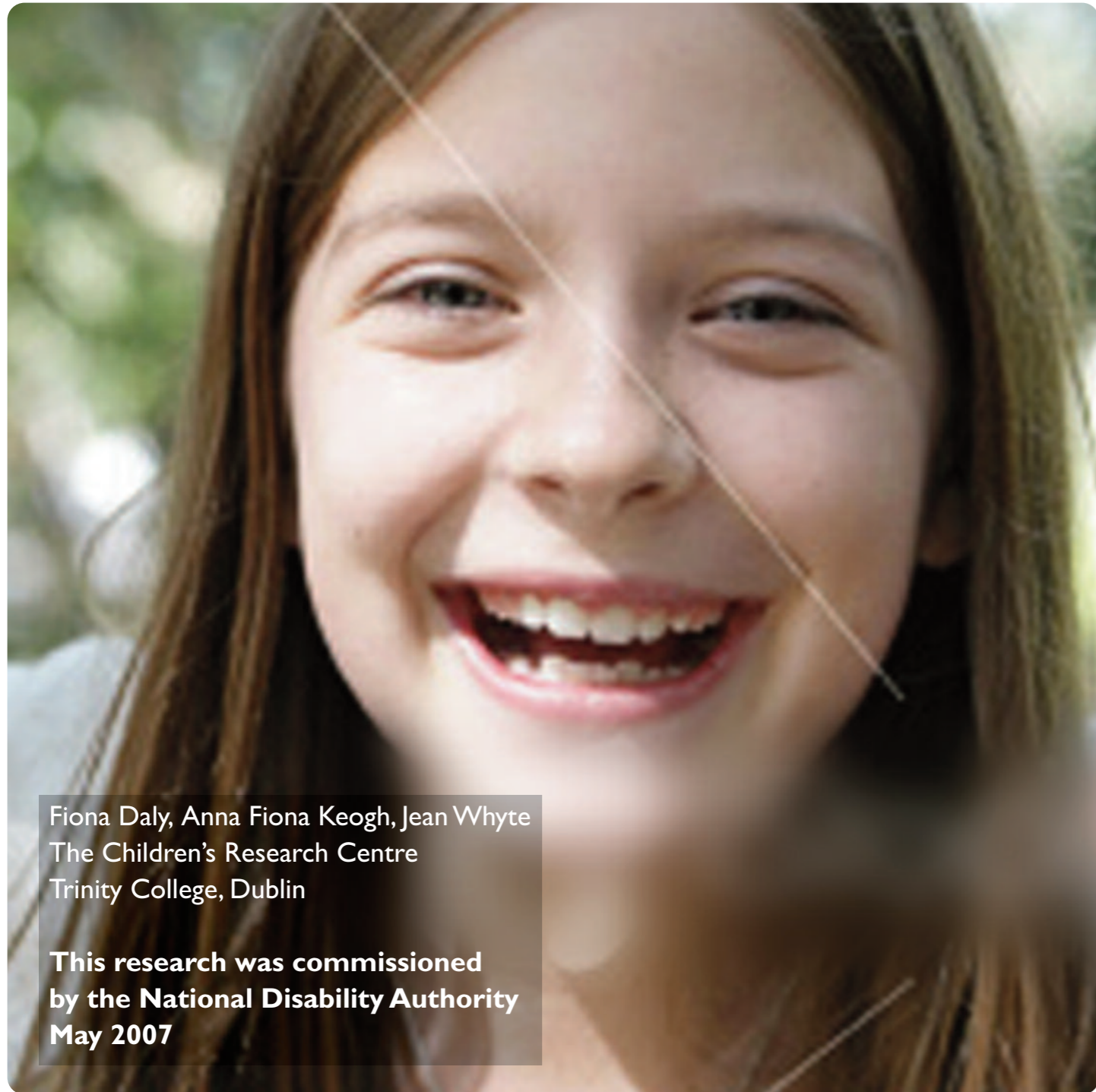


National Disability Authority
Údarás Náisiúnta Míchumais

The Experiences of Students with Physical Disabilities in Second Level Schools





Fiona Daly, Anna Fiona Keogh, Jean Whyte
The Children's Research Centre
Trinity College, Dublin

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Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore the educational experiences of young people with physical disabilities, and especially the experiences of early school leavers. In particular, it was hoped to identify the factors which impede or, on the other hand, facilitate the participation of young people with physical disabilities in the education system up to and into third level. The research questions were as follows:

- i) What factors in the Irish education system and how it is organised are positive or negative in promoting successful completion of education for young people with physical disabilities?
- ii) What factors at school level help or hinder?

- iii) What supports/accommodations or their absence help or hinder?
- iv) What factors are there at the level of the family?
- v) What factors are there in terms of community supports, socialisation, peer groups?
- vi) What are the perspectives of those who have left school early and those who have successfully completed second level education?

In this Executive Summary, we will outline the background from the review of the literature, describe the methodology, summarise the main findings in relation to the research questions and list the recommendations made by participants.



Review of relevant legislation and research

The review aimed to provide a context for the research study.

It considered:

- the prevalence of disability in the population,
- second level educational provision in Ireland and the relevant policy and legislative background,
- current educational provision for children and young people with disabilities in Ireland,

- Issues and factors that impact on the educational experiences of young people with disabilities,
- research on the educational experiences of young people with disabilities in Ireland and other countries.

A few small scale studies have been undertaken in this area in the last few years, but overall there is a lack of research on the experiences of Irish young people with disabilities (Kenny, McNeela and Shevlin, 2003). However, this is also the case internationally. Davis (2004) argues that, during the 1990s, academics stated that the view of disabled children and young people about their education, health and social services were not known. Despite the general lack of research in this area, some research findings were presented on the educational experiences of young people with disabilities. While there is widespread evidence of negative experiences, this was not the experience for all young people who took part in such research studies. It should also be remembered that young people with disabilities have unique experiences of their education and schooling. The factors that impacted on young people's educational progress that were identified from the research included issues to do with physical, academic and social access, a framework devised by Kenny et al (2000).



Participants

The participants included 34 young people and a number of parents (N=11), education professionals (12) and professionals working in disability agencies (N=9).

The young people were aged between 13 and 35 years. The participants met the target criteria for those who should take part in relation to age, having primarily a physical disability and having experience of mainstream, and some of them of special, education. There was a wide range of physical disabilities among participants, involving different degrees of difficulty with certain activities,

particularly with walking. There were slightly more male participants in the study than females; 59% (20) were male compared to 41% (14) who were female. Young people in the study were drawn from many different areas around the country, with a fairly even breakdown in those from urban and rural areas. Therefore, the experiences of this group are likely to reflect the issues that young people face in both types of geographical location.



Methodology

Data were collected by means of semi-structured individual interviews, in-depth interviews, focus groups and a questionnaire to all second level schools.

Findings in relation to the research questions:

- i) **What factors in the Irish education system and how it is organised are positive or negative in promoting successful completion of education?**
 - Being permitted to repeat a year to make up for lost time was important for some young people who had lost time through illness,

- Having a choice of schools – mainstream, mainstream with a special support unit or special – was perceived as positive, though much depended on the individual needs of the student and the degree of support needed and made available, which differed across schools,
- The transition year was seen as very valuable for the opportunities to make new friends and to engage in extra-curricular activities,
- Lack of joined-up supports when students move from one sector to another is disempowering and disheartening.

ii) What factors at school level help or hinder?

- At school level, the attitudes of the principal and teachers could help or hinder, as could the attitudes of peers,
- Where teachers were sensitive to bullying, life was easier as bullying was a factor,
- Flexibility in relation to timing and teaching arrangements was found to be helpful where it occurred, e.g. some young people needed extra time to go from one class to the next,
- An understanding by staff of the special needs of the individual

without emphasising differences, e.g. for periods of rest, for less homework,

- Attention to building self-esteem and self-confidence was thought to be important by some participants.

iii) What supports/accommodations or their absence help or hinder?

- Physical accessibility, ramps, level access to toilets, lifts instead of stairs, catering facilities, transport for trips were very basic supports which were not available to many of the participants in the study,
- Special needs assistants supporting students on a one-to-one basis were found to be invaluable – but were not permitted in all classes,
- Other supports mentioned included: note takers, specialised equipment, laptop computers, extra time in exams.

iv) What factors are there at the level of the family?

- For many parents, much anxiety stemmed from medical issues as opposed to educational issues and the difficulties involved in

ensuring that their children get the best medical attention and support,

- Some had experienced difficulties linking in with support services,
- Expense is a factor for many: extra transport costs, where the young person cannot access the school transport daily; medical visits or for educational trips; purchasing a wheelchair; paying for additional services,
- Parents reported varied experiences with the schools attended by their children. Some were quite negative and led to a feeling of being excluded; others, in particular primary schools, were extremely supportive,
- Parents seemed to be overall very supportive of their children's ambitions in education and appeared to do everything possible to maintain their motivation and enthusiasm for education, even in the face of adversity.

v) What factors are there in terms of community supports, socialisation, peer groups?

- in some cases, disability agencies were able to provide support to students in schools by liaising with the school and providing

therapeutic support as well as providing teachers with information and basic training around disabilities,

- In addition, young people's own involvement in such agencies provided them with opportunities for participating in different activities and making new friends.

vi) What are the perspectives of those who have left school early and those who have successfully completed second level education?

- All of the four participants in the study who had left school early had, in fact, stayed in or returned to the education system and had completed a range of exams and certificates. None felt that their condition had directly impacted on their decision to leave school. But bullying and a lack of sensitivity on the part of teachers were factors in two cases. One young person had been encouraged to leave by his mother and regretted it. The education system as such does not appear to have been a factor in three cases,
- Those who had completed second level had very diverse experiences. So much depended on the needs of the individual and a range of school-based factors.



Recommendations

One pattern that has emerged is the discrepancy between disability legislation and the experiences of participants in the study. It is acknowledged that the implementation of provisions contained within recent disability legislation is at a very early stage. However, it is intended that the recommendations put forward here can help to inform how such legislation may be implemented in practice and the issues that may require prioritisation.

Recommendation 1: Resource mainstream educational provision and support

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 states that children with special needs are to be educated in an inclusive setting unless this would not be in the best interests of the child or the effective provision of education for other children in the mainstream environment. The findings of this study point to many positive aspects of young people's educational experiences. Whether young people received the appropriate educational supports to meet their needs was, however, largely dependent on the school they attended. In order for schools to mainstream, teachers must be willing and open to accept students with disabilities, and their additional needs, as part of their job role. Some parents felt that teachers may not realise the additional work that is involved in supporting students with disabilities as part of their job role. Schools need to be supported, not only in developing an ethos of inclusion but also to have the appropriate means to implement this in practice and thus realise the policy objective of mainstreaming. Participants suggested various ways in which this could be achieved, which are presented below.

Recommendation 2: Improve the physical accessibility of school buildings and facilities

School buildings and facilities need to be fully accessible to students with physical disabilities. The study found that many schools did not have adequate physical accessibility. In addition, delays were reported in relation to some schools making appropriate alterations to facilitate young people with physical disabilities, for example installing a lift or a ramp.

As recommended in the Report of the Special Educational Review Committee (1993), the Department of Education and Science must ensure that all necessary funding is made available speedily to school management authorities who wish to make modifications to school buildings, furniture, fittings or lighting, in order to accommodate pupils with disabilities. Part 3 of the Disability Act 2005 refers to access to buildings and services in 'public bodies'.¹ One of the provisions of the Act provided for the establishment of a Centre for Excellence in Universal Design in the National Disability Authority. The findings in this report point to a potential role for the Centre in informing the design of State schools that are physically accessible to young people with disabilities, particularly when new schools are being built and

¹ 'Public bodies' are defined as including 'Government Departments, local authorities, health boards and semi-state bodies, as well as most other state organisations.' *Guide to the Disability Act 2005*, Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform

also when schools are making adaptations to premises, including building extensions.

Recommendation 3: Facilitate disability agencies in the voluntary sector to provide supports to schools

From some of the interviews carried out with professionals in disability agencies, it was clear that much work was being done with schools to facilitate them to meet the needs of young people with physical disabilities. However, some disability agencies are restricted in their capacity to do so because of limited resources and funding. One suggestion made was that funding be made available to establish a team of dedicated practitioners whose main responsibility would be to link in with schools directly. The team might include a physiotherapist, a psychologist, a speech and language therapist and an occupational therapist. This would mean that young people could potentially be visited on a fairly regular basis and the team would provide ongoing support to the young person and staff in the school. Some disability agencies that took part in the study reported that schools directly contacted them with queries in relation to supporting young people with disabilities. In order for them to provide appropriate supports requires adequate funding.

Recommendation 4: Provide access to therapeutic services within mainstream education settings

Where young people choose the mainstream route, they should have access to therapeutic services when needed. So, there should be a link established between mainstream education and specialist therapeutic services. A disability service provider interviewed for the study reported that some parents were concerned that their child may not receive certain therapeutic services as provided in a special school setting should they choose to send their child to a mainstream school. There are examples where mainstream education is provided in conjunction with specialist therapeutic services. In some local authority areas in the UK, young people with disabilities attend mainstream classes for the majority of the time while also being able to avail of therapeutic services either on an individual or small group basis. Service agreements are agreed between the relevant schools and the appropriate therapeutic service providers.²

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 includes the provision for a child/young person to have an assessment to establish if special educational needs exist. Where a child/young person is found to have such needs, an education plan for individual

² One example is North Tyneside Council, where therapeutic services are available to a number of young people with physical disabilities in three mainstream schools. *Inclusive schools for the future: Additionally resourced provision for pupils with physical disabilities (2005)* North Tyneside Council Education and Cultural Service, see www.northynteside.gov.uk

children/young people may be drawn up and submitted to the relevant Special Educational Needs Organiser. Section 7 of the Act deals with the provision of services following this process. It states that it is the responsibility of the National Council for Special Education or the Health Service Executive to provide the services identified in the education plan. When this section of the Act is being implemented in practice, the necessary structures need to be put in place whereby children/young people with disabilities can receive therapeutic services while attending a mainstream school, thus facilitating them and their families to access mainstream educational provision.

Recommendation 5: Redefine the role of the special education sector

Despite the emphasis on mainstream educational provision in educational policy and disability legislation, there is still a place for special schools, although not as widespread as in the past. Some suggestions were made for change within the special schooling sector by a few participants in the study. In particular, that special schools should have a role beyond providing day care facilities. In addition, a career guidance system should be introduced into special schools which would facilitate young people with disabilities to access further education/training or employment as appropriate.

Courses aiming to support students with disabilities in a practical way and to help them develop their strengths and life skills would be very beneficial in order for them “to be able to let them go out and live life as normal as possible”.

Recommendation 6: Improve services in the wider community and co-ordination between services

It was pointed out that improving disability services in the wider community would support young people’s educational participation. There is a need for improved accessibility in the wider community. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 recognises the need for health services to provide supports and resources to enable some children to participate and benefit from education. One of the central aims of the Act is to ensure that there will be co-ordination and co-operation between the Health Service Executive and the National Council for Special Education. Participants in this study highlighted the importance of improved community services and of co-operation between educational and health services, especially when people cannot easily access services due to financial constraints and lack of transport.

Recommendation 7: Increase disability awareness

The need for increasing disability awareness was highlighted by many participants in the study, especially some of the young people themselves and their parents. In particular, they mentioned raising awareness among teachers and other school staff as well as among the general student population.

Training for mainstream school staff

Access to training for staff in mainstream schools around the specific needs of young people with physical disabilities is required. It was suggested that this could be provided for through increased co-operation between the health and education sectors and/or in conjunction with disability agencies. Several of the disability agencies that took part in the study had established links with certain schools in their area at the time of carrying out the research. This could be developed further given the appropriate resources (as mentioned in the first recommendation).

Some parents of young people expressed the view that attitudes towards people with disabilities needed to change in order to facilitate mainstreaming. Achieving attitudinal change, where needed,

can be facilitated through providing better information on the needs of young people with physical disabilities. One possible way forward suggested was the development of a system of peer education, where young people with disabilities themselves would be trained up to go into schools and talk directly to a group of students and teachers about their lives.

Targeted training for guidance counsellors in second level schools

Provision of specific training targeted at guidance counsellors in second level schools should be provided so that they can advise young people with disabilities about the options of continuing their education, the supports available in particular institutions, and also about career prospects.

An important finding of relevance here is that some of the young people in the study who were currently attending second level schools completed their secondary education at an older age than their peers, usually due to illness which resulted in them missing periods of school. The potential implications of this for young people's choices post-leaving school, as well as their personal development, may need to be addressed.

Recommendation 8: Improve access to information

Many participants (young people and parents) reported that they found it very difficult to access the information they needed in relation to supports, entitlements, etc.

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 states that one of the functions of the National Council for Special Education is to provide information to parents of children with special educational needs about their entitlements. The research has identified a need in this area, based on the responses from some of the participants, and reinforces the importance attached to this function for the Council.

Information on entitlements across different educational sectors

Information should be made easily available on entitlements to supports and financial assistance for young people when they move from one educational sector to another, for example from second to third level, and how this may affect their current entitlements, to prevent being misinformed.

The point was made that supports received by young people with disabilities are tied in to an individual educational institution. Therefore, when young people move from primary to second level school or from second to third level education, they have to re-apply for similar supports, which can take time and be a difficult process. This highlights the importance of having timely access to information on entitlements and supports available as young people progress through the education system.

Recommendation 9: Enhance supports in higher education

There is a need for increased resources in the higher education sector, including more Disability Officers to help organise the relevant supports for students with disabilities.

Most of the young people who had gone on to higher education spoke very highly of the supports they had received, in contrast to some of their experiences at second level. However, the level of supports that were available was largely dependent on the university/college they were attending. Dedicated full-time Disability Officers are needed as, in some cases, this role had been taken on by an already fully-occupied staff member and it was an additional responsibility for them rather than being their core responsibility.



National Disability Authority

Údarás Náisiúnta Míchumais

25 Clyde Road,

Dublin 4.

Tel/Minicom 01 608 0400

Fax 01 660 9935

Email nda@nda.ie

www.nda.ie

NDA is the lead state agency on disability issues, providing independent expert advice to Government on policy and practice.