

**Primary to post-primary transition for students with Special Educational Needs from an Irish Context****Mr. Tom Foley***School of Education University College Cork Ireland***Dr. Shane Foley***School of Medicine University College Dublin Ireland***Dr. Alicia Curtin***School of Education University College Cork Ireland*

*This paper explores primary to post-primary transitions for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) within mainstream schooling in an Irish context. A questionnaire was distributed to a cohort of sixth class students (n=58) from four different primary schools in advance of their transfer and results were then compared with a similar cohort of first year students (n=63) from two post-primary schools following the transfer. The perspectives of the key stakeholders involved in the transition process were gained through questionnaires (n=10) and semi-structured interviews (n=5). Findings indicate that while a minority of first-year students experience transition difficulties, students with SEN encounter greater obstacles during this crucial time of transfer with increased anxiety and are more vulnerable and prone to bullying than their typically developing peers. Schools should place greater emphasis on transitions involving those with SEN due to their increased vulnerability.*

The transition from primary to post-primary school has long been recognised as an important stage in young children's schooling development and has been viewed as a critical educational step for many children (Smyth et al., 2004). Research and reports tend to suggest that the transition is an exciting time for most with the provision of new experiences and challenges, a variety of teachers, varying subject choice and the opportunity to establish new friendships. While for the majority of students, the move is seamless, for others, the transition can present a lot of anxiety and fear (Ó' Dálaigh & Aherne, 1990).

Transitions can be more difficult for students with a visual, hearing or speech and language impairment; those who have specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyspraxia and those who are on the autistic spectrum. The NCSE Implementation Report (2006) estimated that 17.7% of children in Ireland aged 0-17 had a special educational need, by virtue of a disability or other condition, as defined in the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004). Most children will cope with transition adjustments and adapt within the first couple of weeks, while in contrast the child with SEN may require a number of school terms or additional supports to successfully engage with and access the curriculum.

Historically, students with disabilities were excluded from many elements of society, and often did not access equal educational prospects as their peers without disabilities, consequently opportunities were somewhat limited. Education for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) has vastly changed in recent years with the evolution of laws leading up to the introduction of the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) which sets out that students with SEN have the right to be treated with equity, educated in an inclusive environment and supported throughout their schooling. While this is extremely positive, there are still many daily aspects of life and school that present challenges and stresses for students with SEN.

Some 58,000 children made the transition from Ireland's primary schools in 2014 (Department of Education and Skills, 2015), but in excess of 1500 students are only progressing as far as first or second year before dropping out of education (Dept. of Education, 2010). Anderson et al. (2000, p.325) claim that "the process of

disengagement from school too often follows unsuccessful transitions” and although no exact figures exist regarding the number of SEN students involved, the aforementioned high prevalence of such students nationally would raise concerns.

In order to promote social inclusion and combat educational disadvantage, a better understanding is required about factors that have an impact on student’s experiences at school. There is an ever increasing body of literature exploring these factors, with specific emphasis on social class of student, types of school, varying curriculum and modes of assessment. Research indicates that problems students encounter tend to be centred on the new school environment, academic adjustment involving curriculum change and higher expectations and social change as Hargreaves et al. (1996) refer to it as a triple transition for students, the move from a familiar school culture to a new one, moving from established friendships and peer groups to new peer groupings and the move from childhood to adolescence.

The movement toward de-institutionalisation has resulted in the inclusion of the vast majority of SEN students in their local schools, yet the structures and support to enable these transitions have predominantly lagged behind the process (Rasmussen et al., 2012). There has been an increased interest in educational transitions in recent years as the level of success can be a critical factor in determining children’s future progress and development. International studies refer to school transitions as a pivotal time where students are particularly vulnerable to disengagement from school and is viewed as one of the most difficult phases in students educational careers (Zeedyk, 2003) but findings at one level appear mixed (Sirsch, 2003).

Bernt and Mekos (1995) suggest that students experience generally positive perceptions and experiences of transition whereas on the other hand Mertin et al. (1989) report negative experiences. Stradling and MacNeil (2000) concluded that young people can respond to transition in a number of ways with some responding positively, whereas others may adopt a more reactive coping strategy. On balance, this mix of views points to a continuum of transition experiences, which at its best, research suggests causes slight apprehension, while on the flip side of the coin, can provoke deeply felt anxiety (Hargreaves & Galton, 2002).

Many factors impact on the life experiences of students with SEN as they negotiate transition and yet little attention has been paid to the issue of transfer in the academic and educational discourse in Ireland. Relative to the large body of research on student transitions in general (Hargreaves and Galton, 2002; Naughton, 2000; O'Brien, 2001; Smyth et al., 2004), the transition experiences of students with SEN have received less attention at both international and national levels with only limited research on the Irish situation with a study conducted by Maunsell et al., (2007) and more recently by the NCSE (2013). In Ireland most of these studies investigated the issue of pre-transition expectations and anxieties amongst students with findings of pre-transition concern and slight apprehensions evident amongst the majority of students. The NCSE (2013) study on the transition for students with SEN reported the need for coordination across schools and other services to ensure a continuum of support to address the individual needs of students. The existing evidence base to date on the primary to post-primary transition has been described as incomplete (NCSE, 2013) as it fails to address the more complex realities for students with SEN, thus paving the way for further investigation and provides a basis for this study.

This research sets out to investigate both student and staff attitudes towards primary to post-primary transitions with a specific focus on those with SEN. It is intended that findings from the study will make a significant contribution to the understanding of potential obstacles facing SEN students on transition and explore mechanisms to address any issues raised, along with the ability of schools to deliver quality support structures to students with SEN when negotiating the transition phase.

### **Research Method**

As this study was carried out around real-life events and circumstances, close attention was attributed to ethical considerations. Full ethical review was not necessary given the nature of the study which guaranteed anonymity for all respondents, where consent was required from all participants and the research conformed to the Child Protection Guidelines and Procedures (Department of Education and Science, 2001). Several schools required ethical applications to school-based ethics boards and in each of these cases approval was granted before the research commenced. Ethnographic research formed the basis of this study while employing a mixed methods

approach, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Participant observation was utilised, involving the immersion of the researcher in the participant's educational surroundings allowing the researcher capture behaviour in the different contexts of everyday life. After the initial observation and settling in period, a more systematic program of formal interviews was conducted involving questions related to transition experiences. This research was carried out in a typical Irish town and investigated attitudes to transition in both denominational and non-denominational schools, with four local primary schools and two post-primary schools serving a population of 950 students.

Table 1. School types, gender, size of school

Level	Code	Gender	No of students enrolled
Primary School	PS1	Boys	182
	PS2	Girls	161
	PS3	Mixed	66
	PS4	Mixed	51
Post-Primary School	PPS1	Girls	363
	PPS2 (Disadvantaged)	Mixed	127

Initial information for the study was sourced through questionnaires that were sent to four local feeder primary schools in an attempt to explore pupils' perceptions of the transition to post-primary education. Convenience sampling was utilised to recruit participants following permission from the Board of Management in each school. All sixth class students (n=58) from each of the four schools where two schools were mixed with one all-girls and one all-boys schools were recruited. In secondary school a total of 63 first year students from two of the three post-primary schools in the town, one all-girls convent school and a mixed vocational school formed the representative sample to seek student's views following the transition. From this group eight students presented with SEN from the primary sample and nine from the post-primary sample as represented in the table below.

Table 2. Special Educational Need

Category	PS1	PS2	PS3	PS4	PPS1	PPS2
Moderate General Learning Disability	2					
Severe/Profound General Learning Disability	1					
Specific Learning Difficulty		1	2	1	2	4
Specific Speech and Language Disorder					1	
Multiple Disabilities	1				1	1

The questionnaires were distributed in January of the school year and consisted of ten questions formulated by the researcher drawing on research literature on transition into post-primary school focusing on the following issues: school choice and pre-entry contact, level of anxiety before transition, perceptions of new school, issues of worry and school related issues (timetable, more subjects, additional teachers, lockers etc.) Students were asked to respond to a series of yes/no questions with relation to whether a principal visited prior to transfer, did they know which post-primary school they want to attend, did their parents attend an open evening and had they received information about their school prior to transfer. This provided a quantitative overview of their experiences and students were then asked to add their own comments on how the transition process could be improved in order to provide a qualitative insight into their experiences. This dual process provides the statistical data both for quantitative purposes and for qualitative insights into student's experiences.

Two focus group sessions also took place with four students being purposively sampled from primary school, two with SEN and a second focus group session with four students from post-primary school, two of which also were categorised as having learning difficulties and all would have completed questionnaires prior to the focus group session. Focus group questions were derived from the literature that addressed issues related to five key

areas; (a) expectations, (b) transition support, (c) curriculum, (d) adjustment and (e) new school environment. The data were transcribed and interpreted by the researcher to confirm the key issues associated with the transition process. To analyse the interview data, thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was implemented. The data were analysed in keeping with Creswell's (2008) six steps for analysing and interpreting qualitative data: (a) organising the data, (b) exploring and coding the database, (c) forming themes, (d) reporting findings, (e) interpreting the findings and (f) validating the accuracy of the findings.

Finally the perspectives of the key stakeholders involved in the transition process were gained through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Key personnel were interviewed included two school principals at primary level (only two out of four agreed), with one SEN co-ordinator, home school community liaison officer and a deputy principal all at second level, as these would be viewed as the people with closest contact with transitioning pupils. Staff who participated in the questionnaire were identified by using abbreviations to represent their position in the school (PP = Primary Principal; PPDP = Post-Primary Deputy Principal; PST = Primary Support Teacher; PPST = Post-Primary Support Teacher; HSCL = Home School Community Liaison; PCT = Primary Class Teacher and PPCT = Post-Primary Class Teacher).

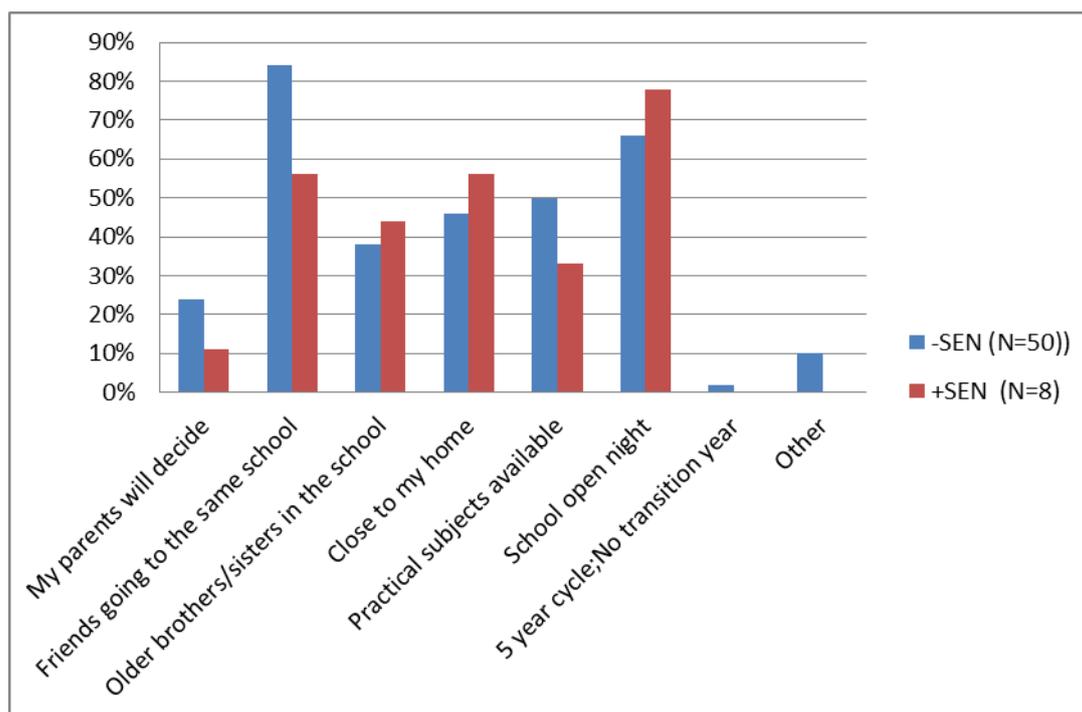
In addition questionnaires were conducted with five primary teachers, four of the current teachers and one who would have taught sixth class students in the past and five post-primary teachers out of 24 (21%) were purposive sampled as they all had dealings with 1<sup>st</sup> year students. Permission was sought from school principals to enlist the staff prior to interview. These personal accounts were then corroborated with statistical evidence from questionnaires in order to develop shared meaning and an understanding of the difficulties facing students with SEN in this transition period.

## **Findings**

### *Phase One: Primary School Students Perspectives*

A total of 58 primary school students were surveyed with 27 males (47%) and 31 (53%) females representing the sample. From this group of students, eight presented with SEN which represents 14% of the total which is in keeping with NCSE figures. From the student sample, teachers reported that four have specific learning disabilities (two with dyslexia and two with dyspraxia), two have moderate general learning disabilities, one has a severe/profound general learning disability while another has multiple disabilities.

Figure 1 below illustrates the results of the question pertaining to factors contributing to school choice where the determining factor most influencing the decision making process was the fact that friends were also going to this school.

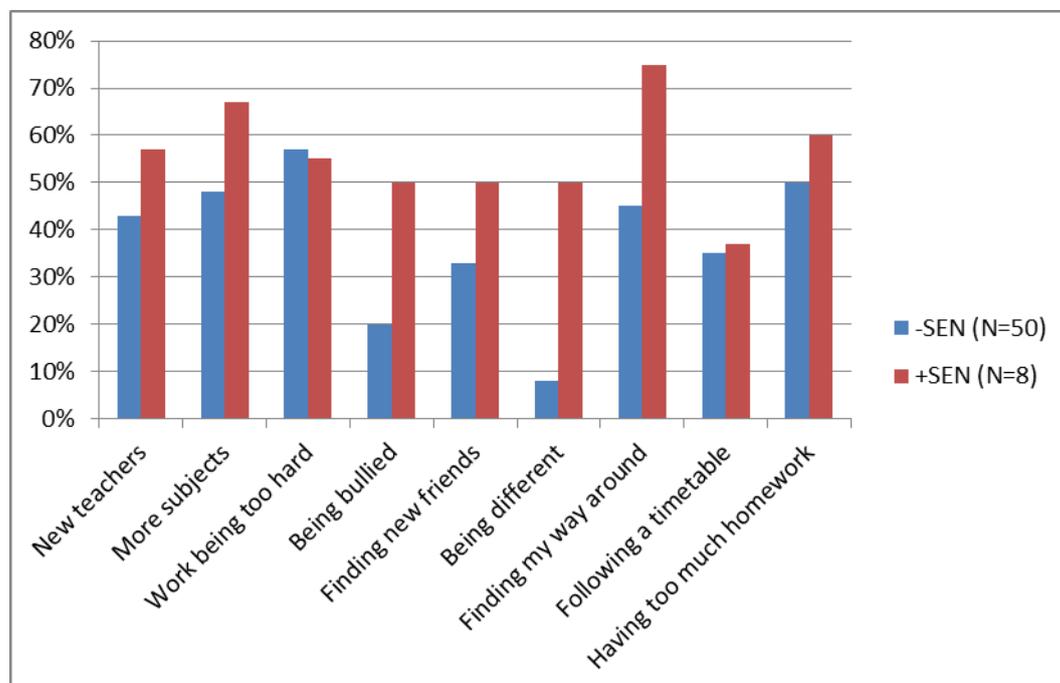


*Figure 1: Factors contributing to school choice*

When students were asked to rate on a scale from 1-10 (1 = Not Worried and 10 = Very Worried) how they were feeling about the move to post-primary school, (72%) of students indicated that they were not worried

about the transfer with a number of students unsure, although 50% of students with SEN, (N=4) indicated that they had a sense of worry about the move, two of which reported being very worried.

On analysis of the data, over one third of the cohort of students surveyed (38%) expressed a concern about the move to post-primary. This fear and anxiety was mainly centred on anxiety about more difficult school work, more subjects to contend with, getting too much homework and making new friends (Figure 2). These findings were also identified in the focus group sessions corroborating findings. Typically developing students found that having too much homework, work being too difficult and extra subjects tended to play on their mind the most, while for the students with SEN the most concerning factor was finding their way around the school, with 75% of students highlighting this as a concern, with 50% citing bullying as an issue in comparison to 20% of the typically developing students. Being different also demonstrated contrasting views with 7% of the typical cohort citing it as a worry whereas 50% of SEN students were concerned about this.

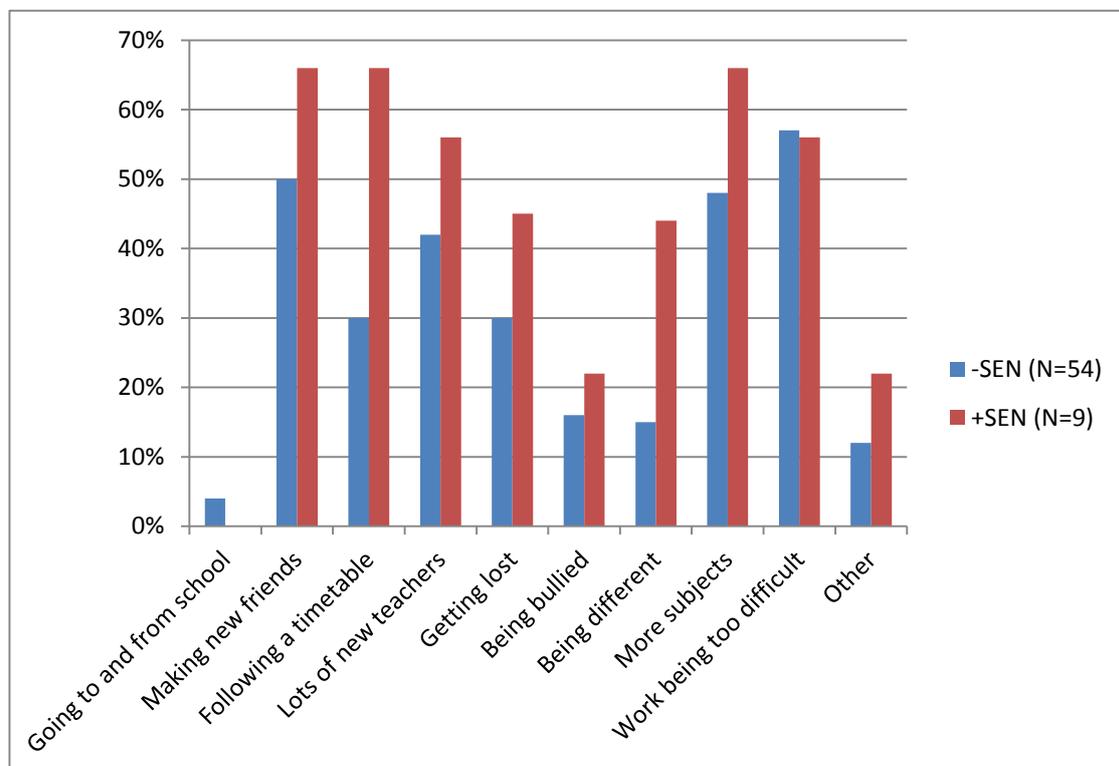


*Figure 2: Specific worries of primary students*

*Phase Two: Post-primary School Students Perspectives*

A total of 63 post-primary students were recruited with 14 males (22%) and 49 females (78%) representing the sample of all first year students from two local secondary schools. From this group of students, nine (14%) presented with SEN. Of these, six have specific learning disabilities (three have dyspraxia, two have dyslexia and one has attention deficit disorder) two have multiple disabilities and one has a specific speech and language disorder.

While the findings illustrate that many of the students are content with the transfer to second level, they still found the transfer experience challenging and a cause for worry. Students stated that post-primary school was difficult in terms of establishing new friendships with 67% of SEN students cited establishing new friendships as a worry in comparison to 50% of their typically developing peers. SEN students also experienced difficulty with following a timetable, more subjects and having to contend with more demanding school work.

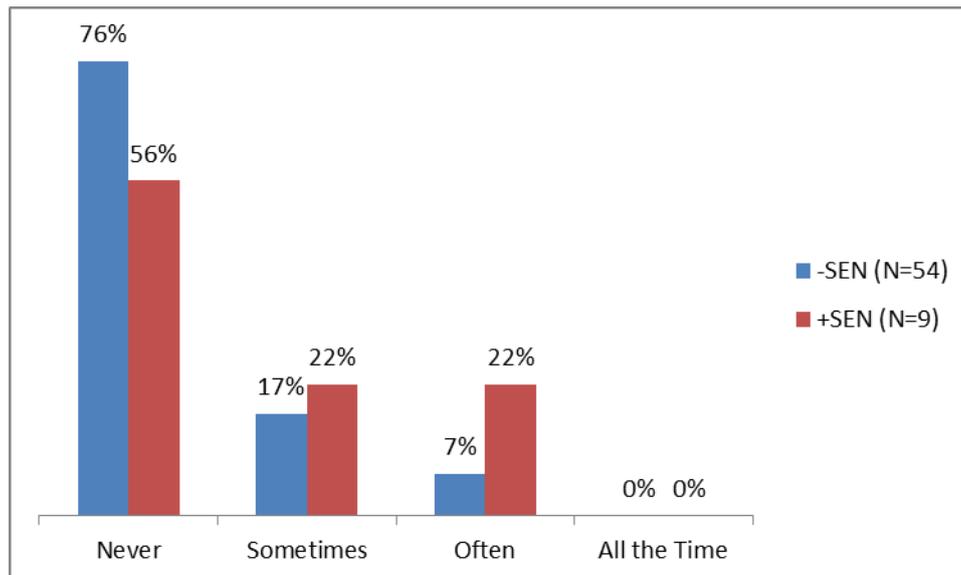


*Figure 3: Specific worries of secondary school students*

In the student questionnaires and the focus group interviews, students were asked about the extent to which their post-primary school differs from primary school. The responses focused on a variety of differences including the variety of subjects, the additional number of teachers, the length of the school day, the change from being the eldest student in the school to now being the youngest and smallest. For the majority of students, the major difference between primary and post-primary was having a number of different teachers with different expectations

*“In primary school we had the same teacher for the whole year so you got to know him a lot better, every time you go into class in this school you have a different teacher for the 35 minutes so it’s a bit more difficult as some teachers are a bit crosser than others. You don’t know the teacher as well as you would at primary school.”*

Students were asked about their experience of being bullied. Students who reported experiencing bullying stated the most common form to be verbal (86%) as opposed to physical aggression. While 76% of typically developing students reported never being bullied as illustrated in figure 4, only 56% of students with SEN reported the same, with 22% indicating that it only occurred occasionally, while 22% cited it as a regular occurrence.



*Figure 4: Incidence of bullying*

Students were asked if they felt comfortable talking to their class tutor about any problems or incidents that may arise and while close to two thirds of the typically developing cohort (63%) students indicated they would not have any difficulty discussing issues with their tutor, only one third (33%) of students with SEN felt comfortable talking to their tutor.

#### *Phase Three: Key Individuals Perspectives*

The majority of second-level teachers in the study believed that the transition from primary to post-primary school was a significant event in the lives of the students. Teachers cited that the social and organisational demands of the second-level system were considerable challenges to students and more so for students with SEN. The social demands mentioned included the move to a bigger school, coping with and meeting a number of new teachers and establishing new friendships. Teacher's views about the significance of the transition in the questionnaire also correspond closely to the anxieties expressed by many of the students. A post-primary class teacher commented

*“For some of the students it’s a significant change as they are coming from small schools, where now they are faced with a much larger environment where they have to contend with more subjects, teachers and pupils.”(PPCT 3)*

The Home School Community Liaison Officer also makes a significant point when he referred to the main barriers and obstacles facing students on transition

*“The parents of the eldest member of the family would often be very apprehensive because they wouldn’t have gone through the process before of a student from the household changing into another school. I think the greatest fear of all really is if you have unsure parents whose fears have transferred onto the kids, you know the parents who would have had traumatic experiences at school themselves. The kids would have picked up on that.”(HSCL)*

Here the HSCL has identified a significant factor to be negotiated by students and indeed their families. He makes reference to the fear and anxieties of parents and the spatial transition from the familiar local school and community to a more distant and unfamiliar one, where Reay and Lucey (2000) highlight that such a change has been shown to have particular significance for working class students in disadvantaged communities.

During the course of the interviews, teachers reflected on the experiences of first year students and the factors contributing to sustained difficulties where they arose. Bullying repeatedly emerged as one of the most significant issues affecting students as they negotiated transition. One post-primary resource teacher stated

*“It can be a traumatic time for students during the settling in period here as instances have arisen in the past where students, particularly students with SEN, have been bullied, mainly as a result of their learning need where they are verbally abused and isolated from the group.” (PPRT 2)*

Establishing friendships from the teachers perspectives emerged once again as most concerning for students with SEN, with bullying being next on the list of concern for these students. This links in with anxieties and concerns expressed by students pre-transfer and further highlights its significance in relation to transition.

School management and teaching staff were asked whether information supplied to them from their main feeder primary schools was first of all accurate and whether it took the form of verbal communication or more formal, with structured reports on individual students. The general response was verbal communication where a post-primary resource teacher commented

*“Probably a verbal communication is supplied and only if the school is contacted. Formal reports seem to have been dispensed with in recent years.” (PPRT 1)*

During the course of this study it also emerged that the majority of teachers cited insufficient time allocated to communication between the primary and post-primary sectors and that it would be worthwhile to understand the demands of teachers at both primary and second-level to improve approaches to curricula and teaching methods. A post-primary deputy principal commented how there is a lack of information provided and that meetings are arranged by their staff where information provided is verbal and stresses the need for more formal and structured reports to be provided or

*“many students will continue to slip through the net, where some go right through school.”(PPDP)*

Satisfaction with learning support in the sample schools depended somewhat on the resources available. Findings from both questionnaires and interviews with staff indicate that the level of provision can only be described as adequate, as all students do not receive their allocation of support due to timetabling issues, lack of resources and the fact that it is carried out on a needs basis. It also emerged that staff were not fully informed of information pertaining to transitioning students as reported by a post-primary class teacher

*“Perhaps we could have a more formal structure for sharing information among all staff. Confidentiality is of course very important but sometimes vital information is not passed onto staff.” (PPCT 4)*

Staff found that having to deal with varying levels of ability in the classroom presented many difficulties, mainly preparing material for each learner as summed up in the following statements by both primary and post-primary teachers

*“Breaking down mainstream subjects for special need students into a more manageable format is difficult for teachers and very time consuming.” (PCT 2)*

*“Having to prepare different questions based on ability and having to give different homework proves difficult.” (PPCT 5)*

From interviews, teachers drew attention to the fact that in pre-service training, little was done to equip teachers with the necessary skills to cater for individuals with learning needs as alluded to by the following post-primary class teacher

*“I would deem myself a competent teacher of students with SEN but this would be from little professional training but through my years of experience as a teacher and dealing with these students.” (PPCT3)*

### **Discussion**

This study investigated the primary/post-primary transition with particular reference to students with SEN and how their perceptions differ from students in the regular cohort. This research was carried out in an Irish town and investigated attitudes to transition in both denominational and non-denominational schools and generated knowledge about the move from primary and secondary students and sought the perspectives of key stakeholders including teachers which previous studies have not carried out. The results illustrate that the factors influencing the transition process from primary to post-primary school are complex. Staff reported feeling that students experience some disruption and discontinuity when moving to post-primary school, thus highlighting that the information gained from the data collection is supporting reviewed literature. Three major themes in relation to transitions emerged from the questionnaires, focus groups, semi-structured interviews and literature reviewed. These included pupil retention, transition constraints and lack of communication. A number of sub themes emerged from the thematic analysis process where perceived constraints included bullying, lack of time, inadequate training, teacher resistance and adjusting to new environment.

#### **Pupil Retention**

Research and reports tend to suggest that most sixth class students should be looking forward to post-primary school with the prospect of a range of teachers, richer resources and a new style of learning builds up the anticipation of a fresh start but current evidence points to the contrary. Children starting post-primary school find that far from being launched into a brave new adventure, they are reassessed, ability grouped, taught by different subject teachers with different expectations, rules and regulations are stricter and teaching styles and methodologies differ from those used in primary schools. The latest school retention report (Department of Education and Skills, 2014) stated that approximately 1 in 10 students are failing to complete post-primary

school with a significant number of these students leaving without any future plans for additional educational or training pathways. The Minister for Education and Skills stated in the report that

*“This is a serious problem and those students who drop out of formal education as teenagers limit their life chances” (Minister Jan O’Sullivan, Department of Education School Retention Report)*

It is also worth noting that an estimated 1,000 children do not move from primary to second-level education each year, but no official figures are available from the Department of Education because a long-sought primary database is still only being planned. The National Disability Authority make reference to the fact that Individuals who were physically disabled were the most likely group to leave school early, followed by individuals with an intellectual disability, and lastly individuals with a sensory disability (National Disability Authority; NDA, 2005b). While most discourse about early school leaving often takes place within the context of a consideration of the concept of ‘educational disadvantage’ the following school related perceived constraints identified in this study may be viewed as contributing factors.

### **Perceived Constraints on Successful Transitions**

#### *(1) Bullying*

In the findings, bullying emerged as a major issue in the adjustment experience as Ross (2003) points out that the immediate effects of bullying can be extremely debilitating to victims. The seriousness of the issue was stressed by both students and staff in all sample schools where each reported having a strict anti-bullying policy in place. In the current study bullying of SEN students was found to be prevalent (44%). This is in keeping with recent research by Rose et al. (2011) who concluded that 50% of students receiving special education services experienced bullying compared to 20-30% of students in general education, unfortunately compounding the problems already faced by these students in this pivotal time of adjustment. Evangelou et al. (2008) study also established that students with SEN are bullied more often than students without SEN.

As students with SEN are increasingly being taught with their typically developing peers, they are subject to a different range of childhood experiences and may be at an increased risk of bullying. While these results are cause for concern, the fact that a lot of these incidents go unreported is significant where only one third (33%) of students with SEN felt comfortable talking to their class tutor. Unfortunately, these experiences are not always positive and they can have an enormous impact on student's educational experiences.

### *(2) Lack of Time*

Lack of time emerged as a major constraint for teachers as they found it difficult to attend to differentiated work in order to support the weaker students and also to communicate with the SEN team regarding interventions and teaching strategies to incorporate into their teaching to support SEN students (Drudy and Kinsella, 2009; Anderson, 2007). Teachers also have the added stress of completing the course curriculum in order to ensure examination success and that all students reach their full potential. Travers et al. (2010) found that an overemphasis on academic results was proving a barrier to inclusive education. Time for collaboration amongst colleagues was cited as a major constraint and this was exacerbated by difficulties in accessing support from external agencies.

### *(3) Inadequate Training*

Inadequacies in the training and support of both trainee and qualified teachers were cited constraints to creating inclusive environments for the support of SEN students. Limited pre-service training for staff to supporting students with SEN has resulted in an inability to develop and implement curricula appropriate to the needs of these students. This is cause for great concern as restricted access to professional development leaves a void and lack of awareness of supports and interventions to support SEN students. Drudy and Kinsella's (2009) research made reference to the lack of opportunities to engage in collaborative problem-solving relating to the effective inclusion of students with SEN. Shevlin et al. (2008) report that the current in-service days and short courses provided to staff as part of their continuous professional development are inadequate. Staff would certainly

benefit from opportunities to learn about specialist support strategies used and information relating to how support teachers and class teachers can work as a team. Clarke et al. (2012) reported that the main sources of guidance for pre-service teachers are other teachers in their school who act as mentors and not university lecturers.

#### (4) *Teacher Resistance*

Teacher's attitudes are important to the successful integration and inclusion of students (Ainscow et al. 2012) and positive attitudes will enhance the transition process for students with SEN into their new school environment. Teachers set the tone of classrooms and thus, the successful integration and inclusion of students with SEN will depend upon the attitudes and positive interactions that they sustain with all students in their classrooms. Unfortunately during the course of the interviews with staff it emerged that a feeling exists among some teachers that the interventions and screening of students with SEN is the sole responsibility of the SEN team. They also feel resistant to differentiation due to the added workload and the fact that they perceive that the timetabled resource classes will attend to this. While streaming classes may resolve this issue, International studies have found that streaming results in very different educational outcomes, with students allocated to lower streams or bands taking longer to settle into their new school environment and making less progress academically (Applebee et al., 2003; Oakes, 1990, 2005). As a result of being labelled in this way, many students develop very negative views of their own abilities and disengage. The importance of instilling in staff an understanding that students learn in different ways is pivotal to a student's sense of belonging, self-esteem and engagement that will ultimately lead to him/her reaching their full potential.

#### (5) *Adjusting to New Environment*

On transfer, teachers made reference to the differences between the primary and post-primary sectors, with particular focus on the number of subjects and new teachers that the students have to contend with. Being used to having just one teacher in primary level, the students now have to adjust to the variety of teaching styles and demands of their new teachers. It was also pointed out that change in environment would impact students with SEN more so and ultimately may result in them taking longer to adjust and settle in than their typically

developing peers. According to Smyth et al. (2004), 20 percent of students settle immediately; 43 percent in one week; 25 percent in one month; and 14 percent take longer. Staff also cited in interviews that a minority of students continue to experience sustained difficulties in making the transition to post-primary and these difficulties are more frequently reported by schools with a high concentration of literacy and numeracy problems, mainly vocational and designated disadvantaged schools (Smyth et al., 2004).

### **Lack of Communication**

On analysis, it is clear that a good deal of contact between schools and parents/students pre-entry takes place prior to transfer. These commonalities include visits from principals of second level schools in the locality, distribution of literature, pre-screening assessment day, parent and home school liaison officer meetings, open nights and information evening for pupils and parents. While this is in line with best practice, students may also benefit from individual meetings with principal or deputy principal in January/February of the year of entry. Though good links between schools and parents/students exist pre-entry, there appears to be poor communication and an inadequate flow of information between primary and post-primary schools at the time of this study. School staff were dissatisfied with the lack of information on in-coming first year students making it very difficult to put resources and structures in place to assist these students on transfer. Additional primary/post-primary teacher transition meetings and information pertaining to transitioning students being routinely transferred electronically would make for a more enriched transition process.

While it is widely known that schools vary in their intake and selection practices, the provision of learning support was also found to be somewhat variable. All staff interviewed in the study recognised the value of learning support but the vast majority viewed the levels of learning support being offered as only adequate. Coupled with this, the management and provision of support lies with the SEN co-ordinator, a significant role for one individual where undoubtedly an established support team would prove a lot more efficient and effective. This system adopted by many schools is difficult to sustain with resource constraints and proves challenging for the effective communication of information relating to students with SEN and is in keeping with earlier research on the inadequate dissemination of information.

The research highlights the continuum of experiences from both staff and students perspectives in relation to transition from primary to post-primary. While most students navigated the transition phase with limited difficulty others reported a less positive experience. This corroborates the findings of previous international research (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Zeedyk, 2003) and Irish research (O'Brien, 2004; Smyth, McCoy & Darmody, 2004) that has explored the experiences of young people who make the transition from primary to post-primary school.

While this study undoubtedly highlights some of the key problems that occur during transition, these problems are viewed to be somewhat short-lived and similar to international findings, evidence from Irish studies has indicated that most pupils settle in quickly after getting used to the new structures and demands of post-primary schooling (O'Brien, 2001; Hargreaves & Galton, 2002). Graham and Hill (2002) reported that the majority of first year's level of concern diminished shortly after transition while Evangelou et al. (2008) reported that 75% of students claimed to have adjusted well shortly after transition.

The present study is not without limitations. Principal among these is the fact that it was not longitudinal in design. Students were interviewed in the primary school setting and ideally these students should have been re-interviewed post transition to compare their initial views. Unfortunately time constraints meant that the study had to interview different groups of sixth class and first year students. Thus, it is recommended that this study should be replicated in a longitudinal design and extended to a wider cohort of schools to increase sample size and ensure a representative distribution of the student population and a means to share best practices and evaluation should be established. While this study attempts to create a picture of the transition experiences of students with SEN in Ireland, it only represents the practices in a small cohort of schools and thus is not appropriate to generalise the findings to every student in Ireland. Nevertheless, this study does help shine a light on the transition experiences of students and adds to the discussion and the story by focusing the spotlight on one group of students from an Irish town as one cross section of experience.

### **Conclusion**

Findings from the study indicate that while a minority of first-year students experience sustained transition difficulties, students with SEN encounter greater difficulties during this crucial time of transfer. The importance of SEN supports in the transition experience must be recognised and it must be acknowledged that the student's needs are a dominant influence on their transition experience. Viewing transition planning as a support and not as an additional burden will help to enable SEN students to reach their full potential.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this study shed light on the need for more co-ordinated and detailed planning with respect to the transition of students with SEN. For students with learning difficulties, it is reasonable to hypothesise that transitional planning will require close co-operation between schools, parents and outside agencies. While the importance of the primary to post-primary transition is widely acknowledged and the findings of Mizelle and Irvin (2000) and Zeedyk et al. (2003) are echoed in the current study where transitioning students are worried about bullying, new subjects, new teachers and the new environment, further research is warranted as our understanding of this phenomenon is limited, due to the gap that exists in what little research has been carried out internationally in recent years.

While each school reported having an anti-bullying policy, evidence from this study highlights the ineffectiveness of these policies with 44% of SEN students having experienced some form of bullying and 67% of them not feeling comfortable informing staff. In spite of the pervasiveness of bullying, Mishna (2003) draws attention to the limited research that examines the relationship between bullying and students with disabilities, an area that requires further examination to understand the academic and psychological impact bullying has on students with SEN. With this in mind it must be stressed that the schools in question would certainly benefit from an improved anti-bullying strategy with particular attention focusing on students with SEN as bullying of

students with disabilities has been “low on the radar screen” of educational policy makers (Holzbauer, 2008 p.162).

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