limitations surrounding confidentiality and all still indicated a willingness to participate. Confidentiality applied to what people agreed to disclose to the researcher. By sending participants copies of their transcripts this was how I tried to ensure that they did not feel their confidentiality or anonymity was compromised.

3.15 Gatekeepers and Consent

The involvement of ‘gatekeepers’ can be essential when undertaking research and they can either facilitate or impede access to possible research participants. As Heath, et al. (2007: 206) assert

The right of gatekeepers to give or withhold access is in practice often conflated with the right to give or withhold consent, even though gatekeepers have no legal powers to give or withhold consent on their charges' behalf.

This can result in people that are interested in participating being denied the opportunity to opt in or opt out of the research process and this may have happened unbeknownst to the research in particular settings. Some of the settings to which information regarding my research was distributed did not acknowledge receipt of information. Therefore, it is difficult to know whether or not my research information was circulated to prospective participants.

However, to include people who were still attending secondary education the cooperation of 'gatekeepers' was utilised to gain access to this section of the population. I initially made contact with a teacher working in the school whose name I had been given and she passed on my name and number to the 'Head of Care Staff' who made contact with me. This individual in conjunction with 'Team Leaders' who have responsibility for those students who reside in a number of houses in the vicinity of the resourced mainstream secondary school selected a house from which students could participate. I believe that the selection of this house was primarily chosen as all those living in this house were in the senior cycle of their education, but there may have been other reasons for the selection of this house that was not known to me. There were a number of conditions attached to being granted permission to involve these participants including seeking consent from the students involved in the research, that the researcher would correspond with the 'Team Leader' who was in charge of the selected students and that the school would get a copy of the completed study. The researcher agreed to these requests. Six students lived in this house and five of these students participated in this research. There was only one person among this group that was under the age of eighteen years of age. At a meeting with him and the rest of the household including 'Care Staff' and the 'Team Leader' the purpose of the study as well as the issues of confidentiality and anonymity were discussed. Each person was also given an opportunity to discuss with the researcher any issues of concern that they had regarding the study. During this meeting written consent was sought and obtained from the 'Team Leader' as well

as from the student who was under eighteen years of age as he was interested in participating in the research. Both oral and written consent was given by the other students in this house who were interested in being involved in this study.

Oral and written consent was obtained from all participants. This was generally done via email as the researcher believed that it was the most accessible way to do it for all participants. Consent was always discussed again at the start of each meeting with participants to ensure that they were still interested in continuing their involvement in the study. It is apparent that:

The relationship that you create with participants in your study (and also with others, sometimes called “gatekeepers,” who can facilitate or interfere with your study) are an essential part of your methods, and how you initiate and negotiate these relationships is a key design decision (Maxwell, 2005: 82).

3.16 Rapport and Disclosure

Rapport and disclosure are topics which are increasingly discussed and advanced within qualitative research. Many including (Byrne, 2000; Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007; Ryan, 2006; Sarantakos, 1998; Wicks & Whiteford, 2006) argue that rapport and disclosure are significant factors to consider when undertaking research. These were areas that were salient to this research as both the researcher and participants came from the same minority group, that is they all shared experiences of vision impairment/blindness and like Shah (2006: 210) it can be asserted that “...my ontological position, as a disabled researcher, was key to the development of this research” and facilitated access to potential participants, helped build rapport with participants and encouraged participants to be more forthcoming with information. Furthermore as Byrne (2000: 143) has stated when the researcher comes from the same marginalized group they can give voice to those who have been silenced which in this case has resulted from the fact that those participating in this research were blind/vision impaired people and as has been stated earlier there has been a dearth of research undertaken which involves the participation of disabled people.

Booth (1996: 238) states that life history research requires the fostering of a close and intimate relationship between the researcher and participant. Developing a satisfactory level of rapport can enhance this relationship resulting in greater trust and a willingness to disclose by participants. Self-disclosure is an important aspect of rapport building and while I had to be mindful that disclosing information to participants regarding aspects of my experiences as a person with a vision impairment could bias the research meetings like Shah (2006: 211) I was aware that I was requesting a significant amount from those participating in this research "...in the way of their time, cooperation and confidences on some personal and difficult matters in their lives, matters which they had every reason not to disclose to a stranger".

As a disabled researcher, empathy was also a significant factor and frequently participants referred to the fact that I would understand what they were talking about. A final matter relating to being a member of the minority group which the researcher is writing about and which I believe is worth mentioning briefly, and which has been considered by others surrounds the issue of participants being seen as the 'other' within research. Both Ryan (2006: 158) & Byrne (2000: 143) have argued that being both an insider and a willingness to self-disclose could challenge the presumed objectivity of the researcher and reduce the perceived gap between the researcher and those participating in the research.

3.17 Reflexivity

It is widely acknowledged that reflexivity is becoming increasingly important within qualitative research. As I have indicated throughout this thesis my ontological position as a disabled researcher was influential in undertaking this study. It is recognised that:

the worldview and background of the researcher affects the way in which he or she constructs the world, uses language, poses questions, and chooses the lens for filtering the information gathered from participants and making meaning of it (Berger, 2013: 2).

In other words, the position of the researcher can be influential at every stage of the research process. Berger (2013: 11) argues that “The degree of researcher’s personal familiarity with the experience of participants potentially impacts all phases of the research process”. Berger also maintains that:

Reflexivity when sharing participants’ experience,...helps address the double sword inherent in the situation. On one hand, such familiarity may enable better in-depth understanding of participants’ perception and interpretation of their lived experience in a way that is impossible in the absence of having been through it. However, at the same time, the researcher must remain constantly alert to avoid projecting own experience and using it as the lens to view and understand participants’ experience (2013: 12).

Elliott (2005: 153) acknowledges that “reflexivity might be understood as a heightened awareness of the self, acting in the social world”. Goodley (1996: 345) states that “It is up to the researcher involved in the collection of life histories to be aware of their impact on the stories told and to acknowledge their input”. As a disabled researcher undertaking research with disabled people I had to be alert at all times as to how my position could impact on this study. Therefore, during participant meetings I endeavoured as far as possible not to lead participants’ answers in order to reduce the likelihood that my comments would ‘lead’ research findings. Furthermore, when I began data analysis I made a conscious effort to focus on what participants were really saying rather than what I expected to find. These are areas of concern that many including (Berger, 2013; Mosselson, 2010) recognise as significant. Consequently, “researchers must continually ask themselves where they are at any given moment in relation to what they study and what are the potential ramifications of this position on their research” (Berger, 2013: 13).

As discussed in the previous section on rapport and disclosure an important aspect of this study was a willingness by me to “share personal insights that develop during the research process” (Wicks & Whiteford, 2006: 99). A consequence of this for me was that on occasions listening to stories aroused “personal memories or strong provocative images” (Wicks & Whiteford, 2006: 97).

This was particularly significant when engaging with participants who had similar life course events to my own.

Many including (Finlay, 2002; Ryan, 2006) have argued that reflexivity can be beneficial within research and when undertaken responsibly can result in "...a more reasoned objectivity" (Lohan, 2000: 171). Finlay (2002: 214) also asserts that self-exploration of one's own experiences can be the foundation for a more "...generalized understanding and interpretation". Furthermore, it has been argued by Ryan (2006) that acknowledging this reflexivity can result in the recognition of the human aspect of the research. This research is based on a subjectivist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology which for me makes reflexivity a salient component of this research.

3.18 Data Analysis

It has been acknowledged by some including Dickson-Swift et al. (2007: 337) that undertaking one's own transcribing is an important component of data analysis. The researcher concurs with this viewpoint and believes that this was a significant first step in the process of analysis. Once an interview was transcribed a copy was forwarded to the participant so that they could read it and discuss it further at a follow-up meeting. It has been recognized that in particular qualitative research is "...co-constituted, a joint product of the participants, researcher and their relationship" (Finlay, 2002: 212).

Sarantakos (1998: 320) states that "Qualitative analysis takes place in waves, each wave following the previous one and providing additional information". Following transcription of interviews transcripts were read through carefully several times in order to identify emerging issues and key themes as Braun, and Clarke, (2006: 87) acknowledge "It is ideal to read through the entire data set at least once before you begin your coding, as ideas and identification of possible patterns will be shaped as you read through". Thematic analysis was utilized for analyzing the data collected. Braun and Clarke (2006:79) assert that "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail". They also argue that thematic analysis "...offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to

analysing qualitative data” and that the flexibility which thematic analysis affords the researcher is particularly beneficial.

Themes and sub-themes were identified as according to Braun, and Clarke, (2006: 82) “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” and a sub-theme “...can be useful for giving structure to a particularly large and complex theme,...” (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 92). Braun, and Clarke, (2006: 93) suggest that the function of the write-up of a thematic analysis “...is to tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis”. Data analysis is presented within chapter four and five. Chapter four contains four case studies that identify the themes and sub-themes and these are further explored in chapter five with examples from other participants.

3.19 Conclusion

This chapter discussed a variety of methodological issues. The chapter began with an examination of the rationale for this study and indicated that even though blind/vision impaired children and young people are increasingly educated within the mainstream setting they still experience challenges both within education and in their transition choices/opportunities. This was followed by an exploration of qualitative research methods and in particular the life history approach which was central to this research. The literature indicates that within the area of disability studies qualitative methodologies offer a suitable means to understand the intricacies of disability in its social context (O'Day & Killeen, 2002). A life history approach places particular emphasis on the insider perspective which the researcher perceives to be one of the most salient reasons for using this approach. A life history approach also allows one to make connections between individual life events and social events, which were important for the purposes of this study. The chapter then focused on particular issues that were germane to this study. The discussion on bias reliability and validity indicated that no research is completely free from bias and that if the subjective voice is what the researcher is seeking then a life history approach is most suitable. This chapter also discussed the importance of reflexivity and indicated that reflexivity can highlight the human

aspects of research which the researcher recognises as paramount in this study. The chapter concludes with an examination of the data analysis method utilized in this study. It indicated that a thematic approach offers the researcher a flexible means by which to organize and describe ones data in rich detail.

The following chapter contains four case studies that identify the primary themes and sub-themes that were pertinent to participants in this research.

CHAPTER FOUR

Case Studies

4.1 Introduction

This chapter consists of four case studies. The four participants whose case studies are included in this chapter were selected to exemplify the various experiences of participants in this research. A format similar to that used in this chapter has previously been used by others including Shah, & Priestley, (2011) for presentation of data. This approach is compatible with a life history approach. The topics considered in this chapter emerged from the thematic and life course approaches that were implemented when analyzing the data. Thematic analysis offered a theoretically flexible way in which to analyse the qualitative data that was gathered using a life history approach. Robert who was in the youngest age group attended a special primary school and the resourced mainstream secondary school. Joe was the only participant who had been blind since infancy who had attended a mainstream primary and secondary school in his own locality. Maria was a participant from the oldest age group. She attended a special school for the majority of her primary education and all of her secondary education. The final case study is Mary. She was one of the participants who lost her sight in adulthood. The themes and sub-themes identified in this chapter will be further explored in the following chapter using examples from other participants.

4.2 Robert

Robert was born in the late 1980s. He has a congenital eye condition and for him this means that he

...can't see long distances and you can't see small writing or the numbers on buses from a certain distance but I also haven't got much peripheral vision.

Increasingly blind/vision impaired children and young people are educated within mainstream schools in their own localities. However, this case study illustrates the supports and resources that were available to Robert within a special primary school and a resourced mainstream school, and indicates how these impacted on his educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities. The utilization of a life history approach enabled the researcher to explore how people born in different historical times were exposed to different historical worlds and opportunities (Shah, & Priestley, 2011).

4.2.1 Education

When I first met Robert he was preparing to sit the Leaving Certificate Applied in the resourced mainstream secondary school. This school is located on the same grounds as the primary school for the visually impaired. This mainstream secondary school is not typical of other mainstream secondary schools around the country. There was evidence of significant awareness around vision impairment, appropriate teacher support and greater access to resources such as Braille and textbooks in alternative formats. Robert generally spoke favourably about the resourced mainstream secondary school saying

...a lot of teachers down in (resourced mainstream secondary school) they are good for helping students that have disabilities.

He also stated that

...the good thing about it with (special primary school) and with (resourced mainstream secondary school) there is a great relationship between the staff and students and with the students themselves and with the teachers and the students...

Robert became a boarder when he was in second or third year in secondary school the result of this was that he lived in a house near the school from Monday to Friday during term time. He found that boarding was a positive option for him for many reasons as he said

I work better I will study harder and the atmosphere is good. You get along with more people than you would at home because you go out more because you are with more people that are visually impaired or whatever.

He also felt that he was getting the help he required both academically and emotionally particularly as he said there was “a bit of dysfunction in my family at the time” and he believed that boarding was “...extremely important to me”.

4.2.2 Access to the Curriculum

Research indicates that vision plays a significant part in education and learning for children and young people (Khadka et al., 2012). This issue is further explored in chapter six. Robert’s primary education occurred within the special education system. Robert believed that “You need more blind and visually impaired schools in this country” but he was also of the view that there was a need for integration as he said “...you need to integrate no matter if you have disabilities...everyone is different everyone needs to integrate”. Robert went to the resourced mainstream secondary school for his secondary education where he did the Junior Certificate and followed this with the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. This programme has a strong vocational dimension and while this programme can provide greater access to the curriculum for some students careful consideration is required as it can restrict future choices. The Leaving Certificate Applied course was a topic that was discussed on both occasions we met which was before and after he sat these exams. In the first statement Robert implied that many of the vision impaired/blind

students that attended the resourced mainstream secondary school sat the Leaving Certificate Applied course. In the second piece he considered the positive and negative aspects of taking the Leaving Certificate Applied course. He indicated while the practical component to this course suited him he did not feel that he was academically challenged sufficiently indicating how a provision can have both positive and negative outcomes

Well myself like a lot of other VIs (vision impaired) and blind students in the school I chose LCA (Leaving Cert Applied programme)...it is not as academic and I believe that's down to the whole insecurity thing again students thinking the LCA is the easy way out where it's not.

And

I think it was good because it helped me work my way around things it was more practical which was what I wanted it was more interesting. But on the other hand I felt I could have been more academic that would have helped me more it would have got my brain and pushed more you know.

Robert took a variety of subjects for the Leaving Cert Applied and while he did encounter some challenges with some subjects he had the required supports available to him to enable him to overcome most of the obstacles he encountered. This demonstrates how the appropriate level of provision can enhance educational experiences. This excerpt identified aspects of the curriculum that were most problematic for Robert and indicated some of the supports that were available to him

...Engineering we had a...practical task to do and during the practical task what I did was I basically I got a lot of help from the instructor but I done my best it took me longer to finish the task than everyone else...the written exams were grand it's just some of diagrams in some of the exams kind of threw me off a bit and I was kind of getting confused and that. It was more practical subjects I suppose that were kind of an issue the other ones that weren't so practical were grand.

4.2.3 Transitions

At our first meeting Robert expressed his concerns about leaving the resourced mainstream secondary school he was attending. The residential setting that was a component of this provision was of particular importance to Robert and the excerpt below suggests that the residential staff were an integral part of this. This excerpt also identifies some of the positive and negative aspects of this type of provision

I am very worried about leaving this place. I am so scared of leaving this place because I have become so dependent on it in the sense of the staff here do so much for us and they help us out so much we are literally we are nearly spoon fed and I really appreciate the stuff they do, do for the students.

At our second meeting Robert acknowledged that he had encountered some difficulties when he left the resourced mainstream secondary school and the residential setting as is evident in the following quote

I just hit rock bottom and I couldn't hack it...a lot of things happened so I just went really downhill.

Supports were put in place for Robert to enable him to address some of these issues. Staff within the resourced mainstream secondary school and in particular the 'Care Staff' in the residential setting ensured that the required supports were available to Robert. These supports included that Robert was permitted to stay "...in that (residential) house once a week for a couple of weeks" which indicates that even though Robert was no longer a student within the resourced mainstream secondary school there were still supports available to enable him to overcome some of the transition difficulties he was experiencing. This demonstrates how targeted effective supports were established to meet Robert's needs.

When I met Robert for the second time he was still receiving both medical support and support from the 'Care Staff' in the residential setting but was living at home with his family. The following excerpt indicates that there were difficulties associated with this transition but that he was beginning to develop a relationship in a new way with his family which was a positive experience for him. This excerpt

also illustrates some of the consequences of living away from home which had resulted from the type of educational provision available to Robert. This is similar to research undertaken by Shah and Priestley (2011) which indicated that an impact of being within a residential setting for school can be estrangement from family.

I live with my Mam and Dad and my two sisters and that's grand and I think now that I'm living...back at home now I've begun to develop a better relationship with my family because...I wasn't really thinking about my family as much when I was in (residential setting) or whatever. Now I'm only starting to develop more get more in touch with my family and all that develop a better a much stronger relationship with them.

4.2.4 Transition to Further Education and Training

When I first met Robert he had definite ideas about what he wanted to do after he left school and his ultimate aim was to work on radio as the following example indicates

In relation to further education...I plan to go into radio because I want to do a talk show.

Therefore his transition choices were focused on pursuing a course in a PLC college in Dublin that would further his opportunities in obtaining the relevant knowledge that would enable him to work on radio. He was aware that not all of the smaller colleges had a dedicated Student Disability Support service which he recognised would be important for him when he made the transition from the resourced mainstream secondary school to further education and training. When he initially left school he commenced an acting course in one of the National Learning Networks (NLN) in Dublin but due to the transition difficulties he encountered after leaving the resourced mainstream secondary school he was moved to a different NLN. He stated that this course was a Level 3 course. The following excerpt indicates what was required of Robert while undertaking this course

...basically...it involves going out on work experience searching new career ideas and seeing basically what you are capable of.

Robert initially had reservations about being moved down to a Level 3 course which he perceived to be the equivalent of a Junior Certificate level course and he believed was below his ability level. The following excerpt indicates that once Robert commenced this course he identified the positive aspect of this course for him and how this course could benefit his transition choices/opportunities

...it takes certain aspects and helps you improve on what you need to achieve your goals in the future.

Robert was generally satisfied with this course and setting but as the following excerpt indicates he found some of the attitudes within this setting to be condescending and therefore inappropriate. This could reinforce dependence rather than fostering independence which could impact negatively on future transition choices/opportunities

...they can be a bit patronising that like they treat you like your in school still but I know I have done a Leaving Cert I'm out of school I'm twenty one years of age.

Social model theorists would suggest that it is attitudes like these that impose unnecessary disabling barriers on people with impairments (this was discussed in greater detail in chapter two).

4.2.5 Work Experience and Employment

This course had given Robert the opportunity to do work experience within a voluntary radio station where he had been given the opportunity to produce his own show. Many including McDonnall and Crudden (2009) have indicated the importance of various work experience opportunities for disabled young people (see chapter two and six for a more comprehensive discussion on various aspects of work experience). Robert was hoping to get the opportunity to do further work in other radio stations. Robert had experienced some challenges while working in the

radio station and the following excerpt identifies how he managed the environment within which he was working. This excerpt also indicates how he overcame some of the more visual aspects of the job illustrating resilience and agency (this is an issue that is further explored elsewhere in the thesis including chapter six where some relevant literature is considered).

...sometimes it was hard visually but during the music I was able to set up my next song look at my script see what I was going to say next read the messages that are coming in from listeners...I would have to make sure that I would have those messages memorized...so that once the music is over I don't have to go straight face up to the screen I can just say the messages out on the air.

Robert also acknowledge the challenges of being a DJ for him because of his vision impairment but as the following excerpts indicate he perceived that with time he would develop strategies that would enable him to manage these situations which demonstrates his resilience and determination to overcome these challenges to enable him to pursue his chosen career path

...at the moment I am applying to be a full time volunteer in a different community radio station and the only thing there is the desk is more different it's more up to date...so I might find that a bit harder getting used to but if I did get used to that desk then I would have no problem say if I was DJ-ing in a night club...so I wouldn't really mind that to be honest with you

And

I'd find it a bit hard because of the lighting and that would be hard to get used to but...once I got used to a computer I can use any computer without looking at it.

Working in a radio station continues to be Robert's long-term goal and therefore when he gets the opportunity to do courses that will enhance his opportunities of

fulfilling this ambition he does them. This demonstrates the significance of resilience and determination in enabling transition choices/opportunities.

4.2.6 Independence

Robert's independence had developed during his time in the resourced mainstream secondary school and this enabled him to have a full and active life. When I met Robert he neither used a white cane or a guide dog and did not envisage needing to use one in the future. The following two excerpts demonstrate the changes that have occurred for Robert around his independence and how this has enhanced the social aspects of his life. Developing independence was encouraged within the resourced mainstream secondary school and the provision of a range of extracurricular activities was an important aspect of this development. This indicates how appropriate provision can impact on experience and outcome

I am very independent whereas two years ago I wasn't, two years ago I would be snapping at anything I was so scared and so angry and I would be afraid to do anything I wouldn't go out really and if I did go out I would be saying I have to go, I have to go and worrying about it getting dark and this that and the other. Eventually I pulled my socks up and I said to myself I need to get myself sorted out its being sensible you know

And

I get a bus into town; I go into town at weekends and hang around with my friends I go to my girlfriend's house. I go training on Wednesday nights to my martial arts class I'll get two buses I'll walk through town I'll come back after it. I've been through town in the night time.

As was indicated in chapter two the transition from dependence to independence is perceived as an important indicator of the transition from childhood to adulthood (Swain et al., 2003).

4.2.7 Societal Issues and Attitudes

While disability awareness in society has improved in recent times people that are blind/vision impaired like disabled people generally can still experience negative attitudes. These are often evident in people's assumption around the capabilities of people that are blind/vision impaired and can have negative implications. This indicates how societal attitudes can impose unnecessary disabling barriers on people with impairments (Sapey, 2004). Literature pertinent to identity is discussed elsewhere in this thesis (see chapter six). The following excerpt indicates how Robert experienced some of these attitudes and demonstrates how resilience enabled him to overcome these attitudes

I didn't have much confidence as a child...I told my Mam and Dad that I wanted to do martial arts classes and people were saying to me...people in the mainstream part of the school were saying no you can't do that you can't do that you are visually impaired or whatever you wouldn't see but I gained up a bit of false confidence because I wanted to do it so bad I just jumped in and I did martial arts class and I seen the sports done here and I got involved in all the sports in (the special primary school) plus my martial arts class

The staff in the resourced mainstream secondary school actively encouraged all the students to get involved in extracurricular activities including sports and this positive standpoint may have helped Robert overcome some of the negative attitudes he experienced. It was apparent that there was a significant level of disability awareness within the resourced mainstream secondary school and the residential setting which indicates how policy and provision can have positive outcomes.

4.2.8 Psycho-emotional Disablism

As a teenager Robert experienced very low self-esteem and had no confidence. Supports were put in place to help him overcome some of these issues which indicates that appropriate provisions were available to meet his various needs. The following quote indicates that Robert perceived that many young disabled

people experienced low self-esteem and demonstrates how psycho-emotional disablism can impact on experience

...the thing with disabilities is they always think people are looking at you there is always the level of low self-esteem there.

It appears that the supports he received during his time in the resourced mainstream secondary school have helped him surmount some of his self-esteem and self-confidence issues. This is evident in the following excerpts and suggests that he is overcoming some of the psycho-emotional aspects of disability that have impacted on his life. This indicates how effective provisions can impact on experience and outcome

I am not afraid to talk anymore see I have gained my confidence and I have gained everything I need I don't worry about visual impairment

And

...my sight isn't the worst in the world I know that it's not my biggest issue in the world. It's not really it doesn't bother me as much. It doesn't really get to me like it did when I was younger I just get on with life you know enjoy life.

4.2.9 Summary

This case study discussed Robert's educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities. This illustrated how provision and policy within education impacted on all aspects of his life. A continuum of effective supports was significant for Robert and demonstrates how appropriate provision and practice has significant implications on experience and outcome.

4.3 Joe

When I first met Joe he had recently taken up employment within the area of legal research and is currently doing further training within the area of law. Joe was born in the 1980s and is the youngest of the family. Following an illness as a baby Joe's optic nerve was crushed and resulted in him losing his sight completely. He was the only participant who had been blind since infancy who had attended mainstream schools in his own locality for all of his primary and secondary education. Increased participation in mainstream settings reflects shifts in education policy since the 1990's and demonstrates how people born in different historical times are exposed to different historical worlds and opportunities (Shah & Priestley, 2011).

4.3.1 Education

Joe went to playschool and saw this as a positive and beneficial experience. When Joe commenced his education in the 1990 the policy of inclusion for blind/vision impaired children and young people was still at an embryonic stage as is apparent in the following excerpt

...the whole kind of mainstreaming attitude was kind of here it was beginning and maybe getting a bit of momentum behind it.

Joe recognized that while subtle changes in attitudes were beginning to emerge it would still have been considered the norm at the time for blind children to attend a special school. His parents believed that he was too young to go away to school at four years of age and therefore he started his education in his locality after his parents "managed to talk their way into the local primary school". While he does not recall the negotiations that took place regarding him going to this school he did say

I think the principal of that school may have had his doubts to a certain extent...but essentially I went down there on a trial basis.

Joe did believe that in the beginning it was 'trial and error' on the part of his parents to see how things would work out and his parents were particularly supportive which demonstrates how parental agency can impact on experience and outcome. Joe also had a visiting teacher who liaised with the school indicating the importance of effective provision.

4.3.2 Supportive Teachers

The importance of supportive teachers in the early years of his education was apparent. The following excerpt indicates how effective teaching methodologies can have a positive impact on experience. This demonstrates how a variety of "flexible and supportive teaching strategies" (Matthews, 2009: 233) enabled Joe's participation within primary education.

I had a very, very good teacher in senior infants who put a good deal of effort in you know in making sure that I stayed with the class and whatever else you know.

4.3.3 Access to the Primary School Curriculum

While Joe progressed satisfactorily in primary school he did encounter some challenges when accessing aspects of the curriculum. This was particularly evident in relation to the Irish curriculum. The primary reason for this was that he was unable to see what was written on the board and also because he frequently was unable to access Braille books in Irish. This illustrates how teaching and learning practices can impose barriers to disabled students' learning (Powell, 2003; Rieser, 2003; Rioux & Pinto, 2010; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010).

Furthermore, lack of appropriate provision had a negative impact on Joe's ability to access the Irish curriculum. This is evident in the following excerpt and demonstrates that there are limitations to accessing written material in recorded format (Vik & Fellenius, 2007)

...it was actually not seeing the words on the board not from the point of view that I wouldn't learn the words but I wouldn't learn the spelling and

that's still a bit of an issue because if you read something like visually you see the letters and you take them in.

4.3.4 Transition to Secondary Education

The secondary school Joe attended had a right of entry policy and as his siblings attended this school he too “would get automatic preference to the school” and he saw this as being a fortunate situation in enabling him to go to that school. Again his parents and visiting teacher liaised with the school. This indicates the importance of agency and effective provision. He travelled to and from the school predominantly with his youngest sister and he did believe that “having to do that was kind of cutting down a bit on my independence”. This school was much larger than the primary school he had attended and he recognized that “...this was an awful lot harder...to negotiate this place” and he stated that “it was more challenging than primary school had been certainly” which indicates how an environment can impact on experience.

4.3.5 Access to the Secondary School Curriculum

Joe took a wide range of subjects at secondary school and chose option subjects based on how accessible he and the school perceived them to be. This indicates how policy and practice can impact on experience and outcome and indicates how curriculum choices can be significantly curtailed (Burgess, 2003; Shah, 2006, 2007). The following excerpt is illustrative of this

I chose Business Studies some of the options like Metalwork and Woodwork I didn't think they were for me and I don't think the school would have been on for me to do them to be honest and I can understand why.

Proactive teaching methodologies enabled Joe to participate in Physical Education (PE). Joe acknowledged that this was at a time when PE teachers may have had little or no experience of adapting a PE programme to meet the needs of blind/vision impaired students. The following example demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach

...they worked out kind of stuff I could do like weights and stuff...that was very, very good...thinking back on it...I doubt at the time that they would have had much...in the way of experience. They probably wouldn't have learned anything about it in college. Now whether they kind of had discussions with the visiting teacher or not I don't know but they...worked it out.

4.3.6 Access to the Maths Curriculum

The Maths curriculum proved particularly problematic for Joe during his time in secondary education. This is an area of the curriculum that (AHEAD, 2008; Cahill & Linehan, 1996; Karshmer & Bledsoe, 2002) have also identified as being particularly challenging for blind/vision impaired children and young people. This is further discussed in chapter six. A number of factors contributed to this situation for Joe including ineffective teaching methodologies, inappropriate and insufficient provision of Maths books and materials in accessible formats, insufficient teacher training and insufficient appropriate supports. Joe perceived that Maths was an area of the school curriculum where many blind people encounter difficulties. This is evident in the following excerpts and could indicate that the existing Maths teaching methodologies may present barriers to blind/vision impaired students' learning (Powell, 2003; Rieser, 2003; Rioux & Pinto, 2010; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010)

...blind people traditionally have had some difficulties particularly because it maybe hasn't been taught right to them and also perhaps because of some of the more visual elements of the Maths curriculum I think that's an issue that should be looked at

And

A lot of Maths teaching is visual. It is done on a blackboard, with the teacher calling out the lines as they write. Everyone else can read those lines back. I could not.

Joe's first year Maths teacher told his parents that he was unable to teach him Maths this Joe found unhelpful as is evident from the following quote

...from my perspective I didn't appreciate that line of I don't know how to teach you.

For the remainder of Joe's secondary education he had more supportive Maths teachers. The following excerpt is an indication of one such teacher's efforts and indicates how policy and practice can vary even within a school. This also demonstrates how supportive teaching strategies (Matthews, 2009) can impact on experience and outcome

He was...dedicated and...made the effort it was probably a thankless task in that I was never going to get a great mark in it.

While Joe got a B in honours Maths at Junior Certificate level, because of the difficulties he was experiencing he was advised by teachers and his visiting teacher to drop Maths. His parents suggested that he might drop down to ordinary level Maths but Joe believed that the ordinary level curriculum would be more difficult for him to access because of the significant volume of visual components contained in the ordinary level curriculum and chose to continue with the honours Maths curriculum. Joe recognised the importance of keeping on Maths for his Leaving Certificate as he believed that not doing so would impact negatively on his range of post-school choices. Research undertaken by Shah, & Priestly, (2011) and Peters, (2010) among others indicate the importance of resilience and the following quote exemplifies the resilience and determination Joe demonstrated when faced with systemic, institutional and attitudinal barriers

I was advised to consider dropping Maths. I declined to do this on principle and because I thought I might need it. It is something about which I am still very annoyed because I do not think that I got a fair chance.

Joe did receive Maths books in Braille though not always on time. However he did not have access to diagrams during his time in school. These are significant

learning tools for many aspects of the Maths curriculum. Joe believed that this inconsistency of policy and provision significantly impeded his ability to access the Maths curriculum to the best of his ability. The impact of this is apparent from the following two excerpts

Diagrams were unavailable during normal school time. They were made available in the exams themselves, which I think was especially unfair. This meant that I didn't have any idea what I was working with

And

I did have Braille books but not diagrams, which illustrated parts of the course. As a result, my performance suffered very seriously. I did honours Maths for the leaving Cert and got a D1. My lowest other grade was an A2.

As Joe attended a mainstream school in his locality where no one within the school could read Braille it was necessary for him to do his Maths homework and Maths exams on his computer to enable others to read and correct his work. As a result of this Joe encountered additional challenges as he did not have the relevant knowledge to enable him to insert the appropriate Maths symbols. The lack of appropriate support regarding this matter meant that he devised his own notations when trying to represent Maths equations symbolically. This shows ingenuity, resilience and determination on his part but was not without its drawbacks as is apparent in the second of the following quotes. Lack of appropriate provision here again hindered Joe's ability to access the Maths curriculum effectively

I did not know of a programme which would allow me to write the proper notations on my laptop. Nor was my screen reader capable of reading these back at the time

And

The notations were not correct - I essentially made them up $XX = x$ squared etc. Apart from anything else that led to difficulties in correcting the paper at Junior Cert and Leaving Cert levels.

In addition to the Maths support provided by Joe's father he did receive additional support in Maths in fifth and sixth year within the school, but lack of teacher training meant that the school was not always equipped to meet his needs, particularly when trying to access the more visual aspects of the Maths curriculum. The following excerpts indicate how inadequate teacher training and insufficient supports impacted on experience and outcome. It also illustrates that as Joe attended a mainstream post-primary school in his own locality he did not have access to the range of supports and resources that were available within the resourced mainstream secondary school. This indicates that there is not a sufficient sharing of knowledge between the resourced mainstream school and mainstream schools around the country. This was an issue which the SERC (1993) recommended

I got some extra help with Maths for the leaving cert. However, what was lacking was a well-structured programme

And

I also think that my school was badly let down. The teachers were not trained to teach a blind person Maths. No system was put in place that would either have provided someone who was well trained to do this for me or given them information on how to do this.

When I asked Joe to expand on some of the difficulties he encountered accessing the Maths curriculum I also asked him what things would have made it easier for him to access the Maths curriculum more fully. As well as saying learning the proper way to represent equations symbolically, a screen reader that would read these symbolic equations, Maths books in an electronic format, timely access to diagrams throughout his time in education, he also said Maths teaching from a teacher qualified to teach Maths to blind people. While he recognised that this probably could not be provided either easily or cheaply he also sounded a word of

caution in relation to this matter for those attending mainstream schools and indicated how providing, specialized teaching could impact negatively on inclusion if not undertaken in an appropriate way. Therefore it is necessary to be cognizant of how supports can have both positive and negative implications as the following excerpt demonstrates

I would want Maths teaching from someone better trained in teaching the subject to the blind...I doubt this...could be provided easily or cheaply. I also wonder what effect that would have on the student's integration into a class, that's an important consideration.

4.3.7 Access to Written Material

One of the main difficulties Joe encountered throughout all of his education was the significant delays he experienced in receiving the relevant books he required in Braille. Many including (Cole-Hamilton & Vale, 2000; Harpur, 2010; Harris & Oppenheim, 2003; Lewin-Jones & Hodgson, 2004; Royal National Institute for the Blind, 2002) recognise this as being a significant problem for many who have print disabilities and this will be considered further in chapter six. This lack of provision meant that for a considerable amount of his time in education it was Joe's mother who read the relevant parts of the various text books to him. While Joe acknowledged how appreciative he was of his mother for doing this he perceived that this situation resulted in him being supervised to a greater degree than his peers and siblings were which reinforced dependence. The following quote demonstrates this

...my Mother used to read out the bits of the books and she was great to do that you know but it...probably wasn't either good for her or me in some ways...for myself really what it was I suppose I was kind of supervised doing my homework.

As a result of undue delays in receiving books in Braille and with improved access to technology Joe ceased availing of books in Braille and began to scan books instead. While this was quite time consuming at the time it provided him with greater access to written material and increased independence demonstrating the

important role that technology can play in the lives of disabled students (UNESCO, 2011). This is evident in the following quote and indicates how changes in technology can impact positively on experience and outcome. Appropriate access to technology continues to play a significant role in Joe's life

...the thing was once you had them (books) scanned you could read them back to yourself you know and also you could bring them around on the laptop.

4.3.8 Special Needs Assistants

Joe did transition year and it was during this year that the school recommended that he should have a Special Needs Assistant (SNA) as they considered that he was over reliant on friends when it came to his mobility. The school also believed that without a Special Needs Assistant he may not be able to access all aspects of the transition year programme. This illustrates that SNAs are often perceived as being the only solution to inclusion (Rutherford, 2012). The following quote indicates how the school approached this and suggests that Joe did not have any say regarding the supports he received. Research by Mortier et al. (2011) also indicated that this is an issue for disabled students. This demonstrates how policy can impact on experience and outcome

...the school were kind of concerned as to how I would get through the transition year programme...they kind of gave the visiting teacher an ultimatum they felt that I needed a Special Needs Assistant...not from the academic side but from the mobility side of getting not just around the school but getting to say work experience and that kind of thing.

While Joe acknowledged that having an SNA probably enabled him to participate more fully in elements of the transition year programme such as going on school trips that otherwise he may not have been able to go on, having an SNA did pose problematic for him at times. The main area where difficulties arose for Joe was around the perceived level of surveillance which he experienced when with his SNA and how this impacted negatively on his social interaction with peers. This is

apparent in the following excerpts and demonstrates how supports can have unanticipated negative repercussions

...at the time I felt that I was almost stuck with her we were like Siamese twins almost although to be fair to her now like she let me off for lunch...it was like being very closely supervised now she didn't stay in all my classes which was good

And

I wasn't mixing with them (friends) as much as I had been because of the SNA and that now I am not blaming her.

4.3.9 Transition to Third Level Education

There was an expectation within his family that Joe like the rest of his siblings would go on to Third Level education. The following quote demonstrates this and illustrates how expectation can impact positively on an individual's post-school choices and opportunities

I suppose again the whole expectation thing comes into it...the truth is everyone all the rest of my brothers and sisters they had all gone to college people in our school did...and I kind of expected to go to be honest with you.

Joe studied Law at university and this decision had been influenced by a number of teachers and career guidance counsellors who perceived that Law was a suitable area for blind/vision impaired people. During his sixth year in secondary school Joe and his mother went to the college he was hoping to attend and met with the head of the Student Disability Service which he found beneficial. Joe stated that one of the primary reasons for choosing the particular university he went to was that they had received very positive reports regarding the supports that were available within this particular university. The following excerpt demonstrates this and indicates how perceived appropriate supports can influence transition choices

...we had heard...that the Disability Service down there was good. Good for visually impaired people and good for blind people.

In general Joe's university experience was a very positive one and the supports and resources that were available to him were an important element of this experience demonstrating how effective supports can impact on experience. The following quote illustrates this

I found the resources that were available to me...in term of scanning books and stuff was far superior they would do it for you.

Joe's ability to access the relevant written material required for his study was greatly enhanced by the availability of written material in electronic format indicating the important role that technology can play in the lives of disabled students (UNESCO, 2011). Being able to independently access the relevant material was greatly enabled by the awareness of a Post Grad in first year who, was involved in giving induction classes on how to use the library electronic catalogues and offered Joe individual tuition. The following excerpt demonstrates how valuable this support was for Joe and indicates how effective interventions can increase independence and reduce dependence

...you really need to be able to check the cases you need to be able to check the statutes...those were available on the internet. There was a...Post Grad student he was showing people in induction classes...how to use the database...and very kindly he decided...to give me a one-to-one tutorial...the man probably made the difference between me passing and failing my Law Degree because this was where all the cases could be got all the Irish decisions back to 1950 could be got there.

Joe got involved in extracurricular activities including the rowing club during his time at university and this was enabled by the positive attitude of the coach in question. The following example demonstrates how a supportive attitude can enable blind/vision impaired people to access and participate in activities and illustrates how this experience enhanced Joe's social inclusion.

I had a chat with the coach...who kind of said we'll see how it goes...and gave me every opportunity. I was never great at rowing...but it was really good it was a good place to make friends.

4.3.10 Transition Choices/Opportunities

During the final year of his degree Joe sat the various law exams including the Bar entrance exam and also applied to the “big five” firms of solicitors in Dublin in anticipation of getting an apprenticeship. He disclosed on the application forms that he was blind and while he was offered an apprenticeship with one of these firms he believed that this disclosure may have reduced the number of offers he received as is apparent in the following quote. This illustrates how perceived difficulties with disclosure can impact on experience and outcome. (Concerns around disclosure are considered in greater detail in chapter six)

I think and I can never prove this I think I would have probably gotten more had I been able to see but I can't say that for a fact but I did get a job and with a good firm a very long established firm.

4.3.11 Employment

Like many blind/vision impaired people Joe found it particularly difficult to get summer jobs. As is evident from the following quote the types of summer jobs generally available are not accessible to those that are blind/vision impaired and therefore employment opportunities are limited. Joe also perceived that as these types of jobs were short-term employers would be less willing to provide the accommodations necessary to enable someone who is blind/vision impaired to effectively participate in the work environment indicating how barriers can be experienced at different levels

I always found it hard to get summer jobs I rarely got them to be honest with you. I think that's a particularly hard thing to do because the kind of jobs that go for summer jobs they are not the kind of jobs I can really do or do well and it is very hard to persuade an employer to make allowances or to give you accommodations.

Joe got a summer job with a semi-state body at the end of first year in university and considered himself fortunate to get a summer job which indicates that he perceived this to be the exception rather than the norm. The following excerpt illustrates the positive aspects of having a job which Joe experienced and indicates how employment can increase independence. Various aspects of employment are considered elsewhere in the thesis (see chapter two and six)

I managed to land a job answering phones...which was great because first it was my first real job...it was nine to five...and number two it was a job and it paid which was useful for the next year.

Joe got work experience at the end of second year with a firm of solicitors and the following quote illustrates the benefits of this experience for Joe. It also demonstrates how work experience provided him with a greater understanding of aspects of Law which he may not otherwise have experienced. The importance of work experience has been addressed elsewhere in this study (see chapters two, six and seven).

I learned a lot there...about how the law actually happens in business...how it actually goes in practice as distinct from in theory.

While Joe was completing his first Masters he applied for a position as a legal researcher and again stated how fortunate he was to get that job. The following two quotes indicate the positive elements which this employment opportunity offered Joe and illustrates the important role which employment can have on a variety of levels for an individual

It was a great opportunity for me and a wonderful learning experience

And

People were very good about including me...I enjoyed myself a lot and made some real friends.

When his contract expired he was made redundant as his position was “subject to budgetary constraints”.

4.3.12 Disability Service Providers

When Joe moved to Dublin to take up employment he contacted the relevant Disability Service Provider in order to arrange mobility training. This was not a positive experience for him as is apparent from the following quote. This excerpt illustrates how some Disability Service Providers only provide a service within particular parameters which do not always meet the needs of those requiring the service

When I got in contact with them (Disability Service Provider) to arrange mobility they told me that I needed to have a place to live, so that they could assign me to an office. I explained...that I actually needed to get mobility to ascertain whether a proposed accommodation would be suitable to no avail. I want to emphasize how extremely unhappy about this I was and still am. I largely had to figure routes out myself.

This lack of appropriate provision from the Disability Service Provider restricted Joe’s accommodation opportunities which is apparent in the following two quotes and illustrates how inappropriate service provision can impact on experience and outcome and in Joe’s case reinforced dependence

In my early days...another girl...had a vacancy in the house she shared. Had I had sufficient mobility training I could have taken that up without it, I couldn't.

And

I was fortunate enough to be able to stay with my sister for several months but would have been in serious difficulty otherwise.

4.3.13 Societal Issues and Attitudes

While inappropriate provisions from Disability Service Providers impacted on Joe's ability to find suitable accommodation while living in Dublin he perceived that people's attitudes may have also contributed to the difficulties he experienced when seeking suitable accommodation. The following two excerpts indicate how negative disabling attitudes impacted on Joe's experience. The impact of disabling attitudes are discussed further in chapter six

...many people who had rooms to let would make excuses rather than offer the room to me. I can only conclude that this was because of my visual impairment in many if not most cases...So, while I'd say that people were casually very helpful, e.g. they would guide me across the road...and while in social settings they were often extremely friendly, many people obviously did stereotype me because of my disability

And

...my experience regarding accommodation was a profoundly disillusioning one. It really made me appreciate the meaning of discrimination.

4.3.14 Support Network

It was apparent throughout Joe's narrative that his family provided him with a high level of support. This was particularly evident in assisting him to access particular aspects of the curriculum and accessing written material when unavailable to him in an appropriate format. The following quotes are illustrative of the various supports that were provided by his parents during his time in education and demonstrate how they facilitated his access needs

...my Father...spent literally hours and showed great patience in going through Maths for the Junior and Leaving Cert with me

And

My Mother learned Braille from a tape...you would think that there would have been some better resources for herself.

4.3.15 Summary

This case study examined Joe's educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities. It illustrates the systemic, institutional and attitudinal challenges he experienced. It also identified how effective and ineffective supports impacted on his experiences. Connections between these experiences and pertinent literature are explored in chapter six.

4.4 Maria

Maria was born in the late 1960s with a vision and hearing impairment. Maria was the only participant in this research that attended a special school for the majority of her primary education and all of her secondary education. This demonstrates how people born in different historical times are exposed to changing historical worlds (Shah & Priestley, 2011). Maria was in full-time employment and worked as a telephonist.

4.4.1 Education

Maria commenced her primary education in her local school and remained there for about three years. The following quote illustrates the environmental challenges she experienced

...very nervous of the large volume of children around me when I would be trying to make my way out in the hallways...at that point I could really only see shadows.

The following excerpt demonstrates the supportive role which her mother took during this period of her education and demonstrates how her mother encouraged Maria's independence

...she (mother) encouraged me to be as independent as I could...in the evenings...when she'd come to collect me...she'd never kind of run to me she'd let me walk out to her.

As Maria went from junior infants to senior infants and on to first class the print in the textbooks got increasingly smaller and she began to lag behind her peers and subsequently she moved to a special school for blind/vision impaired girls in Dublin. Research conducted by Khadka, et al, (2012: 183) acknowledged the "progressive reduction in print size" as significant for vision impaired children and young people's education and learning. Inappropriate provision was significant in this transition and her mother was pivotal in this decision making process as is evident in the following excerpt

...initially she (Mother) resisted the idea of sending me to special education she...really didn't want to send me away...I suppose my Mother's thing at the time was to give me the best education that she could get for me and really the only option then was to send me to...(the) girls school for the blind.

4.4.2 Separation

Maria perceived the transition to boarding school as a landmark in her life as she said

I had two lives I had the life before I went to...boarding and...the life after because that...was a pivotal moment in my life and completely changed my life from whatever it might have been had I stayed at home....whether that would have been good, bad or indifferent.

Maria acknowledged that sending her to boarding school was probably the right decision with regards to her education but the impact of being removed from the family setting for long periods of time was significant. Shah and Priestley (2011) acknowledged this as a significant factor for those requiring specialised education within residential settings. This illustrates how provision can impact on experience and outcome and the following excerpt illustrates how this impacted on Maria

I lost touch with what was happening in the family, I was like an outsider looking in you know I think the older I got, going into my teens, that was something I really perceived.

4.4.3 Access to the Curriculum

While Maria believed that her hearing loss was generally not considered within the special school she attended she did believe that it may at times have impacted on decisions taken regarding what class she was placed in. The impact of these placements had a negative effect on her self-image as is evident in the following example

I wonder now how much my hearing disability impacted on some of the choices that were made for me...in regards to what class I was put into...for instance one year I might be with a group of children that might be bright and another year I might be put into a class with a group of children that were considered to be not so bright and I think that left me with a lot of questions around my own ability.

When Maria began secondary school she was placed in what was perceived to be the lower of the two first year groups. The immediate impact which this had on her was twofold in that it made her question her ability but also gave her an incentive to prove that she was capable of more. The following excerpt demonstrates this and indicates how policy and practice can impact on experience and outcome

...two things happened to me...I got a very negative self-image of myself...in the sense of I took this on board that maybe I was slow and on the other hand I became very determined to work my way out of it.

Marie succeeded in getting out of the perceived lower group which indicates her determination and how from an early age she found herself having to prove her ability. The following example demonstrates the contradictory feelings she experienced when she heard that she was being moved into the perceived higher year group

I do remember in assembly...how embarrassing...the school principal saying that I was being moved up into the 1As because I had done so well in my exams...there were two things to that I was absolutely mortified...because nobody likes themselves being held up...as an example nearly but I also felt very sorry for the people in 1Bs...Not the fact that I had got on but the fact that there was such a distinction made between the 1As and 1Bs.

Maria performed well in her Inter Certificate (Junior Certificate) passing all subjects. She believed that English, Irish and Maths were essential for transition choices/opportunities but when she returned after sitting her Inter Cert she was told that because of time tabling issues she would have to make a choice between

Maths and History, the latter being her strongest subject and the former being her weakest one. The following quote demonstrates how she experienced receiving this information and demonstrates how policy and practice can impact on transition choices

I remember being very upset over it because I always felt that Maths was a subject that you had to have for everything for future life choices.

School expectations may have been significant in this choice and the following excerpt illustrates the low expectations that existed within this setting when Maria's mother was informed

...with the kind of jobs we'd be getting we wouldn't need things like Irish and Maths and she (mother) took that on board...thinking that these were the experts.

Due to Maria's hearing loss she experienced significant difficulties when learning languages and this problem was particularly apparent with regards accessing the French curriculum at Leaving Certificate level as there was both an aural and oral examination required. Maria considered doing French at ordinary level as she believed that the effects of her hearing loss would have a greater impact for her at honours level. She discussed this with her French teacher but as her hearing loss was never really taken into consideration and her written French was satisfactory the French teacher did not agree with her decision and she believed that she was left with no alternative but to take honours French. The following excerpt indicates how she experienced this situation and demonstrates how ineffective policy and practice impacts on experience and outcome

...she (French teacher) wouldn't hear of it...her idea was that I was good enough to do honours so do honours. And I suppose I wasn't...strong enough to trust my own judgement...Now I did pass it I got a D in it and I was delighted because I know that when I came out of the aural I was extremely upset because I hadn't heard a word.

This situation greatly distressed Maria and as the following example demonstrates impacted on her on a psycho-emotional level. This is an aspect of disability that Reeve (2002, 2006) considers and is further discussed in chapter six

I was very angry that I didn't hear properly in the sense that...I would have issues around not hearing and I had issues even back then and the kind of embarrassment of not hearing...so I was quite angry in the sense that it was nearly like I should have been able to hear which I kind of want to laugh at when I look back at it.

4.4.4 Transitions

Maria's return to the family setting and her own locality after she completed her secondary education was not an easy experience for her. The following two excerpts demonstrate how Maria experienced this transition and indicates that adequate supports were not available to her at that time

...right through my teens I dreamt about getting out of the place (boarding school)...in my head everything was going to be alright once I got out of the place. That didn't happen...I had very big issues adjusting, readjusting to living with my family

And

...it was a very difficult transition...in the sense that I think that by the time I left school I was, very institutionalized. I think that I had very little confidence in myself and I suppose I didn't know what it was to live at home you know I'd go home to my family on holidays but I really didn't know what it was to live at home and that was quite difficult.

Maria asserted that career guidance was not available during her time in school and that as she left school in 1987 choices were limited for people with a vision impairment indicating how inadequate provision impacts on transition choices/opportunities. Maria did a secretarial course in her locality and while she completed the course and did all the relevant exams overall it was not a positive

experience for her primarily due to her inability at the time to interact with people that she perceived as 'normal' and who had very different life experiences to her. The topic of difference and normality is examined in greater detail in chapter six. The following quote illustrates how Maria experienced this situation and demonstrates how issues around identity impacted on experience and outcome

I suppose part of it was for me I saw these as very normal people with very normal lives whereas I thought of myself as in some way flawed because of my visual impairment and that I hadn't had a normal life at all I mean I felt my life was so alien to their lives.

Maria did not find employment after completing the secretarial course and as she believed that she had not coped very well during the course she was also very anxious that she would not manage in a work situation which illustrates how psycho-emotional disablism can impact negatively on experience and outcome which concurs with research undertaken by Reeve (2002, 2006). Maria was put in contact with a Community Resource Worker who worked with one of the Disability Service Providers with a view to seeing what type of employment would be suitable for her. He encouraged her to do a telephony course at a National Learning Network. Telephony was perceived to be one of the most appropriate sources of employment for people that were blind/vision impaired at the time indicating how expectations and attitudes can impact on transition choices/opportunities. The following excerpt illustrates how Maria's self-identity impacted on this experience and outcome

I couldn't see outside the institutional setting I couldn't see outside...the fact that I needed to be minded because I was visually impaired because I was different because I was disabled. I suppose it was nearly thinking I was special in a negative way I suppose it was thinking I couldn't be like other people and I really bought into that I really did buy into that for a long time I really thought I couldn't be like other people you know I was visually impaired.

While telephony may have been considered to be an appropriate occupation for people that were blind/vision impaired the fact that Maria was also hearing

impaired did not appear to have been considered significant which indicates a lack of awareness and demonstrates how the individuals' needs are not always appropriately considered by Disability Service Providers.

4.4.5 Employment

Following completion of the telephony course Maria registered with a Disability Service Provider who employed her for temporary work situations within various Government Departments. One of these positions was for four months and the following excerpt describes how she experienced this placement

I see that as my first real job. I was with other blind telephonists so there was my safety net again...it was also very sheltered because we were all blind telephonists in a room with very little connection to the other staff except on the phone. We used to have lunch in our...office...So we were very isolated that way...

While doing this temporary work Maria did interviews for both the Civil Service Commission and a Government Department with the hope of getting a permanent position. She was offered and accepted a permanent full-time job with a Government Department which required her to move to Cork. The following quote indicates the loneliness she experienced following this move and demonstrates the lack of supports available to her

...my whole experience of starting in Cork first was...isolating in the sense that of not knowing anybody, not being in a place that it was easy to make friends and being very much on my own there...it was a number of years I suppose before I really found my feet.

The type of employment Maria does is still primarily undertaken by people that are blind/vision impaired and as Shah and Priestley (2011: 36) noted these disability-related sources of employment can be seen as “continuing segregated life trajectories begun in childhoods spent in residential institutions”. Telephonists are frequently located in a separate space to the rest of the workforce meaning that there is rarely any “...social aspect to the job” for Maria which is recognised by

many as a significant dimension of employment (Borsay, 2006; Carr, 2004; McGinty & Fish, 1992; Priestley, 2004). The following example demonstrates how provision impacts on experience and outcome

...in the job I'm in and in any other job I have been in it has been all with vision impaired people. It's nearly like we're segregated into these little offices by ourselves and not actively encouraged...to mix with the mainstream of the workforce...it's just the two of us in the office at any one time and if somebody comes into us great and if they don't well that's just too bad. We're not mixing with the mainstream of the workforce and that has been in any office that I have been in over the years the vision impaired are by themselves.

Maria continues to work in this setting even though she has gained further qualifications and finds telephony 'tedious'. She would like her job to be more 'fulfilling' and would like if there was more 'purpose' to her job. Barnes, (2003) acknowledged that such jobs are often low status occupations with comparatively few prospects for career development. The following excerpt demonstrates the conflict she experiences around future transition choices/opportunities and illustrates how psycho-emotional disablism can impact on experience and outcome

I am a telephonist with all of these qualifications still bored in my job and wondering what are my choices here where is all this going to lead me...and again wondering do I have...what it takes to actually maybe abandon...the job and go out into what I would call 'the mainstream world' because the job I'm in is actually quite institutionalized...It is a safety net very much so I don't have to deal, with the real world as long as I'm there.

4.4.6 Higher Education

Maria believed that given the opportunity she could have gone further in her education so in the mid, 1990s she went back and did an Adult Education Course. The following quote indicates her reasons for returning to education through this

route and demonstrates the significance of having a range of post-compulsory education provisions available

I think with doing it through Adult Ed I was kind of testing the water a little...to see would it work...would I be able for it and I suppose being very aware going into it that I had eyesight difficulties and hearing difficulties and wondering would I be able to cope on that level.

This entry route into higher education was effective for Maria and this is apparent in the following excerpt

...it was a positive experience...from an academic point of view I knew I could do it and from a reading point of view and being able to hear the lecturers and even being able to go up to the lecturers and say...I am visually impaired and hard of hearing...it would be beneficial to me if you could give me your handouts...that was my first experience of ever having to do anything like that.

Following this positive experience of education Maria chose to continue with her education. While Maria would have relished the opportunity of going to college on a full-time basis she believed that she could not afford to give up her job to pursue this therefore, in order to continue in higher education she did an Arts Degree by night which her employers funded. Because Maria did her Degree by night subject choices and courses were limited as is evident in the following excerpt and indicates how policy impacts on transition choices/opportunities

...there wasn't a huge amount of choice open to me because I was a night-time student. I would love to have done a Social Science Degree...something like Social Policy and Sociology. I was also interested in Psychology...but while Sociology was an option at Arts Degree level it wasn't an option at Social Science level and Psychology wasn't an option...for my Degree I ended up doing Sociology and History.

Maria excelled in academia obtaining a first class honours Degree and a first class Masters in Sociology. Maria's overall college experience was very positive and she still hankers after returning to academia. Shah and Priestley (2011) assert that participating in mainstream higher education is a liberating experience for disabled students. The following excerpt illustrates how this experience of education had a positive impact on her self-identity

...one of the things I had thought about doing was the PhD in Sociology and...I'd still love to do it...I miss the whole student thing...I always felt when I was in (university) that it was like I was part of something bigger I was part of a real mainstream setting. I really felt...it was the one time in my life I suppose that I felt...that I was actually leading this kind of 'normal' life like any other student out there.

4.4.7 Access

Print material is an inherent component of the education system and one's ability to access it is essential in order to access the curricula. During Maria's time in university she perceived that she was fortunate that she could read print and therefore access the relevant reading material. This indicates that her limited sight did not impact significantly on her ability to access written material and indicates that Maria recognized the importance of being able to access print material. This is apparent in the following quote

I'm in the lucky position where I can read print with assistance from magnification and...I suppose I was very lucky in that sense that I could read the books myself and by and large get the books myself.

Maria did encounter difficulties at times when accessing elements of the curriculum. These difficulties arose for a variety of reasons. When Maria commenced her Degree she elected to record her lectures for note-taking purposes and while the lecturers were agreeable to this, many of her classmates were less supportive as is evident in the following excerpt and illustrates how attitudinal barriers impact on experience and outcome

Maria: ...there was quite a bit of agro among them (classmates) about this you know it was like why is she allowed to tape and we can't tape and there was some bad feeling around that.

Patricia: And how did that impact on you?

Maria: On one level I just thought this is what I'm doing get on with it but on another level I think I was quite embarrassed by the whole thing...you know that feeling when you stand out like a sore thumb...That was really the way I felt...one of the lectures did deal with it by saying that they only allowed people with specific disabilities to actually record lectures and I suppose that made me stand out as a person with disabilities and I wasn't overly enamoured with that idea at the time.

Later Maria decided that listening back to her recorded lectures and taking notes from these recordings was too time consuming as she was in college three nights a week and also working full-time. Consequently, she made the decision to take her own handwritten notes and combine these with the handouts lecturers gave her. It was up to individual lecturers whether Maria received handouts and when these were made available to her. Being able to access handouts prior to lectures was effective for Maria and the following example demonstrates how provision and practice can impact on experience and outcome

One particular lecturer...was brilliant because she would give the handouts on the night whereas other times I might be waiting for them but she would always give them to me on the night because she used overheads quite a bit so that was very beneficial to me.

Maria's hearing loss also impacted on her ability to access the curriculum effectively. This was particularly apparent when she was doing her Masters as unlike with her Degree where just one person would generally be speaking at a time in a lecture situation, the format for her Masters was seminar based which involved group work. While she greatly enjoyed the learning aspect of the Masters and in particular the work which she did for her thesis which considered an aspect of disability and equality the impact of the seminar situations is evident in the

following excerpt and demonstrates how teaching methodologies can impact on experience

Maria: I was very aware of not being able to hear what was being said around me and...that actually caused me huge difficulties initially.

Patricia: So how did you cope with it?

Maria: I basically kept my mouth shut...I didn't really interact in the class...occasionally I would say something just to be seen to be saying something but I never felt comfortable with it. I never felt I actually had anything...constructive to contribute...and there was that continuous struggle with hearing and you know are they still on the same subject that they were talking about two minutes ago.

4.4.8 Disability Service Providers

During her time in university Maria began to avail of some of the services which, the Student Disability Service had to offer. The technology that was made available to her was particularly beneficial and as the following quote illustrates access to appropriate technology increased her independence and reduced dependence. This demonstrates the important role that technology plays in the lives of disabled students (UNESCO, 2011) indicating how effective provision impacts on experience and outcome

...in terms of technology it was brilliant because...I was able to get a laptop computer with ZoomText software on it and that was actually a real plus for me because up until then I had been working off a computer that...had no software on it and a lot of the time rather than use that computer I was just literally getting other people to just type up my essays which was a very frustrating endeavor because I knew the lingo I needed to use in Sociology whereas the people typing it up hadn't a clue and I found that extremely frustrating having to depend on somebody else...so the laptop was a real bonus.

As Maria was a part-time student who was studying by night the same range of services were not always available to her, and those that were available were

often only available to her during office hours. This is a situation that Maria has experienced with a number of disability providers not just those that are based within universities and colleges. The impact of this is evident in the following two examples and demonstrates how Disability Service Providers are not generally designed to meet the needs of the individual concerned and therefore these service providers dictate the terms under which people can avail of their services. This topic is further explored in chapter six

...they (Student Disability Support) helped to the best of their ability but their services were all day time, their services were office hours which meant that because I was working full-time...I was having, to take time off work to avail of services

And

I think that's right across the board I mean even if you take...cane training and stuff like that, all those services are provided by day. Again it meant me taking time out of my job to facilitate their hours you know it wasn't what suited me it was what suited the service provider.

4.4.9 Psycho-emotional Disablism

From an early age Maria had issues around the fact that she was vision impaired and hard of hearing. Maria perceived that the attitudes toward her disabilities from both her family and the school environment impacted on her experience as is evident in the following excerpt

...the attitude to disability in my family...would have been pretty much that it was awful to have a disability and then going to segregated education I think I nearly began to think that it was awful to have a disability.

Reeve (2002, 2006) discussed the significance of psycho-emotional disablism and the impact of this is apparent in the context of disclosure for Maria. This is evident

in the following examples and demonstrates how psycho-emotional disablism can impact on experience and outcome

I'm always worrying about what others will think. How others will view me as a result of my disclosure.

And

...for me there is always a fear of rejection a fear that people don't want to know me if they know I have this disability.

4.4.10 Identity

Maria recalled having eye surgery after which she no longer needed to wear glasses and saw this as one of those "...life changing events". She saw herself differently and also perceived that others saw her differently as she considered the glasses were a signifier of her lack of sight. Maria's glasses could be perceived as 'stigma symbols' which, Goffman (1990: 59) asserts are "signs which are especially effective in drawing attention to a debasing identity discrepancy". This is evident in the following excerpt

...getting rid of my glasses helped me see myself differently...people weren't seeing me with 'milk bottle glasses' and...weren't realising that I was seriously visually impaired, I think that gave me a bit of confidence...I remember that year after getting rid of my glasses I went off and I got my hair done differently...bought new clothes...I can remember walking in the streets and feeling I looked well whereas always when I had the glasses I felt all you could see was the glasses and I always felt I suppose that the glasses made me look blind, a very severe way of putting it but it was the way I felt.

4.4.11 Proving Ability and Expectations

Maria perceived that because of her disabilities her family and teachers within the school had lower expectations for her. Consequently after Maria left school and

began to get a little more confidence in her own ability she found that she set very high standards for herself particularly within the realm of academia. This extreme need to prove her ability in order to demonstrate her capabilities is very apparent in the following excerpt and illustrates how perceived expectations can impact on experience and outcome

...there was this element of well I'm going to prove to them that I can do it...there was also an element of proving to myself...I wasn't going to settle for second best...I wasn't going to settle for being average...generally my grades would have been in the sixties the late sixties the high sixties...So actually the odd time when I went down from those grades that I might have hit fifty nine or something like that I was actually disgusted even though logically I knew it was still a good mark...I wanted to do better than average. I think that's a kind of an overcompensation thing in a way having to prove yourself...that you just want to show the world that ok I have these disabilities but I can do x y and z.

Maria believed that her family's low expectations meant that her further education was not viewed in the same way as her siblings studies were. Furthermore, she felt that they never saw her further education as a transition point as is evident in the following quotes and indicates how others expectations can impact on transition choices/opportunities

I do think my study was seen as a pastime, not something that I was going to make any great use of

And

...my sister is being encouraged to go and get work experience in the particular area she studied...and get her full affiliation where with me it was 'hold on to that good job that you have' it doesn't seem to matter that...I'd love to get out of the job that I'm in or whatever its just hold onto that good job.

4.4.12 Societal Attitudes

Maria believes that while societal attitudes have changed somewhat, negative attitudes towards disabled people within society as a whole still exist and while equality exists in theory it is not always the reality for people who are disabled. The following quote illustrates how Maria perceives others view those who have a disability and indicates how societal attitudes can have disabling consequences for disabled people

...from experience and I suppose from my reading...there is an awful lot of...inbuilt attitudes in society prejudices and attitudes that are still there even though the politically correct version of events might be out there I think there is still a lot of attitudes of the disabled person as the 'less than person' of the disabled person as somebody that you 'feel sorry for'.

4.4.13 Summary

This case study examined Maria's educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities and illustrates how societal norms and inadequate provision were influential in relation to her transition choices/opportunities. This indicates how people born in different historical times are exposed to different policies and practices and how these are significant factors. This case study also indicates how psycho-emotional disablism can be significant in many aspects of a disabled persons' life including on their transition choices/opportunities. These are issues that will be further explored in chapter six.

4.5 Mary

When I met Mary she was in full time employment within the disability sector and she had a particular interest in education. Mary was born in the 1960s and was diagnosed with insulin dependent diabetes in the early 1970s. Complications from her health condition resulted in her losing her sight in her twenties. This case study focuses particularly on the challenges Mary experienced following her sight loss.

4.5.1 Education

Throughout her secondary education Mary frequently missed out on school as a result of her health condition and consequently repeated fifth year. After her Leaving Certificate Mary went to university and had very little health issues during this time. The following excerpt illustrates how Mary approached her education prior to losing her sight which is not an approach that she could utilise after she lost her sight

I never had any problems you go to lectures you cram in your information before exams...you do all the things other students do quite easy to access information and I was one that would always, always go to my lectures...but I wouldn't study during the year...I was always a crammer at the last minute. Read all the notes very, very quickly and that was the way I always got through my exams.

4.5.2 Access to Written Information

Even though Mary's health condition began during her primary education she did not perceive this to be disabling as it did not impact on her ability to access written information, which is an integral part of daily life in modern society. This is evident in the following quote and indicates that one of the most disabling aspects of her sight loss has been the limitations this has placed on her ability to access written material.

I was a student without a disability all through school except that I used to get sick a lot which wasn't really disabling because I could access all the information.

Following her sight loss Mary returned to Higher Education and undertook a variety of courses. During this time Mary experienced various barriers including difficulties in accessing written material. The following excerpt demonstrates how inappropriate policy and practice can result in reinforced dependence

...my first assignment was corrected and some of them were given back electronically and mine was (handwritten) I had to get my parents to read it to me I was raging.

Mary perceived that students who are blind and vision impaired are at a disadvantage compared to their able-bodied peers when accessing written information. The following two excerpts indicate the importance of having ready appropriate access to written material and, demonstrates how ineffective access to written information impacts on experience and outcome

...when you have to look up journals and things like that it takes so long mainstream people will scan read they will go into the library and they can scan through the books very quickly. So, as you progress from first year right up to fourth year and onto Post Grad it gets more difficult because you are expected to read more on your own and to do a lot more.

And

I know I wouldn't be doing as well as I could if I had all the information in electronic format.

4.5.3 Access to Technology

Another area where Mary experienced challenges was in access to mainstream technology when using necessary assistive technology. Research undertaken by

(Fichten, Asuncion, Barile, Ferraro, & Wolforth, 2009; Foley & Ferri, 2012; Söderström & Ytterhus, 2010) among others recognise the challenges that arise for those using assistive technologies and this is discussed in greater detail in chapter six. The following quote illustrates how this impacted on Mary's educational experience and demonstrates the importance of appropriate support at the individual level, academic staff level and support level

...with the Graduate Diploma a lot of their computer stuff like the database they used to access...doesn't work with JAWS (assistive technology) very well...so they did kind of compromise with me...those sort of things slowed me down.

Technology in general and assistive technology in particular has greatly enhanced access to written material for those that are blind and vision impaired but the following excerpt illustrates how poor design of websites can pose particular difficulties for many who use assistive technology. It indicates the necessity for awareness when designing mainstream technologies that are utilised by a diverse range of people in a variety of situations. This is a topic that is discussed further in chapter six

...our webpage now has a hundred and eighty two links and I was looking up something on a course...JAWS reads it differently I had to keep tabbing down and I went down to the bottom and then it went upwards...in the end I went down to the careers office and got the prospectus and got them to read it out because it was taking too long and it's all got to do with the bad design.

4.5.4 Access to Supports

Mary accessed supports on various levels and the following two excerpts illustrate that while supports are often vital they also can have unanticipated implications for the individual receiving the supports that are not always recognised by others, including how they can impact on the individual's identity. The second of the two quotes exemplifies how the provision of certain supports can be delivered inappropriately. The consequence of this is that the supports provided may not

meet the needs of the individual effectively. This is an issue that is examined further in chapter six

...there were some problems where they would have graphics and stuff because the course had a bit of accountancy stuff it...some of my lecturers...did help me you see I had the advantage they knew me...I used be mortified I hated feeling stupid in front of them.

And

...they had a reader in with me...she insisted on reading out the paper...she was reading really slowly and I wanted her...I would say now we will just quickly go through and they would start reading question one and I would say no, no that's fine just go on and she said no I will just read the thing out completely to you now...I didn't want to do that question but no this is the way we'll do it I'll read every question out to you and then you can decide.

4.5.5 Access to Special Needs Assistants/Personal Assistants

Mary herself does not use a Personal Assistant and as the following quote illustrate she is of the opinion that in general people who are blind and vision impaired do not require a fulltime Personal Assistant (PA) if the appropriate supports and resources are available

...if you are in college you will need somebody to take notes but I don't think you need somebody to be bringing you around you can be trained like if you get correct mobility training and orientation.

It is common practice for blind/vision impaired people to receive supports from SNAs and PAs within educational settings whose primary function is often perceived as being there to provide a care role rather than a learning support role (Department of Education and Science, 2007; Douglas, McCall, McLinden, & Pavey, 2009; Douglas et al., 2011). The following quote demonstrates the importance of clearly identifying the role and supports which are required by an

individual and the need to put those supports in place in a way that enhances rather than diminishes independence for the individuals requiring supports. This issue is examined in detail in chapter six.

...different colleges give different supports and call it by different names so some colleges might call it a PA no matter what it is and then people have this idea that the PA is doing everything...it is only certain people need a full-time PA you know so that's just a personal thing...if a student only needs a note-taker it should be called a note-taker it shouldn't be called a PA.

4.5.6 Employment

Mary only worked as a lecturer for a short period of time prior to her health and eye condition deteriorating. Her job had been kept open for her for a period of time and even though she was interested in pursuing a career as a lecturer lack of appropriate provisions and limited accesses to technology impacted on experience and outcome

I knew then that there was no way how could you prepare notes and at that stage everything was handwritten.

In the mid, 1990s Mary found work within the disability sector initially this was on a part-time basis and now works there fulltime. It is evident from the following excerpt that the importance of employment cannot be underestimated as there are significant aspects to employment that has very little do with the salary attached to work. Employment is associated with status, independence and social interaction which are important factors in the lives of all adults.

...when I went back it was mornings I worked so that I did actually have a structure to my day...it made you feel that you were worth something the social contact I would say was the most important and the structure to the day.

Mary's health condition has required frequent hospitalizations but as the following excerpt demonstrates the support of colleagues and her own resilience has been significant in ensuring that she continues to be able to work

...in fairness they were very good to me in work but I'd bring my laptop up to the hospital and you are so bored anyway you know once you get over the first two or three days they keep you for two weeks and they won't let you home...I used to start doing the policy stuff.

Mary's work mainly involves dealing with Guidance Counsellors, parents and also policy work but occasionally she now gets the opportunity to lectures, which she finds has re-motivated her. The following example illustrates that she finds this challenging but rewarding and indicates that lack of practice is significant in relation to these challenges

...while I find it stressful going in and giving the lecture (it) was great to do it even though I could see all the faults I keep saying I should do it this way and that way but it's hard when you haven't done it for years.

Mary recognised there were drawbacks to working within the disability sector as is apparent in the following excerpt and this is an aspect of employment that is further discussed in chapter six

I have noticed more and more in my area more people with disabilities are working in that area which is bad you know because it looks like...you're being pigeon holed.

While Mary acknowledged that in general employment prospects for people that are blind and vision impaired have improved over time and asserted that legislation has made an important difference in this regard. However, the following quote indicates she perceives that disabling attitudes still persist and that these can impact on transition choices/opportunities

...they (general public) think there are only certain jobs suitable for a person with a disability.

4.5.7 Disability Service Providers

Once Mary began to lose her sight she was put in contact with the various organizations that provide services for blind/vision impaired people. Her experiences of these service providers were mixed. Lack of information from some of the service providers was a significant factor for Mary. This was most apparent in the early stages of her sight loss when she was unaware of what benefits were available to her. The following excerpt indicates that lack of appropriate information resulted in her missing out on nearly a year of one benefit that she was eligible to claim. This demonstrates how lack of information can impact on experience and outcome and how service providers do not always have the required appropriate information to meet the needs of individuals availing of their services

I didn't realize I could claim Social Welfare and the Blind Pension until I went down to (Disability Provider 2) so like nine months later...I missed out you could claim two allowances for eighteen months and I missed out on ten months because nobody told me...they didn't know so lack of information.

Another area where lack of information impacted significantly on Mary's experience in the early stages of her sight loss, related to her future employment prospects. When Mary lost her sight she already had a Degree and had been employed. The following quote indicates employees within disability provider 1 where she sought advice, were unable to meet her needs in an appropriate manner

...all the Social Workers kept telling me the same thing we don't know with your qualifications we don't have any experience of what you could do.

Mary found the lack of information she experienced when dealing with Disability Provider 1 particularly difficult and frustrating. When she contacted Disability Provider 2 her experience was significantly different in that they were able to provide her with much of the information she required in order to claim the benefits she was entitled to. Mary also perceived a difference in how these two disability

providers operated and as the following two excerpts indicate her experience of engagement with these two disability providers was markedly different. This topic is also discussed in chapter six

I found them (Disability Provider 1) patronizing and I found that they actually weren't promoting independence.

And

I did find it good in that they (Disability Provider 2) treated you like a normal human being they didn't kind of categorize you.

Even though Mary herself works in the disability sector she recognised that some of these organizations were reluctant to develop in a proactive way. This is exacerbated by the 'charity model' that is still prevalent within these organizations and as the following quote exemplifies this attitude can have negative repercussions for those availing of these services

...(they) want to keep themselves in a job...they don't want you to become too independent because they feel that they are going to lose their job.

4.5.8 Independence

Initially when Mary was losing her sight she was reluctant to use a white cane as this would signify to others that she was vision impaired. The white cane or guide dog can be identified as a 'stigma symbol' (Goffman, (1990). Consequently, in the early stages of her deteriorating sight, she used other strategies when out in public as is evident in the following quote. It also illustrates the lengths people go to avoid using a white cane which would reveal that they have a vision impairment

I remember getting the bus as far as O'Connell St and following a woman in a striped t-shirt all the way down so that I would stay on the path.

When Mary got her first guide dog her mobility improved significantly and this is something that she has to continue to work on to maintain her independence. The following excerpt indicates that it is relatively easy to lose independence and demonstrates how Mary tries to maximise her independence

I could feel my mobility getting less and less because I was getting taxis, so I stopped, when I can get a bus I am making myself because I was quite mobile with my first guide dog in Dublin.

People's lack of awareness and understanding can also reduce a person's independence and mobility. This can impact on experience and outcome, which is illustrated in the following excerpt

...they would all want me to get a lift...they don't realize that I am able to get up and down stairs and that the dog is...once there's a banister and once I get to the top of the step I'm fine. So there's all the kind of physical access...even going back to work that was one of the things...they were afraid that I might fall down the stairs. That was a big thing what if I fell down the stairs.

Lack of awareness by those undertaking road works and significant construction work can cause major difficulties for blind/vision impaired people. Furthermore, lack of consistency around tactile paving which is of significant benefit to blind/vision impaired people can greatly impede one's mobility and independence. The first of the following two quotes identify some of the difficulties Mary experiences when significant construction work is undertaken in the locality where she lives. This demonstrates that while a vision impaired person may be able to negotiate these challenges it does not mean that a blind person can and therefore there is a need to be cognizant of the individual needs of people. The second quote illustrates that while tactile paving is beneficial there is a need for greater awareness around where and how much tactile paving is needed

...the mobility was really, really difficult because they kept changing everything and blocking roads and I used to have a nice little route that I used to go with my guide dog and they knocked down an old school

and a few things and now it's worse than Dame Street...I was getting retraining...a couple of months ago...and they said another guy who is blind went around with the town council but he's visually impaired he says he's blind

And

I cannot understand why the tactile paving is not directly beside the pole or even have it extended a bit. The best tactile paving is in Cork where it goes right across the road I find that great.

Mary acknowledged that increased disability awareness among employees and the availability of supports that are provided by the various public transport operators is of great benefit and enables greater independence. This is evident in the next excerpt, and indicates that supports provided in an effective manner can enhance independence

I must say travelling in taxis or help on the LUAS now I haven't got a bus in a while but all that sort of help is good and I find (named train station) very good just go to customer information I find them excellent.

Maintaining independence is significant for Mary and as the following two excerpts illustrate Mary employs a variety of strategies to try and minimise the barriers which can impact on her independence. These quotes also demonstrate Mary's determination and resilience which appear to be significant factors in the lives of disabled people

...if it was somewhere I'd never ever been to before I would actually ask somebody or else somebody that knows it really well that I would trust like there would be one...she used to work with us...and is brilliant at description absolutely brilliant and knows me well enough now to know exactly how to describe things

And

When I did...the two year course...a friend...came up with me...maybe three weeks before...the course and I booked into the student accommodation...we...got the bus out to where the bus stop was in the college found where the accommodation is and then...went between the student accommodation and the Arts building and the canteen was there so you passed the canteen so we did it five times and that was enough.

Mary recognised the need for forward planning now that she is blind. The following quote illustrates that the necessity to forward plan can have negative repercussions as it means that doing something on impulse is no longer an option for Mary. This can impact on experience

I have to plan everything you know you can't just decide to go off and do something anymore everything has to be planned and that drives me mad...not to have that option can be a bit frustrating.

In general Mary is very independent but she acknowledged that fatigue is a factor that can impact significantly on all aspects of life. The following quote illustrates that fatigue impacts on Mary's experience. Furthermore, it suggests that lack of awareness around fatigue also has a bearing on her experience

I find that when I have a busy day or if I have been walking around a lot or if I have had to go to meetings where there is a lot of talking I just find that I am exhausted in the evening and the fact that I have a second disability...the fatigue is very difficult and people don't understand fatigue.

One area where Mary found her independence being seriously restricted when she began to lose her sight was in relation to the monitoring of her own diabetes. The following two excerpts indicate how this impacted on Mary and while people were probably trying to be helpful it demonstrates how paternalistic attitudes can have negative consequences for the individual including reinforcing dependence

The other horrific thing was I was diabetic and the big thing was...I am going to have somebody else doing my blood tests...it was back to being a child again...I wouldn't be telling people...half the people didn't know I was diabetic only my friends I never made an issue out of it I was quite independent...so those little tiny things really affected me

And

...the nurses didn't want me to do that (use talking glucometers)...they felt...that I might not put enough blood on the test strip and all this sort of thing. They were against me doing that so there was a lot mind her and be protective which I found quite difficult.

4.5.9 Societal Issues and Attitudes

Mary believes that there is now greater disability awareness amongst people generally in society. However, she feels that in certain areas there can be negative attitudes towards disabled people and that this is evident at various levels of society. As someone who lost their sight in adulthood Mary is in a position to recognise how people have changed towards her since she lost her sight. This she finds difficult and the following excerpt demonstrates how this change of attitude impacted on Mary and has meant that on occasion she feels a burden amongst people she considered close friends prior to her sight loss. This demonstrates how societal attitudes can impose disabling barriers and cause psycho-emotional disablism

I suppose my big thing is I want people to treat me normally...you can see that they do treat you differently...what I did find and found quite upsetting was that some of my friends who I considered really my best friends and at age twenty five, twenty six, twenty seven the next thing rather than ringing you up wanting you to go because they wanted somebody to go with they started only bringing you.

Through her work Mary perceived that disabled people are treated differently at many levels of society. She stated that the terminology used within policy

documents can indicate how disabled people are perceived differently to their able-bodied peers. An exploration of terminology and disability is included within chapter one of this study. The following quote demonstrates how difference can be experienced at the systemic level which will have a trickledown effect at all levels of society

Why do they change all the terminology to learner with disability on a policy documentation why are students with disabilities called learners everybody else is called a student.

Mary acknowledged that one cannot generalize but she believed that "...they do treat students with disabilities differently". The following two excerpts indicate that inclusion only occurs within particular parameters. She also states that particular courses are still not always easily accessible to disabled students. This type of 'pigeon holing' can stem from the fact that disabled people are frequently perceived as a homogeneous group rather than the individuals they are with a diversity of needs just like all human beings

...if you are old have a disability or no money you integrate with each other. I find that horrific I just find the whole idea they think that's integration that's a person without a disability, thinking and that to me is a very patronizing way of treating the diverse students that are coming into a college.

And

The perceptions that people...the academic staff in colleges they kind of say well if you have such and such a disability these are the only courses you can do. Now while I do agree you do need to go through the type of course and that but there is so much pigeon holing of people really. There is much more than people realize there is you talk about access to education but once they get in there immediately then and everything then goes back to somebody like me you solve all the problems. You know the integration still isn't there...certain people are great.

Mary perceives that there are misconceptions around people that have disabilities in relation to work and social welfare. The following quote illustrates that while Mary is in fulltime employment there can be a misconception that she is in receipt of social welfare benefits. This could suggest that her employment is not perceived by others as worthwhile indicating how societal attitudes towards disabled people can still perceive them as dependent and in need of care

...he asked me...was my social welfare cut I said but I'm working I'm not on social welfare and he said oh so they pay you...I said of course they pay me I'm working a full-time job.

This can have significant implications for disabled people whether they are in work or seeking employment and as the following quote illustrates this can be particularly significant at a time when unemployment rates are higher than they have been in Ireland for a number of years. This suggests that while attitudes in society have improved there is still significant room for improvement and demonstrates the need for continued disability awareness at all levels of society

...one of the things that worries me is with the recession and no jobs people will be thinking that a person with a disability shouldn't be getting the job when they can go on disability allowance...they will be taken care of and the person without the disability then would be able to do a better job which is not always true.

4.5.10 Proving Ability

It was obvious that Mary feels the need to demonstrate that she is the same as her able-bodied peers. This is a theme that is explored in more detail in chapter six. In the following quote she indicates that in order to achieve this she frequently pushes herself to the extreme when proving her ability. It is also evident in this quote that psycho-emotional disablism impacts on Mary's experience and outcome

I find I'm always trying to prove myself to others and I would have a bit of I suppose an inferiority complex that people are thinking that I'm not

able to do certain things I would always be pushing myself to prove myself you know and that's not good either.

4.5.11 Transition to Sight Loss

Mary has achieved a considerable amount since she lost her sight. It is evident from this final excerpt that the effect of losing her sight is something that continues to impact on her experience. This excerpt also indicates that Mary is a resilient person

...it is hard nothing replaces losing your vision you know what I mean and there are I still would have low times when I'd say if only I could see you miss your sight so much and all the you have to get on with life.

4.5.12 Summary

This case study illustrates how the transition to sight loss impacted on Mary's educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities. It is evident that the transition to sight loss has significant implications on all aspects of life including education and employment. Therefore, this has significant implications for policy and practice.

4.6 Conclusion

These four case studies included in this chapter explored a variety of educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities. These are illustrative of the experiences of those who participated in this research. The topics identified in this chapter are explored further in the next chapter where examples from other participants are utilized to examine themes and sub-themes in greater detail. Chapter six then connects these themes and sub-themes back to existing pertinent research.

CHAPTER FIVE

Findings

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter set out four case studies, in which a range of experiences pertinent to participants in this study were examined. This chapter focuses on the themes of access, transitions, supports and resources and identity. These themes are divided into a number of sub-themes in order to explore in detail how these issues impact on the educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities of those who participated in this research. Transcripts of participants' interviews were read through carefully several times to identify emerging themes and sub-themes. Thematic analysis was utilized for analysing the data collected as it offered a theoretically flexible way in which to examine qualitative data.

5.2 Access

5.2.1 Introduction

This section will consider a variety of access issues that were experienced by participants in this study. The majority of topics discussed pertain to their educational experiences, but are not exclusive to education, as a number of issues could also be significant to areas such as life choices/opportunities including employment. This section begins by focusing on the core theme of curriculum access and the sub-themes of this include access to option subjects, access to practical subjects, access to the Maths curriculum, access to transition year programmes and access to the Third Level curriculum. This section will then consider access to technology, access to print material and access to Braille and alternative formats. The barriers that were experienced by some participants in relation to the access topics that are discussed in this section demonstrate experiences of exclusion and indicate that some participants did not always experience equality of opportunity when it came to their education.

5.2.2 Curriculum Access

The majority of participants in this study did not state that they experienced significant challenges in accessing the curriculum at primary school level. There could have been a range of reasons for this, including that for most their primary

education was a considerable time in their past, and also the fact that print material is often larger at primary school level and therefore easier to access for those who are vision impaired. However, Lisa who is blind and began her primary education in a mainstream school in her own locality stated that she did encounter difficulties during this time. It appeared that these difficulties contributed to her transferring to a special school for the remainder of her primary education. Maria's case study (see chapter four) also identified decreasing print size as being a contributing factor to her moving from a mainstream school to a special school. The following two excerpts indicate that inadequate teacher training and inappropriate provision were significant to Lisa's educational experience and outcome

I remember a lot of the time...I was there sitting inside in class and not really doing anything you were just kind of being put aside because people didn't really know how to deal with you or what to do with you.

And

That was a bit frustrating obviously you felt out of place. You weren't being the same as the rest of them and say if you didn't understand a Maths question or anything like that it was this kind of thing well we don't really know what to do with you...and then when I was about six I remember visiting (special school) up in Dublin (Lisa).

At second level a wide range of subjects were taken by participants. This was particularly evident amongst those in the younger age groups, all of whom attended either mainstream schools in their own locality or attended a resourced mainstream secondary school. This school is situated on the grounds of a special school for vision impaired/blind children at primary level. Therefore this school offers greater access to a variety of supports and resources. While this may indicate that there is now greater participation by blind/vision impaired students in a range of subjects accessing particular aspects of the school curriculum was not always easy for participants and barriers were encountered at different levels.

When it came to choosing option subjects, particular subjects were often avoided and others chosen depending on whether subjects were perceived as accessible or not. Some participants considered their vision impairment to be a barrier to their ability to access particular subjects. The following quote indicates that components of the curriculum and the way in which subject information is imparted to students who are blind/vision impaired can limit participation. This illustrates that inadequate provision and inappropriate teaching methodologies can impact on access to the curriculum

I tried that (Home Economics) in first year but I got out of it...because the sewing was an absolute nightmare, and I was never good at Art or playing an instrument because you know watching somebody else's hand as they teach you to play notes and that I just couldn't do that (Anne).

Other practical type subjects such as Woodwork, Metalwork and Technical Drawing were assumed by some schools and also perceived by some participants to be subjects that were inaccessible to them as a result of their vision impairment. These subjects are not always option subjects as particular schools have a policy which states that these subjects are compulsory at least for a period of time. This was the situation that Lisa encountered when she commenced her secondary education in a mainstream school in her locality. Lisa believed that these subjects were not accessible to her because she was blind and the school were of a similar viewpoint. The decision was taken by the school that as her twin (who is also blind) was in the same year but in a different class to Lisa that during these class periods she would sit in on whatever subject her sister was doing at that time and vice versa. The school policy that these subjects were compulsory and the solution reached by the school in this situation caused difficulties for Lisa and resulted in her being separated at times from her class peers. This situation continued for all of first year at a time when Lisa was trying to settle into a new school environment after spending the previous six years in a special school a considerable distance away from her own locality. The following excerpt indicates how this reactive response by the school impacted on Lisa's experience

...it was pathetic...what they used to do was if I had a Technical Drawing class I would be sent into my sister's class and I would have to join whatever subject she was doing and vice versa if they had it she was sent into my class and that was so stupid (Lisa).

Occasionally access to the curriculum was restricted for less apparent reasons. This was the situation that arose for Maria Kelly who was informed by the mainstream school she attended that she could not take French for her Leaving Certificate. No satisfactory reason was given for this decision but one teacher said that Maria Kelly would not require French after she left school. The following two examples indicate how the policy within the school regarding what subjects Maria Kelly could take and attitudinal barriers greatly restricted Maria Kelly's ability to access the curriculum. The impact of this decision resulted in exclusion for Maria Kelly from particular aspects of the school curriculum

...the languages were really out because the teachers that taught the languages weren't willing

And

...apparently I couldn't do French which was news to me, Mum and a few others...because they couldn't trust what I was putting in that little computer of mine and one of the teachers said that I'd only need to know fruit and veg (Maria Kelly).

The impact of this decision for Maria Kelly was that she was left with no alternative but to take Art for the last two years of her secondary education in order to have sufficient subjects to sit her Leaving Certificate. While, Maria Kelly initially did Art through the medium of knitting, weaving and clay which were all mediums on a list that had been provided by the Department of Education and Skills, shortly before she was due to sit her Leaving Certificate she was informed by the Department of Education and Skills that these mediums were unacceptable for examination purposes. Consequently, she was obliged to do painting and drawing for her Leaving Certificate examination. The following excerpt indicates how the policy of the

Department of Education and Skills regarding what medium she was required to use for her Art exam restricted Maria Kelly's access to the curriculum

...they (employees in the Department of Education and Skills) said I couldn't do any of the mediums I had chosen from the list that they had provided...to everybody...I had chosen the ones I could definitely do which was embroidery, knitting and clay all reasonable...these guys said it was questioning the integrity of the exam so I had to do painting and drawing and it was ridiculous (Maria Kelly).

The following two excerpts demonstrate how inappropriate provision further restricted Maria Kelly's access to the curriculum. Inappropriate policies within both the Department of Education and Skills and the school she attended impacted significantly on Maria Kelly's experience and outcome

I had to do painting and drawing and it was ridiculous I have to say when I sat in the exam centre the first half of it I had to do with everyone and I had to paint a jungle scene. I thought this makes no sense whatsoever and I hadn't held paint since I was about five!

And

...then the second half...for my still life drawing and I thought this is probably going to be a teapot or a bowl of fruit something that I can feel and that would be reasonable (ish!) It was a little fourth year...and my principal frog marched her in and said now this is your model and I went wow right and I said ok what are you wearing and she started handing me her clothes and I said no, no, no I can guess the rest skirt, jumper shoes yeah...and my principal then said to me would you like to feel her and I said no and I thought groping a fourth year...would really send out the wrong message! (Maria Kelly).

A small number of participants had been given exemptions from particular language subjects including Irish by the Department of Education and Skills. This may indicate that some blind/vision impaired students experience barriers when

accessing particular subjects and offering exemptions is a policy solution to this difficulty. Exemptions from particular subjects can also provide schools with the additional class periods that some blind/vision impaired students may require in order to, access additional learning support in particular subjects. The second of the following quotes suggest that this was a pertinent factor in the school Michael attended. Issues pertinent to exemptions from particular subjects are discussed in more detail in chapter six

I didn't do Irish I'm exempt from Irish since primary school I have never done it in my life (Bob)

And

Michael:...up until Junior Cert it was the normal Maths, English I didn't do Irish at all or French there was Geography, History, Science, Business and Home Economics.

Patricia: OK and was there a reason you didn't do languages other than English?

Michael: Well I got extra help during I was finding those subjects difficult to grasp so I applied to get extra help in the other subjects like in Maths and Geography and English during those times so we got that system in place.

Barriers experienced when trying to access the curriculum can at times determine whether a subject is taken at ordinary or honours level. While a number of participants took Music for their Leaving Certificate (mainly those who attended the resourced mainstream secondary school) apparently without any real difficulties, for Lisa who went to a mainstream school in her locality accessing particular components of the Music curriculum proved challenging. This was primarily because she lacked the necessary means or skills to read and write music as she had never been taught Braille music and was unable to do it on the computer. The impact of this for Lisa was that she took Music at ordinary rather than honours level for her Leaving Certificate because she believed that the ordinary level curriculum required less reading and writing of music notation. Consequently, she perceived that she had greater access to the overall Music curriculum at ordinary

level. It is evident from the following quotes that it was curriculum and assessment barriers that influenced this decision. It is also apparent that Lisa did not have sufficient support at her disposal to overcome this barrier to aspects of the curriculum

Music...was kind of hard because I used to kind of do alright in the practical parts but when it came to the actual theory of the notation and all that kind of thing...that was proving quite challenging because I never knew Braille music and obviously I wouldn't know how to do it up on a computer (Lisa)

And

...in the honours you would have had a lot more of that (reading and writing music notation) and it would have been the cause of me failing the honours so that was the reason I didn't do it (Lisa).

Modified exam papers can be provided by the Department of Education and Skills for state examinations for blind and vision impaired students in subjects where pictures, diagrams etc. are a standard component of an exam paper. This is recognized as a reasonable accommodation for blind/vision impaired students and means that these students are provided with a text only alternative question. Some aspects of the curriculum are quite visual in nature as they contain components such as map work and diagrams which could result in curriculum and assessment barriers for students who are blind/vision impaired. Consequently, modified exam papers have resulted in greater access to a wider range of subjects. This demonstrates how policy and provision can enable greater access to the curriculum for these students and this is evident in the following two quotes

...we had...text only papers no pictures in anything whatsoever (Michael)

And

...in Maths now as well they modified the paper as well in Junior Cert for the diagrams I can feel them tactile diagrams (Steven).

A number of participants did the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. This has a strong vocational dimension to it and is a programme that can be better suited to meeting the needs of some students than the traditional Leaving Certificate because of this vocational element. While this programme can provide greater access to the curriculum for some students who may otherwise drop out of education at an early age, careful consideration needs to be taken by those who do the Leaving Certificate Applied course rather than the traditional Leaving Certificate as it can restrict ones future choices. This issue is revisited in chapter six. A number of those who attended the resourced mainstream secondary school were amongst those who took the Leaving Certificate Applied course, and this appeared to be a choice taken by many blind and vision impaired students in that school as the following quote suggests

Well myself like a lot of other VIs and blind students in the school I chose LCA (Leaving Cert Applied)...it is not as academic and I believe that's down to the whole insecurity thing again students thinking the LCA is the easy way out where it's not (Robert).

5.2.3 Access to the Maths Curriculum

The majority of participants had difficulties accessing the Maths curriculum. Research undertaken by AHEAD (2008), Karshmer and Bledsoe, (2002) and Cahill, & Linehan, (1996) among others has identified the teaching and learning of Mathematics for blind/vision impaired children and young people as being particularly challenging. This is a topic that is explored further in chapter six. One participant did not do Maths at secondary school level and another one did not do Maths for her Leaving Certificate. The following quote indicates that Maria Kelly encountered challenges when doing even basic Maths as she was blind and could not access the curriculum through the medium of print. This indicates how provision can impact on experience and outcome

I only ever managed to get to primary school level of multiplication division and whatever which was going line under line under line and even that was pretty tricky doing it on a braille machine (Maria Kelly).

The introduction of foundation level Maths appears to have given blind/vision impaired students greater access to the Maths curriculum. The decision to take Maths at foundation level immediately restricts post-school choices and opportunities. Issues relating to such decisions are explored further in chapter six. A number of those in the younger age group who attended the resourced mainstream secondary school were among those that did Maths at foundation level. This indicates how policy and provision can impact in both positive and negative ways on access to the curriculum and future choices. Foundation level Maths can appear to be the solution to the access difficulties blind/vision impaired young people experience in relation to Maths. A number of those who did foundation level Maths recognised that while they may have got an A at this level it was not satisfactory for entry to college. This is evident in Paul and Claudia's quotes below and demonstrates that while foundation level Maths may be appropriate for some blind/vision impaired young people it should not be the primary solution to access difficulties

...foundation level Maths I was doing because I wasn't able to do any ordinary or higher level Maths I got an honour in foundation level (Bob)

And

I got an A in the Maths...but it's not a high enough grade you know when they look at foundation they look at not good enough (Paul)

And

I got an A in Maths but it was foundation so it was good for me but it was also bad because it is very hard to get to college with that (Claudia).

For others that continued to access the Maths curriculum challenges persisted in relation to various aspects of the curriculum. Many of those who were blind or worked primarily through the medium of Braille found Maths particularly challenging. Some pertinent reasons for this are examined in chapter six. Some participants received extra tuition in Maths in order to enable them to access the Maths curriculum more fully. The following quotes illustrate this

I had a teacher...I had him for Maths in sixth year and because he had a background of working with us for years I found I learned so much from him when I was taken out of my big class and working with a group of three or four with him I really found it beneficial (Patrick).

And

I was terrible at Maths so I wasn't very good at Maths and I had extra tuition (John).

As the following excerpts indicate Lisa who attended a local mainstream school encountered significant obstacles. This was due to the lack of knowledge around Braille by teachers when trying to impart information regarding particular elements of the Maths curriculum. This demonstrates how teaching methodologies and provision can impact on one's ability to access aspects of the curriculum

...the Maths I found hard...and even some of the Maths things say...graphs...and for a sighted person to try and explain graphs to you they just don't understand that say...the letter L in print they think it should feel the exact same in Braille (Lisa)

And

So they think if they are saying the two points meet here...and physically show you they think that you should know because Braille and print...would have the same shapes but they feel different that's their impression (Lisa).

There was one participant in this study who excelled at Maths which was the exception for those who participated in this research. Cahill, & Linehan, (1996) indicate that excelling at Maths is uncommon for many blind/vision impaired students and this is discussed further in chapter six. This participant also did Applied Maths at second level and found that because so few students took this course in her school that this was of great benefit to her. This indicates how provision can impact on experience and outcome. This individual has gone on to study Maths at university which again is not usual for blind/vision impaired people in Ireland. The fact that Anne could access the curriculum through the medium of print may be significant in relation to her ability to access the Maths curriculum more fully

I have always just been naturally drawn to them (Maths)...it was really good for the Applied Maths it took up a lot of extra time but because I was in an all girl's school there was only two of us in the class because nobody else wanted to do it (Anne).

5.2.4 Access to Transition Year Programmes

A number of participants got the opportunity to do transition year and some said that this was the year during which they matured and gained confidence. Many spoke about the outdoor pursuits that were a component of transition year for them. This gave them the opportunity to try out a variety of activities that they had never done before. Some said that activities such as kayaking and rock climbing were ones that prior to this they would have considered not possible because of their vision impairment. The transition year programme places a strong emphasis on personal development and for those that did transition year personal development seemed to be a very important aspect of the programme. The transition year programme is not always compulsory and not all schools offer a transition year programme therefore these experiences are not always available to all students as a result of policy within schools. The following quotes are illustrative of the positive aspects of access to transition year programmes for some of those who participated in this research

Last year was brilliant you know I did transition year and I did a lot of new things...I couldn't believe that I could do these things like climb and that kayaking and stuff so that was brilliant (Steven)

I also did transition year...we had a lot of stuff there that was I think very good for me to do. Just kind of things that you wouldn't ordinarily see someone with a visual impairment doing like rock climbing, hill walking... (Ted)

And

I felt it was the year that I both matured and developed. I became much more confident (Patrick).

5.2.5 Access to the Third Level Curriculum

The majority of those who participated in this research undertook post-compulsory education/training in a variety of different institutions. While some participants experienced barriers accessing the curriculum in Third Level, overall participants were able to access most elements of the curriculum without encountering significant obstacles. Effective transition choices may have been a significant factor in minimising the obstacles encountered at Third Level. Some participants also acknowledged that the supports that were in place at Third Level were more targeted at meeting the needs of the individual which would also enable greater access to the curriculum. The following quote indicates how policy and provision can impact on experience

I find the system for Third Level is much more efficient and far superior like everyone works off the one page and there's no conflict over different things. It's not that layered it's your needs you're not kind of lumped in with other people's needs (Patrick).

For people that are blind/vision impaired, a needs assessment should be an integral part of commencing any course. This would identify elements of a course where barriers to accessing the curriculum could arise, and to ascertain solutions

where possible. When needs assessments are not carried out unforeseen barriers may arise for students once they have commenced a particular line of study. Post-compulsory education is a very new and different experience for many participants, and for those that encounter barriers in accessing the curriculum challenging the system may be required. This was a situation that Lisa experienced. Aspects of Lisa's course were inaccessible to her primarily because the assistive technology she required was not always compatible with the mainstream technologies that were an integral component of some of her course work. Therefore, she was not always satisfactorily able to access particular subjects within the overall course. These incompatibilities between assistive technologies and mainstream technologies are considered more fully in chapter six. The following quotes illustrate how provision and practice can impact on experience and outcome

...in second year I knew that there would be a few subjects again that would be a bit challenging and maybe cause me having to quit the course (Lisa)

And

...three subjects...were going to be totally out for me in the second semester...I found that the college weren't really on my side...they just wanted an easy option...they wanted me to...change course (Lisa).

Lisa experienced significant pressure to change course but her tenacity ensured that she was continuing with the course she had commenced. This illustrates the importance of resilience in the lives of disabled people and is an issue that is returned to in chapter six. The impact of these barriers to the curriculum for Lisa was that rather than doing some of the compulsory components of her course, which were inaccessible to her, she had to challenge the system to allow her take option subjects which were accessible instead. Curriculum institutional and system barriers can restrict one's ability to access the curriculum. The following quotes indicate how Lisa experienced this situation

I am there...that is not what I want...why can't ye give me alternative subjects to do say subjects that are down as electives...because they would be options for my group anyway...they wouldn't agree to this for ages (Lisa)

And

...they kept going on that I should do another course...then the Access officer sent me this email...about a new course that was coming into the college...it was front of office...it was basic...very basic computer skills and...dealing with phone calls...I just said...that is going backwards for me...I said no way...eventually...they decided that they would let me blend in with other groups for three other subjects...but only for me kind of standing up for myself I would have been thrown into any basic course again (Lisa).

How an individual negotiates challenges can determine how successfully they are able to access the curriculum. Self-efficacy and agency can be essential for blind/vision impaired people to enable them to access the curriculum more fully. This may require having to personally engage with academic staff to enable them have greater access to the curriculum. This inevitably results in disclosure of one's disability which can be very difficult for some individuals and is considered in greater detail later in this chapter and again in chapter six. Having to engage with members of staff on this level can also result in the individual coming across to their peers as different because this level of interaction between students and academic staff is not generally perceived as the 'norm', particularly at undergraduate level. The following quotes demonstrate how autonomy can be experienced

Even with some of my academic course work having it formatted having the course made more accessible I do it through ear or through the piano and they have to transcribe it or that kind of thing you have to work together with your lecturers an awful lot (Patrick)

And

I even found in the class people saying God you're very pally with the lecturers (Patrick).

Semesterisation is a policy that has been introduced into a number of institutions in recent years and had been experienced by a number of participants in this study. The main areas of contention for these participants was that in spite of their chosen course having been semesterised, all their exams occurred at the end of the academic year and, that the reading weeks which were an inherent component of semesterisation could be misused by academic staff. This indicates how policy can impact and how institutional and system barriers can create obstacles to accessing the curriculum for blind/vision impaired students. Alan explained how exams during one of his reading weeks meant that two essays that were due for another subject could not be completed on time. This indicates how policy when not effectively implemented can impact on experience and outcome

It's just an absolute disaster you know two twelve week terms most of the exams at the end of the year even for stuff that you haven't done since December it is just a bad idea (Alan)

And

...my particular experience was we had six weeks and then the seventh week was a reading week so History decided when we got back from that reading week that we had two essays due...Economics decided...we are going to have exams during reading week so I had Economic exams during the reading week and then the Monday we got back there were supposed to be two essays due despite my last exam being on the Thursday or the Friday of the reading week (Alan).

5.2.6 Access to Technology

In mainstream society the use of technology has increased significantly in recent decades and for those in this study the availability of and access to technology and equipment has definitely improved over time. The majority of those that participated in this research had access to a variety of technologies. These

included both mainstream technologies and assistive technologies. The availability of technologies and equipment to students has been enabled to a significant extent by the availability of funding from the Department of Education and Skills which shows how policy can have a positive impact.

The increased use of mainstream technologies within education has meant greater access to written materials for all including those that are vision impaired and blind. This is evident in the availability of 'blackboard', 'Web CT' etc. While this is very useful, problems arise when students that are vision impaired/blind cannot access these systems effectively and, when the relevant materials are not made available to them in a timely manner. As PowerPoint presentations can be a valuable tool used in lectures, a consequence of this is that rather than being able to follow the PowerPoint presentation in a format that meets the needs of the individual, as the lecture is occurring, they are regularly only able to listen to what is being said. People do not always say what is on a slide as they can assume that people can read it for themselves. This can 'disable' students that are blind/vision impaired from participating fully in lectures and can, also limit their ability to access the curriculum appropriately. These instances can result in students experiencing frustration. For Alan who generally cannot see PowerPoint presentations unless he either has a hard copy or an electronic copy himself, the fact that he would not always get PowerPoint presentations in advance of a lecture meant that on occasion all he could do was sit and listen. Some of Alan's course was quite visual in nature. Therefore, just being able to listen was not always sufficient for him to be able to adequately understand the content of the lecture. The following quotes from Alan demonstrate some of the differences he experienced in relation to this matter, and they also indicate the importance and benefit of timely delivery of relevant written material. The level of disability awareness by academic staff can be significant in this respect and shows how policy and provision can have either a positive or negative impact on experience and outcome

...he had PowerPoint presentations but wouldn't send them to you until afterwards I couldn't see the PowerPoint presentations it was in a small room so the PowerPoint wasn't really that big so I couldn't read the bloody things so I was basically there listening to him (Alan)

And

...in the Economics they would all use PowerPoint and they would put them up beforehand so you could print them off and bring them with you (Alan).

Some assistive technologies do not work particularly efficiently with some mainstream technologies and can result in students that are blind/vision impaired encountering barriers when trying to access particular components of some courses. Research undertaken by Foley, & Ferri, (2012) has identified issues around mainstream technologies and assistive technologies and, some of these will be considered in chapter six. There are currently not always satisfactory technological solutions to these obstacles and the impact of this may result in some students not being able to fully participate in all aspects of their chosen course. This was the situation that Lisa experienced when as part of her coursework she was required to use a computer package for things like accounting, and her screen reader is not designed to work with this package. Consequently, as her assistive technology was incompatible with the mainstream technology, this component of her course was completely inaccessible to her as is apparent in the following excerpt

...a lot of the problem with the Sage was the screen reader I use JAWS wouldn't tell you what you are on a lot of the time it is not really designed to work with that programme anyway...I am kind of fighting a losing battle here with Sage as it was just not possible to do it if the technology is not there to do it then you kind of can't do it (Lisa).

The availability of assistive technology can be seen as an enabler to blind/vision impaired people because it gives them greater access to the curriculum at various levels. The following quotes demonstrate the importance of the provision of appropriate supports and indicates, how assistive technology can be used to minimise the effects of environmental barriers that can be encountered within aspects of education

...one of the things I found quite useful last year...was this device called the Opti Verso it's kind of a camera thing on a stand...you hook it up to a laptop so on half the screen I set it up so that you have your word document and the other half is a camera and you can zoom in and out on the blackboards and that and you can take snapshots of a point in time of what's up there so I found that was really useful (Alan)

And

...my sight...it's sort of more disadvantageous now because there's bigger lecture theatres and there used always be smaller classes and if I sat in the front row I could see the board but now if I am still in the front row I still can't read anything on the board which is a bit of a nightmare but I have been using a thing I have a laptop and I also have Opti Verso (Anne).

5.2.7 Access to Print Material

A significant challenge encountered by people that are vision impaired/blind in their everyday lives is their ability to access written material which is integral in modern society. This is of particular importance within the area of education and a variety of options were utilised by the different participants with some participants using various different methods to access written material. Relatively simple things can act as enablers or disablers for people that are vision impaired when it comes to accessing written material and disability awareness and policy initiatives can be significant in this regard. Alan described how whiteboards are easier for him to see than blackboards and the challenges that he encounters when trying to read lecturers handwriting. Claudia explained that if when people were writing on the board they also said what they were writing this simple solution would enable her to take handwritten notes which she could later type up. This demonstrates how practice can have an impact in both positive and negative ways

...whiteboards are much easier to see than the blackboards so college wise blackboards are a pain in the ass I don't like those at all or...the old overheads I don't like those either and then they start scribbling on

them and most of their handwriting is pretty appalling. Or little things...using a red marker rather than a black marker or things like that that just drive you mad (Alan)

And

...for me what I can do if you are writing on the board and you are saying what you are writing I can write as well it could be messy but when I go home I can just type it in the laptop (Claudia).

Some vision impaired participants required materials such as hand-outs and course assignments to be enlarged to enable them to access written material and participate fully. The lack of provision in these areas can result in significant frustration for those who encounter such experiences, as it restricts their ability to access written material. Occasionally an accumulation of these instances while not the only reason can be an influencing factor when it comes to a person's decision regarding whether they continue with a course or not. This was the case for Claudia who found that lecturers delivering her course frequently forgot that she required her assignment sheets enlarged, even though they were regularly reminded by Claudia of her requirements. Frequently what happened was that by the time Claudia got the enlarged assignment sheet her class peers had finished the assignment and she found herself regularly having to try and catch up on this coursework at other times. The following excerpt indicates how this impacted on experience

...what pisses me off...your there you have to wait coz the teacher forgot then you have to wait for her to go to enlarge the paper and by the time she comes back everyone else is finished and then you're still doing the work and the class is finished and you have to move on then you have to catch up those kind of things (Claudia).

5.2.8 Access to Braille and Alternative Formats

Significant challenges arose for those participants who were unable to read print, and were solely dependent on getting their reading materials in either Braille or

alternative format. One of the primary issues which emerged regarding Braille was the delay in receiving Braille books and, the unavailability of other books in Braille. These are issues that are further examined in chapter six. While a brailing service is available, the inconsistency in being able to access Braille material in a timely fashion limited participant's access to the curriculum. The following excerpts illustrate how provision can impact on access to written material

...some were available others were limited in their availability (John)

And

I use Braille wherever possible any books that I could get in Braille I got but again a lot of the time you don't get the books until your year is finished (Lisa)

And

I remember like I finished the Leaving Cert and I got half my books the day after I finished (Lisa).

Lisa who went to a mainstream school in her own locality did not always have Braille books available to her and, occasionally teachers would give her their print copy of the book, assuming that someone at home would be available to read to her which was not always the case. The impact of lack of provision of Braille material right through her secondary education and, the assumptions made by teachers, that as Lisa said she would have "a twenty four hour babysitting service at home", whereby people would be at her disposal to read to her caused Lisa significant frustration and reinforced dependence as is evident in the following quote

...the problem that was always standing out was the books. You know you didn't have them on time...then say if you went into class and you didn't have your homework done...a teacher would kind of give you their print book and they would say take that home with you and get someone to call out those questions to you or whatever they just

couldn't understand like they think you have a twenty four hour babysitting service at home they just couldn't get their heads around you know you didn't have anyone to read it out to you or whatever (Lisa).

For participants who know Braille this is often their preferred medium to learn through and most of this group believed they learned best through Braille. It is important to acknowledge that this was evident among the various age groups. Lack of provision of Braille material can impact on access to written material and preferred choice of reading medium as is evident from the following quotes

I think with Braille you memorise information much faster you will listening to it you know with JAWS. With JAWS you might read stuff fairly quickly you might get through it fast you might get to where you want to go but with Braille its actually learning and memorising it is where the Braille really works (John)

And

...with text files they can do them really fast that's why I want to get a Braille and Display (assistive technology) so that I can read them in Braille because I can learn better I can study better with Braille you know (Steven).

The use of, and access to Braille in Ireland has declined over time for a variety of reasons, and currently the Department of Education and Skills are considering discontinuing teaching Braille to young children. The impact of this if implemented could both limit their ability to access reading material and, significantly limit their choice to learn Braille if desired. The following excerpts illustrate the importance of Braille for participants

I think Braille...is vitally important (John)

And

...the Government or the Department of Ed closely related! They are wanting to stop teaching of Braille to young children because I think their excuse is because it is too expensive! I am 100 percent against this (Maria Kelly).

While accessing written material in alternative formats has improved significantly in recent years due in part to the improvements in scanning software the actual process of turning a written document into a format that can be utilised appropriately within an academic setting is still quite time consuming and requires the cooperation of academic staff in order that the person who is blind or vision impaired can access the relevant material at an opportune time. Harpur, & Loudoun, (2011) have acknowledged this as significant. Maria Kelly who is totally dependent on accessing her reading materials in alternative formats experienced significant challenges throughout her Third Level education in relation to this. Even though academic staff were made aware that she required reading lists and relevant reading materials in advance in order to have the relevant readings put into an alternative format, this frequently did not happen. The impact of this for Maria Kelly was that she was often without the relevant reading materials at the time they were required. Subsequently her participation in class was often restricted. This demonstrates how policy and provision can have a negative impact. The following quotes illustrate the experience of this lack of appropriate provision for Maria Kelly and the second of the two quotes also indicate the disabling attitudes that can contribute to this inappropriate provision

...the Department (in college) do not understand we have visited them on a communal meeting each year to ask them to please send materials in advance when they can this does not happen (Maria Kelly)

And

When we do get stuff we could get 120 pages which I am supposed to have read for next week which cannot be done this is obnoxious. There is one person in particular within the Department...has said "have you any idea how much trouble it is to have a blind girl in the Department" And "how much stress you cause the staff" (Maria Kelly).

5.2.9 Conclusion

This section has looked at a variety of access issues that were experienced by those who participated in this study and indicated that while in general access for people that are blind/vision impaired has increased, there are still particular challenges that they encountered which at times minimized or excluded their participation in certain aspects of their education. Barriers to access can be experienced at a variety of levels including systemic, institutional and attitudinal and these experiences can result in exclusion and limited participation. This section indicated that policy and provision can have significant consequences for those who are blind/vision impaired in relation to the various access issues that were discussed in this section. Many of these access issues are examined further in chapter six where connections between the findings of this study and existing research are discussed.

5.3 Transitions

5.3.1 Introduction

This section will consider the transition points that were experienced by participants in this research. It will discuss the factors that impacted on these transitions and some of the issues that arose in relation to them. The section begins by looking at school transition and how policy and provision influenced this. The section then discusses post-school transition choices including career guidance at school, course selection and mainstream and specialized settings at Third Level, and some of the factors that influenced these aspects of post-school transition. The section concludes with an examination of employment including career guidance, transition to employment and the barriers and facilitators experienced at this transition point.

5.3.2 Transition to Primary School

At primary school level there were two options available to those who participated in this study. These were either a special school in Dublin or a mainstream school in their own locality. For those that commenced their education in the 1970s and 1980s they predominantly went to a special school, even if they had started off in a mainstream school in their own locality. For the majority of those in the older age groups lack of choice and inappropriate provision were the main reasons most gave for going to a special school as mainstream schools were not equipped to support the needs of blind/vision impaired students at the time. The following quote illustrates this and indicates how those born in different historical times are exposed to different experiences

There were no choices because my Mum often says to me now that if I could have just read print cause I read Braille...she often says to me if you could read print I probably wouldn't have had you in these schools (John).

For those in the younger age group that went to the school for the blind access to greater supports and facilities was often the reason given for choosing that

particular school. The following quote illustrates how policy and provision can be significant factors in school selection

...my Dad was here before I came to Ireland so he found the school...the school for the visually impaired people, which was a very good school. It has facilities Braille and everything (Steven).

For the majority of those that attended mainstream primary schools they never mentioned that attending a special school had been considered. The exception to this was Joe (see chapter four). The majority of these participants would have completed their primary education in the late 1990s or early 2000. The policy initiatives of mainstreaming could have been influential in these decisions. The increased provision of a range of supports and resources were probably significant for these participants. The majority of those that attended mainstream primary schools in their own locality were vision impaired which meant that they could access written material through the medium of print which as the previous section indicated is significant when accessing the curriculum. For those that attended mainstream primary school in their own locality a variety of reasons were given for attending particular schools including closeness to home and, family members attending the same school as is evident in the following excerpt

For fourth class we moved...it was closer to home and the three of us were in the one school (Anthony).

For Anne smaller class sizes had influenced the decision to send her to the local private school as her parents perceived she would get more attention within this setting. The impact of the decision to send Anne to a private school was that even though Anne had access to a visiting teacher since she was nine months old because of a Government policy at the time which stated that those attending a private school could not avail of the visiting teacher service within that setting. Consequently while Anne continued to see the visiting teacher in her own home the teachers in her school “had no access to the visiting teachers”. This demonstrates how system barriers and policy can impact on experience. It also illustrates how people born in different historical times are exposed to different societal experiences.

5.3.3 Transition to Secondary School

There were three types of schooling experienced by those who participated in this research at secondary level. These were a special school, a resourced mainstream secondary school and mainstream secondary schools in the participants own localities. Only one participant (Maria) had experience of going to a special school for her secondary education and she completed her secondary education in the 1980s when mainstreaming was not policy or general practice (see chapter four).

The resourced mainstream secondary school is located on the same grounds as a primary school for the visually impaired. The majority of those that participated in this research and who had attended this special school for their primary schooling went to the resourced mainstream school for their secondary education where they had a high level of supports and resources available to them. This was evident among the various age groups. This indicates the role provision can have on education choices and as the following three quotes indicate the high level of supports and resources available within this setting was significant in relation to experience

I try and get as much help as I can from all the teachers...there are four teachers that are dealing with vision impairment students like a tutor as you'd call it that if you have anything or need anything you go and let them know what you need done (Bob)

I felt really comfortable knowing that there was a resource area and I could get my books my Braille books pretty easily once I gave a bit of notice (Patrick)

(Resourced mainstream secondary school) I chose because it has the facilities I need for example the Braille books text files and resource teachers as well (Steven).

Claudia who attended mainstream schools for all of her primary education in her own locality and for a significant part of her secondary education transferred to the resourced mainstream secondary school for the last two years of her education on

the advice of her visiting teacher. This arose as a result of the challenges she was encountering at mainstream school even though she had supports such as enlarged books and help from the teachers. The following quotes indicate how provision and policy impacted on Claudia's educational experiences at both mainstream schools in her own locality and the resourced mainstream secondary school. The differences she experienced between the mainstream schools in her own locality and that of the resourced mainstream secondary school demonstrate the importance of provision of appropriate and dedicated supports and resources, and as the second of the following two quotes indicate transferring to the resourced mainstream secondary school appears to have had a positive impact on experience and outcome

I couldn't see the board and I get very frustrated and even the enlarged books that I used to get when the teacher would say page twenty but the page of the enlarged books are different I'd be very frustrated and I would be very behind in work...my teachers tried to call out what's on the board (Claudia)

And

I find my grades have improved because they have special teachers down there and they go to my main teachers and whatever work they are giving to the students I have it enlarged the books have the same page as the other ones and the computer the laptop has enlargements you know what I mean I have books on CD as well and that's another way if I get too tired to read I can just go to the computer and listen to them so basically the school has helped me in every way (Claudia).

There were also a number of participants that attended mainstream schools in their own locality. The majority of those that went to mainstream secondary schools did so by choice and they had attended mainstream primary school in their own locality. A significant number of those that went to mainstream secondary school in their own locality were able to read print with the use of low vision aids and assistive technology which in general meant that they were not completely reliant on getting their reading material in an alternative format. This

minimised the barriers to accessing the curriculum as the following excerpt indicates

I tended to just use the normal textbook and have one of those magnifying reader yokes and just worked like that it was faster I found and just blowing up (enlarging) the textbooks wasn't really worth it (Alan).

School/teacher awareness was a factor that facilitated the inclusion and participation of participants in mainstream secondary schools. The following two quotes illustrate how provision and practice can impact on experience

I suppose because I'd had lots of the teachers before they were all kind of fairly aware of it and really, really good (Alan)

And

My secondary school was very good actually. They were very organized...they were very good to get things organized everything was done quickly and efficiently (Anthony).

Size of classrooms was also significant when it came to inclusion and participation for a number of participants. The following two quotes illustrate the physical environment can impact on experience and outcome

...school wise and subject wise sitting up the front in school was usually ok cause you are in fairly small rooms (Alan)

And

...there used always be smaller classes and if I sat in the front row I could see the board (Anne).

5.3.4 Transition to Boarding

For the majority of those that attended a special school for their primary education boarding was an integral part of this experience. For those participants who attended the resourced mainstream secondary school for their secondary education all resided in houses in close proximity to the school from Monday to Friday. All of these participants were from the greater Dublin area.

Claudia went to the resourced mainstream secondary school for the last two years of her secondary education and like the other participants that went to this school she boarded there from Monday to Friday. This was a new experience for her. The positive impacts of boarding for Claudia were experienced at various levels. The following excerpt indicates this setting provided Claudia with an environment that was conducive to study and therefore this impacted positively on her educational experience. It is also apparent that the supportive environment was significant and illustrates how provision can impact on experience and outcome

...if I'm here I can ask one of the lads or one of the girls or one of the staff even to help me and here we have an environment of study (Claudia).

This setting also provided Claudia with the opportunity to meet and talk to others that were vision impaired. As she was the only person in her family that was vision impaired she had no contact with other vision impaired people prior to going to the resourced mainstream secondary school. As the following two excerpts demonstrate boarding gave Claudia the opportunity to interact with other blind/vision impaired young people which enabled her to develop her identity as a vision impaired person. This indicates how provision can impact on experience and outcome

I was really happy cause at that time I said this is a good way of meeting other people that have similar cases to me (Claudia)

It took me probably a month to adjust then I was asking the students here what did they have and how did they find it because I was the only

*one in my family so it was very hard for me to talk to my family
(Claudia).*

There were less satisfactory outcomes of boarding for some participants this was not being able to develop or maintain friendships in their home localities and, the isolation and separation that resulted from this. Feelings of difference were also experienced when people boarded as they perceived themselves as different to their peers in their locality who lived at home with their families. So while the academic provisions of extra supports and resources that were available in the schools that had boarding facilities were advantageous for some participants, as the next two excerpts from Paul who was a student in the resourced mainstream school at the time that this study was undertaken, demonstrate the consequences of boarding itself for some participants restricted their ability to develop and maintain friendships in their own locality. This has significant implications for socialization and identity formation. The impact of this can have long term implications for those concerned and, indicates how school provision can impact on all aspects of life experience

...the biggest problem I have being over this side is It's taken a huge impact actually on social life I don't see any of my mates at all other than the weekend (Paul)

...what happens is I divide the places...when I leave here (resourced mainstream secondary school) I leave everything that's here behind when I leave the other side (home) I leave everything that's there there (Paul).

Bob had been a boarder for a significant part of his time in education. He believed that during his time in the resourced mainstream secondary school he had been bullied as a result of being a boarder. It appeared that Bob arriving with his luggage set him apart from his class peers and consequently led to bullying situations. He suggested that if he had a choice he would not have continued as a boarder. This again indicates how school provision can impact on various aspects of life experience. The following three excerpts illustrate Bob's need to be in this

setting but how this setting has both positive and negative consequences on experience and outcome

I feel...I really don't need now to be in residence the only reason I was in last year and the years beforehand was to get the help that I needed and that's how I got the results that I did in the Junior Cert (Bob)

I am getting bullied in school by a number of students in the class when I come in on Monday with my suitcase from home they pass remarks on to me saying am I going on a holiday or what's the story or why do you have to go to residential (Bob)

I'd feel that (not boarding) would, might stop them from bullying me stop what they are saying (Bob).

5.3.5 Summary

Thus far this section has considered the variety of transition choices/opportunities as they pertain to school transitions. It indicates how lack of choice, societal norms, policy and practice and inappropriate provision were significant factors for those in the older age group regarding school choice. Changes in policy and practice and effective supports and resources were relevant to those in the younger age group. This indicates how people born in different historical times are exposed to changing historical worlds.

5.3.6 Post-school Transition Choices

There was a range of Higher Education and Further education options experienced by those who participated in this research with people attending universities, Institutes of Technology, PLC courses, FÁS courses and courses in National Learning Network centres around the country. This demonstrates how the wide range of post-compulsory education provisions that are currently available, can be availed of by blind/vision impaired people. It was also apparent that while some participants made the transition directly from secondary to tertiary education

this was not the case for all participants and some participants also did further education courses before making the transition to higher education courses.

5.3.7 School Career Guidance

There were mixed views around the availability and practical usefulness of the formal career guidance and advice participants received when it came to making post-compulsory education choices. A number of people stated that they received very little help in this respect, and a number of participants sought advice from family members and friends, care staff as well as teachers when making post-school choices. Participants indicated that they generally found this advice to be of greater benefit to them than that which they received from career guidance counsellors in schools or from Disability Service Providers. This indicates how people avail of the various resources that are available to them. Paul one of the participants attending the resourced mainstream secondary school had seen the career guidance counsellor in the school but did not find this particularly useful. He had also sought and received advice from the care staff in the house he lived in from Monday to Friday, and found this to be effective. The following two quotes illustrate how the provision of career guidance can be experienced both positively and negatively and indicates that people often receive career guidance from more than one source indicating how provision and resources can impact on experience and outcome

He (school guidance counsellor) annoyed me...he was just very arrogant I suppose he's trying to do his job but everything that he done that he was going through I had already done so I was wasting time going up and it wasn't that I wanted to go up I was told to go up to see him (Paul)

*They (residential staff) were very helpful like they helped me with PLCs as well they got me on the PLC courses advised me on a few of them.
Patricia: Ok so you are happy with the help that you got from them.
Paul: Oh yeah incredibly happy because like I hadn't got a clue from stage one they knew how to do it and done it for me. They spoke to me sat down took an awful lot of time to explain everything to me (Paul).*

5.3.8 Course Selection

It was apparent that when considering post-compulsory education choices computers/IT were areas perceived by many to be appropriate or one of the limited fields within which blind/vision impaired people could study and work. Societal attitudes and expectations can impact on people's own expectations. The impact of this can be that low expectations can have limiting effect on transition choices. In society IT and telephony are considered to be some of the more 'appropriate' areas within which blind/vision impaired people can seek employment opportunities and, this conception can impact on people that are blind/vision impaired. The next excerpt demonstrates societal expectations at a point in time influenced John's decision to say that he would like to do computer programming. He perceived his choices were limited by this opinion

I only said I want to do computer programming because every other blind person was told that's all they could do (John).

The following quote indicates how Michael who was a participant in the younger age group perceived that due to his vision impairment a technology based course would be an appropriate area within which he could progress. This could be evidence of how one's own expectations can impact on experience and outcome

It was kind of difficult but I was thinking along the lines of computer work IT because of the way the sight was going technology is the way forward for a person with a sight problem I suppose (Michael).

Some of the younger age group perceived that they had a range of post-compulsory education options available to them. Informed choice was evident among this group. While some of this group had quite definite ideas regarding what they wanted to do after their Leaving Certificate, others were still in the process of making those decisions. This is apparent in the following two quotes

Well I knew I wanted to do Maths for a long time (Anne)

There is a lot of things out there that I am looking at so far Business and Law, Physiotherapy and Radio and there's Sport Management (Paul).

Some participants including Claudia, Ted and Anthony indicated that they were interested in the area of Medicine but recognised that significant challenges could be encountered when trying to access particular aspects of Medicine such as the 'surgical routine' so had decided that Medicine itself would not be a suitable area to pursue. Anthony instead chose to pursue a course within the Health Sciences. This he considered was more accessible to him as a vision impaired person. The following excerpt indicates how perceived restrictions of access to some courses can impact on life course options

...I wanted to do Medicine but I probably kind of cancelled out because you have to do a surgical routine and I suppose I'd be a bit I don't know I wouldn't be able to do that now probably (Anthony).

5.3.9 Mainstream and Specialized Settings

The option of attending a mainstream or specialized setting for further education and training was also a factor of transition choice/opportunity and some participants had experience of both of these environments. Frequently participants who did courses in a National Learning Network (which provides courses for people with a range of disabilities) went on to pursue further education in mainstream settings. A pre-university course that was offered by one of the National Learning Networks was an option chosen by some participants. This course enabled people to repeat their Leaving Certificate in a supportive environment. This demonstrates how a specialized provision can enable people to reach their potential. Jenny who had lost her sight in adulthood undertook this course and the following quote indicates how this specialised setting provided Jenny with the necessary stepping stone she required after sight loss to enable her to go back to university where she completed a Degree and Masters

I got into (National Learning Network) and that was a fantastic thing because...it was a very positive place and then the teachers were absolutely fabulous fantastic gifted kind of individuals who just nothing was impossible and would give you amazing self-confidence and just tell you, you can do what you want...it wasn't all like that but it was most

of my experience there was very good very positive and enjoyable (Jenny).

John who had attended a special school for his primary education and had attended the resourced mainstream school for his secondary education also did this course. This gave him the points he required to go to university where he did a Degree followed by a Masters. The following quote indicates the purpose of this course and how John experienced this provision

The aim was to get into university. The support was excellent firstly I must say. The teachers were excellent (John).

To my knowledge this course is no longer being offered therefore those in the younger age group did not have this option available to them. This indicates how those born in different historical times are exposed to changing opportunities

5.3.10 Career Guidance

Research undertaken by Kim and Williams, (2012) and Vickerman and Blundell, (2010) suggest that many disabled people do not receive formal career guidance and of those that do many found the advice offered was very limited in respect of employment opportunities available to disabled people. In this study some of those that sought career advice in mainstream settings believed that those who worked there lacked sufficient knowledge to offer constructive advice to blind/vision impaired people. The impact of this was that the advice received was often very narrow in respect of the type of employment that would be available and suitable for someone that was blind/vision impaired. This is evident in the following excerpt and demonstrates how societal attitudes and expectations can impact on the transition choices/opportunities of those that are vision impaired/blind

...she strongly recommended that I take up the telephone operating jobs because she knows that blind people are very good at that (Maria Kelly).

John, who had completed a Degree at university and had been doing a variety of part-time work during his time in university found it very difficult to obtain fulltime employment once he left college, even though he had applied for jobs and gone for interviews. On one occasion John was told he had the job subject to Garda clearance, he was later informed that the position was no longer available. The reason given for this was cutbacks but John did not believe this to be the true reason and thought that his vision impairment had been a contributing factor, this he found very frustrating. About a year after completing his Degree he was advised to contact a recruitment agency that specialized in looking for jobs for disabled people. He did this and found that within about a month of his initial contact with this agency he had obtained a fulltime job. The impact of this for John was that while having a fulltime job was the desired outcome he understood it to mean that without the intervention of a specialized recruitment agency he would have continued to find it extremely difficult to obtain fulltime employment himself. The following quote illustrates how John perceived he was dependent on this specialised recruitment service to obtain employment. It also demonstrates how provisions are experienced

John: I met her (career recruitment person) and I got on great with her. She was really sound and really good...she said...I am going to do my best for you this is nearly a year...after graduating. I think I met her around the end of May the beginning of June by July she had me in a job a fulltime job.

Patricia: Wow.

John: Which kind of told me well that's what I'm up against I have to go to a bloody specialized recruitment agency for disability just to get a job to be taken seriously.

5.3.11 Transition to Employment

The literature indicates that many disabled people encounter challenges when seeking employment (these issues are examined in chapter two and six) and barriers to obtaining employment were experienced by many of the participants in this study. These barriers were apparent when seeking work experience, part-time work or fulltime employment and they found that their choices were significantly

restricted. The following two excerpts illustrate that Tom initially found it difficult to obtain employment and perceived that his vision impairment was a barrier in this regard. On one occasion he went for interview with a large company and he believed he had performed well at this interview but he did not get offered the job. He thought that concerns around the assistive technology he uses may have been a contributing factor in relation to him not getting the job. This indicates how lack of disability awareness and societal attitudes can impact on experience and outcome

I was trying other places for jobs some places I felt were reluctant to take me on and I felt it was because of my visual impairment (Tom)

I walked out of the interview and I thought to myself...that went perfect then I got a letter to say that I didn't get it but in the interview itself they were questioning JAWS (assistive technology)...I think they were afraid to take me on because of that because they were afraid that it was a network thing and it would ruin other computers you know even though you and I know that it just goes on one computer...and all it is, is software a screen reader so I didn't get it (Tom).

Tom later got a permanent job with another company and, the following excerpt indicates how this experience has been a very positive one. This has resulted from the high level of disability awareness that permeates throughout the organization and indicates how policy can impact on experience and outcome

...they (the company he works for) have their own equality department they are majorly geared towards getting people with disabilities into employment. I know the people in that department personally they will always try to get people employment so I have to put my hand out to them (Tom).

Particular work situations were perceived by some participants as being problematic environments within which to gain employment. The main reason given for this was that they would encounter significant barriers within these settings because of their lack of vision. Some of these sources of employment such as bar work, waitressing and working in shops are often the types of part-

time jobs sought by young people these are not generally available to blind/vision impaired young people. The impact of this is limited access to such employment opportunities, reduced opportunity to develop independence and continued dependence on family and the state for financial support. The following excerpt illustrates some of the barriers Anne perceives she would encounter if working in this type of environment. It also indicates how perceived barriers can impact on experience and outcome

I am sort of apprehensive about being in a pressured environment like if I was to be a waitress or something I just couldn't I would be dreadful I wouldn't see people calling me and I work very slowly naturally so that sort of thing would be out completely which narrows it down (Anne).

Development of social networks and feeling of self-worth are often key components of employment. This is an important aspect of employment that has been identified by many including, Borsay, (2006), Carr (2004), Priestley, (2004), and McGinty, & Fish, (1992) and is discussed in greater detail in chapters two and six. The following two quotes demonstrate the importance of employment opportunities and indicates how these can impact on many aspect of life

I liked working and to meet people it gives you a better quality of life rather than sitting at home doing nothing you know then you are earning money as well and you are contributing and you feel...as if you are part of the whole set up you know (Sean)

...there is the social network and there are clubs and different things through work as well and that leads to isolation as well if you can't get to it and you are not meeting people (Kieran).

Alan works part-time as a tour guide in a Georgian museum. This could be considered a non-traditional or 'unsuitable' area of employment for people that are vision impaired. Alan has experienced barriers within this job such as not being able to read the written labels explaining what some of the smaller pieces are, nor is he able to see sufficiently to identify everything that is in a particular room. As the following excerpt illustrates Alan has developed strategies to overcome these

barriers and he does not let these barriers deter him from doing this job. Alan's case was an exception but indicates how resilience can impact on experience

...most of its fine I know where everything is... some of the rooms are pretty long and I haven't a clue what's down the end of them but I know from kind of reading the book or being on tours with other guides cause that's how you learn it to begin with...I can't actually see I just know it's down there you know so I just point it out (Alan).

A number of participants found work either in an area of employment that is perceived as being suitable for blind/vision impaired people such as telephony or for a Disability Service Provider. Not all that worked in these areas were satisfied with their current position or future prospects but believed that their employment opportunities elsewhere were limited. Consequently, they perceived that they had little or no opportunities available to them which resulted in them believing that they needed to stay in their current position, even when they thought that they were not being treated fairly by their employers. John had worked within the disability sector for about ten years but had never been made permanent. In his present job he has always only been given yearly contracts even though he is there longer than some others that have been made permanent. The impact of this for John has been significant in relation to job satisfaction and self-worth. This demonstrates how barriers within the work place can be experienced and the following quote illustrates this

...these disability sector organisations kind of have an idea of their rights as employers and they have an idea of how far they can push you...they can exploit people with disabilities because they know the system and they know we can't fight them back on equality issues because they will still try to do everything by the book (John).

5.3.12 Conclusion

This section encompassed the various transition stages that were experienced by those who participated in this research. It began by considering the transitions that occurred at primary and secondary school level, and the factors that impacted

on these experiences. It indicated how changes at a variety of levels impacted on these experiences and suggested that people born in different historical times are exposed to differing opportunities. The section then discussed the various aspects of post-school transition choices and considered some of the factors that impact on these transitions. This is a topic that is further considered in the next chapter. The section then looked at transition to employment and the enablers and barriers that were experienced at this transition point. This section demonstrated how policies and provisions can facilitate or hamper transition choices. It also showed how barriers encountered at various levels of society can contribute to effective and less effective transitions for people that are blind/vision impaired.

5.4 Supports and Resources

5.4.1 Introduction

The following section will examine the supports and resources that were available to participants and how these were experienced. The section begins by considering the visiting teacher service, the resource teacher service, Special Needs Assistants/Personal Assistants within compulsory and post-compulsory education and exam accommodations. The section will then examine the student disability supports within Higher/Further education and the Disability Service Providers that participants in this research engaged with. The section will then consider the impact of supportive/unsupportive environments and will conclude with a discussion of the supportive role that family and peers provide.

5.4.2 Visiting Teacher

The visiting teacher service for blind and vision impaired children and young people was established in 1978 (Douglas et al., 2009). This service is available from time of referral through to Third Level education. This service offers a range of supports to the blind/vision impaired person as well as their family and schools in which the blind/vision impaired person is a pupil. Some of those that participated in this research utilised this service at a variety of levels throughout their education. A visiting teacher began to visit Ted in his teens when his eye condition became apparent and she put in place a number of supports and resources. As the following excerpt indicates the impact of this provision enabled Ted to continue with his education in the school in his locality

...she (the visiting teacher) will try and organize whatever the school can get such as laptops and all that. The laptop I actually had during secondary school was from the school itself so that was all down to her (the visiting teacher) organizing it and as regards books and everything she (the visiting teacher) put the orders into the (relevant organization)...who kind of cut the books scanned them onto a computer and then sent them on to me (Ted).

Others like Michael and Alan demonstrated how they placed greater emphasis on utilising the visiting teacher service at particular stages of their education and demonstrated the importance of the continuum of provision which this service offers. The following two quotes illustrate the supportive nature of the service and how participants availed of aspects of the service that were most relevant to them at a given point in their education

Michael:...they (the visiting teachers) came every couple of months just to see how I was getting on and they were in contact every so often

Patricia: And did you find that of benefit or not?

Michael: Yeah it was good. It was more in the Leaving Cert cycle that I really took full use of it with the Leaving Cert and getting everything prepared for that

And

...that (the visiting teacher service) was quite useful and she (the visiting teacher) kind of sorted out meeting the disability services in (universities) and that...which was organized for fifth year or sixth year (Alan).

In contrast Maria Kelly's experience of the visiting teacher service was less positive. She perceived that she did not receive appropriate support from the provision of this service. The following quote is illustrative of how Maria Kelly rejected aspects of the convivial nature of these meetings in an attempt to obtain the level of provision that she perceived she should be receiving indicating how experience can impact on outcome

I think we just sat and ate biscuits she (the visiting teacher) kept ordering biscuits and coffee from the staffroom which I always refused to partake in because I wanted lessons and they were meant to do Music with me and French but to be honest I don't think they (the visiting teachers) did...I never got much out of them.

The impact of this lack of support from the visiting teacher service resulted in Maria Kelly seeking support from others including resource teachers within the school she attended. A close friend also helped her with music. The following two quotes indicate how the impact of these effective supports provided the necessary backup Maria Kelly required to enable her to access those components of the curriculum which she found challenging

There were remedial teachers in my school and I went to one of them eventually (Maria Kelly)

And

(the visiting teacher) kept coming for the Music which wasn't great so piano didn't go for very long and I think I passed it I got a C1 in Music for the exams but because (a friend) stepped in and helped out...unofficially (Maria Kelly).

The visiting teacher service provides a continuum of supports and resources throughout the educational trajectory of people that are blind/vision impaired. The diverse nature of the visiting teacher service was apparent from those who availed of the service and illustrated how this is a beneficial aspect of the service. While the overall experiences of those who utilised the visiting teacher service were positive demonstrating how a provision that offers a range of supports and resources can enhance the educational experiences of blind/vision impaired people, a negative experience of the service demonstrated how inappropriate or inadequate provision can restrict the educational experiences of blind/vision impaired people.

5.4.3 Resource Teachers

In Ireland pupils that have been identified as blind/vision impaired are allocated a maximum of 3.5 hours per week from a resource teacher. None of those who participated in this research indicated that they received resource teaching hours during their primary education but some did receive resource teaching hours during their secondary education. For Michael this support was provided for him

during Irish or French class periods as he did not do French and had an exemption from Irish. Michael received support in a variety of subject areas and as the following excerpt illustrates he was involved in the arrangement of these supports indicating how support arrangements can be implemented in an effective manner

I applied to get extra help in the other subjects like in Maths and Geography and English during those times so we got that system in place (Michael).

Maths was the most prominent subject area in which participants received additional support which indicated the challenges that participants encountered when accessing the Maths curriculum. Ted did not appear to have difficulties formulating or comprehending mathematical concepts but his vision impairment meant that he generally used a laptop for the purpose of writing. However, this was not a suitable medium for him when doing Maths. The impact of this was that up until his Junior Certificate he had someone read out the Maths questions and he worked it out in his head and he gave them the answer to write down. He recognised that because he was doing honours Maths for his Leaving Certificate this was no longer “a viable option”. The following excerpt indicates that the one-to-one assistance he received from his Maths teacher was essential in enabling Ted to develop the method he used. This demonstrated how the provision of this teaching support worked effectively. The impact of this was that it enabled Ted to reach his potential in Maths

The one-to-one absolutely if it wasn't for him (Maths teacher) I probably wouldn't have been able to figure out a way to do the Maths (Ted).

Some of those that attended the resourced mainstream school also received resource teaching hours and again this was most prevalent within the area of Maths. This was provided by teachers who had additional training around vision impairment. The impact of this provision for these participants was that they obtained teaching in Maths in a manner that was best suited to meet their individual needs. This is evident in the following two examples

...up until my Junior Cert I was getting one-to-one classes from a specialist teacher that was trained to deal with vision impairment...and this year the Leaving Cert Applied course the same teacher that was teaching me up until my Junior Cert for me Maths I have him again for the two years which is great (Bob)

And

I had a teacher...I had him for Maths in sixth year and because he had a background of working with us for years I found I learned so much from him when I was taken out of my big class and working with a group of three or four with him I really found it beneficial...I think if I had have had him for my whole time I may have been a bit better (Patrick).

The provision of this provision facilitated participants that availed of the service to access more fully those elements of the school curriculum where they encountered access difficulties. The experience for those that availed of this service was positive. It indicated how one-to-one teaching or teaching in small groups can enhance the learning experience of blind/vision impaired students. This was particularly evident in some subject areas such as Maths where significant challenges arose.

5.4.4 Exam Accommodations

It is recognized that standard examination formats and procedures may pose particular challenges for vision impaired pupils (Douglas et al., 2011). All participants in this research received exam accommodations when doing state examinations and exams at Third Level. A variety of accommodations were utilised including additional time (which all participants received), typing exams where possible and desired, receiving exam papers in an accessible format, having a separate exam centre, spelling and grammar waivers, scribes and readers. The various accommodations that were availed of demonstrate the diverse nature of the needs of those who participated in this research. It also illustrates that blind/vision impaired people are not a homogeneous group. These

provisions alleviated some of the barriers that people who are blind/vision impaired could encounter when undertaking exams.

A number of participants type rather than handwrite exams but difficulties arise when doing particular subjects or courses and some vision impaired participants elected to handwrite particular exams as is evident from the following example

I was able to type any exams I could type. I couldn't type Maths...it would be too difficult (Anthony).

Alan made choices on whether to type or handwrite particular exams depending on the content of the exam and, what was required of him in exam situations. As the following quote illustrates he perceived the additional time he was allocated as being beneficial particularly when handwriting exams. This demonstrates how effective accommodations can impact on experience and outcome

I'll type the History that's fine but Economics...I'll probably just handwrite that because there will be an awful lot of drawing diagrams and when you have diagrams to do it's...not worth splitting between the two (typing and handwriting)...Maths I'll just handwrite so the extra time...will be handy (Alan).

Other participants choose to use a scribe rather than type or handwrite as they perceived this to be the best option for them. The following excerpt illustrates this was particularly significant in exam situations when they were under additional pressure to get information down quickly. This indicated how the provision of a variety of accommodations facilitated the diverse needs of participants

I discovered during my Leaving Cert that if I have a little bit of pressure on like exams I try to type as fast as I possibly can but when I type that fast accuracy kind of goes out the window...so for the exams this year I will have a scribe (Ted).

Modified papers were another exam accommodation availed of by some participants in some subject areas. This was where participants received

alternative 'text only' questions or components of the question in an alternative format, where diagrams, pictures, maps etc. were an integral part of the exam paper. The experience of this provision is evident in the following two examples and indicates how this provision resulted in participants being able to access more fully aspects of the examination that would otherwise have proven difficult to access. This illustrates how policy and practice impacts on experience and outcome

...Geography I find hard because of the map working but I was told that I don't have to do it I can do the modified papers for the Leaving Cert so I'm happy because I don't have to do the map work...everything is so small even if I use the visual aid it's still too small but since I know that I don't have to do it it's a relief (Claudia)

And

...in Maths...they modified the paper...for the diagrams I can feel them tactile diagrams (Steven).

A minority of participants occasionally experienced difficulties receiving their exam papers in the required format and while these instances were rare the impact of them at times of exam stress can be at the least disturbing as is evident from the following example

A few times it has happened where I'm supposed to get both enlarged papers and the normal print and they'll only give me one...One or the other this is a bit disconcerting. It hasn't caused any problems. I have been able to manage with them (Anne).

Maria Kelly did not receive a Braille copy of an exam paper for one of her Leaving Certificate exams, and consequently neither did she receive 'text only' alternatives to questions that contained photographs. The impact of this was that she was left with no alternative but to depend upon the invigilator reading and describing photographs that were a compulsory element of the paper. As the following excerpt illustrates having to write on a topic based on an individual's description of

photographs resulted in Maria Kelly's ability to access this exam paper being significantly restricted. This indicates how inappropriate provision can impact on experience and outcome

...the first exam...came in a print paper...I had to do the first paper with my supervisor describing it, a third of it was photographs...she was talking to me about a lady stepping out of a lake a very tall stone lady and I was to write on this and what I thought it was. It turned out to be the Statue of Liberty any models I have felt she hasn't been stepping out of the lake (Maria Kelly).

The provision of exam accommodations, are intended to facilitate those with additional needs to demonstrate their ability more fully within exam situations. The variety of exam accommodations that were available to, and utilised by, those who participated in this research indicated the diverse needs that these accommodations are intended and generally did meet.

5.4.5 Special Needs Assistants/Personal Assistants

A number of those that participated in this study used an assistant during their time in education. The primary utilization of this provision for these participants was to enable them to access written materials and access the curriculum. The effectiveness of this provision was evident from the following two examples. These illustrate the levels of support that can be essential within a mainstream setting when accessing written material which is essential for effective access of the curriculum

...she (Special Needs Assistant) kind of sat beside me in the room and took the notes and that and she would enlarge any notes the teacher would hand out (Anthony)

And

...in some of them (classes) I need a Classroom Assistant because most of the teachers...when I am in mainstream classes...write up on a

white board and with my vision I can't see it and the teacher can't call it out because the classes...are too noisy for me to hear it (Bob).

While the effectiveness of this support was apparent issues did arise for those utilising this provision. The impact of the additional adult presence in the classroom resulted in some of those who had an assistant perceiving that they were being supervised. This has been identified in research undertaken by (Khadka et al., 2012, Rutherford, 2012, Mortier et al., 2011) among others as significant and is further explored in the next chapter. The following excerpt illustrates that the presence of this additional adult can result in peers querying their presence. This can result in the person receiving this provision feeling socially uncomfortable

I felt nearly monitored it was like having a parent beside you or something and it was just all so weird at the start everyone else in the class just wondering who that (the Special Needs Assistant) was (Anthony).

Paul, a secondary school participant did not have an assistant, and did not want an assistant as he perceived that having one would draw unnecessary attention to his vision impairment from his peers. The following quote illustrates how a provision can be perceived negatively by those who could benefit from the assistance which this provision offers. Consequently this assistance is rejected because of the perceived negative fallout of such a provision

I don't want them (Special Need Assistants) or need them. I don't look at myself as if I have an eye problem so I don't bring on anything that would bring any attention (Paul).

Lack of appropriate training or insufficient training for assistants resulted in some participants encountering challenges when availing of a Special Needs Assistant. The impact of this for Maria Kelly was evident throughout much of her education. As Maria Kelly was blind and attended a mainstream school in her locality she required an assistant throughout her secondary education to enable her to access written material. It appeared that the behaviour demonstrated by the individual

providing this service for Maria Kelly created additional obstacles for her. The impact of this was particularly evident in Maria Kelly's interactions with peers as the following examples illustrate. This demonstrates how inappropriate provision can impact on experience and outcome

Having a forty two year old...tasting people's lunches which she (the assistant) did...doesn't help because as young girls they were connecting it to me so it was a nightmare

She gave me no space I actually have two friends...(from school) because she had put such a barrier between me and them. She was a very invasive lady she had not been trained (Maria Kelly).

In Higher/Further education the provisions for Personal Assistants/Academic Assistants are determined by the policies of individual institutions. Maria Kelly required the services of an assistant when she went to Third Level education, and again she encountered difficulties in the provision of this service. Inadequate training again appeared to be at the root of her problems with this service. She perceived that the Disability Support Service within the college did not provide adequate or appropriate support for those interested in working as assistants. The impact of this was evident throughout much of Maria Kelly's Third Level education. In her first year she received very little of her reading material at all because the person providing the assistance did not get the materials to her when required. The following year Maria Kelly perceived that the assistant that was assigned to her, resented being told by Maria Kelly that they would have to meet regularly to organize the relevant reading materials that she required to be put into an alternative format. This is evident in the following example where Maria Kelly recalled an encounter with this assistant

...she (the Academic Assistant) wasn't even calling me by my name she was saying "hello what now" so I said we have to meet for two hours a week minimum...and she flipped...she actually started shouting how dare I...tell her how much to work...I actually had to go about that (Maria Kelly).

Following this experience Maria Kelly was assigned a different assistant who provided the support she required in an appropriate manner. This assistant had previously worked with another person that was vision impaired. Therefore, this person had developed the necessary skills required to produce written materials in alternative formats that were required by Maria Kelly when accessing written material. This is illustrated in the following example and indicates how supports delivered in an appropriate way have a positive impact on experience and outcome

...she knew how to scan and how to format and how to do this that and the other and that really, really helped and it took less time because before that I was explaining over, and over, and over (Maria Kelly).

The provision of Special Needs Assistants/Academic Assistants is an important service for those that are vision impaired/blind, particularly to enable them to access written material. Some of those who availed of an assistant during their time in education perceived the provision to be beneficial but lack of training, inappropriate training and discrepancies that existed between what an SNA is perceived to be employed to do, and what the blind/vision impaired child or young person actually requires of an SNA can prove problematic and resulted in negative experiences of the service for some participants. This illustrates how inadequate policies around the training, selection and understanding of what an SNA is employed to do can have significant implications for those availing of this provision. Some of the issues around this provision are explored in more detail in the following chapter.

5.4.6 Student Disability Supports

Participants who attended Third Level were all registered with the Student Disability Support services within the various institutions. There were a wide range of supports and resources available to participants. The impact of this is illustrated by the following example and demonstrates how being made aware of the facilities provided by Student Disability Support was beneficial. This enabled participants, select aspects of the service that could enhance their educational experience

They (Student Disability Support) are pretty good...there are plenty of things there that you could use It's nice to know they are there even if you don't avail of them. One of the things is I got an email saying something about one-to-one tuition in some subject and you are going...I should probably consider that (Alan).

The next example from Alan demonstrated how a piece of equipment that was made available to him through the Student Disability Support service enhanced his learning experience and enabled him to access written material with greater ease in settings that would normally prove challenging. This indicates how appropriate provisions can have a positive impact on educational experiences and outcomes

...one of the things I found quite useful...was...the Opti Verso it's kind of a camera...connected by a USB...to a laptop so on half the screen...you have your word document and the other half is a camera and you can zoom in and out on the blackboards and...you can take snapshots of a point in time of what's up there. So I found that was really useful...particularly...with Economics a lot of my lectures had four hundred people...so you pretty much can't see most of what's going on (Alan).

The following two examples are from two participants that attended the same Third Level institution during the same time period and had somewhat contradictory opinions regarding the level of support they obtained from this service. In the first example Anthony appears to receive correspondence from Student Disability Support ensuring that he has everything he required for his course and exams, while Martina appeared to have had no communication from them and even when she contacted them she perceived that the response she got was unsatisfactory. These examples demonstrate how a service can be experienced differently by individuals

They (Student Disability Support) are very efficient every year you get "is there anything else you need?" or exam supports (Anthony)

And

Nobody has contacted me from the disability (Student Disability Support) this year at all! Not once...I did go to the (Student Disability Support) and as usual no response blasé kind of attitude towards things (Martina).

For some participants their involvement with Student Disability Support was limited and as the following example illustrates this can be viewed as a positive outcome. When Patrick was doing a Masters he received all the relevant reading materials directly from the school in the university he was attending. The impact of this was that it reduced significantly any need for Patrick to be in regular contact with the Student Disability Support service in the university he attended

...once I had everything...I never needed to go to them (Student Disability Support) which was just great I didn't really fancy going to them to be honest! (Patrick).

The variety of supports and resources available to and, utilized by participants through the Student Disability Support service within Third Level institutions indicate the wide range of needs of people that are vision impaired/blind. It was apparent that while these services were generally beneficial some participants experienced some difficulties when using the service. This was also discussed in Maria's case study (see chapter four).

5.4.7 Disability Service Providers

The majority of those who participated in this research had varying degrees of engagement with service providers including two national charities that offer supports and services to blind/vision impaired people. Experience of these service providers varied. The following two excerpts illustrate that while participants acknowledged that some of the individuals that worked within these organisations provided effective supports a significant number of participants articulated that overall many aspects of these organisations were problematic

I have a great CRW (Community Resource Worker) now but that's about it but overall they (Disability Provider 1) are dire that's being honest (Patrick)

And

There are some nice people in there (Disability Provider 1), don't get me wrong but as an organization I think they are brutal (Tom).

The following excerpt illustrates how ineffective provision can impact on experience and also indicates how particular supports and resources were not delivered in a manner that met the needs of the individual in an appropriate way. This was also identified by Joe (see chapter four) as being an issue and is further explored in the next chapter

I found them (employees of Disability Provider 1) really bad the first lady who came out would cancel if it started raining which we never saw the point of in our house because you have to learn to be able to get from places in all sorts of weather and it is different to do it with your hood up because your hearing is different but you are still going to have to go places (Maria Kelly).

It was apparent that participants had different experiences when engaging with the two main providers that offer supports and services to blind/vision impaired people as the following two quotes illustrate

I have not found (Disability Provider 1) very helpful at all to be honest. I rang up the (local branch of Disability Provider 1)...looking for a meeting with my new social worker and still have not had one. I don't know who he/she is at all don't even know the name of my social worker (Sean)

I have found (Disability Provider 2) quite good in every respect...I have found that they are very good in getting back to me with any queries I had (Sean).

It was evident that the attitude that permeated throughout one of the two providers was more appropriate at meeting the needs of those who availed of their services. This is evident in the following two excerpts and demonstrates how effective supports delivered in an appropriate way can impact on experience

...if I were to choose between (Disability Provider 1) or (Disability Provider 2) I would definitely have a lot more time for the (Disability Provider 2)....they promote independence more. They definitely promote independence more (Lisa)

...the person there that runs it (living skills course) is lovely, she is no way patronizing and she does whatever people want her to do...before you go they ask you...kind of stuff you want to do (Lisa).

It has been identified that while charitable organisations generally have the support of the non-disabled public the aims of these service providers do not necessarily concur with the wishes of the disabled people that are availing of their services (Drake, 1996). The charity model attitude that prevails within some of these service providers was problematic for many participants (see also chapter four and six). The following two excerpts illustrate how this can impact on experience

I as a blind person would feel (Disability Provider 1) are not a positive representation of the world of the blind (Maria Kelly)

The organization (Disability Provider 1) is dire...it's a layered big kind of business...all about charity, charity give, give, give...if you need something...it's like as if it's coming out of their own pocket the way they go on (Patrick).

It was obvious that participants engaged to varying degrees with Disability Service Providers and that the effectiveness of the supports and services that were provided differed. This impacted on experience and outcome. The following quote illustrates what people expect of these providers and how they envisage these provisions should be delivered

...we are people getting along with our lives...we just need a little more help here and there but we want it given professionally and we want it done properly (Maria Kelly).

5.4.8 Supportive/Unsupportive Environments

The provision of supportive environments, were experienced by participants and, it was evident that these accommodating situations had a positive impact on and enhanced their educational experiences. Michael's eyesight deteriorated during his secondary education, which resulted in him needing to use assistive technology to enable him to access written material. One of the pieces of technology he used was a CCTV which was quite cumbersome to move, and quite time consuming to set up as the following excerpt demonstrates

...with the leads and all it takes about ten minutes there was about a month in September where we tried moving and it didn't work really (Michael).

In order to facilitate Michael's technology needs, the school agreed that rather than Michael moving from room to room for each class, which would generally be the norm at secondary school, he would remain in one room whenever possible, and the teachers would come to that room. The following excerpt illustrates how the provision of this accommodation impacted on Michael's experience and meant that he was not under pressure at the beginning and end of class periods to assemble and disassemble this equipment. This also demonstrated how a supportive environment enabled Michael to participate to his optimum

Michael:...we put in a request because of this Andromeda (CCTV) it was so big and bulky that it could get damaged easily...to have just one room on its own where I just stayed in that room and they fulfilled the request

Patricia: So it was the teachers came to you rather than the other way around?

Michael: Yeah so we just had one classroom except for the science subjects I went up to that but all the other subjects they all came to my room.

Other participants acknowledged the support and awareness they experienced from teachers and how this facilitated their increased inclusion and participation. The following examples demonstrate how awareness and support from teachers/lecturers can be positively experienced

...my History teacher was really, really good like at sort of things...he'd always write in a black marker black pen every so often he'd check can you read this? Is this ok? He was really helpful in that sense (Alan)

And

...they (lecturers) would email me the modules we actually had...all our readings on CD (Patrick).

Maria Kelly is blind and used Braille whenever possible to access the required readings for her school curriculum. Because Braille is bulky when a print book is converted into Braille, the Braille book is divided into multiple volumes.

Consequently, it is vital for someone using Braille to know what section of the print book the class will be working from in advance in order to have the required Braille volume available to them, as it would not be possible to carry all volumes of all the books they would require in any given school day. Therefore a culture of awareness was essential during Maria Kelly's mainstream secondary schooling. This is exemplified in the following example

It was quite tough...things like organizing the right books because my history book was eighteen volumes and to organize the teachers to say what chapter they would be working from the next day so that I can have the book in...in secondary school they mightn't know and they will say oh we'll flick over to page X. I must say they (teachers) were super I really must credit them (Maria Kelly).

Lack of awareness by teachers and lecturers was experienced by some participants even when the relevant information regarding the participants learning and educational requirements had been made available. The following two examples demonstrate the positive and negative responses Anne experienced both in school and university when teachers and lecturers were aware of her requirements. They also suggest that Anne had resigned herself to the fact that the type of response she received was dependent on the individual concerned rather than any particular practice or policy within the institution

My Mum was good and she made sure that all my teachers were aware about my vision and all that and she gave them reports and stuff and some of them would be very conscious of it whereas others wouldn't. It just sort of depends on the person (Anne)

And

One of the lecturers photocopied notes for me, which was good...but the others they are not really interested like there is a lot of talk like all the lecturers got the...report (learning and academic needs report) (Anne).

5.4.9 Support Networks

Participants acknowledged the support they received from family and peers which helped to alleviate some of the challenges they encountered during their time in education. Anne is vision impaired and while she can now read standard print without too much difficulty, this was problematic for her when she was younger. To overcome this barrier, and to enable her to access print with greater ease, her mother frequently enlarged the print of the books she required. This is illustrated in the following example and demonstrates how support networks can impact on experience and outcome

Now I would read ordinary print but back then my Mum used to enlarge the books for me which was very helpful (Anne).

As Maria Kelly was blind she was dependent on getting reading material in an alternative format which included having books read on to tape often by members of her extended family as is evident from the following example. Without such support networks many participants (see also Joe's case study in chapter four) would have experienced significantly more barriers than they did when accessing the curriculum

...we did a lot by tape my aunt was very generous in reading a lot of what she had she is a teacher...and she read it on to tape and again I am very indebted (Maria Kelly).

John's experience of peer support was very positive for him and was particularly beneficial during his time in Third Level education when he encountered difficulties accessing particular aspects of the curriculum. One component of his course required that he use a statistical software programme which was inaccessible to John because of the visual nature of this programme, and the fact that this programme would not work in conjunction with the screen reading software John required. This is an issue that is further explored in chapter six. The impact of this was that without the support he received from his class peers he would not have been able to complete this module of the course. His experience of these supports from peers enabled him to overcome obstacles he encountered in accessing the curriculum, and as the following example illustrates rather than reinforcing dependence the manner in which this support was offered meant that John perceived that he was also supporting his peers

...it was very tough especially...when I was having issues with books or some modules not accessible like research in second year...that was an absolute disaster. I thought...I was going to fail but I passed it in the end because, myself and another student said we would do a joint project and the teacher accepted it so that was good in the end. I did all the typing he did the research...I basically typed the whole thing up he had done the research so he was happy and I was happy. I had learned from what he was doing (John).

5.4.10 Conclusion

This section examined the various supports and resources that were available to and utilized by participants. The section considered the positive and occasionally negative aspects of these supports and resources and how these were experienced by participants. It discussed some of the aspects that impacted on the provision of these supports and resources at various levels. It also indicated how policies, institutions and individuals contribute to how these were experienced by participants. The most salient aspects of these supports and resources and the pertinent literature are considered further in the next chapter.

5.5 Identity

5.5.1 Introduction

This section explores various aspects of identity including self-identity, expectations, proving ability, disclosure, difference/normality and transition to sight loss and, how these impact on educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities. It is apparent that people do not have a single identity rather one's identities can be recognized as multifaceted and fluid (Reeve, 2002; Vernon & Swain, 2002). Therefore, while all those who participated in this study were blind/vision impaired the majority did not claim an identity based on their impairment.

5.5.2 Self-identity

Vision impairment/blindness is an important element of identity and a small number of participants while having a desire to have more effective vision acknowledged that vision impairment/blindness was an integral component of their identity but was not their master identity. This is apparent from the following quote from Tom who lost a significant amount of his vision in his late teens and perceives that this has been significant in making him the person he is today

If I could have a magic button...that I could bring my sight back now yes I would press it there is no doubt. If I could press that button to bring me back to previous to finding my tumour...to finding it at an earlier stage where my sight wouldn't be as impaired would I press it no, the reason why I wouldn't press that button is because I have learned so much from what has happened to me to become the person that I am now and I am very happy with the person I am now (Tom).

Our identity and role in life can be subject to change depending on a number of factors including how we position ourselves in relation to others. The following excerpt from Niamh indicates the various identities she sees herself having depending on the circumstances she finds herself in. The most cogent part of this quote is how she perceives herself as a trainee having to act in a particular way in

order to achieve her objective. This also indicates that it was necessary for Niamh to do this to minimize the impact of negative societal attitudes. Society can identify one's impairment as their master identity

...sometimes you know I have my own family and friends I am just an ordinary person people know me and just take me as I am I have more of an identity through disability and advocating for everyone with disabilities and advocating for social change...so I have that identity and I suppose I have the identity of being a trainee pretending to be the same as everyone else because that's the only way of getting by (Niamh).

Identity can be an ambiguous thing to determine and for some of those who have some sight this can increase their uncertainty around their identity. This is apparent in the following example where Niamh explains that for the majority of her life, she did not perceive herself as having a disability identity, as she was generally able to conform to the norms of the sighted world. It is evident that it was only when within the course she was pursuing that her vision impairment became an issue. This resulted in her beginning to consider her identity differently indicating how societal perceptions can impact on experience and outcome

...my near vision is quite good so I always feel on the border line of having a disability and I am never quite sure of my identity depending on the context I am in...I didn't grow up with a disability identity as such and...I have only thought about it a lot more recently when in my professional training it has been questioned a bit I pretty much learned to blend in and adapt people think I can see a lot more than I can (Niamh).

Identifying oneself as a disabled person can also mean having to acknowledge that one require assistance in particular areas of their lives. Coming to terms with this and learning how to find a balance between independence and dependence can be quite challenging as is evident in the following quote. This excerpt demonstrates some of the inner conflicts experienced as a result of seeking assistance

I registered with disability support for the first time I got some of the entitlements that I am entitled to...I think it is really important to ask for help but I suppose I always had a fear that if I did that then I would start disenabling myself in some way or something (Niamh).

Societal attitudes to disability in general and vision impairment/blindness in particular, can impact on identity. Societal attitudes towards blindness are socially constructed. It is obvious from the next quote that Ted recognized this and that he did not want his vision impairment to be the factor that determined who he was and how he was perceived by others

I don't want it (visual impairment) to be something that people would define me by or just if they think visual impairment they think of me and...I think probably that people would have...whatever preconceived conceptions people would have...I don't want their opinions of me to be formed on that (Ted).

Some of those who participated in this research suggested that at times as a consequence of their vision impairment/blindness they perceived themselves as an encumbrance to family and friends. This perception can be reinforced by societal attitudes as is apparent in the following example

...one or two people that I wouldn't even call them friends anymore...they feel I'm a burden now I feel myself as a burden even on my friends that will tell me that I'm not a burden...sometimes I do feel like a burden (Tom).

This negative self-image can impinge on many aspects of an individual's life and can restrict or impede participation. The following excerpt illustrates how psycho-emotional disablism impacted on Lisa's experience. It indicates that this experience could inhibit her future participation in similar activities and demonstrates that psycho-emotional disablism can be a significant factor in disabled people's lives

I just hate group projects because I don't know I always kind of feel in a group...that the rest of the group always think you are the weakest link in the group kind of thing (Lisa).

Some of those who lost some or all of their sight in their teens or early adulthood recognized that their identity changed somewhat following this. The following quote from Martina indicates how when she availed of mobility training from a disability provider sometime after losing a considerable amount of her eyesight, she perceived herself as different to others availing of the same service. This excerpt illustrates how this impacted on experience

Martina: I went down learned how to use the stick absolutely hated it, absolutely hated it.

Patricia: Why was that?

Martina: Because I didn't think I belonged there.

The next quote again from Martina illustrates a subtle change in her identity which she had not envisaged happening. It suggests that she is not entirely happy with the outcome of this experience as she perceives it as restrictive

I find that I am having more in common which I thought I'd never ever say with people who can't see and I don't want to limit myself to that (Martina).

Many of those who participated in this study demonstrated resilience and determination. In the next quote Lisa indicates the importance of standing up for herself in order to achieve her goals. This illustrates how disabled people often achieve transition choices/opportunities in spite of the societal attitudes they encounter

I think you have to fight for what you want really because if you don't people will just decide for you (Lisa).

Resilience and determination were evident in many aspects of participants' lives and the following excerpt demonstrates how this has played an important role in Martina's life since she lost a significant amount of her eyesight

I just didn't want to go on half the time I didn't know how I was going to cope...but like I do cope and I am coping in a lot of ways.

5.5.3 Expectations

Expectations can be socially constructed. Many factors including institutions, environments and social relations can impact on expectations. Perceptions around disability can be a significant factor in this regard. The following excerpt demonstrates how the school John attended placed significant emphasis on extra-curricular activities and less emphasis on academia which to him indicated that the school had a low expectation for those who were blind/vision impaired. This illustrates how institutions can impact on expectations

...the expectations weren't as high...in that school...There was a lot of extra-curricular activities like pottery choirs singing and typing because I think at that time it was felt that people with a visual impairment or blind need as many options as possible which was good but then I think there was less of a focus on the educational side of it cause there was all these other things taking place (John).

The next example demonstrates how low expectations regarding ability resulted in Bob perceiving that he had experienced restrictions regarding what level he could take English at for his Leaving Cert Applied course. It also illustrates how Bob considered himself capable of doing English at ordinary level which suggests differences in expectations between Bob and his English teacher. This demonstrates again how provision can impact on expectation and how societal expectations impinge on experience and outcome

I got an honour in foundation level...English...I was finding it pretty difficult to prove myself to my teacher that I could do the ordinary level

*English cause I am pretty good at me English I think I am anyways
(Bob).*

The following quote indicates how one's perceptions around vision impairment can impact on expectations in a restrictive manner. The consequence of this is that it can impose restrictions on future transition choices/opportunities

I had to change everything like subject wise because there is no point in me doing Medicine in case my sight gets lower (Claudia).

It was apparent from the following quote that Paul has high but yet realistic expectations regarding his post-school choices. This indicates that his vision impairment is not a significant factor regarding these expectations. This attitude is in contrast with some participants who identified their vision impairment as being a barrier to particular life choices (see Claudia's quote above)

...when I leave...school I was thinking of many things...it's not a fact that there is not enough out there but there is too much out there and I don't know what to pick from. Its either Business and Law...they are looking for 480-520 points for that which is fairly high and by looking at it I think it is just slightly out of my range I think I am probably a 350 mark person and then I was also looking at Physiotherapy that's a 520 points (Paul).

Niamh's quote is illustrative of how while she recognizes that her vision impairment may be restrictive in particular circumstances, that due to the choices she made she has experienced minimal restrictions regarding her chosen career path. This quote also indicates that while Niamh recognises that there are constraints to what she can do in life, she does not perceive her vision impairment as something that will prevent her from pursuing whatever she desires to do with her life

...there are loads of limitations for me I haven't felt them because the kind of career I personally wanted to do was one I could do...there is very little in life I suppose that I felt I can't do (Niamh).

5.5.4 Proving Ability

People's preconceived assumptions of ability based on an individual's known disability can result in disabled people having to prove their ability primarily because of their disability. Feeling that one has to prove their ability and perceiving that one is being 'judged' because of disability can impact on an individual in a variety of ways and can impact on all aspects of an individual's life. For the purposes of proving how having to prove one's ability can impact on experience and outcome I am going to focus on how one participant experienced having to prove her ability within a professional training setting and how she perceived she was 'judged' because of her vision impairment. Niamh's chosen area of study involved professional training and she perceived that at the start her vision impairment was specifically focused upon to the exclusion of her abilities as is evident in the follow excerpt

I felt that I was seen as every other trainee minus good vision. I think everyone comes with strengths and weaknesses...and everyone has...different ones. So vision is one that I am not strong in but I might be strong in different ones and I don't really think that they see it in that kind of sense (Niamh).

It is apparent from the following excerpt that in order to enable Niamh to complete particular aspects of her training, she had to challenge the way in which some components of the training were 'normally' undertaken. This indicates how assessment barriers could impact on Niamh's ability to engage fully with components of her training. These accommodations did not change the course content as is evident from the following example but requiring such accommodations raised questions regarding her ability to perform particular tasks

...on this training...clinical competency issues came into question. They (supervisors) wondered could I do assessments, as part of my job you do quite standardised assessments and they have to be administered in the same way by every clinician...my argument has always been the way I do it will be different but the way the client does it should be the same so for example I may use a larger print or a different version of

font but the client hears it in the same way but it has been a challenge (Niamh).

The following excerpt demonstrates how lack of awareness and the premise that, tasks can only be undertaken in a particular way, resulted in Niamh experiencing both structural and attitudinal barriers when partaking in elements of her training. Evidence of assumptions of ability and lower expectations are apparent in this excerpt. It also indicates the challenges Niamh encountered when proving her ability to work within her chosen field of study as a consequence of her vision impairment

One supervisor felt that I couldn't work with children...she would question my assessment of a child I might say the child has self-esteem issues...she would have the exact same understanding of the situation so I had done it correctly but she would say did you see the tear in the child's eye... when you asked this question I didn't see the tear in the child's eye but I did intuit that the child was upset at that point which I felt was what I had to do but it was very hard to make her understand that it didn't have to be very detailed visual information to get that (Niamh).

The following example illustrates Niamh's desire to show that she was capable of pursuing her chosen career path without restrictions being imposed on her because of her vision impairment

I wanted to prove that I could qualify on the same level as everybody else obviously there was some accommodations that I needed but I did want to...do as much as everybody else to prove I can do the same...I didn't want it to be a case of well I don't do school visits because of my vision (Niamh).

In the next excerpt the power relationship that exists between a trainee and supervisor(s) are illustrated. It also demonstrates how Niamh perceived the consequences of challenging the system and, the negative impact which this had on her

...as I try to challenge some of those things it felt that I was challenging individuals and that was a very difficult situation to get in but I suppose it was really more social it is not against any one person...they (supervisors) assume things have to be done a certain way and it was hard to say well actually it is acceptable to do it this way. As a trainee you are in a very powerless situation because ultimately they (supervisors) have the power to stop me ever doing this profession (Niamh).

The following excerpt suggests that at times Niamh found it difficult to negotiate her workload with her supervisors. This was exacerbated by her need to prove her ability to fulfil her training requirements, and her perception that she was being appraised as a result of her vision impairment. The quote demonstrates that the situation improved over time due to increased supports within the college, and her impression that she had adequately demonstrated that her vision impairment did not hinder her performing specific tasks

...because the support from college was a lot better I felt stronger in saying to supervisors you know I am really happy to do that (particular tasks) but I need two week to prepare...and that got a bit easier I think because I felt less judged...maybe I had proved myself having got a very good evaluation on the year previous (Niamh).

Niamh experienced instances of conflict between wanting to challenge the system and recognising that sometimes remaining silent was the wiser option. She acknowledged that not challenging situations was not always easy, but accepted that in order to pursue her goals it was a sacrifice which on some occasions she had to make. As the following excerpts illustrate these instances pertained to her lack of vision and therefore the perceptions around her ability to perform particular tasks required within her training

I had to learn to keep my mouth shut a lot...I like to challenge things a bit but in life it's not always worth it...I decided for me succeeding and getting on professionally...it was what I decided to do but it was hard (Niamh)

I had another supervisor who I didn't question...he was incredibly supportive and I had learned to keep my mouth shut...he gave me a super evaluation but...he did say that he had been asked by my college specifically to assess you on your vision...to make sure that you can work with children...I knew we have core competence of profession and vision is nowhere on those core competencies no other trainees are assessed on that and I knew if I challenged that I would win but...if you alienate the person that is evaluating you...it's very hard to challenge those things (Niamh).

Niamh recognised that attitudes within the Department where she was a student had changed significantly during her time there. She also perceived that there was evidence of increased awareness among staff members. She believed that the introduction of disability legislation was an important factor in this respect as is evident from the following example. This indicates how policy can impact on experience and outcome

...things I think have changed a lot...they (college Departmental staff members) have gone out and educated themselves partly through the support of the Disability Service and it did open my eyes to the importance of legislation...it does help saying well under the Disability Act you are obligated to look at this, and that did make a positive change (Niamh).

Niamh acknowledged that the difficult situations she encountered during her training had probably been a valuable learning experience for both herself and those she worked with during her training. She believed that all concerned may not have gained as much if these challenges had not arisen. However, she was cognizant of the implications which completing the course a year later than her classmates had for her but she had resigned herself to this eventuality. This is evident in the following excerpt

...it has been a learning experience for both parties but it is a long term implication in my life I am behind the schedule of everybody else I am on a lower salary the salary scale has changed because I qualify a year

later I will be on a lower rate than everyone else for the rest of my life...but it was probably worth it in the long run as a learning experience. It is hard to say at the time but I think that you do learn a lot more in difficult times than when things go well (Niamh).

Assumptions around ability based on disability can impact significantly on all aspects of a disabled person's life. This can result in them experiencing barriers at all levels of society. Perceptions of being 'judged' because of disability and the subsequent feeling of needing to prove one's ability can have implications for an individual on many levels. How an individual manages these situations can also have significant implications and illustrates how societal attitudes impact on experience and outcome.

5.5.5 Disclosure

Disabling societies are not always conducive to facilitating disclosure (Matthews, 2009). Consequently disclosure can be perceived as problematic. Disclosure of one's vision impairment and concerns around disclosure were issues that arose for a number of participants. Many factors such as use of assistive technology, using a white cane or having a Special Needs Assistant can result in inadvertent disclosure of one's vision impairment which for some of those who participated in this research impacted on them in various aspects of their lives. The following example demonstrates the personal implications for Anne of using necessary assistive technology and how she found this difficult to cope with at the start

When I first started using Opti (assistive technology) I found it daunting using it going into lectures and everyone is staring at you going what's that? Or what are you doing? And I didn't like any of that (Anne).

Paul perceives that availing of a Special Needs Assistant/Personal Assistant would draw unnecessary attention to his vision impairment. This meant that during his secondary education he did not avail of this service. When he was planning his Third Level education options he recognized that he would require the services of a note-taker. The need to disclose in order to receive the necessary supports and resources required can be particularly challenging for those who vehemently try to

protect personal autonomy (Percival and Hanson, 2007). The following quote demonstrates how in an effort to ensure that as far as possible his vision impairment was not revealed to his prospective peers Paul approached the Student Disability Service within the colleges he applied to with this in mind. This excerpt illustrates how necessary provisions can be experienced negatively if delivered in an ineffective manner

...with the Disability Officers...I've explained...I don't want people to know I have an eye problem I don't want any special treatments anything different to anyone else...I knew that I needed notes to be taken...and I knew I wouldn't be able to do that...so I said...I'll take a note-taker...only if the person is not sitting next to me all the time or talking to me or whatever (Paul).

Previous experiences or perceptions around how people will react when they discover that someone is vision impaired can inhibit people from revealing their impairment when they initially meet new people. The following quote demonstrates how past experience has resulted in John being reluctant on occasion to admit that he is vision impaired. It also indicates how people perceive that they are treated differently following disclosure

I don't always tell them I am visually impaired straight off maybe I should be more honest but most of the time if they do find out they might react differently you know which has happened on a few occasions (John).

Feelings of self-consciousness and perceptions about how people will react were contributing factor around people not using a white cane even when they recognized that they needed to use one. The following excerpt indicates that while Steven uses a white cane around the resourced mainstream school he attends he is reluctant to use it in his own locality where he may encounter friends who are less aware of his vision impairment. Friends discovering that someone needed to use a cane was frequently given for reluctance to use a white cane. This demonstrates the importance that people place on being viewed in a particular

way by friends and may also indicate the strategies people use in order to be treated 'normally'. This is a topic that is taken up in the next sub-theme

...back home I don't really use my cane you know and I should....I never used it until I went to sixth class or fifth class so my friends didn't know about it...in boarding school they are trying to get me to use a cane...I use it here no problem but back home I think people might just say oh I didn't know he was visually impaired and stuff like that you know (Steven).

It is evident that disclosure can impact on individuals on a variety of levels but societal attitudes and perceptions around how people will react are significant factors around issues of disclosure. This topic is examined again in chapter six.

5.5.6 Difference/Normality

Campbell, (2008) and Shakespeare, (1996) among others assert that disabled people are socialised to think of themselves as inferior. The topic of difference and normality and how these were experienced were areas of concern, for some participants. Perceptions of being made feel different or being treated differently because of one's vision impairment were experiences that a number of participants recalled. The following quote indicates how Lisa experienced perceptions of difference and how this could impact on outcome

...the last thing you want is to be growing up being treated differently to everyone else, you want to be the same as everyone else and, have the same opportunities (Lisa).

Experiences of difference and normality can result from societal, institutional or attitudinal perceptions towards disability. The next excerpt demonstrates how institutional perceptions around vision impairment resulted in students who were vision impaired/blind having little or no disciplinary consequences for their actions due to their vision impairment/blindness. It also suggests that Paul perceived this to be unjust and an inappropriate way of being treated differently

I don't like this well your visually impaired it's all right you can be late for class or you didn't do your homework oh that's ok whereas someone without a visual impairment who didn't do their homework or are late for class well its 200 lines...I have said it myself to a few of the teachers if you want to punish me punish me I am no different from anyone else (Paul).

Perceptions of 'normality' or not being treated differently were also experienced by participants and these situations were viewed in a positive way by participants. The next quote demonstrates how Jenny who lost her sight in adulthood perceived being treated the same as her peers when she commenced a course in a mainstream setting sometime after losing her sight and how she saw this as a positive aspect of doing the course

...the great thing about that (a course) was that it was nothing to do with being blind...they accepted me and they didn't treat me like I was disabled (Jenny).

The following excerpt from John is an example of how he perceived feeling 'normal' when he entered Third Level education within a mainstream setting. Maria also identified this as being a positive aspect of going to university (see Maria's case study in chapter four). For John this feeling of 'normality' emerged when he realized that while he was dependent on his peers for assistance with certain activities such as reading, he was also able to assist them with their assignments as he was able to type fast and had a laptop at his disposal. This interdependence meant that John perceived that he was capable of contributing something to the relationship with his peers. This gave him a feeling of being 'normal'. The topic of difference and normality are examined further in the next chapter.

The students...offered do you want me to read to you do you want a hand with anything...there would even be deals you type my essay for me if I read it out to you we can help each other...I had a skill that they didn't have and then I needed them to help me...it was great because it was an equal relationship...it wasn't just the one way where I would be relying on them all the time and that was good. That was a great thing it

was my experience of mixing with people in mainstream...feeling that I fitted in and I was bloody 'normal' for want of a better word (John).

5.5.7 Transition to Sight Loss

Thurston et al. (2010), Norowzian (2006), and Baus (1999) among others have focused on the impact which losing one's sight has for individuals. A possible transition to sight loss was a concern for a number of participants. This was a definite probability for some because of the degenerative nature of their eye condition. The following quote is illustrative of the concerns that can be experienced by someone in this position, and indicates how experience can impact on outcome

Steven:...it (eyesight) has deteriorated and I was down about it but I was told not to worry about it. I am not fully blind yet so I was happy about that but it will deteriorate but it will take a long time it is not going to happen over the next two or three months.

Patricia: Ok but it is a concern to you.

Steven: It definitely is it plays on my mind already.

The desire that eyesight would not deteriorate was also apparent among some of those who had a degenerative eye condition. A hope for a cure was also evident among this group as is apparent from the following two quotes. The fact that these two participants were in the younger age group is significant in that they perceive advances in medicine to be a definite possibility to finding cures for their eye condition within their lifetime. This indicates how people born in different historical times are exposed to different opportunities

...you never know in the future they could have cures hopefully one day they will find a cure for RP (Retinitis Pigmentosa) (Claudia)

...there is still research going on so hopefully within the next ten years maybe I could see again (Steven).

A significant transition for some of those who participated in this research was that of losing most or all of their vision in their teens or early adulthood. Hospital visits and medical procedures often also became a significant part of their lives. The following excerpt from Martina suggests that she attended numerous doctors in a variety of hospitals in the hope that someone would be able to do something that would restore her vision. This quote also illustrates that during this time even though Martina had very limited vision, she did not see herself as a blind/vision impaired person and, did not believe that the blind/vision impaired world was something that she would have to live with long-term

Martina:...one doctor...said you are going to have to learn to do things in the...non-seeing world...up to that point I never classed myself as somebody who couldn't see after all those years of going to different hospitals, different doctors, different conferences I never ever once classed myself as partially sighted, or someone with a sight problem
Patricia: And did you think that you would get your sight back?
Martina: Oh yeah I always thought it was going to come back. It was always at the back of my mind something they do is going to make it come back something.

For participants the experience of how they lost their sight was varied but disbelief of the situation was frequently the initial response, and the expectation that somehow they would get their eyesight back was common among this group. Research by Thurston et al. (2010), Norowzian (2006), and Baus (1999) among others also indicate this as a common experience. The next excerpt is illustrative of this and demonstrates how Jenny perceived that when she recovered from the illness that caused her sight loss that her vision would also be restored

...it was absolutely unbelievably horrendous I would say and the truth is I really didn't believe that I was blind because my sight went within a very short space of time and very gradually...it was over the space of say two months where I just had severe headaches and I was very ill and I started to lose my balance and I actually ended up being in a coma so...truthfully I nearly died...I thought I was just really ill and if I got

out of that stage where I would say near death then I would be able to see again (Jenny).

For some, part of the disbelief process was not telling friends and family about their sight loss and not wanting anybody to know that they were blind/vision impaired. The following two quotes demonstrate this and indicates how in the early stages of Martina's sight loss she coped with the situation by not admitting it to people, which for her also meant not really admitting it to herself

So the way I used to fool people was unbelievable. I never told my family for a year for a full year that I had lost my sight to the extent that I did (Martina)

And

I used to walk down the road looking as if I was drunk...because I would be swaying in and out, in and out trying to make my way down in a blurred world. Right still thinking that I could see I think I was fooling myself more than other people or trying to fool myself (Martina).

The impact of this disbelief was often in the initial stages refusal to avail of the support services that were available to them, because in doing so, they would have to admit that they were blind/vision impaired and, that this was a situation that they would have to live with long-term. The next example is illustrative of this and indicates how part of this stage for Sean also involved not even articulating that he had lost his sight

...the Social Worker from my area called to the door she used to come every so often to see if there was anything I needed. I didn't want to be in contact...at all because the, idea of going blind I wouldn't even say that I went blind (Sean).

Most of these participants reached a level of realization regarding their vision impairment/blindness, the impact of which was availing of supports such as learning Braille, learning to use computers, daily living skills and mobility training.

These were available through Disability Service Providers that provided services specifically for those who are vision impaired/blind. This was generally their first involvement with such organizations and how these provisions were experienced varied. Most found aspects of these courses beneficial but found the overall experience of having to do them, and the manner in which they had to do them quite difficult. Some found that these organizations while providing services that were dedicated to people that are blind/vision impaired that the provisions available were not specifically tailored to meet the needs of the individual in question. Therefore one either availed of the provisions that were delivered in a particular way or else you did not avail of them at all. This is an issue that is also examined elsewhere in this thesis (see chapter four and chapter six). The following excerpt illustrates how Jenny who lost her sight in adulthood experienced this provision, and while acknowledging that parts of this course were beneficial to her it also shows the surprise she perceived at being placed in a classroom with people that had little or no formal education when she had already qualified as a teacher

I had to go into a classroom with people who had never had any schooling right who were partially sighted...or had gone blind...they just were not from my background and to me that was like absolutely shocking because I couldn't believe they were making me do literacy and numeracy when I had you know done my Leaving Cert and had been working and had been teaching you know so it was all absolutely horrendous but loads of it was very good as well and loads of it was really good (Jenny).

These organizations were also perceived by some as being hierarchical in nature and that attitudes they encounter in these organizations were often quite patronising. The following quote is illustrative of how Martina experienced one such organization. This issue is considered again in chapter six

Even the way they used to speak to us it was like I'm a grown woman and they were speaking to me as if I was some child. There were people there that did have different kinds of learning disabilities or

*whatever but they kind of categorise us all in the one kind of boat
(Martina).*

The next excerpt demonstrates how Sean found doing one of these courses to be a positive experience for him in that it gave him the opportunity to meet others who had lost their vision. This showed him that while aspects of his life would be different as a person who was blind he could still have a full life. This was an important transition point for him. It also illustrates how effective provision can impact on experience and outcome

I actually quite enjoyed it because when I first went...it was interesting I said I am not the only person who has gone blind there is other people out there life does go on you just have to get back up on the horse again and I just started making friends then and I kept in touch with them (Sean).

For those that experienced sight loss in their teens the transition required having to access the curriculum differently in order to continue with their education. For the majority of this group they did continue with their education either in the mainstream school they were attending prior to their sight loss or else they transferred to the resourced mainstream secondary school.

To illustrate some of the educational challenges encountered and issues around transition choices and opportunities for those who experienced sight loss in their teenage years I am going to focus on Ted's experiences to explore these aspects. Ted's eye condition did not become apparent until he was about fourteen years of age. Therefore it did not impact on his primary education in any way. The immediate impact his deteriorating eye condition had for Ted in his education was the changes he was required to make to enable him to access the curriculum. The following excerpt illustrates the adjustments necessary to ensure that Ted could continue to access the curriculum in a manner that met his changing needs. It also demonstrates some of the challenges he encountered when trying to access information in a timely manner

It caused a lot of issues with schooling...I used the standard approach buy a book...read it learn from it the standard way of education so I had to find an alternative way of doing that like getting books in a computer friendly format which was not an easy thing to do at the time...I took to recording classes so that I could just listen to it afterwards and learn pretty much word for word what the teacher said. After about a year or so I got a lot of practice on the laptop and I got to be able to type fast enough to be able to just take the notes myself (Ted).

The provisions that were put in place for Ted such as a laptop and reading materials in an alternative format enabled him to continue with his education in a satisfactory manner in his own locality. Like many of the participants in this study, Ted demonstrated resilience in how he approached the changes he was required to make to enable him to continue with his education. Ted did encounter significant barriers when trying to access aspects of the curriculum and like many participants the Maths curriculum proved particularly challenging for Ted as his sight deteriorated. This was one of the areas in which Ted demonstrated resilience as he found solutions to these problems that enabled him to access the Maths curriculum in an effective way. The resolution to the difficulties he encountered with the Maths curriculum was only possible in a visual way which demonstrates the problems that appear to exist with the teaching methodologies currently used for Maths.

As the evident in the next quote before Ted's sight deteriorated he had a desire to do Medicine after leaving school but now perceived that this career aspiration was no longer a viable option due to his vision impairment. This indicates how expectations can impact on transition choices/opportunities due to perceived access barriers

I pretty much always considered doing after my Leaving if I did well enough was Medicine but that...wasn't going to happen you could not be in surgery with a scalpel like you have just cut an artery oh crap! (Ted).

Following this decision the career options that Ted perceived as viable for him and in which he had an interest were Psychology and Law and is apparent from the next quote his chosen career path was determined after he did some work experience during transition year in school. This indicates the importance of the provision of this programme on experience and outcome

...there were two things...in my head being Law or Psychology. My fourth year we had...work experience so some investigating in Psychology I found that it would drive me insane if I went into that career so I went into Law and I am in first year at the moment and its going grand (Ted).

5.5.8 Conclusion

This section considered the various aspects of identity that were pertinent to those who participated in this study and indicated how issues around self-identity, expectations, proving ability, disclosure, difference/normality and transition to sight loss impact on educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities. There is a further examination of these issues as they relate to existing literature in the next chapter.

5.6 Summary

This chapter considered the pertinent themes that emerged during data analysis. These are the themes of access, transitions, supports and resources and identity. These themes were divided into sub-themes to facilitate an in-depth examination of how these issues impact on the educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities of those who participated in this research. It was evident that a variety of systemic, institutional and attitudinal barriers impacted on experience and these are considered further in chapter six and seven. The following chapter discusses participants' educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities and connects these with existing pertinent research.

CHAPTER SIX

Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine participants' experiences in relation to existing research. Following analysis of data it was deemed appropriate to examine additional germane research. Consequently, some of the literature referred to in this chapter was not introduced in the main literature review chapter of this thesis (chapter two). This chapter is divided into three primary themes which are identity, access and transitions. Under these headings a variety of topics are discussed that were pertinent to the educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities of those who participated in this research.

6.2 Identity

6.2.1 Self-identity

People don't have a single identity and as (Reeve, 2002; Vernon & Swain, 2002) among others acknowledge one's identities can be seen as multifaceted and fluid rather than fixed constructs. While the presence of impairment is an essential characteristic that enables someone to identify as disabled not all people who have an impairment identify as disabled and even when people identify as disabled they do so in a variety of ways (Reeve, 2004; Watson, 2002). Michalko (2001) states that people who are not vision impaired/blind are identified as people while he is identified as a blind person. As Watson, (2004: 108) argues there is a risk that disabled people cease being regarded as individuals because "...the commonality of their experience is all-important". Generally participants in this research did not claim an identity based on their impairment. This was also apparent in studies undertaken by Shakespeare, (1996) and Watson, (2002: 516) as having an impairment was a fact of life for many participants and therefore it was viewed as "...an everyday condition and as such does not impinge on their sense of self". But as Skär, (2003) acknowledged while one's disability can have little significance on how disabled individuals conceptualized themselves it can be a significant factor in how others conceptualize them. Therefore while people may not identify as a disabled person, society may identify them as such because society's construction of disability is powerful (Cohen & Napolitano, 2007; Shakespeare, 1996). Some participants in this research perceived that people

frequently placed significant emphasis on their vision impairment to the exclusion of any other identity.

6.2.2 Resilience and Agency

Expectations can be thwarted by societal attitudes towards disability. However, evidence of resilience and agency were demonstrated by a significant number of participants in this research and as research by Shah, & Priestly, (2011) and Peters, (2010) among others indicated resilience and agency were significant factors in enabling them to achieve life course opportunities even when faced with significant challenges at both institutional and attitudinal levels. Demonstrations of resilience and agency were particularly evident among many of those who encountered the greatest challenges in society including when trying to access components of the curriculum. These displays of resilience and agency often made the difference between being able to continue with a chosen subject or course, or being actively encouraged by others to pursue another subject or course. This demonstrates how individual resilience and agency were paramount in ensuring that participants could continue with their chosen line of study. There were also other examples of resilience and agency shown by participants often from an early age. Maria demonstrated this when commencing secondary education and was placed in what was perceived to be the lower of the two first year groups. She demonstrated significant resilience and determination by ensuring through dedication to her study that following her Christmas exams she was placed in the other first year group and she remained with this group for the remainder of her time in secondary education. This indicates the important role that resilience and agency played in determining an important transition phase in her life.

Participants including Lisa and Niamh encountered ableist attitudes which can impede meaningful access to the curriculum (Ashby, 2010). They demonstrated resilience and agency when they perceived the need to prove their abilities in ways that their non-disabled peers were not required to do in order that they could pursue chosen career paths. Often these preconceived assumptions of ability are based on an individual's known disabilities. This can result in disabled people having to challenge existing concepts of 'normative performance' (Ashby, 2010) to

enable them to access the curriculum in a meaningful way. As disability is frequently perceived as an obstacle to employability and productivity (Peters, 1996: 220), such ableist assumptions can make the world unwelcoming and inaccessible for disabled people (Hehir, 2007).

6.2.3 Difference/Normality

Norwich, (2008: 10) acknowledged that “Historically difference has been associated with social hierarchies of superiority-inferiority”. While Campbell, (2008) and Shakespeare, (1996) among others argue that disabled people are socialised to think of themselves as inferior. Societal attitudes towards blindness are socially constructed and consequently within a world where the majority of people are sighted the perception is that those of us who have different vision are perceived as “sub-normal” (Dale, 2010) or different in a negative way. The experience of being excluded from full access and participation in society conveys to blind/vision impaired people that they are perceived as different as they do not appear to fit into the ‘norms’ that have been constructed by society. So while those who participated in this research did not generally view themselves as different their experiences demonstrated that they were positioned as being different by society and this can impact on their sense of belonging in public and private arenas (Reeve, 2004).

Difference and normality and how these were experienced were areas of concern for many participants in this research and perceptions of being made to feel different or being treated differently because of one’s vision impairment were common experiences. It was apparent from this study that the majority of those who acquired their vision impairment in their teens and early twenties recognized that they were often treated differently following their sight loss and as research undertaken including that of Thurston et al. (2010: 105) indicated some participants in my research perceived that there was an “...absence of acceptance within society as a whole”.

Söderström, & Yiterhus, (2010) recognised that young disabled people want to be perceived as ordinary and all participants in this study wanted to be treated ‘normally’ and did not perceive themselves as different. As Watson, (2002: 516)

asserted they saw themselves as "...leading a normal life, of just getting on with things". While they recognised that they were different to non-disabled people in some ways these differences they believed should have "...little or no consequence" (Watson, 2002: 520) as Peters (1991: 194) argued "...our differences are what we all have in common". This was strongly articulated by some participants in this research including Lisa and Paul and while it appeared that many participants were "...creating an idea of themselves for themselves" (Watson, 2002: 521) they recognised that blind/vision impaired people are still treated differently and therefore negatively in many realms of society. This is often experienced through the patronizing attitudes they encounter and the lack of access experienced within education, employment and society generally.

6.2.4 Disclosure

As noted by (Matthews, 2009) disabling societies are not always conducive to facilitating disclosure as there are frequently negative connotations associated with disability. Consequently, as Wilton, (2006: 29) asserted many participants in this research "...experienced disclosure as a problematic issue" and therefore a number demonstrated agency in how and when they disclosed their impairment.

Lingsom, (2008) acknowledged that there is a profound difference between having visible and invisible impairments. Having a visible impairment provides others with "...privileged information and therefore power about that body" (Reeve, 2002: 499). Consequently, judgements can be made based on disability to the exclusion of all else. In contrast those with less visible impairments like some of those in this research who were vision impaired rather than blind were on occasion able to conceal their impairment and consequently 'pass as normal' in certain settings. This screening of impairment "...allows people with invisible impairments to construct identities undefined by their stigmatized impairment" (Lingsom, 2008: 5). Such concealment strategies can be both empowering and disempowering (Thomas, 1998). As French (1994) argued 'passing' can be stressful and as was evident in this research a number of participants were reluctant to use white canes in public as doing so would attract unwanted attention to one's vision impairment which they perceived could result in people identifying them negatively. It is possible that white canes could be identified as 'stigma symbols' (Goffman, 1990).

Steven who was in his late teens exemplified this quandary as he was relatively comfortable using a white cane in the environs of the resourced mainstream school he attended where people generally knew that he was vision impaired. In contrast he was reluctant to use it in his own locality where not everyone was aware of the severity of his vision impairment. It was also perceived by some including Paul that having a Special Needs Assistant could have the same result and the desire to be inconspicuous rather than drawing attention to himself meant that Paul did not avail of a Special Needs Assistant. Some other Participants including Maria were also reluctant to avail of particular forms of assistance as it drew undesirable attention to their vision impairment. Such quandaries around availing of necessary supports were also acknowledged by Shah, & Priestly (2011) as being of concern to disabled people in research that they conducted.

While disclosure was perceived as problematic the majority acknowledged that disclosure was necessary to obtain the supports and resources required to enable them to participate within institutions that were often not designed to meet their needs and therefore perceived that they had little options around disclosure in particular settings. This was also acknowledged by Kim, & Williams, (2012), Wilton, (2006), and Lynch, & Gussel (1996) among others as being a significant factor in disclosing impairment. As Percival & Hanson, (2007: 55) asserted disabled people whose impairment is less visible including those who are vision impaired may have to draw attention to their disability in order to 'justify' entitlement to support services which can be particularly problematic for those people who are reluctant to disclose their impairment. Paul who was preparing to commence his Third Level education exemplified this dilemma and while he had contacted the Student Disability Services in the college he intended going to he did so with the understanding that the supports that would be put in place for him would be done in a way that did not draw attention to his vision impairment among his peers. Dilemmas around disclosure demonstrate the on-going conflicts that a number of participants experienced. While for some it appeared that they were able to conform to a sighted world and therefore were able to conceal impairment in many settings for others they were left with no real alternative but to disclose impairment even though "...instincts are to fiercely protect personal autonomy" (Percival & Hanson, 2007: 55).

6.2.5 Transition to Sight Loss

A significant transition for some of those who participated in this research occurred when they lost most or all of their sight in their teens or early adulthood. As Thurston et al. (2010: 100), Norowzian (2006), and Baus (1999) among others asserted shock, disbelief and loss are often initial emotions experienced following diagnosis of a serious eye condition. These were also common experiences among some of this group in this research. In conjunction with these emotions there was often an expectation that somehow they would get their eyesight back. An aspect of this disbelief was often a reluctance to use a white cane or a refusal to seek assistance from Disability Service Providers because doing this would mean having to admit to themselves and others that they were blind/vision impaired and that this was a situation that they would have to live with long-term. Thetford et al. (2011) and Thurston et al. (2010) acknowledged this to be significant in this regard. In my research Jenny and Sean acknowledged that disbelief and an expectation that they would get their sight back were factors in their reluctance to seek supports and begin mobility training.

Over time participants in this group reached a level of acceptance regarding the permanent nature of their sight loss and began to engage with Disability Service Providers. There were mixed views among those who participated in this research regarding the supports and resources that were provided to them following sight loss. While some found the retraining that was offered to them by Disability Service Providers effective in meeting their needs others found that lack of appropriate information from some of the service providers was a significant factor in that the information offered was not always tailored to meet the needs of the individual concerned. This was particularly apparent among those including Mary who had a Third Level qualification and had been in employment prior to sight loss and found that there were little or no information or support available to her from Disability Service Providers to enable her to return to an appropriate level of employment based on her previous educational qualifications. As Thetford, (2011: 56) acknowledged many service providers fail to "...recognize that sight loss is part of a constantly changing social, emotional, physical and technological landscape". Consequently such service providers are not always appropriately prepared to meet the needs of those who require their services. This can significantly impact

on those who have acquired their sight loss and require supports particularly in the initial stages.

Martina stated that a lack of support and emotional understanding from those within the medical profession was significant for her following sight loss. Research undertaken by Thetford (2011) and Thurston et al. (2010) recognised this as relevant. This can be particularly important as hospital visits and medical procedures often became a significant part of their lives and a perceived lack of understanding and support can impact negatively on the transition from sight to sight loss.

Similar to findings in Thurston et al. (2010) a number of those in this research who had lost sight in their teens or early adulthood described a sense of loss in relation to independence and freedom. While some of this group continued to experience a sense of loss it appeared that this lessened somewhat over time as they acquired mobility skills. An aspect of losing independence and freedom for some of this group including Martina, Mary and Tom was that they perceived that they were a burden to family and friends. While Tom acknowledged that he did not think that his friends saw him as a burden Martina and Mary asserted that they were made to feel like a burden or a nuisance as a result of the attitudes of friends and family following their sight loss. This can result in psycho-emotional disablism and this can operate in conjunction with other disabling environments and can negatively impact on blind/vision impaired people.

Loss of future plans was also identified by Thurston et al. (2010) as significant following sight loss. Claudia and Ted whose eye condition was diagnosed in their teens both acknowledged that their future plans to go into Medicine changed following diagnosis as they perceived that this career path would no longer be a feasible option due to their sight loss.

As Thurston et al. (2010: 104-105) acknowledged "...sight loss impacted significantly and irrevocably on their life, necessitating a changed way of living and being" which was also apparent among those in this research who lost their sight in their teens and early adulthood. The majority of them appeared to have successfully made the transition from sight to sight loss with some including Tom

recognising that their sight loss was now an integral part of who they perceived themselves to be.

6.2.6 Summary

This section focused on a number of factors related to identity. Beginning by considering how society in general identifies disabled people primarily based on impairment factors. It then consider how resilience and agency were essential for many when accessing the curriculum, in enabling participants to make effective transition choices and when overcoming ableist attitudes. Difference and normality were then discussed and how in society difference and disability are perceived negatively and while those in this study may have perceived themselves as the same as their able-bodied peers, difference was experienced at various levels of society. I then focused on how disclosure was a significant factor for many participants and resulted in some that were vision impaired choosing not to disclose in all circumstances because of the perceived attitudes of others on discovering that they were vision impaired. However, many recognised that disclosure was necessary in order to receive the supports and resources necessary to enable them to participate more fully in society. I concluded this section by considered factors that impacted on those who lost their sight in their teens or early adulthood and indicated that shock disbelief and loss were common initial experiences for these participants. Overall this section indicates the continuous negotiation around identity that blind/vision impaired people experience within the private and public arena.

6.3 Access

The theme of access was significant in this study. Kim, & Williams, (2012: 846) study indicated that access was an important issue and that barriers to access were “associated with feelings of being limited or at a disadvantage”. Therefore, access is a matter of great concern at all levels of society for disabled people.

6.3.1 Access to Technology

UNESCO (2011: 5) acknowledges the important role that technology plays in the lives of disabled students as it can enable “flexible curriculum development”, assist “students with disabilities to participate as equals in the learning experience” (ibid) and help “to prepare them for life-long learning, recreation and work outside of school” (ibid). Increased access to and use of technology was apparent among those who participated in this research. As Hesketh, (1999) asserted no group stand to gain more from advances in technology than blind/vision impaired people but he also acknowledged that “Conversely no group might lose more from missed opportunities” (Hesketh, 1999: 17). This indicates the vital importance of appropriate and effective access to a wide range of technologies for this section of the population.

Fichten, Asuncion, Barile, Ferraro, & Wolforth, (2009: 543) acknowledged that in order to succeed in college “students must adapt to the extensive use of e-learning” that has become an integral component of learning environments in recent decades. They also asserted that “E-learning has the potential to facilitate the inclusion of students with visual impairments in classrooms of higher learning” (ibid) including giving them greater access to class notes and handouts. For some participants in this study challenges arose regarding accessing some of the e-learning resources that are on offer within Third Level institutions. As noted by Hopkins (2011) there was inconsistency in the timely provision of PowerPoint presentations and other written materials. This was apparent from some participants narratives including Alan who found that while provision was effective in some subject areas at the Third Level institution he was attending it was not consistent across all subject areas which meant that he was not always able to participate fully in all of his course work. This inconsistency can be challenging

and frustrating and as Matthews, (2009: 234) asserted making such things as PowerPoint presentations and class hand-outs readily available in a timely manner may mean that "...students who might otherwise require 'special' provision...may no longer have additional learning needs in that setting". This indicates how policy and provision can be either an enabler or a disabler.

Fichten, et al. (2009: 550) study found that "Many forms of e-learning that the participants with low vision found moderately accessible were not accessible to the participants who were blind". This is significant in relation to my research as some participants including Mary who is blind stated that she was unable to access things such as Web CT while at university. As many including Burgstahler, (2006) and Foley, & Ferri, (2012: 196) assert while e-learning is increasingly prevalent such systems "have been developed with little functional understanding of disability. This results in technology development that does not work for many people, including disabled people". So while e-learning has the capacity to facilitate inclusion "As long as software and hardware are designed and built without consideration for their accessibility..." (Fichten et al., 2009: 555) there will continue to be significant challenges for blind/vision impaired people. As Fichten, et al. (2009: 555) noted "students with visual impairments have a way to go before they can function independently in an educational environment that uses e-learning materials".

McDonnall, & Crudden, (2009: 330-331) state that the employment of assistive technology is "...a compensatory skill" as it allows vision impaired/blind people to undertake tasks that are frequently performed by sighted persons and while technologies generally and assistive technologies in particular have greatly enhanced the opportunities of blind/vision impaired people's increased participation in all areas of society challenges still arise. There is often an assumption that assistive technologies level the playing field (Foley & Ferri, 2012: 192) or the assumption that "when assistive technology is provided the aim of access is achieved" (Söderström & Ytterhus, 2010: 311) but it is not always as simple as that. Söderström, & Ytterhus, (2009: 311) acknowledge that assistive technology is generally "...reactive in design, and by the time accommodations are made mainstream technology has moved another step forward".

This was a concern for some of those who participated in this research and was a particular issue for Lisa and Mary both whom are blind and were required to use mainstream technologies as part of their course work. The consequence of this for these participants was often either that the tasks they were required to perform were very problematic when using their essential assistive technologies or else totally inaccessible as the assistive technologies they used were incompatible with the mainstream technologies. Foley, & Ferri, (2012: 195) acknowledge that there is an attitude which suggests that "...there is technology that is designed *for* disabled people and technology designed for *presumed* non-disabled people; and more importantly, the latter need not be accessible *because* of the former". Furthermore, they argue that "...technology is designed in ways that reflect taken-for-granted ideas about what constitutes normal" (Foley & Ferri, 2012: 192). If technologies are not going to remain "inaccessible or only partially accessible" (Foley & Ferri, 2012: 196) to blind/vision impaired people there is a need to understand disability and technology in a more appropriate manner and stop "conflating disability with assistive technology" (Foley & Ferri, 2012: 196) and offer "a vision of accessible technology, as opposed to assistive technology" (Foley & Ferri, 2012: 196). This would greatly enhance access to all aspects of technology for blind/vision impaired people. In relation to my study this would ensure greater access to a wider range of courses and reduce the barriers currently experienced by some participants within particular technology based courses. Greater cognisance by those who design mainstream technologies of the diversity of people using such technologies would also improve employment opportunities for blind/vision impaired people who currently experience difficulties undertaking particular tasks within employment settings. Tom was one of those in this research who indicated that he experienced challenges in this regard as some websites were inaccessible to him and also the accountancy programme he was required to use in his job was not compatible with his assistive technology. Consequently, reactive solutions to the problems he encountered were required to enable him to perform his job more effectively.

6.3.2 Access to Print Material

In modern society written information is an integral part of our daily lives. Subsequently, there is a “requirement for efficient and flexible reading strategies to participate and manage independent living situations” (Vik & Fellenius, 2007: 545). Print material is an inherent component of the education system and one’s ability to access it is essential in order to access the curricula. The challenges experienced by participants when trying to access print were problematic on different levels. Hesketh, (1999: 17) recognized that “The problems in education and employment of reading and writing if one has a visual impairment are complex but comprehensive solutions are called for to enable such people to work and study effectively”.

Difficulties reading handwriting is a common experience among many people with print disabilities including those that are blind/vision impaired. This was an issue for a number of those who participated in this study. This can pose challenges when teachers/lecturers write on blackboards/whiteboards or when hand written feedback on assignment is provided to blind/vision impaired students. As (Harpur, 2010: 121) acknowledged

While hand written comments throughout a paper are extremely valuable for most students, where the student has a vision impairment or another print disability the use of hand written comments can deny such students receiving vital guidance.

Issues around accessing hand written material were apparent among some participants and Mary spoke about an instance she experienced where she received hand written feedback on one of her assignments. Mary is blind therefore it was necessary that her parents read this feedback to her. As Mary is a lady in her early 40s this type of provision reinforces dependence. The difficulties experienced by those who were unable to read what teachers/lecturers wrote on blackboards/whiteboards could be alleviated if teachers/lecturers said what they were writing as they wrote on the board. Therefore, the methodologies utilised by teachers/lecturers can have enabling or disabling consequences.

Maria perceived herself to be 'lucky' in that she was able to read print. Consequently, she was generally able to read the majority of the reading material required for her degree and masters in print with the assistance of low vision aides. Some participants including Claudia required reading materials in a large font and inconsistency in receiving this material in the required format resulted in difficulties in accessing aspects of the curricula. With modern technology this is a relatively straightforward process. Tobin (2008) suggests that the delays and barriers experienced by vision impaired/blind people are caused by the lack, inadequacy or inaccessibility of information which were significant factors in this research.

No one medium was suitable for all vision impaired people in every situation and therefore various means were utilized to access print. Many of those in this study who had some sight and generally type assignments often reverted to handwriting when doing Maths as using a keyboard to represent mathematical equations was generally considered too problematic. This indicates that the means by which participants undertake assignments vary depending on what tasks are required of them in any given situation. It also demonstrates the importance of having a range of options at their disposal. Of the twenty three people that participated in this research ten were able to read print with the use of various assistive technology devices and/or low vision aides. This gave them somewhat greater access to printed materials than the remaining thirteen participants who were completely reliant on getting reading material in Braille or an alternative format.

6.3.3 Access to Braille and Alternative Formats

Michalko, (2001: 352) noted that "Reading, and doing so *with the eyes* is an assumption as universal to the classroom as is the raising of the hand". However, he also asserted that "There are many ways to read and even though visually is the dominant way, it is not the only way" (Michalko, 2001: 352-353). For the majority of those who participated in this research, alternatives to reading visually were essential. As Harpur, & Loudoun, (2011: 153) stated "Generally students with print disabilities cannot read standard print textbooks and require their textbooks converted into accessible formats".

While technological advances have made it increasingly possible to provide blind/vision impaired students with access to text books in accessible formats Harpur, & Loudoun, (2011) have asserted that it is still not clear if educational institutions are utilising these advances to the fullest. One of the primary challenges experienced by those in my research who were solely dependent upon receiving reading material in either Braille or alternative formats was the significant delays they encountered in receiving required reading material in appropriate formats. This was relevant for all those who required their reading material in a format other than ordinary print. This is a factor that has been identified by many including (Cole-Hamilton & Vale, 2000; Harpur, 2010; Harris & Oppenheim, 2003; Lewin-Jones & Hodgson, 2004; Royal National Institute for the Blind, 2002) as a significant concern. As Harpur, & Loudoun, (2011: 159) acknowledged students frequently receive reading material late. In their study “Only 50 percent of respondents indicated that first year students with print disabilities were provided with access to prescribed textbooks before the semester starts” and the RNIB (2002) stated that 47 percent of vision impaired students do not receive the required materials in an appropriate format.

For some including Joe, John and Maria Kelly a consequence of lack of provision of required reading material was that participants were dependent on others including family and friends to either read to them or assist them in producing reading material in alternative formats. This indicates again how ineffective provision reinforces dependence. The RNIB stated that of the written material that is readily accessible to the majority of learners, only 5 percent is similarly available to many counterparts with impaired vision (Bolt, 2004: 354). The lack of reading material and the delays in receiving reading material in required formats significantly restricts curriculum access and for some including Joe the lack of provision of material in Braille was apparent throughout his education. The impact of this for Joe was that he was heavily reliant on his mother who frequently had to read the required material to him which reinforced dependence.

While accessing print material in alternative formats has improved significantly in recent years due to improvements in technology the actual process of turning a written document into a format that can be utilised appropriately within an academic setting is still quite a time consuming process and requires appropriate

preparation on many levels including the individual level, academic staff level and support level to ensure that the barriers experienced by those who require their text books in alternative formats are minimised. Lewin-Jones, & Hodgson, (2004: 36) asserted that “One of the biggest issues that VI students always raise is the lack of preparedness of institutions in providing such things as hard copy on time” which as Harpur, & Loudoun, (2011: 153) acknowledge is significant because “students with a print disability need timely access to the textbooks required for their courses if they are to compete with the wider student cohort on a relatively equal footing”. Producing a textbook in an alternative format is not simply a matter of scanning a book and handing the scanned material over to the blind/vision impaired student as Harpur & Loudoun, (2011: 156) recognised

Students do not just read textbooks from cover to cover. Students are required to navigate the textbook so that they can identify footnotes or endnotes, read prescribed pages or pinpoint pages within the text. The latter requirement is especially important as all faculties instruct students to use pin point referencing in assignments which requires students to be able to identify what page a quote comes from.

Therefore as Lewin-Jones and Hodgson, (2004) acknowledge the reproduction of written material in accessible formats can be very time consuming and labour intensive. Harpur, & Loudoun, (2011) suggest that reading lists should be finalised at least six weeks prior to the start of a semester but they also recognise that enforcing such procedures is difficult. This indicates how policy and provision can significantly impact on blind/vision impaired people’s ability to perform on a relatively equal footing with their peers. As Harpur, & Loudoun, (2011: 154) asserted “...students with print disabilities continue to experience barriers which the wider student cohort does not confront”.

Similar to what emerged in Vik, & Lassen, (2010) the majority of those in my research who accessed reading material in alternative formats primarily used audio formats for this purpose. This was not always through choice but was a consequence of the lack of available reading material in Braille. Some participants including John, Lisa, Maria Kelly and Steven indicated that Braille was their preferred format for reading as they perceived that this format enabled them to

learn in a more effective manner. Vik, & Fellenius, (2007) asserted that there are limitations to accessing written material in recorded format and state that this medium is not equal to written language. The use of, and access to Braille in Ireland has declined over time for a variety of reasons including increased access to technology and the cost of producing reading material in Braille. Currently the Department of Education and Skills are considering discontinuing teaching Braille to young children. The impact of this has implications on a number of levels as audio formats are not always the most appropriate means through which to learn. The discontinuation of teaching Braille could both limit one's ability to access reading material in a chosen format and significantly restrict one's choice to learn Braille if desired.

6.3.4 Access to the Curriculum

Khadka, Ryan, Margrain, Woodhouse, & Davies, (2012: 183) assert "Vision plays an important role in education and learning in children and young people" and as they noted "Visual demands increase significantly as children progress in school because of the increased work load and a progressive reduction in print size...". Consequently this places an "extra burden on children and young people with a visual impairment in school" (Khadka et al., 2012: 183). These appeared to be a factor for those who were vision impaired and were able to read print as the majority of this group did not generally appear to have encountered significant access barriers to the curriculum at the primary school level of education. However, Maria whose eyesight was very limited, acknowledged that print size decreasing as she entered first class in primary school resulted in her beginning to lag behind her peers and that this was a contributing factor when the decision was taken to send her to a special school. A number of participants indicated experiencing greater challenges as they progressed through the education system because of the increased workload. Print size was significant in this regard too as a number of participants indicated that the heavy workload resulted in tiredness which made it more difficult to read small print and not all participants had ready access to print material in alternative formats.

A social model perspective argues that there is a need to reduce the systemic barriers that obstruct disabled children "...from gaining access to the same

academic benefits as other children” (Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2010: 702). Many including (Powell, 2003; Rieser, 2003; Rioux & Pinto, 2010; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010) acknowledge that teaching and learning practices can present significant barriers to disabled students’ learning. This appeared to be a significant factor for many participants in this research as there appeared to be an emphasis on imparting information through visual means which were often not available in accessible formats when required and therefore access to the curriculum was restricted. A “diversity of flexible and supportive teaching strategies” (Matthews, 2009: 233) should be common practices at all levels of education. Many including Nutbrown (1998) and Goode (2007: 47) assert that “...access to learning and teaching needs to be both integrated and differentiated”. Nutbrown (1998: 173) states that it is the responsibility of “...teachers, schools and government to ensure that *all* children have the experience of education which enables them to learn and develop to their fullest potential”. Shah (2006: 208; 2007) and Burgess (2003: 429:430) recognized that for some young disabled people curriculum choices were significantly curtailed due to “poor access to the curriculum and the disabling environment, including attitudes of teachers”.

It was apparent from this research that inadequate differentiation of the curriculum restricted access for some and resulted in other participants having to “forego certain activities and classes” Shah (2006: 208; 2007). This included practical subjects such as Woodwork and Technical Drawing and one participant indicated that she was prevented from doing French as the school perceived that she would not require French once she had left school. This demonstrates how attitudes can prevent access to the curriculum. Inadequate differentiation of the curriculum meant that Lisa perceived it necessary to take ordinary level Music rather than honours Music as there was a greater emphasis on reading and writing music at honours level. This she was unable to do in a satisfactory manner as she was blind and had never been given the opportunity to learn Braille music and had no satisfactory alternative means by which to do this component of the subject.

Franklin, Keil, Crofts & Cole-Hamilton (2001) found that Geography, Science and Physical Education (PE) were less accessible than other subjects for the blind/vision impaired people who participated in their research. While some of those who participated in this research indicated that they experienced significant

barriers in relation to Physical Education as the curriculum was not generally sufficiently differentiated to meet the needs of blind/vision impaired pupils in the majority of mainstream schools attended. The barriers regarding access to the Geography curriculum had been reduced primarily because of the availability of modified exam papers which the majority of participants availed of and science appeared to be relatively unproblematic. Some of the younger participants in this research did the Leaving Certificate Applied course rather than the traditional Leaving Certificate and as the former is more vocational in nature and has more ongoing assessments this may have also contributed to some participants experiencing fewer access barriers to particular subjects. While this is a very worthwhile programme it does limit post-school choices and opportunities and should only be pursued if it truly is considered to be the best option for a student.

One of the primary areas of the curriculum where the majority of participants experienced significant access barriers was in relation to the Maths curriculum. This has also been acknowledged by many including AHEAD, (2008), Karshmer & Bledsoe, (2002) and Cahill, & Linehan, (1996) as being significant for blind/vision impaired people. Cahill, & Linehan, (1996) and AHEAD, (2008), among others acknowledge the importance of Mathematics and the significance of this subject to gain entry to Third Level education. Consequently the difficulties experienced by blind/vision impaired pupils when trying to access the Maths curriculum is of great concern. Maths is generally presented in a visual, two-dimensional, and nonlinear form (Cahill & Linehan, 1996) which results in access barriers for vision impaired/blind people. As Karshmer, & Bledsoe, (2002: 471) asserted "Reading and writing mathematics is fundamentally different than reading and writing text". One of the main reasons they gave for this is that "Text is linear in nature while mathematical equations are two dimensional" (ibid, 471). Cahill, & Linehan, (1996) indicated that blind students encountered greatest difficulty when accessing the Maths curriculum and that this may be due in part to the confusion with Braille notation that can be experienced by those who are unable to access the Maths curriculum through the medium of print. Another factor that was identified by Karshmer, & Bledsoe, (2002: 472) of significance was that the majority of Maths teachers do not know Braille Maths notation.

These were relevant factors to participants in this research where generally only those that attended a special school or a resourced mainstream secondary school had access to teachers that were familiar with Braille. This meant that those who attended mainstream schools in their own locality generally had no one available to them that could read Braille or enable them to write complex mathematical equations in a satisfactory manner. This was a particular challenge for Lisa and Joe who were both blind. While Lisa struggled with the ordinary level Maths curriculum Joe undertook to do Maths at higher level as he perceived that aspects of the higher level Maths curriculum was less visual than aspects of the lower level Maths curriculum. Cahill, & Linehan, (1996) noted that it is very unusual for blind/vision impaired pupils to do higher level Maths. Joe took this decision even though he had been strongly advised by both teachers within the school and his visiting teacher to give up Maths altogether. Joe continued with higher level Maths because he expected that he would go to university and therefore did not want to restrict his future opportunities. In contrast Maria who attended a special school was put in a position where she had to make the decision between doing Maths or History the latter being her best subject. She took the decision to drop Maths even though she perceived Maths to be of great importance for future life choices. This may indicate how differences of expectations impact on future opportunities.

While the majority of participants encountered substantial barriers accessing the Maths curriculum one participant who was vision impaired and was able to work through the medium of print appeared to excel at Maths and took the decision to do Maths at Third Level this is unusual for blind/vision impaired people.

While the majority of participants did Maths a number of the younger age group took Maths at foundation level which immediately limits post-school choices and opportunities. While, foundation level Maths may be appropriate for some students it should not be the main option offered to blind/vision impaired students when decisions regarding Maths are being considered.

The issues around the inadequacy of Braille for Mathematics, teachers not having the relevant training to impart Mathematical information to blind/vision impaired pupils, expectations regarding students ability and that until recently in Ireland “There has been little development in the process or pedagogy of teaching

Mathematics” (AHEAD, 2008: 36) are all contributing factors to the access barriers to the Maths curriculum experienced by those who participated in this research.

Access barriers were often dealt with in a reactive rather than a proactive manner. This Hopkins’ (2011) indicated was a concern and asserted that the “challenge...is to make staff internalise inclusivity as a general guiding ethos rather than something that is tagged on to a disablist curriculum as a reaction to an excluded student” (2011: 723). An example of this was experienced by Lisa when she was unable to participate in practical subjects such as Woodwork which due to the policy in her school were compulsory subjects. She was obliged to sit in on whatever class her twin sister was doing during these class periods. Rioux, & Pinto, (2010) among others ascertain that a barrier-free environment is paramount for greater participation and Vickerman, & Blundell (2010: 30) asserted that staff, need to “...commit to facilitating a barrier-free curriculum”. There was evidence in this research that barriers are still experienced by blind/vision impaired students at all levels of the education system.

Goode (2007: 41) noted in her study that participants had to develop appropriate means to articulate their needs effectively to academic, administrative and support staff. This was also apparent in this research as a number of participants including Claudia, Lisa Maria Kelly and Niamh had to frequently manage their learning environments by having to persistently remind teachers/lecturers about their access requirements. This was also recognised as significant by Goode (2007) and Hopkins (2011: 721) who acknowledged that students in that study had to “fight bureaucratic rules in order to get their needs met” and demonstrate “overt resistance” (Hopkins, 2011: 723). In my research Lisa and Niamh were two of the participants that had to demonstrate “overt resistance” and “fight bureaucratic rules” in order to ensure that they could access their chosen courses at Third Level. Hopkins (2011: 721) stated that while “this kind of overt resistance is admirable, it makes you wonder how often students just sit back and suffer in silence”. This is something that would also be of concern in this research particularly for those participants including Maria and Paul that were hesitant about drawing attention to their impairment. As Goode (2007: 42) noted disabled students “can become ‘invisible’ if/when their needs are not met” resulting in them being “disabled by the environment from full participation and ‘disappear from

view”’. She goes on to state that “when they have to go out of their way to make their needs known they become ‘extravisiible’ in a negative way” (Goode, 2007: 42). This was evident among some participants in this research including Maria Kelly and Niamh who had to challenge the system to get their needs met which sometimes resulted in unfavourable attention being drawn to them. Madriaga (2007: 401) indicated that “Disabled students have to contend with issues that non-disabled students may not experience”. Having to make the choice whether one makes themselves ‘visible’ or remain ‘invisible’, which some of those who participated in this research were required to do, is generally something that most non-disabled students do not generally have to contend with. Connected to this is the concept of psycho-emotional disablism (Reeve, 2002, 2006) which was also experienced by some participants in this study. This was sometimes evident among those that had to make repeat requests in an attempt to have their needs met which can result in feelings of frustration and being made to feel like a nuisance. This was particularly notable in Maria Kelly’s narrative who stated that a member of staff within the Department in which she was studying asked her if she was aware of the amount of ‘stress you cause the staff’. This type of psycho-emotional disablism can result in people attempting to become as ‘invisible’ as possible and for Maria Kelly meant that she became somewhat hesitant in asking to have her needs met.

Petrou, Angelides, & Leigh, (2009: 439-440) noted many children can experience marginalisation caused by “Certain actors within schools, communities and local and national policies act as barriers to learning and participation”. Furthermore, factors of marginalisation can relate to “curriculum, school or classroom organisation, assessment, or more generally, to cultures, policies and practices” (ibid) and this was apparent for some of those who participated in this research.

6.3.5 Access to Supports

It is paramount to recognize that blind/vision impaired children and young people are not a homogeneous group. Therefore it is imperative that they are seen as individuals with unique needs and that the supports they require can vary depending on situation and location (Dale, 2010; Douglas et al., 2009). The majority of those who participated in this research received a range of supports

and many of these provisions were essential to enable participants to access the curricula more fully. As AHEAD, (2008: 26) acknowledged accommodations and supports are necessary particularly “...within a mainstream educational system which is designed around the learning needs of children with full sight”.

6.3.6 Access to the Visiting Teacher Service

In Ireland the visiting teacher service for blind and vision impaired children and young people was established in 1978 (Douglas et al., 2009). The visiting teacher service is available from time of referral through to Third Level education. This service provides a range of supports to ensure that the needs of the child or young person are met. The visiting teacher service can be an integral part of the various transition stages experienced by blind/vision impaired children and young people.

Overall those that participated in this research perceived the supports they received from the visiting teacher service to be of benefit throughout the various stages of their education. Participants engaged with this service to varying degrees throughout their educational trajectories with some participants receiving most support around preparation for state examinations or when their eyesight deteriorated. This indicates how the diverse range of supports, the continuum of supports and flexibility which the visiting teacher service provides is an important aspect of this provision. It appeared that not all participants received the level of support they required from the visiting teacher service. This was particularly apparent in Maria Kelly’s narrative as she perceived that supports provided by her visiting teachers were not adequate to meet her needs and she stated that it was necessary to get the required supports from others including family and friends. This indicates that inconsistency in provision could have adverse effects on the educational experiences of blind/vision impaired children and young people that do not receive the level and range of supports from this service necessary to meet their individual needs.

6.3.7 Access to Resource Teachers

A number of participants in this research received additional learning support from resource teachers and this provision was often perceived as essential for

participants to enable them to access components of the school curricula. While participants received supports in a number of subject areas Maths was the prominent area in which participants required this support. In Ireland pupils identified as vision impaired are allocated a maximum of 3.5 hours per week from a resource teacher within mainstream primary education and they generally are entitled to the same allocation of hours within mainstream post-primary education (Douglas et al., 2009). The allocation of these resource hours enabled participants to access more fully aspects of the school curriculum where they encountered greatest barriers. The experience for those that had access to a resource teacher either in mainstream schools in their own locality or within the resourced mainstream school that a number of participants attended was positive. This indicated how one-to-one teaching or teaching in small groups can enhance the learning experience of blind/vision impaired students particularly in some subject areas such as Maths where particular challenges were experienced. It was evident that the resource teachers within the resourced mainstream secondary school generally had additional teacher training targeted at meeting the needs of blind/vision impaired children and young people. However, it was not apparent that resource teachers in other schools had this specific additional training. The impact of this additional teacher training appeared to be that the teaching methodologies utilized by these resource teachers were most appropriate to meeting the individual learning needs of blind/vision impaired pupils.

6.3.8 Access to Special Needs Assistants/Personal Assistants

None of those who participated in this research indicated that they had a Special Needs Assistant during their primary education. However, a number of participants had a Special Needs Assistant while in secondary education and some also had a Personal Assistant/Academic Assistant during their time in tertiary education. In Ireland many vision impaired/blind children and young people in both mainstream and special education settings receive classroom supports from SNAs whose primary function is often perceived as being there to provide a care role rather than a learning support role (Department of Education and Science, 2007; Douglas et al., 2009; Douglas et al., 2011). Generally it is the latter that blind/vision impaired children and young people require most. This discrepancy between what an SNA is perceived to be employed to do and what the blind/vision

impaired child or young person actually requires of an SNA can prove problematic. As Rutherford, (2012: 760) argues SNAs are often perceived “as the ‘solution to inclusion’, the resource upon which students’ entry to the (compulsory) education system depends”. To ensure that the supports offered by an SNA are most effective in reducing the barriers experienced by blind/vision impaired children and young people their “...duties should be modified to accommodate the particular needs of the student” (Department of Education and Science, 2007: 84). However, this was not always apparent among those in this study who had an SNA during their education as some perceived the supports they received as inappropriate and did not meet their needs in an effective manner.

Research undertaken by (Khadka et al., 2012; Mortier et al., 2011; Rutherford, 2012) among others indicates that additional surveillance and control can be experienced by those who have an SNA and this was apparent in my research. The “...physical proximity of the support persons” (Mortier et al., 2011: 213) can be significant with regard to this perception of surveillance and control. The presence of an additional adult in the classroom can also result in segregation and isolation from peers (Khadka et al., 2012; Mortier et al., 2011; Rutherford, 2012) for students that have an SNA. This was also evident among some of those in my research including Joe and Maria Kelly who identified the presence of their SNA as being a barrier to peer and social interaction. Therefore, as Rutherford (2012) noted it is imperative to assess the benefits of having an SNA against the social implication of such supports.

Mortier et al. (2011) acknowledge that children and young people should have the opportunity to evolve from being only recipients of supports to becoming actively engaged in the development of their own supports. However, Mortier et al. (2011: 215) stated that “...even though the children had clear ideas about their own preferences regarding supports, none of them had been able, or been encouraged, to express any choice in whom or how and for what they received support”. This was also evident in my research for participants during secondary and tertiary education. This can significantly limit independence and in many instances reinforces dependence. Maria Kelly was one of those in this research who was allocated an SNA during her secondary education in a mainstream school and also had a Personal Assistant/Academic Assistant during her tertiary

education but was never actively involved in the decision-making process around her required supports. Consequently, when Maria Kelly experienced difficulties with the supports she was receiving she did not always feel in a position of power to satisfactorily negotiate with those providing her with assistance. Lack of consultation regarding the supports they require disempowers individuals.

Lisa was another participant who experienced difficulties in relation to the supports she received during periods of her education particularly when institutions insisted that she required a Personal Assistant with her at all times. When she commenced a course in an Institute of Technology where the policy was to encourage disabled students to take an active role in the decision making process regarding their support requirements she found that she was actively involved in the consultation process regarding her supports. This gave her greater power regarding what supports she received and from whom she received supports. This increased her independence and reduced unnecessary dependence indicating how policy and provision can have enabling and disabling consequences.

Rutherford, (2012) and Douglas et al (2011) assert the necessity that assistants should be given adequate and appropriate training that would enable them to effectively meet the needs of the individuals they are employed to support. However, this research indicates that there was absence of appropriate and adequate training offered to those providing assistance for some participants. This was particularly evident for Maria Kelly, Martina and Lisa who were all heavily reliant on getting reading material in alternative formats and as Hopkins (2011) indicated there was evidence of inconsistency regarding the level of assistance provided by assistants. This places those that are dependent on such supports at a disadvantage when compared to those that are not so reliant on such supports. Rutherford, (2012: 760) noted assistants can be "...part of the problem and/or part of the solution to the educational inequalities experienced by many disabled students". Therefore, it is vital to provide assistants with the relevant training and also to clearly define their role so that they can effectively meet the needs of those individuals they are employed to support.

6.3.9 Access to Exam Accommodations

In modern society public examinations are an integral component of most education systems. However as Douglas, et al. (2011) acknowledged standard examination formats and procedures may pose particular challenges for vision impaired pupils resulting in them being unable to demonstrate their abilities under standard examination conditions. A wide range of exam accommodations were utilized by participants in this research. Not all participants availed of the same accommodations in all situations. This indicates that the same exam accommodations are not always suitable in all exam situations. This was indicated by a number of participants including Alan who acknowledged that while he generally typed exams he did not avail of this accommodation when doing Maths as typing answers proved too challenging in this subject. It was also evident that some but not all participants availed of a scribe which demonstrates the diverse range of needs among those who participated in this research. As acknowledged by the Department of Education and Science, (2007), and Steer, et al. (2007: 170) accommodations are intended to level the playing field for blind/vision impaired people so that they can "...show what they know, without being impeded by their disabilities".

Modified examination papers were availed of by participants in particular subject areas. This meant they received alternative 'text only' questions or components of the question in an alternative format where diagrams, pictures, maps etc. were an integral part of the exam paper. Consequently, participants were able to access more fully aspects of the examination that may otherwise have been inaccessible to them. This demonstrates how policy and provision can have a positive impact on enabling blind/vision impaired pupils to participate in aspects of the school curricula that were previously considered inaccessible as a result of their impairment. This indicates the significance of such reasonable accommodations for disabled people which are intended "...to facilitate equality of participation in the education system for these persons and to ensure that they achieve appropriate learning outcomes" (Kinsella & Senior, 2008: 653).

6.3.10 Access to Service Providers

The majority of those who participated in this research had varying degrees of contact with service providers including two national charities that offer supports and services to blind/vision impaired people. A number of participants had also undertaken courses with a large non-Government training organisation.

Experience of these service providers varied with participants acknowledging that some of the individuals that worked within these organisations provided effective supports but a significant number of participants articulated that the hierarchical nature of these organisations and the charity model attitude that prevails within some of these service providers was problematic.

Drake (1996: 150) noted that charities became progressively more powerful throughout the twentieth century and the perception that these charities are “altruistic enterprises” that were established to care for disabled people has consequently resulted in their position in society being “...all but unimpeachable” (ibid). The implications of this is that while such charitable organisations generally have the support of the non-disabled public the aims of these service providers do not necessarily concur with the wishes of the disabled people that are availing of their services (Drake, 1996). My research indicates that when individuals sought supports from some of these service providers they could only do so within particular parameters that were determined by the service provider. These parameters do not always meet the needs of those requiring the service. As Finkelstein, & Stuart, (1996: 173) argued the function of service providers should be “...to *provide* services and allocate resources which would enable the attainment of life-style goals which the user has identified as most appropriate to his or her personal circumstances”. However, my research suggests that not all service providers offer supports and services in a way that most appropriately meets the needs of the individual in question. Finkelstein, & Stuart, (1996) acknowledged that disabled people are still frequently absent in any meaningful way from the decision-making process regarding the planning and delivery of the services they require. This further disempowers individuals from challenging the way in which supports and services are provided by service providers.

The way in which some service providers portray themselves through the media often places a heavy emphasis on the charity aspect of the organisation. The

assumptions underpinning these images often depict disabled people as helpless, dependent and pitiable. A number of participants in this research perceived differences in how service providers represent blind/vision impaired people through their media advertising with one service provider appearing to portray a negative representation of blind/vision impaired people with an emphasis on dependence and pity while the other main service provider portrayed blind/vision impaired people in a much more positive light where independence was promoted. Participants indicated that these attitudes were prevalent within the different service providers and that the one that depicted a more positive image of blind/vision impaired people in the media was also the one that was more flexible in how they met the needs of those availing of their services and also facilitated greater independence.

6.3.11 Summary

This section considered the pertinent issues around access for participants in this research. I began by discussing access to technology and signalled the challenges experienced by some participants particularly when trying to access mainstream technologies using assistive technologies. It was apparent that mainstream technologies are often developed without sufficient thought to the diverse needs of those using these technologies. Furthermore, there can be an assumption that assistive technologies are the solution for those that encounter difficulties with access. Access to print material noted the difficulties that blind/vision impaired people can encounter when handwritten feedback on assignments is provided and how this can reinforce dependence. I then focused on access to Braille and alternative formats and demonstrated that a lack of provision of required reading material was significant for those participants that were unable to read print and dependence on others for help accessing reading material was significant. Access to the curriculum was then considered and focused on how ineffective differentiation of the curriculum can significantly restrict or prevent blind/vision impaired people from participation. The difficulties in accessing the Maths curriculum were considered and indicated that inadequacy of Braille for Mathematics, teachers not having the relevant training to impart Mathematical information to blind/vision impaired pupils, inadequate or inappropriate teaching and learning methodologies and expectations regarding students ability were

significant factors. This section also indicated how some participants were required to manage their learning environments to ensure that their access needs were met appropriately. This often required fighting bureaucratic systems which were not designed to meet their needs resulting in increased negative visibility.

This section concluded by considering the wide range of supports that were available to participants and indicated that many were compensatory supports which were necessary as the existing education and employment settings are not designed around the needs of blind/vision impaired children and young people. It was evident that the continuum of supports and the diverse range of supports offered by the visiting teacher service were generally viewed positively by the participants. A number of participants received additional learning supports in different subject areas from resource teachers and it appeared that this support was most necessary in relation to the Maths curriculum where a number of participants experienced significant challenges. Therefore these supports were essential to enable participants to access the curriculum more fully. It was evident that some of the supports that participants were allocated were not always effective or appropriate in meeting their individual needs in all situations. It appeared that because of lack of consultation regarding these supports with the individuals concerned blind/vision impaired children and young people were expected to accept these supports as passive rather than active agents. This was also apparent with regard to the supports and services provided by service providers where blind/vision impaired people are frequently not enabled to be proactive in determining how the supports and services they require are delivered.

6.4 Transitions

This section considers a number of transition stages that were pertinent to participants and will explore some of the salient aspects of these transitions. Transition stages are neither straightforward nor linear processes and this was indicated by the experiences of participants in this research.

6.4.1 School Transitions

In Ireland the educational provision for vision impaired children within special schools began at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Department of Education and Science, 2007). Societal changes in the early 1990s resulted in the beginnings of a shift “away from the segregated model of provision to one of access to and inclusion in mainstream schools” (Department of Education and Science, 2007: 13). Shah, & Priestley, (2011: 12) recognised the importance of acknowledging that “people born in different historical times are exposed to different historical worlds and opportunity structures” that impact on the choices and chances available to them in their lifetimes. This was apparent at different levels in this research beginning with the type of school available to participants. For those in the older age groups, special schools were the norm as society perceived this to be the most appropriate type of provision for blind/vision impaired children. Inadequate provision within mainstream schools was also a significant factor at that time. As Shah, & Priestley, (2011: 102) acknowledged “...lack of accessible schools often meant being sent away from home to a residential special category school”. This was evident among some of those who participated in this study including John and Maria who articulated lack of accessible school provision as being a significant factor with regards to their attending a special school. As Shah, & Priestley (2011: 55) stated families of this group “...were forced to accept separation because the opportunity structure presented by the policies and institutions of the time” left them with no alternative.

My research concurs with Shah & Priestley (2011), in that this group also experienced estrangement from family and neighbourhood friends as a result of this type of provision. While long-term placement within special schools settings is no longer the norm for most blind/vision impaired children there was also some evidence of estrangement from family and neighbourhood friends among the

younger age group who attended the resourced mainstream secondary school. Consequently, it is still relevant as about 10 percent of the population of the resourced mainstream school are vision impaired/blind and a significant number of this group reside in the locality of the school from Monday to Friday. The majority of those who attended the resourced mainstream secondary school had also attended a special school for their primary education. Many of this group resided in this school from Monday until Friday during term time. Consequently they had little opportunities to develop friendships in their own localities. This was also reported by Shah, & Priestley (2011).

For those in the younger age groups there was greater choice available to them however a number of them attended a special school for their primary education and transferred to the resourced mainstream secondary school. Availability of additional supports and resources appeared to be a significant factor in this regard indicating how appropriate provision can be an important indicator of school selection. The majority of those that attended mainstream secondary schools in their own locality had also attended mainstream primary schools in these same localities. The majority of this group were able to work through the medium of print with the use of low vision aides and assistive technologies. This meant that they were not all reliant on getting reading materials in alternative formats which reduced some access barriers. Joe and Maria Kelly both attended mainstream schools in their own localities and required reading material in alternative formats. They both indicated that they were heavily dependent on family for assistance in producing reading material in alternative formats or reading print book when alternative formats were not available.

Shah, & Priestley, (2011: 12) identified that significant life transitions can be delayed for disabled people when compared to trends within the general population. This was also apparent in my research as a number of participants were at least a year older than their peers when they left secondary education. This was most evident among those that attended special schools or went to the resourced mainstream secondary school and subsequent transition phases were delayed or displaced.

Adolescence is a difficult period of transition as there is a shift from dependency to responsibility and there are a myriad of choices to be considered. Decisions have to be taken regarding what subjects to take, what courses to pursue, what career to follow, and decisions must be made, regarding where to seek advice and from whom. As Wong, (2004) and Williams, & Young, (1992) among others indicate there is often a disconnection between what young people would aspire to do and what they are capable of doing and another disconnection between what they are capable of doing and the opportunities open to them. In Ireland decisions taken at secondary school regarding subjects undertaken, the level at which these chosen subjects are undertaken and which Leaving Certificate programme to pursue can all have significant implications as to what pathways are open to people once they leave school. As many, including AHEAD (2008), indicated in Ireland academic success is paramount to future opportunities. Armstrong, (1998: 54) acknowledged that pupils are steered along different channels through assessment and selection practices and that these

...have been determined by social factors...and realised through a highly differentiated education system offering different kinds of schools, curricula, assessment and forms of accreditation to different social groups.

Exemptions from Irish, exemptions from Maths, Maths taken at foundation level and students doing the Leaving Certificate Applied programme were some of the decisions experienced by a number of those who participated in this research. Such options can have significant repercussions for post-school choices and opportunities and therefore such decisions should not be taken lightly as they may not always be the appropriate routes to pursue for any or all young people that are blind/vision impaired.

6.4.2 Transition Year Programmes

While in Ireland transition year was introduced as a pilot programme as far back as 1974 it was not until September 1994 that the programme was introduced on a national basis. This indicates how historical changes in policy and practice result in people being exposed to different opportunity structures (Shah & Priestley, 2011).

Transition year programmes were not available to those in the older age group and while not all schools in Ireland currently offer a transition year programme as part of the curriculum a significant number of the younger groups had the opportunity to undertake transition year programmes. This gave them the opportunity to get work experience and as Ted indicated it was work experience during this year that enabled him to make the decision to pursue a particular career path. Others indicated that activities undertaken during transition year enhanced their self-confidence and as personal development is, an important aspect of this programme this is significant.

McGinty, & Fish, (1992) the Salamanca Declaration (1994) and Ebersold (2011) among others recognise the important role that schools can play in relation to effective transitions. There appeared to be a significant lack of transition preparation available to those in the older age group during their time in secondary education while those in the younger groups appeared to have varying degrees of transition preparation available to them. This preparation appeared to become more focused as they progressed through post-primary education. This was particularly evident for those that had effective transition year programmes available to them. McDonnall, & Crudden, (2009) indicated that there is significant evidence that there is a positive correlation between work experience and successful transition to employment for disabled people. As providing work experience is often an aspect of transition year programmes such programmes can be viewed as having a valuable impact on preparing students for future transitions including the transition from school to higher education and employment. A number of participants indicated beneficial aspects to doing transition year though not all of them found the work experience they had undertaken to be adequate in preparing them for future employment opportunities.

6.4.3 Post-school Transition Choices

Following compulsory education participants in this study pursued a variety of higher/further education options in both mainstream and specialized setting and some had experience of undertaking courses in both of these settings. Shah, & Priestley (2011: 168) asserted that "...the liberating opportunities of participating in mainstream higher education have become more accessible" to disabled people

and this was apparent in my research as all of those in the older age groups had pursued further education/training at some point after they completed compulsory education. Those that were still in secondary education, aspired to continue in education once they had completed their Leaving Certificate.

Some of the younger age group perceived that they had a range of post-compulsory education options available to them and did not envisage significant obstacles in pursuing their desired career path. Perceived access issues with regards to some courses such as Medicine impacted on course choices. It was noticeable that many went into areas such as IT and Law which were perceived to be areas within which blind/vision impaired people could obtain employment. As Hopkins (2011) suggested students' options are often limited from the outset and often societal expectations impact on people's own expectations. Consequently, others expectations can have limiting effects on transition choices.

Many including (Cole-Hamilton & Vale, 2000; Hutchinson, Atkinson, & Orpwood, 1998; Simkiss, Dryden, & Garner, 1998) acknowledge that vision impaired students who enter university can face a number of barriers. While some of those in this research who attended universities or Institutes of Technology experienced barriers some participants indicated that because of the more individualized supports available to them at this level of education the barriers experienced were no greater than and were often less than the ones they experienced during their second level education. This indicates how appropriate provisions and policies can have a positive impact on experience and outcome.

A number of participants undertook courses in National Learning Networks around the country which is the training and employment division of the Rehab Group. They offer a large number of vocational programmes the aim of which is to either lead directly to employment or enable people to progress to further education. Participants' experiences of these courses varied with those that did a pre-university course having the most positive experiences. While others who undertook other courses perceived that many of the courses were too basic and did not adequately prepare them for other educational opportunities or for future employment.

Research has indicated that higher education has a significant impact on future access to employment (Friehe et al., 1996; Turmusani, 2001). However, these studies also suggest that for disabled people the relationship between a college education and paid employment is not always evident. This was apparent in my research for some participants including John and Maria Kelly who found it particularly difficult to obtain paid employment after completing their university education.

6.4.4 Career Guidance

Evidence of change over time was also apparent when it came to career guidance as those in the older age group notably Maria who went to a special school indicated that she got practically nothing with regards to career guidance during her final years in school. Whereas those in the younger age groups acknowledged that varying degrees of career guidance was available to them. Career guidance counsellors can have a significant role in facilitating the transition process for disabled students but they require the appropriate knowledge and expertise to help in this process.

Many disabled people do not get formal career guidance and of those that do many found that the advice on offer was very limited in relation to employment opportunities for disabled people (Kim & Williams, 2012; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). There was also evidence of this among a number of those that participated in my research. It was indicated that those that provided career advice in mainstream settings often lacked adequate knowledge to offer constructive career advice. Furthermore, the advice offered was perceived to be very narrow in respect of the types of employment opportunities available to blind/vision impaired people. This indicates that much of the mainstream career advice provision available to blind/vision impaired people is not structured in an appropriate way to meet their needs. Subsequently, some participants had to rely on career advice from family, friends and disability providers who assisted them in looking for employment.

6.4.5 Transition to Employment

It is widely acknowledged that paid employment is a significant indicator of adult status (McGinty & Fish, 1992; Shah, 2006; Shah & Priestley, 2011; Smith, 1996; Turmusani, 2001). In most western societies there is an expectation that as adults we make "...a contribution to society through the work we do" (Smith, 1996: 145) and most of those who participated in my research indicated a desire to be gainfully employed. However (McDonnall & Crudden, 2009; Robin, 2002; Shaw et al., 2007) among others indicate that blind/vision impaired people find it particularly difficult to obtain employment. Barriers to employment were experienced whether when looking for work experience, part-time work or fulltime employment. Some employment environments were perceived by some participants as being particularly problematic because of the barriers they believed they would encounter. Some of these sources of employment such as bar work, waitressing and working in shops are often the types of part-time jobs sought by young people but are not generally perceived as being accessible to blind/vision impaired young people. Such jobs are frequently either short-term or part-time positions and some including Joe and Lisa indicated that employers may be less prepared to provide the necessary accommodations required to enable someone who is blind/vision impaired to effectively participate in these work environments. The consequences of this are limited access to such employment opportunities, reduced opportunity to develop independence and continued dependence on family and the State for financial support.

Smith (1996) and Shier, et al. (2009) among others acknowledged that some disabled people perceived their difficulties obtaining employment to be as a direct consequence of being labelled with a disability. Sapey, (2004: 274) suggested that there can be an assumption by employers that disabled people are "unable to perform as efficiently as non-disabled people". While Smith (1996) and Finkelstein, & Stuart, (1996: 183) argue that such disabling barriers to employment "...have proved to be the most resistant to change". There was evidence of this in my research and Lisa, Joe, John and Tom were among those who indicated that they perceived that their vision impairment was a significant factor in their difficulties obtaining work experience, part-time work and full-time employment. John and Tom perceived that on occasions it was the reason that they did not get jobs they had interviewed for. When Joe found employment he believed that he was

fortunate to do so. For some transition to employment was facilitated through a specialized recruitment agency that helped disabled people obtain work or through an employment programme that offered disabled people six months work experience and for one participant this was the turning point he required to get a full-time job. Overall it was evident that significant determination was required by those seeking employment in my study. This was also apparent in the study undertaken by Vedeler, & Mossige, (2010) and while many organizations now state that they are 'equal opportunity employers' it is apparent that blind/vision impaired people may still experience inequality when attempting to obtain employment and when trying to advance their career opportunities.

A number of those in my research who were employed worked either with a Disability Service Provider or in an area of employment that society perceives as suitable for blind and vision impaired people such as telephony. As with research undertaken by Keller, Schretzmann, & Stegie, (1999) my research indicated that not all of those that worked in these areas of employment were satisfied with their current position or future prospects but believed that their employment opportunities elsewhere were limited. Some perceived that they were 'pigeon holed' within these areas of employment by society's perception that these were appropriate areas within which blind/vision impaired people can obtain work. Shah, & Priestley, (2011: 36) indicated that "...these disability-related jobs might be seen as continuing segregated life trajectories begun in childhoods spent in residential institutions". In this study this could be true for Maria and John who had been in special schools in the 1980s and early 1990s. As Barnes, (2003) noted such jobs are often low status occupations with relatively few prospects for career development. This was apparent in the narrative of Maria who despite being in employment for a long number of years had little or no opportunities for career advancement. While John who had been employed for over ten years, had never had a permanent position.

Many researchers including Borsay, (2006), Carr, (2004), Priestley, (2004), and McGinty, & Fish, (1992) indicated the significant impact employment has for people's self-esteem and emotional wellbeing. These were elements of employment that were particularly evident in the narratives of Mary, Kieran and Sean who indicated how employment gave them a sense of purpose and identity. The social contact and structure to the day were also important components of

employment. Therefore the importance of employment cannot be overstated as employment provides individuals with status, independence and social interaction which are crucial factors in the lives of all adults.

6.4.6 Summary

This section considered the different transition stages that were experienced by blind/vision impaired participants in this research. It indicated how societal perceptions and expectations can influence these transitions. Societal norms in the 1970s and 1980s generally determined the type of school that blind/vision impaired children attended. Lack of appropriate provision within mainstream schools at the time was also a significant factor. A number of those in the younger age group attended a special school for their primary education and transferred to the resourced mainstream school for their secondary education. Additional supports and resources appeared to be significant in this regard. It was apparent that the majority of those that attended mainstream schools in their own locality and required reading materials in alternative formats relied on family support to enable them to access written materials. It was evident that decisions taken at secondary school curtailed the post-school choices and opportunities of some participants in this research. Consequently, it is essential that decisions regarding exemptions from particular subjects including Maths and Irish and, which Leaving Certificate programme is pursued by blind/vision impaired young people are taken in consultation with all concerned and that the choices reached are in the best interest of each individual. Participants in this research undertook a range of Third Level courses and while obstacles were experienced a number of participants indicated that the provision of more individualised supports at this level of education were generally appropriate to meet their needs. It was evident from this research that the career advice provided to blind/vision impaired people is often inadequate and suggests that career advice within mainstream settings is not designed to meet the needs of blind/vision impaired people which can negatively impact on employment opportunities. Participants also indicated that there were relatively few employment opportunities available to blind/vision impaired people and that this is often influenced by societal perceptions and expectations.

The next chapter is the final chapter of this thesis and contains a summary of the key findings of this study. Furthermore, it considers the policy and practice implications of these findings. The chapter also provides an overview of the advantages and limitations of this study and offers some suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by placing the research questions in context. It then identifies the key findings of this study and discusses the policy and practice implications of these findings. This chapter provides a brief overview of some of the advantages and disadvantages of the role of the researcher as insider and concludes by indicating where future research involving blind/vision impaired people would be beneficial.

Until comparatively recently in Ireland as in many other European countries disabled children and young people have been assigned to particular types of education based on their disability category. Blind/vision impaired children and young people were among the first to be provided for within the special educational system. It was perceived that the social and learning needs of children and young people with special educational needs "...were significantly dissimilar to other children so that they required separate education away from their mainstream peers" (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007: 2). In recent years within an Irish context we have witnessed an increased awareness of the importance of educating disabled children and young people within mainstream schools. This has been influenced by policy initiatives both internationally and nationally which promotes the inclusion of disabled children and young people within ordinary educational institutions. Therefore while it was the norm until the 1990s to educate blind/vision impaired children and young people within the segregated special education setting increasingly provision for this section of the population is within the mainstream setting.

Education is recognised as a fundamental human right and while access to education has been enshrined in policy internationally and nationally there also needs to be an emphasis on "...the right of quality education and the right to respect in the learning environment" (Rioux & Pinto, 2010: 622). The right to education is recognised in Ireland under article 42 of the Constitution therefore one might query "...why the vindication of the rights of persons with disabilities to an education have been characterised by deferral, delay, denial and official neglect for so many years" (National Disability Authority, 2004: 11). It has been recognised that there is a significant correlation between level of education and

labour participation (Gannon & Nolan, 2005; Watson & Nolan, 2011) and findings from Watson, & Nolan, (2011: 50) indicated that “...people with a disability are very disadvantaged in terms of educational achievement, participation in employment and living standards”. Watson, & Nolan, (2011: 16) also acknowledged that “...children with a disability are likely to face particular challenges in terms of schooling and preparation for adult life”. While it is recognised that the numbers of students with disabilities within Third Level education has increased in recent years the numbers of blind/vision impaired students within this sector remains low (AHEAD, 2008) and it has been recognised that blind/vision impaired students were 50 percent less likely to continue on to Third Level education than their able-bodied peers (AHEAD, 2008). Therefore, the researcher considered that the following research questions were appropriate for this study as they focused on:

- What are/have been the educational experiences of blind/vision impaired people?
- What factors have impacted on these educational experiences?
- What factors in their lives have impacted on their life choices/opportunities?

In Ireland there has been a dearth of information available that focuses on the educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities of blind/vision impaired children and young people from an insider perspective. Shah, & Priestley, (2006: 12) recognised the importance of acknowledging that people born into “...different historical times are exposed to different historical worlds and opportunity structures”. Therefore, a life history approach was utilised for the purposes of this research to explore how changes over time have impacted on the educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities of blind/vision impaired children and young people within the Republic of Ireland.

7.2 Summary of Key Findings

This section will consider some of the key findings of this research and the significance of these for policy and practice. The key issues that emerged in relation to identity were concerned with the disparities that appear to exist between how blind/vision impaired people construct their identity in a positive way and did not perceive themselves as different to their able-bodied peers and how this often

contrasted with more negative connotations which society often assigns to disability. This discrepancy regarding how identity is constructed can have significant implications for policy development and practice in terms of how blind/vision impaired children and young people are educated and particularly in how they are supported in their learning environments. Another key finding pertained to access and demonstrated how access issues are experienced at a variety of levels. It indicated how appropriate access arrangements enables greater participation for blind/vision impaired children and young people while inappropriate or inadequate access can impose unnecessary barriers to inclusion for this section of the population. This indicates the importance which needs to be placed on ensuring effective access for blind/vision impaired people in policy development and in practice. The final key finding of this research related to transitions and how transitions were experienced by blind/vision impaired people. It was evident that greater transition opportunities are now available to this section of the population due to a variety of changes including within policy and practice. However, it was also apparent that transition choices and opportunities can be thwarted through disabling environments and disabling attitudes. Therefore it is necessary to ensure that policy development and practice always enables rather than disables transition opportunities for blind/vision impaired people.

7.3 Identity

Disability is frequently perceived by others as an individual's master identity and many participants who were vision impaired rather than blind chose not to disclose their disability within particular settings. This was done to minimise the attitudinal barriers they perceived they would encounter. Those that were able to mask their impairment or 'pass as normal' were able to construct identities that were not defined by their disability. While disclosure was perceived as problematic the majority acknowledged that disclosure was necessary to obtain the supports and resources required to enable them to participate within institutions that were often not designed to meet the needs of blind/vision impaired people. This illustrates how blind/vision impaired people frequently have to negotiate their identities within the private and public arena. This need to negotiate one's identity within disabling environments where disability is perceived as negatively different was problematic for participants in this research.

Expectations can be thwarted by societal attitudes towards disability. However, evidence of resilience determination and agency were demonstrated by a significant number of participants. These were significant factors in enabling participants to manage learning environments and achieve life course opportunities even when faced with significant challenges including systemic, institutional and attitudinal barriers. The need to prove one's ability within disabling environments where one's ability to participate is determined by societal perceptions of disability was evident and often necessitated challenging disabling environments and disabling attitudes to ensure participation and inclusion.

7.4 Access

Written information is an integral component of our daily lives and one's ability to access information is essential. Significant shortage of access to required written material, substantial delays in receiving required written material and inaccessibility of information were relevant issues for many in this research. This was particularly evident for those who require access to written material in a format other than standard print. This placed many participants at a significant disadvantage throughout all levels of their education.

Increased access to and use of technology was apparent among those who participated in this research. This was most apparent among the younger age group. It was evident that appropriate and effective access to a wide range of technologies was essential to enable access for blind/vision impaired people. Technology in general and assistive technology in particular has greatly enhanced access to written materials for blind/vision impaired people. However, poor design of mainstream technologies presented particular challenges for some who use assistive technology. These challenges ranged from an inability to process material to challenges in presenting material for assessment purposes. These were often as a result of the incompatibility that can exist between mainstream and assistive technologies. Therefore, it must be recognised that assistive technology is not the sole solution to access barriers. The increased precedence of e-learning systems within education was evident in this study but these systems have not generally been developed with any real functional appreciation of disability.

Consequently, some participants experienced access barriers, limited independence and reinforced dependence when using these systems.

Changes to the curriculum, greater access to technology, greater availability of exam accommodations, greater access to learning supports and more diverse teaching and learning methodologies mean that a wider range of subjects are now available to blind/vision impaired children and young people. However, it was apparent that access barriers were experienced in relation to aspects of the curricula at all levels of the education system. Access to the Mathematics curriculum presented particular difficulties for the majority of participants in this research. This is significant as Maths is a required subject for the vast majority of the programmes at Third Level. While greater numbers of blind/vision impaired young people appear to be continuing with Maths at secondary level a number of those who participated in this research did Maths at foundation level. This restricts significantly post-school choices and opportunities. A number of factors contributed to participants' inability to effectively access the Maths curriculum including ineffective teaching methodologies, inappropriate and insufficient provision of Maths books and materials in accessible formats, insufficient teacher training, insufficient appropriate supports and inappropriate attitudes around ability and expectations.

Findings in this research indicated that there is often a disparity between what vision impaired/blind people required of SNAs and what they were perceived to be employed to do. This is pertinent as the role of the SNA is perceived of in a care role rather than a learning support role which is generally what blind/vision impaired children and young people require most from an SNA. It was evident that the presence of an SNA impacted on social interaction and a consequence of this was that friendships with peers diminished. This was particularly apparent during secondary education at a time when young people are trying to gain independence from, and over-reliance on adults. Therefore while an SNA can enable inclusion in some contexts they can also contribute to social exclusion.

It was evident that many Disability Service Providers dictate the terms under which people can avail of services. It was apparent that blind/vision impaired people are still frequently absent from any meaningful aspect of the decision-making process

regarding the planning and delivery of the services they require. This diminishes independence and reinforces dependence. These issues were evident at all stages of people's lives and were particularly relevant during various transition phases when people often had to engage with service providers on their own behalf for the first time. These concerns are significant and may be relevant when considering the implementation of direct payments for blind/vision impaired people. While there appears to be moves towards direct payments within some areas there continues to be considerable resistance towards implementing direct payments by particular sectors of society including some Disability Service Providers.

7.5 Transitions

It was evident in this research that the educational experiences of blind/vision impaired children and young people have changed over time. There was evidence of greater transition opportunities available to this section of the population due to a variety of changes including those within policy and practice. Two of the most evident areas where changes have occurred are in relation to access to written information and the education provision offered to this section of the population.

In the 1970s and early 1980s Braille was primarily the means through which blind/vision impaired children and young people accessed written material when they were unable to read standard print but significant changes in recent decades particularly in relation to advances in mainstream and assistive technologies has greatly transformed how blind/vision impaired children and young people can access written material

Societal norms and policies in the 1970s and 1980s generally determined the type of school that blind/vision impaired children and young people attended. Lack of appropriate provision within mainstream schools was also a contributing factor to the majority of blind/vision impaired children and young people being placed within the special education system at that time. Changes in many areas including policy practice and provision in recent decades, means that increasingly blind/vision impaired children and young people have the opportunity to be educated within mainstream settings. While the majority of those in this research that attended the

resourced mainstream secondary school, including those in the youngest age group, had also attended a special school for their primary education, this may not be an accurate reflection of choice of educational setting for blind/vision impaired children and young people. Difficulties obtaining access to participants who were still in secondary education other than those who attended the resourced mainstream secondary school may be a significant factor in this regard.

It was apparent that in the resourced mainstream secondary school there was a significant level of awareness around vision impairment, appropriate teacher support and greater access to resources including Braille and textbooks in alternative formats. While this school is identified as a mainstream secondary school it is not typical of mainstream schools that are situated in other localities. Seven of those who participated in this study attended this school for some or all of their secondary education and this may indicate that appropriate provision can be an important indicator of school selection. While these settings may have provided the most effective academic supports a consequence of this type of provision was that these participants resided away from their families for significant periods of their education and often were unable to develop or maintain friendships in their own localities.

Decisions taken at secondary school can have repercussions in relation to post-school choices and opportunities. Exemptions from Irish, exemptions from Maths, Maths taken at foundation level and students doing the Leaving Certificate Applied programme were some of the decisions experienced by participants in this research. All of these can restrict post-school choices and opportunities in terms of higher education and employment.

Findings in this research indicated that those that provided career advice within mainstream settings often lacked adequate knowledge to offer constructive career advice to blind/vision impaired people. This study also indicates that the advice offered by those providing career guidance was often narrow in respect of the types of employment opportunities available to blind/vision impaired people.

Findings in this research indicated increased access to post-compulsory education settings for blind/vision impaired people. While the range of post-school

choices/opportunities available to blind/vision impaired young people have increased it was apparent that there is still a perception that particular transition pathways such as IT, Business and Law were considered to be appropriate while Medicine was perceived as unsuitable for blind/vision impaired people indicating that perceived restrictions of access impacted on life course opportunities.

While EU policy and Irish policy and legislation have combined to enhance employment opportunities for blind/vision impaired people access barrier to obtaining employment were experienced by the majority of those who participated in this study and had sought work experience, part-time work or fulltime employment. While employers state that they are 'equal opportunity employers' it is apparent that blind/vision impaired people still experience inequality when attempting to obtain employment and when trying to advance career opportunities. Of those that found employment a number either worked within areas of employment that were perceived by society as suitable areas within which blind/vision impaired people could work or else worked for a Disability Service Provider. These sources of employment can be quite restrictive in that they often offer little or no opportunity for career advancement; they can often be in settings where they are separated from the rest of the workforce. Furthermore, many participants also perceived that they were 'pigeon holed' within these areas of employment.

7.6 Implications of Findings for Policy and Practice

This study has implications for policy and practice in the following areas: adequate and appropriate access to written information; adequate and appropriate access to technology; satisfactory and effective access to the curriculum; access to adequate, effective, flexible and relevant supports and resources; access to effective and appropriate transition choices and opportunities; access to adequate and effective career guidance and access to equal employment opportunities.

There needs to be a realization of the importance of ensuring adequate availability of access to written information, timely access to written information and access to written information in accessible formats for all blind/vision impaired people. There is a need to recognise that these barriers obstruct blind/vision impaired children

and young people from gaining the same level of access to academic benefits and employment opportunities as their able-bodied peers. Therefore a collective response at all levels of society is necessary to ensure that blind/vision impaired children and young people have the same access opportunities as their able-bodied peers. Consequently, at a national level policies need to be established and implemented that ensure that access to written information in required formats is automatically available for all blind/vision impaired people. Getting publishers involved in this process is essential. It is also necessary to have legislation in place that ensures that all information produced is within appropriate accessibility guidelines. Voluntary codes of practice while useful will not provide this level of guaranteed access. Therefore, action needs to be taken at a number of levels including policy and practice that ensures that all blind/vision impaired children and young people at primary and post-primary education become acquainted with, familiar with and competent in the use of both mainstream and assistive technologies. There also needs to be a recognition that at the post-primary stage of education the level of sophistication required in terms of assistive technology skills is much higher given the demands of the curriculum. To ensure that this happens funding needs to be put in place, teachers will require additional training and also there needs to be greater input from support services including the visiting teacher service. There is also a need to consider the whole examination system in terms of equity of access to the same materials as their peers, limited access to materials including written materials can mean that blind/vision impaired children and young people have limited access to the curriculum depending on what materials are available. This means that blind/vision impaired children and young people can be significantly disadvantaged which can impact on transition choices and opportunities.

The availability of and access to technology has improved significantly over time for blind/vision impaired people. The increased utilisation of both mainstream technologies and assistive technologies has meant in theory that there is greater access to written materials for blind/vision impaired people. However, this is not always the reality. The perception that assistive technology is the solution to all access difficulties is erroneous. There needs to be an understanding of the limitations of assistive technology and a recognition that assistive technology may not always be the solution to all access challenges. Consequently, greater

emphasis needs to be placed on accessible technology as opposed to simply assistive technology being the solution to access barriers. This would take greater cognisance of the diversity of people using mainstream technologies and it could also reduce the notion that mainstream technologies are designed for able bodied people while assistive technologies are designed for disabled people and because of the latter the former need to be accessible. Having consistent policies around accessible technologies would enhance access to all aspects of technology for blind/vision impaired people and would ensure greater access within both education and employment settings. This requires greater cognisance by those who design mainstream technologies of the diversity of people using such technologies. Accessibility audits for all mainstream technologies and awareness by those that design mainstream technologies that their products need to be compatible with assistive technologies would greatly enhance overall access to technology and the recognised benefits associated with this access for blind/vision impaired people.

While access to the curriculum has improved for blind/vision impaired children and young people it was apparent that substantial barriers still exist. At the compulsory school level access to the Maths curriculum presented greatest difficulties. While foundation level Maths may be the solution to the access challenges for some blind/vision impaired people assumptions of ability should not be determined by an individuals' disability therefore greater emphasis needs to be placed on developing suitable teaching and learning methodologies that facilitate blind/vision impaired children and young people to access the Maths curriculum. This necessitates that teacher training programmes are cognisant of this and develop their programmes accordingly. It is essential that adequate supports are made available to both teachers and blind/vision impaired children and young people to ensure access to required specialised knowledge. Awareness of accessibility at all levels of the education system should be considered a priority rather than an afterthought. Greater involvement by visiting teachers who in addition to being qualified National School teachers should also hold the Diploma for Teachers of the Visually Impaired or the Diploma in Special Education or the equivalent. Therefore they should have the expertise required to support both the blind/vision impaired child or young person and all those involved with that individual to ensure that the blind/vision impaired child or young person can access and participate fully in all

aspects of the education system to their optimum. Greater engagement by Disability Service Providers that provide services for blind/vision impaired people in mainstream schools where there are blind/vision impaired pupils may provide additional supports and resources for these students as well as additional expertise and knowledge for all those involved with blind/vision impaired children and young people.

Blind/vision impaired people are not a homogeneous group therefore it is essential, that the diversity of their needs be recognised. It is also necessary to understand that the needs of blind/vision impaired people can change over time and can differ depending on situation and location. The majority of participants accessed a range of supports and it was apparent that flexibility of access to supports is essential. It is necessary to ensure that the supports availed of, are designed to meet the needs of each individual. This is particularly pertinent in relation to the provision of SNAs and PAs and there is a need to clearly define the role of the SNA/PA in a way that ensures the most appropriate level of support to meet the needs of the individual in the least restrictive manner. The purpose of supports should be to enhance rather than diminish the individuals' independence and to enable rather than disable inclusion. Therefore, there is a need to establish policies and practices around provision of supports that are proactive rather than reactive and promote the active involvement of blind/vision impaired people at all levels of the process.

Blind/vision impaired children and young people are increasingly educated within mainstream settings. However, the greater availability of and access to necessary supports and resources within the school for the visually impaired and the resourced mainstream secondary school means that there are still a significant number of blind/vision impaired children and young people being educated within these settings and often away from their families and communities. To guarantee that all blind/vision impaired children and young people have access to the same range and level of supports and resources regardless of where they go to school it is necessary to ensure the necessary resources and supports appropriate to the needs of blind/vision impaired children and young people are made available within all schools. This requires that appropriate action is taken at a variety of levels and could include greater consultation and cooperation between the

resourced mainstream secondary school that has significant expertise at their disposal and mainstream schools throughout the country where blind/vision impaired children and young people may be located. Greater involvement of the various service providers may also offer greater access to the necessary supports and resources that would ensure that blind/vision impaired children and young people can participate to their optimum regardless of what school they choose to attend.

It is apparent that decisions taken at secondary school can curtail the post-school choices and opportunities of blind/vision impaired young people. Consequently, it is essential that decisions regarding exemptions from particular subjects, and which Leaving Certificate programme is pursued by blind/vision impaired young people is taken in the best interest of each individual. Exemptions may be a policy solution to access barriers and can also provide schools with the additional class periods required by blind/vision impaired young people to access additional learning supports. While these reasons for providing exemptions may be perceived as valid, subjects such as Irish and Maths are essential subjects for entry to higher education. Consequently, such exemptions from these subjects at secondary level restricts the transition choices and opportunities for blind/vision impaired young people and as research has identified this section of the population are 50 percent less likely to make the transition from second to Third Level education. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the reasons behind decisions taken regarding exempting blind/vision impaired from particular subjects and which Leaving Certificate programme is pursued by blind/vision impaired young people. It is also necessary to ascertain if there are less restrictive solutions available that would enhance rather than limit the transition choices/opportunities of blind/vision impaired young people. The implementation of the Junior Certificate reforms which it is intended will provide for different modes of assessment and a selection of short courses could offer a flexibility to blind/vision impaired young people that would enhance inclusion and participation and therefore provide them with greater transition choices and opportunities.

Those providing career guidance can have an integral role in facilitating the transition process for blind/vision impaired young people. However, they require the appropriate knowledge and expertise to facilitate this process. This requires

that disability awareness is incorporated into all aspects of career guidance training and that policy and practice ensure that career guidance programmes are structured and designed in an appropriate manner to meet the needs of all those availing of career guidance.

While recent legislation has contributed to greater employment opportunities it is apparent that negative societal expectations and perceptions of disability still exist. These impact on employment opportunities for blind/vision impaired people and restrict transition choices and opportunities. Therefore, it is imperative that public discourses around disability are examined and changed where necessary to ensure that disability is portrayed in a more positive way. The ideology of inclusion also needs to be internalized within practice. This can be achieved in a variety of ways and undertakings such as Project IRIS (Inclusive Research in Irish Schools) which is a three-year longitudinal research project that is investigating the development of special and inclusive education in the Republic of Ireland can help in this respect. The purpose of this project is to address research questions that will allow for an in-depth analysis of the current provision and practice experienced by pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in both mainstream and special schools throughout the country. This project has sought multiple perspectives in an effort to develop a picture of the practices and procedures that support young people with special education needs in their learning. Research like this and the development of the index of inclusion can facilitate a more inclusive environment.

7.7 Advantages and Limitations of Research Approach

This section will briefly consider the advantages and limitations which are pertinent to the research approach that was utilised for the purposes of this research. It will also look at the advantages and disadvantages associated with the role of researcher as insider.

All methodologies have both advantages and limitations in their implementation and for the purposes of this research study a life history approach was utilized. The primary reason for using any research method is that it is considered to be the most appropriate one to obtain the information being sought. A life history approach enables one to make connections between individuals' life events and

social events and this is what differentiates life history from other forms of narrative. This was particularly pertinent for the purposes of this research in that it placed the accounts of those who participated in this research within the broader contexts of social, institutional, and political settings. This methodology provided a means through which to explore "...the impact of public policies on private lives in the context of change over time" (Shah & Priestley, 2011: 93). Life history research acknowledges the integrity of the individual and recognises their experiences as valid. This approach acknowledges that participants are the experts about their own lives and this can help to redress the imbalance that can exist between researcher and researched. Clarke, (1998: 67) asserts that this approach can offer "...those who have been silenced...the platform...to speak in their own words about their experiences" and this was an essential objective of this research.

It has been argued that life history research can be accused of failing to pay "...proper attention to issues of representativeness, validity and objectivity" (Plummer, 1983: 65). Generalization is often identified as evidence of reliability and validity but as this research is primarily interested in the personal experiences of blind/vision impaired people in relation to their educational experiences and life choices/opportunities trying to make generalizations would be inappropriate. Plummer (1983: 102) acknowledged that "If the subjective story is what the researcher is after, the life history approach becomes the most valid method...".

The involvement of 'gatekeepers' was necessary to distribute research information to prospective participants and in the case of gaining access to participants who were still attending post-primary education. The utilization of 'gatekeepers' can sometimes result in restricted access to participants which may be recognised as a limitation of this research.

My position as a vision impaired person was relevant in this research and self-disclosure was an important aspect of building rapport and empathy with participants. I believe that this enabled me to build a high level of trust with participants and gave them the opportunity to discuss openly aspects of their educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities in a manner that many participants had not previously experienced. I also perceived that my

position as a disabled researcher impacted positively on the power relationship that can exist between the researcher and participants.

I am aware that the closer one's subject matter is to one's own life experience the more likely it is that bias can occur but as Plumber (1983: 102) acknowledged, to eradicate research of all sources of bias is to rid research of human life. I remained cognizant of my position as research as insider throughout this study and tried to ensure that this did not cause unintended biases. I tried through the methodological safeguards that this did not happen. This included regular contact with participants for clarification of information and providing them with copies of transcripts.

As the subject matter was close to my own life experience at times aspects of the study impacted on me emotionally so it is necessary when engaged in work that is close to one's own life experience to ensure that the necessary supports are available so that such experiences can be managed appropriately. For me this included the support of friends and fellow students. While this may be perceived as a disadvantage I also saw it as an advantage as I believe that it helped to build greater rapport and empathy with participants.

Confidentiality and anonymity are major concerns in research. While being cognizant of this it is not always possible to ensure confidentiality. This was problematic in this research as the researcher was known to some of the organisations where research information was distributed and to the personnel who worked within them it is difficult to guarantee confidentiality. I made every attempt to ensure that participants were aware of the limitations and they still indicated a willingness to participate. While this is a small community and people are known to each other the confidentiality applied to what people agreed to divulge to the researcher and by sending them copies of their transcripts this was how I guaranteed that they were not being compromised in any way.

7.8 Further Research

This study indicates that there is a need for further research involving blind/vision impaired young people. I believe that there is a dearth of research on the transition

from sight to sight loss. This is particularly pertinent for young people who acquire their vision impairment while in compulsory education. The lack of research in this particular area perhaps reflects societal misconceptions around transition to sight loss as primarily occurring in the older age group. As is evident from this research this transition also impacts on the younger population with five of the twenty three participants in this research acquiring their vision impairment while still in the compulsory education system and a further three in their late teens or early twenties. Therefore, it would be germane to explore in depth some of the significant issues experienced by this group in the transition from sight to sight loss such as their educational experience before and after sight loss, their engagement with support services following sight loss, societal attitudes and expectations following sight loss and issues pertaining to identity and status in society.

As is apparent from this research, access to the Mathematics curriculum proved problematic for the majority of participants. The implications of this are particularly relevant as Mathematics is a significant subject for transition to Third Level education. Therefore, at a time when significant changes to the Junior Certificate are being considered, including different ways of assessment it would be worthwhile to further explore the challenges that blind/vision impaired young people experience in this area and try to identify some possible solutions that would enable blind/vision impaired young people to engage more fully with the Mathematic curriculum.

It was evident from this study that blind/vision impaired young people can experience challenges when availing of particular supports including Special Needs Assistants. It would be pertinent to further examine how blind/vision impaired young people engage with the range of supports and resources that are available to them. Research is required to explore how the provision of these supports and resources can be best delivered to meet the needs of blind/vision impaired people in an appropriate and effective manner.

7.9 Conclusion

Since the 1990s European and international policy has increasingly influenced the Irish education system. In terms of recent policy and legislation, Ireland has

manifestly adopted an inclusive position and the rights of disabled children and adults have been increasingly recognised in legislation. This is apparent in The Education Act (1998), The Equal Status Act (2000), The EPSEN Act (2004a) and The Disability Act (2005). Access to education is recognised as a universal right and is enshrined within international human rights treaties including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006). Ireland is a signatory to the UNCRPD but has not ratified it. Article 24 of the UNCRPD relates to education and asserts that state parties should recognise the right of persons with disabilities to education. In order to realise these rights a number of provisions are recommended including reasonable accommodations and effective individualised supports systems. Article 24 (3) refers specifically to the education of blind and deaf children and asserts that their education should be "...delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximize academic and social development" (United Nations, 2006). In order that this can happen Article 9 refers to accessibility and asserts a need

h) To promote the design, development, production and distribution of accessible information and communications technologies and systems at an early stage, so that these technologies and systems become accessible at minimum cost (United Nations, 2006).

International policy and national policies and legislation are pertinent to the educational experiences of blind/vision impaired children and young people and indicate the importance of placing the individual needs of disabled people at the heart of decisions taken regarding their education. As is evident from this research while the educational experiences and transition choices/opportunities of blind/vision impaired people have changed and improved over time many still experience exclusionary practice at a variety of levels of society and therefore are disadvantaged in both educational and employment settings. While it is not always possible to legislate for all the issues that have arisen in this research it is imperative to recognise the importance of involving blind/vision impaired people at all stages of the research process to ensure that future policy and practice is informed by the lived experiences of this section of the population.

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