

Disabled Students' School and Post-School Careers

The number of young people identified with additional needs has increased dramatically. But how do they fare after second-level education? This research-based article looks at how disabled students are supported, or not, to pursue further education and training or higher education and to develop their self-determination skills. It also outlines the essential elements of such support.

Introduction

Like many countries, Ireland has seen substantial reform in inclusive education provision in recent decades, which has led to additional autonomy, and responsibility, for schools in distributing resources. The number of children and young people identified with additional needs has increased dramatically over the past two decades, making up over a quarter of the school population today (McCoy et al., 2019).

Despite stated policy aspirations, we have a 'multi-track' approach to the provision for students with additional needs, with a steady enrolment in special schools and rapid expansion in special-class provision across primary and second-level settings (Kenny et al., 2020). In the 2023/24 school year, about 2.7% of the overall student population was in a special class or special school, projected to rise to 5% by the end of the decade; 1,700 special classes have been established over the last five years (Department of Education, 2024).

In the context of these trends, it is important to ask: How do young people experiencing a range of additional needs and disabilities fare as they progress through and beyond the school system?

Challenges



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The evidence shows the multiple challenges facing disabled young people in Ireland, in particular reflecting the direct and indirect impact of socioeconomic disadvantage at family, school, and community levels. Of particular note is the importance of attendance, engagement, and achievement during primary and early second-level years, and of parental expectations, for later outcomes. Across a diversity of studies, expectations are key – the importance of high expectations for all students, regardless of background and the role of disability or SEN (special educational needs) labels in impacting on the expectations held for children and young people, is repeatedly highlighted.

The evidence also shows the disproportionate representation of disabled students in DEIS schools and in economically vulnerable households, and the significance of these factors in students' school and post-school pathways. While the DEIS programme has shown impact in tackling gaps in achievement, attendance, and engagement (OECD, 2024), adequately supporting the complexity of needs that their students are facing demands more resources. A proposed 'DEIS+' category attracting greater resources is warranted. The evidence also points to higher DARE (Disability Access Route to Education) application rates among disabled students in non-DEIS schools, raising questions about the effectiveness of the programme in meeting intended needs.

Resource constraints faced by both schools and wider youth mental health services create challenges for schools in supporting student wellbeing. Only 46% of students feel that their school provides adequate wellbeing supports, with disabled students faring less well. The evidence points to the importance of identifying those most vulnerable to poorer wellbeing, listening to what students need, supporting teacher professional development in wellbeing, and embedding a whole-school approach, as the best ways to foster wellbeing in schools (Dempsey & McCoy, 2024). The evidence also highlights the urgent need for professional, therapeutic supports for children and young adults, supports which follow them as they move through and beyond the educational system (McCoy et al., forthcoming).

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Trajectories

While students' life trajectories are shared in many ways through school, they diverge significantly upon leaving. All else being equal, children who are identified with socio-emotional or behavioural difficulties are less likely to progress to higher education in Ireland. Research also shows that disabled students reflect less positively on how well school prepares them for adult life, independent living, and career decisions. Students with complex needs, in particular, are less likely than their peers to report being encouraged to pursue education or training and to feel well-supported in such decisions. Open days in non-mainstream post-school settings, mentoring programmes, and work

experience opportunities are all essential in ensuring informed choices (McCoy et al., forthcoming).

Self-determination skills are essential in the post-school transition period, for accessing post-secondary opportunities and achieving success in them. Such skills are particularly crucial for disabled students, enabling their access to support services and accommodations for their disabilities, navigating institutional infrastructure, communicating with instructors, and engaging in academic and social activities. Evidence reveals wide disparities between disabled and non-disabled students in perceived school support for self-determination skills development, as well as among disabled students in school support for this skills development. Notably, positive school engagement, student-teacher relationships, and enhanced self-concept emerge as protective factors, highlighting the pivotal role of supportive and inclusive school climates, positive interpersonal relationships, and individual beliefs in nurturing decision-making agency (Ye & McCoy, 2024).

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There has been an expansion in the range of post-school opportunities for disabled young adults, alongside valuable HSE supports for leavers from special schools to ensure that placements align with individual needs and interests, within the constraints of what is available. The evidence largely points to positive learner experiences across a range of settings, including further education and training programmes and the National Learning Network, with disabled young adults reporting positive engagement and enriching programmes. However, challenges with staffing shortfalls in some programmes, particularly relating to adult day services, mean that transitions are delayed or disrupted, having a real impact on young adults' personal and learning progression and social engagement. The absence of accessible public transport and transport supports on leaving school are also key barriers for many disabled young adults. Finally, flexible study options, including online courses, and tailored post-school pathways are essential in meeting the increasingly diverse needs and preferences of disabled young adults (McCoy et al., forthcoming).

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ICO's Choral Christmas in Limerick



Irish Chamber Orchestra

On 19 December 2024, the Irish Chamber Orchestra presented a Choral Christmas with the Irish Youth Choir, featuring some of Ireland's finest young voices under Director Patrick Barrett. University of Limerick is home to Ireland's National Chamber Orchestra (ICO) which also regularly tours Ireland and internationally. The Irish Chamber Orchestra (ICO) is funded by the Arts Council of Ireland.