

# Examining the Post-School Decision-Making and Self-Determination of Disabled Young Adults in Ireland

## Introduction

The end of compulsory education is a moment when students' life trajectories, which in many ways have been shared through primary and second-level schooling, profoundly diverge. Our research explores how disabled students experience decision-making at this critical juncture.

While disabled young people have made gains in post-secondary education and employment outcomes over time, gaps persist (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Carroll, McCoy, & Mihut 2022), particularly for students with socio-emotional difficulties (Carroll, Ye, & McCoy, 2022). Disabled youth remain less likely to attain and maintain competitive, integrated employment or to pursue post-secondary education to prepare for long-term careers (Newman & Madaus, 2015; Chatzitheochari & Platt, 2019).

These gaps have been linked to individual characteristics as well as home- and school-related factors. School-based interventions aimed at reducing these gaps by increasing self-determination and transition skills (Gothberg et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2019; Lindstrom et al., 2020; Lombardi et al., 2022) have shown promise in decreasing achievement gaps, but less effectiveness in increasing quality of life (Levy et al., 2020).

Using evidence from Growing Up in Ireland, the national longitudinal study of children, our research traces the multifaceted influences on self-determination over the life course, examining the role of early educational experiences, parental expectations, economic vulnerability, school context, and educational supports.



**Keyu Ye**

Research Assistant, Economic and Social Research Institute



**Selina McCoy**

Head of Education Research, Economic and Social Research Institute

---

**There is a dearth of research on how disabled young adults reflect on self-determination and post-school opportunities, and how school context shapes these. This article reports on a study of decision-making at this critical juncture. It shows that self-determination and decision-making are systemic phenomena, and certain risk factors tend to appear together. It makes recommendations for schools to ensure that all young adults can make self-determined choices and are prepared for post-school life.**

---

## Results

Despite the generally positive response to schools fostering self-determination skills, there are wide gaps between students with and without special educational needs (SEN) or disabilities, with disabled students expressing less positivity about school developing their self-determination skills.

Our analysis reveals systematic gaps between and among disabled and non-disabled students – some displaying strong self-determination and others conveying constrained decision-making. In particular, students facing social, emotional, or behavioural challenges are consistently less likely to feel that their decision-making was supported at school, also found in earlier research (Carter et al., 2006; Carroll, Ye, and McCoy, 2022).

Significant gender differences emerged, with girls being less positive about their self-determination skills developed at school. Globally, research findings are mixed on the influence of gender on self-determination competencies. Some studies do not find gender a significant predictor (Abery & Stancliffe, 2003; Garrett, 2010), while others identify specific challenges that girls encounter in exercising self-determination (Wehmeyer & Lawrence, 1995; Trainor, 2005).

In addition, certain key school-related factors strongly influence students' development of self-determination skills. Students who displayed positive school engagement and had better academic performance tended to be more positive about their school supporting them to make decisions for themselves. Conversely, more constrained decision-making was found among students who reported greater conflict with teachers and those with higher school absence.

Students' development of self-determination skills is also closely associated with entry to higher education (HE). Compared to those who attended HE, students in any form of education are much less likely to feel that their school supported their development of self-determination skills. The relatively negative experiences of students following paths other than HE might reflect a traditional perception that further education was, at least up to recently, considered a 'second-best' option compared to HE.

On the other hand, our analysis shows that positive interactions with teachers act as a protective factor, and an enhanced self-concept may also increase decision-making agency. In particular, those with higher academic self-image scores were more likely to feel that their self-determination skills were cultivated at school.

When considering family resources, students who are economically vulnerable also tend to experience more limited decision-making opportunities.

---

*Significant gender differences emerged, with girls being less positive about their self-determination skills developed at school.*

---

## Discussion

We address a significant research gap in examining the processes shaping decision-making for young people with different types of disability. After accounting for proximal processes and personal and contextual characteristics, we assess the potential associations between disability status and disability type with post-school self-determination and decision-making.

Approaching these results through a bio-ecological lens, we can see that self-determination and decision-making are systemic phenomena, and that disabled students were more likely to experience cumulative risk factors shown to impact on early school leaving and post-school opportunities. The results illustrate how post-school decision-making both reflects and contributes to social stratification.

It is imperative that schools value and teach skills to ensure that all students are college- and career-ready while they are still in school, in line with research by Lombardi et al. (2022). In this context, reforms to streamline and facilitate the transition from further education and training to higher education are particularly important. Other potential areas for policy in school and post-school settings are identified, particularly in the development of self-determination skills.

---

## REFERENCES

- Abery, B.H. and Stancliffe, R.J. (2003) 'An ecological theory of self-determination: Theoretical foundations'. In: M.L. Wehmeyer, B.H. Abery, D.E. Mithaug, and R.J. Stancliffe (Eds.) *Theory in Self-Determination: Foundations for Educational Practice*. Charles C. Thomas Publisher.
- Blackorby, J. and Wagner, M. (1996) 'Longitudinal postschool outcomes of youth with disabilities: Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study', *Exceptional Children*, 62(5), 399–413.
- Carroll, E., McCoy, S., and Mihut, G. (2022) 'Exploring cumulative disadvantage in early school leaving and planned post-school pathways among those identified with special educational needs in Irish primary schools', *British Educational Research Journal*, 48(6), 1065–1082. DOI: 10.1002/berj.3815
- Carroll, E., Ye, K., and McCoy, S. (2022) 'Educationally maintained inequality? The role of risk factors and resilience at 9, 13 and 17 in disabled young people's post-school pathways at 20', *Irish Educational Studies*, 41(3). DOI: 10.1080/03323315.2022.2093257
- Carter E.W., Lane, K., Pierson, M.R., and Glaeser, B. (2006) 'Self-determination skills and opportunities of transition-age youth with emotional disturbance and learning disabilities', *Exceptional Children*, 72(3), 333–346. DOI: 10.1177/0014402906072003
- Chatzitheochari, S. and Platt, L. (2019) 'Disability differentials in educational attainment in England: Primary and secondary effects', *British Journal of Sociology*, 70(2), 502–525.

Garrett, B.A. (2010) 'Improving transition domains by examining self-determination proficiency among gender and race of secondary adolescents with specific learning disabilities'. Dissertation, Kansas State University. <http://hdl.handle.net/2097/6819>.

Gothberg, J.E., Greene, G., and Kohler, P.D. (2019) 'District implementation of research-based practices for transition planning with culturally and linguistically diverse youth with disabilities and their families', *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 42(2), 77–86.

Levy, B.B., Song, J.Z., Luong, D., Perrier, L., Bayley, M.T., Andrew, G., and Munce, S.E. (2020) 'Transitional care interventions for youth with disabilities: A systematic review', *Pediatrics*, 146(5).

Lindsay, S., Lamptey, D.L., Cagliostro, E., Srikanthan, D., Mortaji, N., and Karon, L. (2019) 'A systematic review of post-secondary transition interventions for youth with disabilities', *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 41(21), 2492–2505.

Lindstrom, L., DeGarmo, D., Khurana, A., Hirano, K., and Leve, L. (2020) 'Paths 2 the Future: Evidence for the efficacy of a career development intervention for young women with disabilities', *Exceptional Children*, 87(1), 54–73.

Lombardi, A.R., Riftenbark, G.G., Rogers, H.J., Swaminathan, H., Taconet, A., Mazzotti, V.L., Morningstar, M.E., Wu, R., and Langdon, S. (2022) 'Establishing construct validity of a measure of adolescent perceptions of college and career readiness', *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*. DOI: 10.1177/21651434221081229

Newman, L.A. and Madaus, J.W. (2015) 'An analysis of factors related to receipt of accommodations and services by post-secondary students with disabilities', *Remedial and Special Education*, 36, 208–219. DOI: 10.1177/0741932515572912

Trainor, A.A. (2005) 'Self-determination perceptions and behaviors of diverse students with LD during the transition planning process', *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 38, 233–249. DOI: 10.1177/002221940503800305

Wehmeyer, M. and Lawrence, M. (1995) 'Whose future is it anyway? Promoting student involvement in transition planning', *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 18(2). DOI: 10.1177/088572889501800202

---

*Lifestyle medicine (LM) is an emerging branch of medicine with a focus on preventing and managing non-communicable diseases through evidence-based lifestyle interventions and education (ACLM, 2022).*

---