
Students' Voices: Listening to blind / visually impaired students' transition needs

Introduction

This article presents two student profiles from a recent report '**Giving voice to blind and visually impaired students transition experiences, addressing gaps in policy provision**'. (HEA, Dublin, 2015) which represents a small-scale qualitative research study into the senior cycle transition experiences of blind/ visually impaired young people in Ireland.

The study reviewed current literature in the field and focused on the experiences of four students while also drawing on the multiple perspectives of family, service providers, educators and advocacy groups etc. The student cohort comprised of Jack, a current Transition Year (TY) pupil; John, studying for his Leaving Certificate; Sandra, preparing for her first year undergraduate degree exams and Aoife, enjoying her second year of her undergraduate degree. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant confidentiality. While the student voices are the heart of this study, the research team also chose to include the voices and experiences of their 'support circles' - these include parents, resource teachers, classroom teachers, special needs resource coordinators, parents, disability service, school principal, representatives from Féach parent support group for blind and visually impaired children, and Visiting Teacher Service. To ensure inclusion of as many stakeholder views as possible we decided to host a seminar on the topic of access to third level education for visually impaired/blind students. The 'Access to Higher Education for Blind/Visually Impaired (VI) Students in Ireland' seminar was held at Trinity College Dublin's School of Education on September 25th 2014, and was funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. On the day there were 40 representatives from a range of stakeholder groups, including students who led discussions. Some of the recommendations that emerged during this debate were included in this study (and this article).

The aim of this article is to highlight access to curriculum challenges experienced by two of the research participants, **Jack** and **John**.

Research methodology

The HEA pilot study was designed to investigate the transition experiences of young people who are visually impaired, and inform further more in-depth studies into this issue. As a result, qualitative research which emphasises documenting 'the world from the point of view of the people studied' (Hammersley 1992: 65) was considered the most suitable method. This preference makes this method an ideal match for the research goal of this study, as its investigative lens is sharply focused on the opinions, views and beliefs of the selected participants. This approach also offers as disability scholars Hartley and Muhit (2003:104) recognise 'the opportunity of closing the gap between the science of discovery and the implementation of such discoveries'.

Participants were selected and approached in consultation with professionals supporting these young people. Table A outlines each student participant's educational stage and the family members and professionals who also participated in this study.

Student	Education stage	Family & Professional Participants	Interview time (Approximately)
Jack	Transition year in large rural post primary	Mother, SNA, resource co-ordinator	50 minutes
John	Sixth year in large urban post primary	Parents, visiting teacher, resource co-ordinator, SNA	2 hours 10 minutes
Sandra	First year undergraduate student in a large urban university	Visiting teacher	1 hour 10 minutes
Aoife	Second year undergraduate student in a large urban university	College disability officer	1 hour 18 minutes

Table A: Student participants' education stage and their participating family and professionals

All of the professionals supporting these students have a vast range of expertise supporting young people with disabilities in education. In this study, these individuals shared experiences supporting both these particular students and other current and past pupils with visual impairments. In recognition of the critical role of family support, a representative from Féach, the parent group for visually impaired children, was invited to participate. The National Braille Production Centre perspective is also shared in this study, along with additional perspectives from a school principal, resource teacher and maths teacher from a school with a national reputation for supporting significant numbers of blind and visually impaired post primary pupils. In total, 18 semistructured interviews were conducted.

Participants (parents & professionals)	Interview time (approximately)
Féach representative	45 minutes
National Braille Production representative	30 minutes
Sandra's visiting teacher	55 minutes
John's visiting teacher	2 hours 10 minutes
Aoife's disability officer	1 hour 15 minutes
School Principal	30 minutes
Resource teacher	1 hour
Maths teacher	40 minutes
Jack's resource co-ordinator	1 hour
John's parents (interview with John)	2 hours 15 minutes
Jack's mother	25 minutes
John's resource co-ordinator	1 hour 20 minutes
John's SNA	20 minutes

Table B: Parent and professional participants and length of interviews

All of the student interviews took place face-to-face. **John** was interviewed along with his parents in their home. **Jack** was interviewed with his Special Needs Assistant (SNA) at his school. **Aoife** was interviewed at her college campus and **Sandra** was interviewed in her hometown in a local café. Three Skype interviews were conducted with professionals. These were with both visiting teachers and the disability officer. All of the other professional interviews took place face-to-face in locations convenient for the participants. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

A case study approach was considered the most effective method to capture the qualitative data, in composing the student profiles for this study. The strategy was adopted to facilitate weaving in the qualitative data shared primarily by students themselves according to the emergent themes. While supporting information from family members and

professionals was also included, the individual profiles aim as much as possible to 'give voice' to these students particular concerns, beliefs and experiences. Documenting the supporting perspectives from the wide range of professionals was presented in a thematic analysis format. This method was chosen to support and complement the student profiles, while also presenting emergent recommendations.

Student profiles

For the purposes of this article two student profiles will be shared to reflect access to curriculum challenges experienced by blind and visually impaired students. These accounts incorporate students experiences shared and supported by their 'support circles'. Given the space limitations for this article, rather than zone in on particular access issues, the idea is offer a holistic experience which encapsulates the real lived experience for these students.

The recommendations made in the larger study are derived from these experiences. In order to give a big picture overview all of these recommendations are presented following Jack and John's profiles.

Jack

Jack is a sociable, confident transition year student with a visual impairment, attending a large rural public post primary school. Throughout his education, he has been well supported by his family, who are very proactive in engaging with his school and other national support services for people with sight loss. Jack is linked in with Irish Guide Dogs and attends their life skills course, which focuses on independent living skills such mobility and cooking, which he enjoys. At school, Jack is supported by his SNA, Mary, who accompanies him in all his classes. He has a visiting teacher, who has supported him since primary school, with whom he has less regular contact. Her role is to link in with the school to ensure he can access the curriculum.

Although when he was in primary school he learned Braille, he no longer does. Instead his resource hours are dedicated to improving his maths and spelling. Mary helps his access by taking notes from the board, ensuring the curriculum is accessible, and equipment is set up and working. Mary is keen for him to devote time during his transition year to improving his Braille reading. In class Jack uses an Opti Verso camera to access the curriculum and has been using it since sixth class in primary school. While it is an excellent support for accessing classwork, he finds it quite 'awkward' and wonders whether there would be another assistive technology option for him to access the curriculum. Aside from being a cumbersome piece of equipment, it often breaks which can cause considerable stress, as while he waits for it to be sent to the manufacturer to be fixed, he cannot access the entire curriculum:

This (the arm of the Opti Verso) continuously snaps. It goes away and it takes three weeks to come back...it's very, very difficult.

When Jack is without the Opti Verso, he must rely on Mary to take notes during his classes, and after school he has to go over all the class work with his Andromeda at home:

So I just go home and do it all then, like go back over everything I did in school yesterday. You would be wrecked.

Mary arranged a meeting with Jack's mother, visiting teacher and the School principal to request a second Opti Verso, to be stored on stand by for the Junior Certificate, just in case it broke down. This has since been arranged for Jack, which is a great relief:

It's just good to know there is another one around, if this one breaks in an exam.

Jack is keen to find new technology support before going to college as he 'can't be carrying that around, like, it's too big and awkward'. Working with his SNA during his upcoming transition year, a priority is to investigate other options. Like most of his classmates, at this stage in his education he is not sure about his career choice, but he is considering third level education opportunities in Dublin and has already been to a couple of open days. It was through his network of friends made at Camp Abilities that he has learned about the latest assistive technologies and education options from other young people with visual impairment:

You're around other people who are visually impaired and they're going through the same stuff as yourself so it's kind of nice for that. And you do find out more about, like, what's out there, different organisations like....as I got older I heard about Child Vision ... and then there's Vision Supports and they had their weekend actually up in Dublin, which I was at over the weekend.

John

John is a bright and diligent sixth year pupil with a visual impairment, currently preparing for the Leaving Certificate at a large urban secondary school. John acquired his visual impairment towards the end of his primary school education. He has many hobbies and interests both in and outside school. Academically, he enjoys business studies and music, while by his own admission he struggles with maths and spelling. John's parents are very supportive of his education and are proactive in engaging with all professionals supporting their son, in particular with his SNA Mary, the school's special needs coordinator Maura, and Sarah, his visiting teacher.

John and his family feel especially well supported by Sarah:

We're fortunate in the position that the visiting teacher lives a few hundred yards away, she is very helpful, she has come down here on loads of occasions, and at this table she has taught John to do various things, like using that calculator.

They are acutely aware of the close proximity of their visiting teacher to their own home and how this plays a significant factor in the level of support John receives, and that other students may not to be as fortunate. Given the visual nature of maths, and as John was struggling with the subject, his visiting teacher recommended that his resource hours be solely allocated to support him with his maths course work. Typically John has these resource classes during physical education class times. John enjoys sports outside of school, however at school there are limited opportunities for him. His first year at secondary school represented a very challenging adjustment, both academically and socially. Despite feeling social isolation due to disability related challenges such as mobility and orientation within a large school, John has now settled well into secondary school.

John accesses the school curriculum principally through Braille. Accessing the curriculum materials involves Sarah, liaising with his school teachers and his SNA Mary, to order Braille versions and text files from the National Braille Production Centre. In general, his books are delivered in time for the start of each term, however, on occasions when there have been delays caused by last minute curriculum changes, this has caused him a great deal of distress and frustration, as he explains:

There were problems, however, with some of the Braille books, especially in French - for a couple of months I was left with no book pretty much in the classroom... Mainly just because the books that would have been used for class were changed at the last minute, really, and that was a bit of a problem... I mean, I've noticed myself I've even, in terms of grades and that, I mean it was a lot harder to study, I was almost looking for something to do in class because I couldn't really follow well.

Communication breakdown between all the school personnel involved is identified by John and his parents as the root of the issue and they feel they are ultimately the ones responsible for coordinating communication:

We primarily had to try and co-ordinate communication between all these people. Seven individuals (John's mother)... We found there were probably too many people involved and everybody thought everybody else was doing something, it was very disappointing. (John's father)

Ultimately, the person who is impacted upon is John, as he reports:

It's quite frustrating and also quite disappointing to be honest, because as any student I trust my teachers, you know, and even, say, today, in French class, I was sitting there putting my hands out, what can I do, you know. You know, I mean, because even like if the book wasn't there, I don't think it's really too much to expect for the teachers to give you alternative work.

Since completing the Junior Certificate two years ago, John has been planning with the support of his parents and visiting teacher for his transition to third level education. It is not common practice for visiting teachers to participate

in transition planning, as their role is focused on primary and post primary access to curriculum. Due to his health condition, John repeated a previous school year so has decided along with his parents to continue into fifth year. Although John's parents suggest that John would have benefited from a transition year, which focused on transition planning for his specific needs, exploring different technology supports, extra tuition in Braille and maths, and independent living skills; this, unfortunately, was not an option:

Once Maura was saying that transition year would be great for him because he could do this and we could do more of the Braille stuff and get extra support in the weak subjects, but then we were having a meeting with the school about other issues, we realised that the resources aren't there, the money's not there and there's no way we could tailor make a package for John for transition year. I'm just saying like, for somebody with disability or whatever, transition year could be great. You could do your mobility skills down in Cork, you could do your one-to-one in your maths... they're the subjects that you want to do for fifth and sixth but there's no way that school was going to tailor make it, they just wouldn't be in a position to do it. (Mother) ...It's an opportunity... independent living skills. (Father)

At school, career guidance is limited to all class discussion and instructions about the CAO application. John's father's understanding is that no extra support is in place for students with disabilities for transition planning:

I would say the fact that John has little or no career guidance was probably not all that different to his older brother... I don't think it's a factor because he was blind.

John and his parents have been very proactive in meeting with third level education institution disability services. Overall, they have found the experience worthwhile but warn in their experience that reception and support on offer for students with disabilities varies from institution to institution:

Very non-standard, everything is specific when they teach... it varies from college to college, and supports vary. DARE programme is quite different in one college to another and it doesn't happen in some.

John and his parents have visited several colleges and were weighing up options between local and larger third level institution options. In some larger institutions, John felt adjustment may be overwhelming and he could just be 'a number', while at one institution of technology they came out walking on air:

We thought oh my God, they're really bending over backwards, they really had a kind of holistic approach to the student, it wasn't all academic, it seemed to be very much like the door is open if there's any problems. (John's mother)

As John's father recognises, this was their individual experience - another student and their family may share a different story:

Again, that was our experience, you could get another group of people in and they might be completely different.

Nevertheless, the positive openness of the meeting with that institution and their willingness to listen to John's needs was encouraging for both John and his parents:

The important thing for me coming out of it was that John felt, you know, there's a possibility here. Because when you've got your Leaving Cert hanging over you and all, just to kind of know there's something out there for you... (John's mother)

It's not the end of the world. (John)

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the qualitative data gathered, the study made a range of recommendations, all relevant to the two student voices included in this article. These recommendations encapsulate key areas that require attention by the education system and schools in order to ensure effective transition outcomes for blind and visually impaired students and are made at system, institutional and school levels and full details will be in the research report due to be published by AHEAD.

Briefly these recommendations include:

- implementation of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) provision as outlined in the EPSEN Act 2004;
- review of the collaborative framework between school personnel and the Visiting Teacher Service with students and families, to make best use of scarce resources;
- provision for a structured transition plan to engage in outreach educational support activities between post-primary and third level sectors;
- development and implementation of a customised plan for transition year to address the needs of blind/visually impaired students on a national basis;
- provision of tailored career guidance support for blind/visually impaired students;
- review of the provision for reasonable accommodations by the State Examinations Commission and by schools;
- specific efforts to address mathematics and physical education access issues;
- inclusion of mathematics and technology innovation themes;
- mobility skills as part of physical education;
- inclusion of physical education and mobility themes;
- greater exploitation of 'mainstream' technology to address assistive needs;

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- alignment of Braille and print materials delivery;
 - establishment of peer support networks to reduce burden on scarce resources, for example through DigiPlace4all.

One direct outcome of the study related to a need identified to investigate the potential of mainstream solutions for blind and visually impaired senior cycle students - a new low vision aid app is in development. (The low vision app was a finalist in an educational publishing company's annual Hackathon.) The principal investigator together with the educational developer conducted a preliminary proof of concept test with the aid of a student from the study and the initial test proved that the aid demonstrated potential to provide improved access to the curriculum both in the classroom and at home.

This study recommends as a first step to implementing these research recommendations the co-ordination of a strategic meeting to bring together a collaborative team of providers (e.g. Visiting Teacher Service) schools, family advocacy group representatives and students to address these issues.

Implementation

To maximise the potential impact and minimise costs, implementing these recommendations should be done in such a way as to exploit common themes where present as presented in Diagram A. Diagram A (captured in accessible text) illustrates the interconnected strategy required to implement the new recommendations advanced in this study.

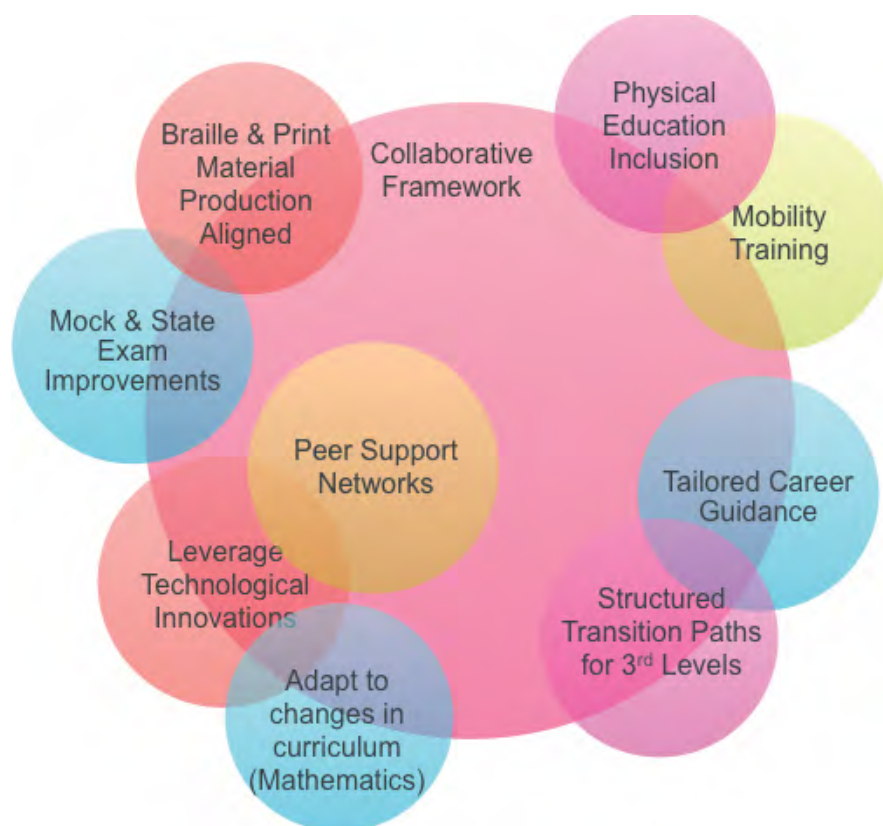


Diagram A: Strategy for implementing new recommendations on provision for blind and visually impaired students.

- Collaborative Framework
- Physical Education Inclusion
- Mobility Training

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- Tailored Career Guidance
 - Structured Transition Paths for 3rd Levels
 - Adapt to changes in curriculum (Mathematics)
 - Leverage Technological Innovations
 - Mock & State Exam Improvements
 - Braille & Print Material Aligned
 - Peer Support Networks

It is recognised that significant progress has been made in supporting blind and visually impaired students especially through provision of the Visiting Teacher Service. However, while a recent report from AHEAD (2015) indicates a positive trend for participation of blind and visually impaired students in third level, they are far less represented than other students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.

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