Exploring the Experiences of Students with Additional Educational Needs in Further Education:

An Investigation into the Transition from Mainstream Education to Further Education

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my beautiful sons,

Ben and Leo.

Your strength and tenacity make me beam with pride.

Thank you for choosing me.

Mam x

ABSTRACT

How do students with AEN, who have had learning support throughout their mainstream schooling, experience moving into Further Education without that support?

This study delves into the unique journeys of students with Additional Educational Needs (AEN) as they transition from mainstream secondary school to Further Education and Training (FET) colleges. With the introduction of the EPSEN Act in 2004, the Irish Education System has made significant strides towards inclusivity, particularly within primary and secondary schools. (Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, 2004) However, what happens when these students embark on their adult journey in the further education sector, without the constant supervision of their parents and the dedicated support provided by SEN departments and an SNA during their earlier educational years? The research focuses on five students enrolled in various QQI level five Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses at a FET college in Dublin. These courses range from Pre-University Arts to Art Portfolio Preparation to Pre-Nursing Studies. Each student involved in this study has disclosed at least one disability or AEN, which includes autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, Chronic Regional Pain Syndrome, and Anxiety. Their valuable insights and personal perspectives shed light on their educational experiences within the context of Further Education. The research is qualitative and uses semi structured informal interviews. This study aims to analyse the complexities and power dynamics of education through a Foucauldian lens by exploring the double-edged sword of care, policy implications, and the need for comprehensive training for educators.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Autism Spectrum Disorder

"Autism is a neurodevelopmental disability present from birth which causes difficulties in communication, forming relationships, understanding abstract concepts and sensory processing. It is a spectrum condition, meaning that people living with autism will experience varying levels of challenges and needs. Many of autism's main characteristics may not be noticed until much later in a person's life and are mistaken for personality quirks. An autistic person may not receive the right supports from crucial people in their daily lives. Getting a formal diagnosis is critical for anyone on the spectrum to access the help that's best for them and their families." (AsIAm, 2023)

Complex Regional Pain Syndrome

CRPS is a broad term describing excess and prolonged pain and inflammation that follows an injury to an arm or leg. CRPS has acute (recent, short-term) and chronic (lasting greater than six months) forms. CRPS manifests with combinations of spontaneous pain or excess pain, much greater than normal, after something as mild as a touch. CRPS is hard to treat and currently there is no cure. (NINDS, 2023)

Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia is a specific and persistent difficulty in understanding numbers which can lead to a diverse range of difficulties with mathematics.

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a condition of neurodevelopmental origin that mainly affects the ease with which a person reads, writes, and spells, typically recognised as a specific learning disorder in children.

Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia also known as developmental co-ordination disorder (DCD), is a common disorder that affects movement and co-ordination.

ACROYNMS

AEN – Additional Educational Need

ASD - Autism Spectrum Disorder

ASIAM – Irelands National Autism Charity

CRPS - Chronic Regional Pain Syndrome

DES – Department of Education and Science

FET – Further Education and Training

IEP – Individual Education Plan

MDT – Multi Disciplinary Team

NCSE – National Council for Special Education

NFQ - National Framework of Qualifications

QQI - Quality Qualifications Ireland

SEN – Special Educational Needs

SENO – Special Educational Needs Organisers

SERC – The Special Education Review Committee

SNA - Special Needs Assistant

SSP – Student Support Plan

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The journey from mainstream education to Further Education and Training (FET) is a critical transition for individuals with additional learning needs (AEN), as they often face the challenge of navigating new academic, social, and support structures without the familiar resources and accommodations they had in place. A Foucauldian perspective sheds light on the intricate power dynamics and complexities within the education system, urging a critical examination of disability in education and revealing the mechanisms that influence the experiences of individuals with AEN in this realm.

Education can be a transformative force, providing opportunities for personal growth, skills development, and social inclusion. However, education can perpetuate oppressive systems and marginalise individuals with disabilities. The notion of care within the educational system adds another layer of complexity. Care can be both empowering and restrictive, as it encompasses elements of support, surveillance, and control. Recognising the dual nature of care is essential to understanding how it impacts the agency and autonomy of individuals with AEN. Effective policies and comprehensive training for educators are paramount to address the challenges and power dynamics inherent in area of disability education. Policies that promote inclusive practices, reasonable accommodations, and anti-discrimination measures are key to providing inclusive education. Equally important is providing educators with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to support students with disabilities effectively. This study seeks to contribute to the discourse on inclusive education and advocate for the creation of empowering educational environments.

The research is a result of a qualitative study, with five candidates in a FET centre, using semi structured interviews. It comprises five chapters, commencing with this introduction. The second chapter presents a comprehensive review of the literature I have examined during the research process, carefully selected for its relevance to the study.
It is worth noting that disability studies in Ireland are still in the early stages of development, with individuals who have experienced inclusive education in mainstream schools with AEN and SEN now transitioning to FET colleges and universities. The methodology chapter details the research approach adopted for this study, while the subsequent findings chapter highlights the valuable insights obtained from interviews conducted with my chosen

candidates. An in-depth analysis of these findings is then presented, accompanied by an exploration of limitations and suggestions for further research in relevant areas.

What I needed to know

The first day I set foot in a college to start placement for the Higher Diploma in Further Education, I met a student who resonated with me. During the first few weeks as I observed the class with my supervising tutor, I watched the dynamic develop within the class, a level five preparatory award for those seeking a place in a University Arts programme. There are eight modules within this Major award: psychology, concepts in education, local history, European studies, political studies, word processing, communications, and work experience. I had not been informed of any AEN within the group, however I was acutely aware that this student had needs. I waited to see when and where the support would come from for this student: it didn't. Leading me to ask the question, how do students with AEN, who have had learning support throughout their mainstream schooling, experience moving into FET without that support? This question formed the basis of the research.

The research provided me with profound insights and expanded my perspective. The candidates interviewed, demonstrated a remarkable willingness to share personal stories, and it was evident that, no one had ever enquired about their feelings regarding their educational experiences before. From the first interview, my preconceived notions and ideas were challenged. As a researcher, I was delighted with the outcomes. It became apparent that the students were deeply engaged and content with their experiences in FET thus far. As a parent, I was taken aback by their level of satisfaction and the positive impact that FET had on their lives. I could not help wondering what the learners' parents felt. I consciously set aside that thought and focused on genuinely listening to what they had to share. I anticipated there would be strong dissatisfaction regarding the lack of SNAs, the restricted availability of support classes, and the absence of staff with specialized training in SEN. The learners proved me wrong.

What led me to this research

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the significance of empowering students with AEN by giving them a voice in shaping their own educational experiences. (Mooney & O'Rourke, 2017) By examining the transformative potential of allowing these

learners to take control of their own destiny and education, this study seeks to highlight the benefits of embracing their voices and fostering an inclusive educational environment that truly values and respects their unique perspectives.

Throughout this study I encountered many difficulties due to my personal attachment to the story. It has been exceptionally hard to separate my personal feelings as a parent and those of an educator from those as a researcher. My son was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, or autism when he was nine years old. His first three years of school were a nightmare for our family. We made the difficult decision to move him from the school which was not meeting his needs. I took redundancy from my full time job to spend time at home with my boys. While the children were at school I had an opportunity to enrol in a part time SNA course locally. I wanted to get an insight into the education system my son was experiencing and I needed to know what care and assistance was available for him to improve it for him.

Participating in the course opened my eyes to the education system but also to adult and further education, it gave me an opportunity to reflect and identify on what I always wanted to do, teach! I enjoyed meeting like-minded women, many of whom had raised their children and decided to retrain and return to work. There were also mothers of children with AEN on the course, who like me, needed to know more about what their children would be faced with in their formal education. A support network grew and became a platform to share information on therapies and educational supports for our children.

It was a transformative experience for me, one that led to a complete career change but also deepened my understanding of my sons' AEN, specifically ASD and dyslexia, my second child was diagnosed with severe dyslexia in senior infants. This knowledge empowered me to challenge the SEN structures within school and to share my insights and experiences with other SEN families.

I am an advocate for inclusive education. My experience was with the primary and secondary school systems but not with further education. As I began my teaching career in adult education, I became aware that no information transfers to college automatically with a student who has had support for an AEN all through school. As part of the registration process at PLC level, the student must declare for themselves that they require support. This

posed so many questions for me, in my capacity as a parent, as an educator with an interest in SEN and as a potential researcher.

The Education System in Ireland

Understanding the origins of the Irish education system is paramount in providing a comprehensive context for discussing the experiences of students with learning difficulties in further education. By delving into the historical foundations of the education system, we can grasp the underlying principles and ideologies that have shaped its development over time. Moreover, outlining the origins allows us to appreciate the societal and cultural factors that have influenced educational practices and policies.

The history of the Irish education system is complicated and can be divided into several chronological phases. It has been shaped by a complex historical trajectory, beginning with the English and Scottish plantations in Ireland that occurred from the 1500s until the Act of Union in 1800. For nearly 800 years, Ireland's education system remained under the control of a colonial power. The Penal Laws introduced in 1695, prevented Irish Catholics from being educated. Local clergy or travelling teachers, poets, writers, created secret, "hedge schools" which gave catholic children some form of education. (Coolahan, 1981) The establishment of the National School System in 1831 marked a significant turning point in Ireland's education landscape, coinciding with the aftermath of Catholic Emancipation in 1829. However, it would take another half a century before any funding was allocated specifically for secondary school education, with the implementation of the Intermediate Education Act. The year 1922 witnessed the formation of the Irish Free State. In 1924, the Dáil (Irish Parliament) established a dedicated Department of Education to oversee primary, secondary, technical, and higher education. Remarkably, as I write this in 2023, we reflect upon the fact that the creation of the first Department of Education in Ireland occurred merely a century ago, highlighting the relatively recent nature of this historical development.

Special Education In Ireland.

The central focus of this research revolves around the experiences of learners with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities as they progress to FET colleges, specifically examining their capabilities as self-advocates in contrast to the advocacy programs they encountered in

primary and secondary education. In this study, I aim to provide a succinct overview of the historical provision of special education in Ireland, delving into the educational options available to learners with SEN since the publication of the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) in 1993. By exploring these aspects, I seek to shed light on the unique challenges and opportunities faced by these learners during their educational journeys.

It is crucial to examine the landscape of inclusive education in Ireland since the implementation of The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act in 2004. This act serves as a pivotal point of reference for this study. An integral aspect of this research involves exploring the key distinctions between integration and inclusion of learners with AEN and analysing how they navigate the transition from secondary to tertiary education.

It is noteworthy that disability has been classified into two distinct models, the medical model, and the social model, which will be further examined and discussed. The Medical Model of disability, which perceives individuals as being disabled by their impairments and suggests that medical interventions are necessary to address or "fix" these impairments, has historically played a significant role in education. An example of this could be that a person who is hearing impaired should learn to lip read, as not many people know how to sign. (Flood, 2018, p. 4) Now there is a growing acceptance and adoption of the Social Model of disability. This approach recognises that it is society that creates barriers, impeding the full participation of individuals with disabilities. It emphasises that these barriers are created by society. According to the Social Model, it is the responsibility of society to ensure accessibility, remove obstacles, and promote inclusivity, enabling all individuals to have equal opportunities and rights.
(ILMI, 2020)

Special Education in Ireland is categorised into three separate phases. The three categories or eras of special education are, the era of neglect and denial, the era of the special school and the era of inclusion. (Swan, 2000) The era of neglect and denial is a shameful part of Irish history, there was no education provision for children with any kind of disability or learning difficulty. Historical governments did not see fit for children with any kind of SEN to be educated leaving children with disabilities to be institutionalised.

The medical model has always focused on the causes and symptoms of disability and how it can be treated. (Flood, 2018) It only sees the barriers to learning being inherent in the learner. The medical model was prevalent in the second era of special education in Ireland. It endorsed a separate educational provision and encouraged the grouping of children with the same needs into "Special Schools". In 1959 the appointment of the first inspector for Special Education saw an increase in schools for children with SEN. These schools categorised children by their impairments. In most cases they were established by Religious Orders e.g., St. Joseph's School for the Blind in Drumcondra. They were residential and often used old institutional buildings, the children were isolated from their families and community. The 1980's saw an international change in the popular opinion regarding segregated education and moved to include children with SEN in mainstream schools to be educated alongside their peers. By the early 1990's over 2,000 children had a place in a special class within the mainstream framework of education. (Flood, 2018)

The government authorised an all-encompassing review on the provision of Special Needs from early years right through to tertiary level. The Special Education Review Committee (SERC) report was circulated by the Department of Education & Science in 1993. This report was instrumental in the development of inclusion. It highlighted the aspiration of parents of children with needs to be educated alongside their peers in mainstream schools. It emphasised that children who were extremely able, both physically and mentally could be educated along with their contemporaries. SERC made recommendations for the introduction of a National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS) which would work in tandem with the educators to help assess and plan for this model of inclusion and was realised in 1999. Teacher training around the area of SEN was to be re-evaluated and improvements made. (Guerin & Tadgh, 2020). Several legislative changes were made in the 1990's and 2000's with the roll out of specified acts to improve the lives of children and those with disabilities in Ireland.

Key Legislation

It is necessary to provide an overview of the significant legislative factors that have shaped the inclusive model present in Irish schools today. The modifications made to the Irish education system in relation to disability are relatively recent. I am struck by the symbolic nature of this transformation and its occurrence within my lifetime.

The 1998 Education Act recognises the right to education for all individuals, including those with disabilities and learning difficulties, fostering a partnership among communities, families, educators, and the state. (Government of Ireland, 1998) In tandem with this The National Disabilities Authority Act 1999 establishes the NDA as an advisory body, providing recommendations on disability-related policies and practices. (NDA, 2023)

It was not until the year 2000 that the Irish Government guaranteed minimum education standards for every child in the country, The Education Welfare Act 2000 ensures mandatory school registration, and promotes compulsory school attendance. (Government of Ireland, 2000) Again, in the year 2000 the introduction of the Equal Status Act 2000 prohibits discrimination, harassment, and promotes equality in the provision of services. (Government of Ireland, 2005) The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) 2004 focuses on equal educational provisions for individuals with disabilities, supporting their inclusive participation and independent living. (Government of Ireland, 2004) The Disability Act 2005 assesses the health and needs of disabled individuals, facilitates service provision, and promotes social equality and justice. (Government of Ireland, 2005)

Inclusive Education

With the introduction of the National Disability strategy in 2004, inclusion of those with disabilities came to the forefront of discussion. (NDA, 2020) Historically when working with people with disabilities there was a presumption of lack of ability as opposed to the assumption of competence. Integration and Inclusion are symbiotic practices which can sometimes be misperceived as stand alone.

In 2004 The EPSEN Act was written into legislation by the Irish Government and was projected to be fully implemented by 2009. It is the most important piece of legislation relating to the education of children under the age of 18 with special needs in Ireland. The EPSEN Act (2004) states that "A child with SEN shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs", however there are two caveats. The first that the "best interests" (Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, 2004) of the child must be met in line with the assessment carried out under the legislation and second that said needs of the child do not impede on the education of the other children in the class environment. Section three of the act states that the principal of the

school still has the final say with regards to the progress of the child. They can advise that further assessment through the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is required in conjunction with parents and the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO).

Inclusion in mainstream primary and secondary education thanks to EPSEN and the NCSE, has provided a pathway for those learners to Higher and Further education. This pathway does not always provide a positive learning experience for the student. As part of the provisions to inclusion in education, each student with a professional report from a Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) which identifies special needs is entitled to an Individual Education Plan (IEP) as part of their Student Support Plan (SSP) in school. Failure to understand the differences in each of these plans can lead to issues around the provision of the correct supports a student needs.

Why does this change when the learner moves to Further Education? The ambitious FET Strategy 2020-2024 drawn up by SOLAS, who manage further education and training in Ireland, which includes SEN as a "priority cohort" (Solas , 2020, p. 63) of the most marginalised learners, in tandem with migrants, the travelling community, long term unemployed, ex-offenders and women returning to education. The strategy aims to reform and increase the amount of funding for those with disabilities which now covers only Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses and to enable the practice of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which will allow the inclusion of people with disabilities in mainstream FET instead of having to offer separate provision.

The research has links to similar issues in the UK for example, the need for SEN training for educators, concentration on results and outcomes to secure funding for the following years course and teacher allocations and limited availability of specific computer technology. Anne-Marie Wright in her paper "Provision for students with learning difficulties in general colleges of FET– have we being going around in circles?" highlighted issues around provision of FET for students with SEN in the UK based on OFSTEAD reports. They showed despite strategic planning and provisions for SEN in FET that there were still areas of failing, specifically gaps in specialist training for educators, over emphasis on accredited provision, deficits in diagnostic assessment, unsatisfactory use of Information and Computer technology (ICT) and a key area I am interested in an underdeveloped individual learning plan. (Wright, 2006, p. 36)

In "Learning support for young people in Transition, FET and work", McGinty and Fish focus on the transitions from school to FET and training but stress the transitions should be a shared process. They highlight the need for joined up thinking institutions across the sector, to ensure a smooth transition process for the learner. (McGinty & Fish, 1992) Think about Secondary Schools and FET centres, Multi-Disciplinary Teams and Tutors, Health, and Social Services, all speaking together to ensure the best educational experience for the learners.

Sutcliffe states in her review of Learning Support for Young people in Transition, that it is very rare for multiple organisations to contribute to a transition plan for a learner with AEN. (Sutcliffe, 1992, p. 219) Once a learner reaches the age of 18, they are classed as an Adult. They have limited parental involvement in their education. Assisting young adults in making informed decisions about their future is crucial. The concept of self-advocacy poses a challenge when individuals have relied on others to advocate on their behalf throughout their lives.

Joyce Harrison in her paper, "Accessing further education: views and experiences of FE students with learning difficulties and /or disabilities" is asking the same questions in 1996, that I am asking in 2023. "Do learners with learning difficulties and or disabilities feel they are involved in setting and reviewing their learning programme and how do they feel about their FE experience?" (Harrison, 1996, p. 187) Key outcomes from Harrison's questioning of FE learners, highlight the difficulties I have seen first-hand, Reading, and understanding assignments, time management and executive function were mentioned by the participants of her research.

The issues surrounding FET and AEN have been flagged for the past 20 years, yet we have not seen a consistent response or solution to these problems. While funding exists for learners, the question arises as to whether it is sufficient to provide financial support without the presence of experienced educators to support the learners' needs.

Special Needs Assistants

The research prominently highlights the significant role of the SNA. Considering their substantial presence within the study's scope, it is essential to give context to how the role has evolved and where it currently fits within the mainstream classroom in Ireland. The SNA has been an invaluable addition to the mainstream classroom over the past 25 years. The SNA is focused around the "care needs" of the child and highlights that it not a teaching position. Despite this, there have been calls for the role to evolve from solely a caring nurturing responsibility. (Keating & O'Connor, 2012) During the interviews, two candidates mentioned the fact that the SNA assigned to them at school, did not have sufficient understanding of their condition to help them in a way they felt was conducive. The educational requirements to be employed as an SNA are a level three QQI qualification or three grade Ds at junior certificate level. (Careers Portal , 2023) It is now common practice for schools to request their SNAs have a minimum of a Level five QQI qualification in Special Needs Assisting, which means that their staff are trained to a higher level. Many SNAs upskill throughout their careers in a personal capacity, developing their understanding of the SEN requirements. I believe that SNAs are educators and should be rewarded for same. Logan is quoted by Keating and O'Connor "the least powerful staff, to the least powerful students" highlighting the devalued status of both groups. At the beginning of this research, I believed that each student would be calling out for access to an SNA, this was not the case. The idea that I as a parent or an educator means I know what is best for you is not what the students want. Some of the students felt suffocated by the care. We as parents and educators do not get to decided always what is best, there is an evolution of autonomy for the students I interviewed. They took the opportunity in some cases to push back and say I do not want this help or care, I do not need an SNA, especially if I do not like the person and they do not understand me. There is an option here to look at the role of the SNA and the possibility of upskilling as an area for further research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The field of education is a complex and multifaceted realm that encompasses a wide range of experiences for individuals, both positive and negative. Within this context, disability studies have emerged as a critical lens through which scholars examine the experiences of individuals with disabilities within educational settings. Drawing inspiration from Michel Foucault's theoretical framework, this literature review aims to explore the interplay between education, disability studies, and key concepts such as creating subjectivities, care and governmentality, autonomy, and self-regulation, as well as policy and training. By delving into both the positive and negative aspects of education, we can identify the factors that contribute to a supportive and empowering educational experience, as well as the challenges and barriers that individuals with disabilities may encounter.

One theoretical framework that informs this exploration is Michel Foucault's concept of subjectivity and power relations. Foucault's work highlights how power operates within educational institutions, shaping the identities and experiences of individuals. This Foucauldian lens allows us to critically analyse the ways in which education, as a disciplinary apparatus, constructs and regulates subjectivities, particularly for individuals with disabilities. "The examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalising judgment. It is a normalising gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates and judges them." (Foucault, 1975)

The role of care and governmentality within educational contexts is also examined. Care encompasses the support and assistance provided to individuals with disabilities, while governmentality refers to the governing practices and strategies employed by educational institutions to regulate and control individuals. Exploring the dynamics of care and governmentality helps us understand how these forces can both enable and limit the agency and autonomy of individuals with disabilities in educational settings.

This review investigates the concepts of autonomy and self-regulation within the educational landscape. Autonomy refers to the ability of individuals to make informed decisions and

exercise self-determination, while self-regulation involves managing one's own learning and behaviour. Examining these aspects provides insights into the opportunities and challenges individuals with disabilities encounter in developing their autonomy and self-regulation skills within educational contexts.

Lastly, the role of policy and training in shaping inclusive educational practices will be discussed. Policy frameworks play a crucial role in providing guidance and support for the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in educational settings. SEN training programs equip educators with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively support students with diverse needs. Analysing the effectiveness of policy initiatives and training programs helps identify areas for improvement and best practices in promoting inclusive education.

Disability Studies and Education – A Foucauldian Approach

Subjectivities and Labelling

There are advantages and disadvantages to having a label, however, at 18, do students see the benefits for them? "Children with special needs are defined in relation to normality" (Allan, 1996, p. 222) It could be seen as an opportunity to shake free the yoke of a diagnosis or label, for once, to be seen as the person and not the disability, in an educational situation, to avoid judgment by peers and to feel what it is actually like to be "normal", whatever normal actually is? Pickett describes the definitions of the modern normal as a construct of the social sciences and a fiction (Pickett, 1996, p. 453) The idea of what normal is has an impact on the "subject" within the classroom and in other institutions.

It is not until the student turns 18 that they can finally decide how whether they would like to disclose that they have an AEN, that for once they will not be known as the dyslexic student or the autistic student or the one who ticks or gets overwhelmed with change or frustrated with new work in class. There is an opportunity for them now to identify as the young adult who has dyslexia or autism. They have the power now to choose to use the description of their ability as opposed to the disability if they chose.
Foucault presses on the "micro physics of power" and advocates looking for themes of endurance which give students with AEN or SEN an opportunity to break free of their

identities and chose a different educational experience. (Allan, 1996, p. 225) Foucault argues that power is not just a repressive force but also operates through disciplinary techniques that shape and regulate people's behaviour. Within the educational context, disciplinary power is carried out through various methods such as surveillance, examination, normalization, and the creation of hierarchical systems. Learners often must endure disciplinary practices and controlled ways of being including adhering to rules, structures, and norms within the school system. Because of this they are compelled to obey the strict timetables, delivering assessments in a prescribed way, and constantly adapting to the expectations the education system has of them. This endurance can be interpreted as social conditioning. People with AEN can either become a master of this or fail badly, it limits their agency and autonomy in how they chose to learn. (Foucault, 1975)

Privilege of Diagnosis

Obtaining a diagnosis for a child with special needs can be a transformative experience, bestowing upon parents a unique privilege and granting their child the opportunity for comprehensive support and understanding.

A diagnosis can be a beacon of hope providing a profound sense of support for a child's journey. Many families intuitively sense that their child is unique, and in the case of children with ASD, these differences can be subtly nuanced. It was only when we witnessed our son during play dates, school concerts, or standing still amidst a bustling football field while his peers dashed around, that we began to realize something was amiss.

I cannot describe the anguish we felt when summoned to the school, facing a first-class teacher who berated and criticised us, claiming our child was defiant, bold, and disruptive in her class. None of these behaviours were evident to us at home. Only after receiving a diagnosis, we discovered our son wouldn't be dismissed or forced to endure distressing activities due to sensory overload in the classroom. Instead, a comprehensive plan, an IEP, would be implemented to help him develop strategies and navigate the school day. Though the worry never truly dissipates, the moment of diagnosis provided us solace. No longer did we have to offer explanations or make excuses, for we finally understood why our child was different and, most importantly, we gained the knowledge to effectively support and manage his unique needs.

Yet, the acquisition of this diagnosis was not devoid of a significant financial burden, for time was of the essence in our case. Our son was already nine years old when the investigations commenced, compelling us to seek answers promptly. However, the stark reality emerged as we faced an arduous waitlist for the public assessment of needs—an excruciatingly long wait that stretched over 12 months.

Driven by our unwavering determination to support our son, we resorted to private means, shouldering the financial responsibility for an occupational therapist who, in turn, recommended the involvement of a private psychologist. Each report we required to unravel the complexities of our child's condition was procured through private channels, underscoring the stark truth that, in some instances, a diagnosis can truly be considered a privilege.

Regrettably, the persisting issue lies in the unchanged waiting lists, leaving countless children without any assessment to this day. This realisation magnifies the significance of having access to timely assessments, for it highlights the unfortunate reality that many families continue to face, desperately navigating an uncertain path without the crucial information and support that a diagnosis can provide.

World Autism Awareness month falls in April every year. On the 11th of April 2023, Newstalk journalist, Gavan Reilly, reported on the status of Disability Services in Ireland especially around Autism. The segment aptly named "You should be aware" highlighted the situation surrounding the diagnosis of Autism. At the time, Reilly highlights the fact that legally a child is entitled by law to an assessment of need within 6 months of application though the HSE, but the reality in 2023 that waiting list is over 19 months sometimes even longer. Many parents sought in the past to bypass the public waiting lists and pay privately for assessments, however due to the shortage of professionals in the public sector, the private sector has now become equally as clogged with waiting lists spanning over 12 months. (Reilly, 2023) Throughout this research it has become evident that there is no longer the benefit of having the means to pay for therapies and assessments privately. The issue of late diagnosis for learning disabilities for example Dyslexia or Dyscalculia or even what would have been described as "mild" autism are on the rise because their system is at an impasse since the dissolution of the six to 18 disability teams and the introduction of the Community Network Disability Teams which outsource to several charities such as Enable Ireland,

NCSE. There is very little literature around this issue, a distinct lack of information. Reilly describes the system as a "shambles". (Reilly, 2023) In February 2023, a committee was formed to discuss the delays in the Assessment of Need process for children in this country. Some of the recommendations include that therapists employed by the HSE should have increased salaries to match those in the private sector, also that austerity cuts must be balanced out and that any student therapists or interns need to be paid for the work that they undertake. Kathleen Funchion TD has highlighted so many questions around why the system is failing our most vulnerable. (Government of Ireland, 2023)

Michel Foucault's contributions to disability studies have been instrumental in challenging traditional notions of disability, examining the ways in which power and societal structures shape and control the experiences of disabled individuals. He emphasises how society, through various discourses, institutions, and practices, defines and categorises certain bodies and minds as "abnormal" or "deviant." This labelling and classification contribute to the marginalization and exclusion of disabled individuals, reinforcing power differentials and reinforcing ableist attitudes. Also, his concept of "biopower" and the notion of disciplinary mechanisms provide valuable insights into how disabled bodies are often subjected to medicalisation, surveillance, and control. "Disability surveillance that operates on perceived notions of risk are carried out under biopolitical rationalizations that aim to promote the health and prosperity of the population through social sorting processes that involve identifying and categorizing 'abnormality' through the collection of medical data". (Saltes, 2013)

Governmentality concentrates on the controlling of societies, through the emergence of institutions. Institutions such as schools, hospitals etc. Foucault's ideas around the evolution from the art of government to the science of government are discussed in his essay on governmentality from 1978. (Gane, 2008) Schools have become businesses, training children to be "generation citizens" (Burch, 2018, p. 108), instilling ideas of independence, employability, and good health, all to reduce the stress on the public expenditure on welfare. The idea that in some societies you get paid more to not to work than to work creates massive divides among the masses. Therefore, if we, as good citizens contribute to the workforce, we have a better grasp on how to succeed in life. The power of education can drive youth into a society under the control of the rules enforced by the institutions. In her paper on the

Governmentality of Adulthood, Burch talks about how the transition to adulthood is controlled by the education system and the pressures that are put on those with disabilities and AEN are burdened by the self-regulation to become accepted by the state. In some cases, the need to be an ideal citizen further "others" people with disabilities. Burch states that "adulthood… becomes a status awarded only to young people who participate in approved activities" for example youth community projects, voluntary work and participating in society. (Burch, 2018, p. 104) The award of "Adult Citizen" for the right behaviour in youth is an example of the meritocracy of the neoliberal environment we are living in today. There is a huge emphasis on self-regulation which is presented to us as the luxury of freedom and choice and being responsible for ourselves and those around us. Being a good influence, an ideal citizen, is a way of generating points on a scale towards the prize of having stepped up and contributing to create a better society. A meritocratic society at its best.

In Norway, Foucault's ethical and genealogical writings, conduct of conduct, governmentality, subject positioning all contribute to the ethics of inclusion in special education. (Knudsmoen & Simonsen, 2016, p. 38) The idea that the learner with AEN can contribute to the richness of the education experience in the classroom. Participation in mainstream can enhance the learning of all within the classroom. Everyone is an "agent of their own learning and development" Befring quoted by Knudsmoen and Simonsen said the focus should move away from the negativity of the medical model of disability and the subsequent diagnosis and labelling of a child. (Knudsmoen & Simonsen, 2016) Ethically all students can be active players in the classroom. There is a concept of "Self-Mastery" or adapting to schooling. Students with additional needs can gain the agency to learn and have a will to conduct themselves in the framework of the classroom. (Knudsmoen & Simonsen, 2016) There is a belief that the degree of self-control one can exerts over oneself, free will and determinism can coexist.) "Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics, but ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection" (Foucault, 1997, p. 284) Norway has moved away from discipline as a technique to mould a learner into a seemed normal. The focus is on "self-technologies" and the learner becoming meshed into the school day activities. (Knudsmoen & Simonsen, 2016, p. 39)

As part of Foucault's analysis of power in education, he introduces the power relations through the pedagogy of a teacher who is "bringing modern power into play through the

normalisation procedures" Does the school experience fall into the category of the "caring institution" which Foucault would have expected a certain amount of knowledge of the "subject" to have been upheld? (Marshall, 2010, p. 15)? Are people with AEN being coerced into "normalising" in today's inclusive educational system or are society normalising the fact that there are people who learn differently and that we can learn from them. Regulation as a form of governmentality is inherent in parents and teachers of students with AEN. There is a need for constant supervision, interaction, and observation, ensuring that everything is being managed in the best possible way.

Care in Further Education and Training

Foucault is critical of humanism or care and Picket in his paper on Politics of Resistance quotes Foucault saying "humanism is everything in Western civilisation that restricts the desire for power; it prohibits the desire for power and excludes the possibility of power being seized" By way of challenging the humanism or care, we can learn from those who are the direct targets of power and repression, in this case, the students with AEN. These are the most vulnerable who have been "divided, distributed, selected and excluded" under the auspices of care. (Pickett, 1996, p. 452) Foucault's exploration of power relations and knowledge production unveils the ways in which medical and scientific discourses construct and reinforce notions of disability. This can lead to the pathologisation of disabled identities and the dominance of medical models that frame disability as a problem to be fixed or normalised. Foucault also highlights the role of institutionalisation and the creation of specialised spaces, such as asylums and hospitals, in controlling and managing disabled individuals. These institutions often operate under systems of surveillance and normalisation, imposing norms and expectations on disabled bodies and minds. (Foucaut, 1967)

Education and care can be defined as a holistic approach that combines educational instruction with nurturing and supportive care for learners. It recognises that learners' overall well-being and development are interconnected with their educational journey. The implication of education and care is that learners receive not only academic knowledge and skills but also the necessary emotional support, physical safety, and social engagement required for optimal learning and growth. By providing a supportive and inclusive environment, education and care can foster positive learning experiences, enhance learners'

self-esteem, promote social interactions, and contribute to their overall educational outcomes and personal development. "Care is the foundation of education; without care there can be no genuine learning" (Noddings, 1992)

The care aspect of further education can have two meanings, it can be genuine and altruistic, and give a sense of doing good for another person but on the other hand the care can be a power play and ultimately subjugate the learner, removing any self-advocacy they have acquired for themselves. Under the guise of thoughtfulness and sensitivity for a person, the educator can stifle them and take their power away. The candidates I interviewed had very little power bestowed upon them in their primary and secondary education. They were observed and assessed and buoyed with support plans and IEP's, resource hours, SNA's, readers and scribes, parent teacher meetings, yet had very little interaction or contribution within the structure put there to sustain their AEN in mainstream education. I have witnessed first-hand the vocation of some FET Tutors who have taken their learners with AEN over the line in their own time. Yet, I question the fact if this is the right thing to do as it could lead to a false hope or false sense of security in the qualification they receive.

Independence, Autonomy and Responsibility

Schools exerted control beyond the confines of the classroom, encompassing various aspects of society. This control extended to indirect supervision by parents and families within the home environment and ultimately encompassed the wider societal context. (Foucault, 1982) Because of this control, the most vulnerable have been packaged and labelled for their educational journey most since primary school. Foucault believed that "any particular theory of what a person ought to be like by nature, is false" and it has the effect of limiting human potential and marginalizing individuals who do not conform to these norms. (Pickett, 1996, p. 452) Foucault's archaeology phase presents a sharp critique of humanism, portraying it as a force that suppresses the inherent "desire for power." (Pickett, 1996) Through studying and understanding the experiences of the most vulnerable individuals, particularly those with educational disabilities in this research, we can actively challenge and resist the oppressive nature of our cultural institutions. On the other hand, is the independence that the learners perceive to have in FET false sense of freedom following on from the surveillance of their life to date. Victoria Pitt, wrote in 2004 about a group of students with physical disabilities who moved from mainstream, to a special needs school to complete their further education.

She mentions that of the 8 students who were involved in the research all needed physical help and help recording information in class, all of which was not readily available to them at the college they attended (Curtain & Pitt, 2004, p. 391) When asked, most of the students felt that their academic needs could be met by the college, but because they had no access to therapies or specialist support the better option for them was to move to a more specialised college. They also found that there was a positive aspect to attending a mainstream college, as they had "ordinary" friends and they didn't have a constant reminder of their disability (Curtain & Pitt, 2004, p. 393).

Stephen Brookfield uses Foucauldian ideas to describe experiences of adults returning to learning. The idea that adult education can empower a person is a solid argument, however, how does the empowerment come about if a person has had a barrage of support through their previous schooling experiences. "Repressive power constrains and coerces bending its subjects at its will." (Brookfield, 2001) Brookfield argues that Foucault's "analysis of power" has a direct corelation on what he calls institutionally funded formal programmes of Adult Education, for example in Ireland QQI and National Framework of Qualifications. Foucault suggests that educators can be divided into "Good Guys" those who are democratic and use their pedagogy and experiential teaching methods to divert from the dominance of the institutions and the "Bad Guys" who toe the corporate line and enforce institutional schemas onto the learners. (Brookfield, 2001, p. 1)

Training for Educators

Foucault's ideas around critical gaze and the power play of surveillance of education does not exclude the educators. "Relations of power are intertwined with pedagogical effects of guilty obligation and verification" (Deacon, 2006, p. 184) As a new member of the teaching profession I was curious as to how training for educators is approached. My role falls into the capacity of post primary and FET tutor as I am employed in a dual school/college, therefore I am obligated to participate in "Croke Park Hours". Within these hours there is an allocated 10 hours spaced over the academic year for Continuous Personal Development. There is no specific requirement for FET tutors to upskill in areas of SEN. The available courses are promoted and shared by management but it's optional. Speaking to the college principal about this issue she said by sharing the courses in a general way to all staff members that the right people take the opportunities and those who "care" upskills for the needs of their

students. This is not a new discovery, Anne Marie Wright wrote in 2006 about the lack of training identified for educators in the UK, key weaknesses in the OSFTEAD reports had highlighted that they had "underqualified staff" leading to "insufficient use of information and communications technology (ICT)." (Wright, 2006, p. 36) During the initial stages of this research and one of the main reasons why I had concerns surrounding the support options for those with AEN in the FET setting I work in was that support hours were offered to those who needed to bulk up hours for contracts or were simply available when the support hours were timetable, irrespective of whether they have any knowledge of the AEN requirements the student has. What good is care to an educator if they do not have the skillset to support their learners? In (Marquis, et al., 2016) Development is frequently offered from management, which is a positive thing. However, it is a personal choice of the tutor to attend these CPD courses. Therefore, the uptake on these courses is limited.

Shevlin et al, identified the lack of Training and Professional development in all aspects of mainstream education in 2008 in the paper "A time of transition, exploring special educational provision in the Republic of Ireland". Teachers identified that they did not have sufficient knowledge to meet the needs of individual children who enter their classroom. The onus was on the teachers to reach out to parents, other teachers and participate in self led learning online. The paper highlighted an example of maintaining a traditional approach to teaching and asking a student with dyslexia to stand up and recite tables or spelling tests when this is completely inappropriate. (Shevlin, et al., 2008) They also stress that the short CPD courses and staff in training days are inadequate for educators working with children with SEN. There needs to be awareness of strategies and skills which are suited to working with these students. When this was written it was recommended that there should be a compulsory SEN module in teacher training colleges, this recommendation has been taken on board for mainstream primary and second level teaching courses. (Shevlin, et al., 2008, p. 46)

How then can the FET and training sector ensure they have the required experience to take on learners with additional needs. There are no SNAs available in Further Education, whereas in Higher education, SNA's become Personal Assistants to those with disabilities most exclusively to those with physical disabilities. Is there not a requirement for those who had an SNA to enable them to continue through mainstream school to continue with similar supports in further education?

Support Plans in FET

Support Plans in education serve as vital tools for individuals with AEN, providing personalised strategies and accommodations to ensure their academic success and overall well-being. Within the school system, support plans evolve with students and are living documents. Support allocations are based around SOLAS funding, which is applied for, assessed, and then allocated. However, the allocations do not always come in until the start of November, depending on the administration time frame. The FET sector has a very short academic year, with work experience, and skills demonstrations etc, the core face to face between students and tutors is between September and the end of October. This is a crucial time for retention, if someone is struggling, chances are they could not return after the Halloween Midterm break. Currently there are no retention statistics available for FET for students who have completed a full course once they participate until October the college receives the funding for the course the following year. (Solas, 2022)

Issues can also arise with support if you have a mature student who has returned to education and has not had a diagnosis, its only when the first assignment is set that any concerns arise. "A mature student mightn't necessarily know they have a learning difficulty because they haven't been assessed…first assignment…. only then it comes out". (Mooney & O'Rourke, 2017, p. 31) This report on barriers to education, also highlights from speaking to educators in the FET sector that there was a distinct lack of support for all vulnerable students, all the educators interviewed flagged that there was a need for more one to one guidance and support and are in line with my concerns surrounding the learner having to seek the support themselves. One is quoted as saying "it's not like secondary school where they are assigned help, they have to go looking for it". (Mooney & O'Rourke, 2017, p. 31) It is also worth mentioning that Vocational Education and Training Options (VTOS) students and Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) part time students do not qualify for support funding as they already receive financial assistance to attend the course in the first place.

Irish Education and Disability

To grasp the policy framework context within which this research is situated, it is essential to provide an overview of the evolution of Irish disability services within the education system. It was difficult to find literature to support the themes which emerged from the research I

conducted from Ireland; possibly since Irish disability studies is such a new area. Due to the newness of the inclusionary education system in Ireland, the literature seems to be always reaching for solutions to improve the system which is currently in place to provide people who learn differently with an opportunity to be educated successfully with their peers. However, the issue I have is that although we have instigated this inclusionary system of education, it is yet to achieve the aspired pinnacle of its aims. It is like a political slogan, "A lot done, A lot still to do". A pat on the back for everyone involved.

Michael Shevlin is one of Irelands foremost academics in the field of disability studies. In his paper with Joanne Banks, they discuss the fact that Ireland is at a "crossroads" in terms of special education. Ireland is obliged to adhere to the United Nations Convention for People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (UN Departmemnt of Econonic and Social Affairs , 2006), while having a confused system whereby special education is literally "grafted" onto mainstream education. (Shevlin & Banks, 2021) Shevlin emphasises that in recent years there has been a significant increase in governmental expenditure for special needs provision in schools, divided up among teaching posts, SNAs and special classes. This report also draws attention to the fact that we may be creating an over dependence on the SNA in mainstream. (Shevlin & Banks, 2021, p. 3) Autism seems to be the focus of most SEN provision in Ireland with ASD classes being a major focus by lobbying parents, disability charities and politicians. The question arising from this is that in creating these ASD classes in mainstream inclusion schools are we prevailing with the idea of segregation of education overall? (Shevlin & Banks, 2021, p. 6)

Policy

In conjunction with the EPSEN Act of 2004 the Equal Status Act (2000-2011) is legally binding that reasonable accommodations are put into place to enable those with additional needs or disabilities to participate in training and education but there is no provision to remove any of the other challenges that people with disabilities encounter along the way. When this report was published in 2017 there was no way of tracking the statistics for attendance of persons with SEN in FET. (Mooney & O'Rourke, 2017, p. 17)

The Adult Learning Forum facilitated by Aontas in 2017 made recommendations that all learners should have access to guidance in advance to starting a course and throughout the

course. (Mooney & O'Rourke, 2017, p. 21) Even with these allocations made, as a newly qualified educator in the FET sector the question of how learners with AEN manage within the sector plagued my mind. I approached this inquiry in a trifold capacity, as a parent, newly qualified educator, and a researcher.

Progression

Upon successful completion of a FET course, individuals can embark on a journey to further accreditation within the Further or the Higher Education sector, opening doors to new opportunities and enhanced professional growth. During our discussions some of the interviewees did turn to progression to Higher Education after PLC.

Barriers to participation in Higher education are highlighted in the 2017 report by Robert Mooney and Claire O'Rourke. Educators within this report expressed concerns about the stigma of FET, that even though in their opinions FET was an opportunity for those who had not gained sufficient points in the leaving certificate to springboard into Higher Education, that people still looked down on the students for not going straight to HE. (Mooney & O'Rourke, 2017, p. 29) Most of the educators interviewed felt it was their role to provide the skills required for their students to progress to third level. Colleges also have specific requirements surrounding progression within their own courses. If a person has completed a QQI level five course the next step is QQI level six, and it is very evident that there is a big jump between the two. (Mooney & O'Rourke, 2017) In some cases, students with SEN do not have the capacity or the need to move to HE, with the help of guidance they can be advised on next steps, but, once they are done, they are done. The report has stressed that there is no data on progression of students to higher education and those courses which have a design map to HE courses have such limited places due to the cap. Therefore, there is a severe lack of information available on progression for FET learners. (Mooney & O'Rourke, 2017, p. 42)

Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature review highlights the complex dynamics of disability studies and education when approached through a Foucauldian lens. The analysis of subjectivities reveals how individuals with disabilities are constructed within socio-cultural discourses, often marginalised, and excluded based on notions of "normal" and "abnormal." Late diagnosis

poses challenges for individuals who receive their diagnoses later in life, impacting access to support and a delayed understanding of their experiences. Addressing the privilege of diagnosis is crucial to ensuring equitable opportunities for all individuals, considering the socio-economic factors and institutional biases that influence accessibility.

The themes of care and governmentality underscore the power dynamics in play, where the provision of care influences control and autonomy for individuals with disabilities. Heightened surveillance perpetuates dependence and limits self-expression, underscoring the importance of fostering self-regulation and autonomy while respecting individual differences. Policy and training for educators are critical aspects of promoting inclusive education, reasonable accommodations, and anti-discrimination measures, ensuring equal access to quality education for all students.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this methodology chapter, I will explain the significance of the chosen research methods and provide an explanation for my initial selection to discover, How do students with AEN, who have had learning support throughout their mainstream schooling, experience moving into FET without that support? The central focus of my research revolves around comprehending and acquiring a deeper understanding of how learners with AEN can advance and thrive in their educational journey independently, free from continuous supervision and the watchful gaze of parents and educational professionals, particularly during their transition from post-primary education to adult and further education. This research takes an exploratory approach, as my aim is to explore and interpret the learners' perspective within a Further Education college, diverging from the viewpoints and outlooks of educators.

Philosophy

During a recent discussion in Maynooth, the following analogy was used to describe ontology - Imagine there is a sick person in the room, and you are a medically trained doctor, beside you there is a trained homeopath, both are professionals in their field, and both are looking at the same sick person, but both will see totally different ways of treating the person. This is because their "science of being" (Fryer, 2020) as medical professionals differ.

This research holds significant personal meaning for me, as it played a pivotal role in my decision to return to education. My interests and values align in three distinct ways: as a newly qualified educator, a devoted parent of children with AEN, and a researcher driven by a thirst for knowledge. As a parent of two boys with AEN, specifically ASD and Dyslexia, I am deeply invested in understanding the opportunities the education system can provide them. The intensity of my desire to equip myself and my children for the future and explore the available options cannot be adequately described. While both of my children possess bright, intelligent, and creative minds, they struggle to excel in standardised tests and conventional examinations. Considering the escalating CAO points each year, achieving a perfect score of 600 seems unlikely. Hence, FET may be the most suitable pathway for them.

I view FET as the gateway described, which holds the potential for a brighter future for both of my boys.

I hope that this research will give me an understanding of how learners manage the evolution from the highly surveilled education system of primary and secondary school to FET which does not have continuity of support and the resources to continue the same path of the previous institutions.

Social constructionism is a theory of knowledge and learning that emphasises the role of social and cultural context in shaping individual experiences and perceptions. It focuses on how individuals construct knowledge through social interactions and cultural practices. Social construction refers to the process by which society collectively creates and assigns meaning to phenomena. It is a broader concept that extends beyond individual cognition and encompasses the larger societal and cultural processes that shape our understanding of reality. Not to be confused with social construction, social constructivism focuses on the individual's active role in constructing knowledge through social interactions. (Burr & Dick, 2017)

I have taken a social constructionism approach to this research; I believe that learning and knowledge emphasises the role of social and cultural context by shaping individual experiences and perceptions. Knowledge is constructed through interactions, culture, and language. I am looking at the knowledge which is generated from the interpretations of students and from their experiences. There is no one truth, you will find that there are several truths in social constructivism theory. We are constantly constructing meaning from our own experiences. Disability education is not just about recognising differences; it is about dismantling the social constructions that limit the full potential of individuals and embracing a society that values and accommodates diversity.

Research Design

"The role of the researcher is to be an effective listener and to see the interviewee as a storyteller rather than as a respondent." (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007, p. 464) As a parent, educator and researcher, I have come to this research with a unique perspective on the subject. As a parent I have experienced a practical insight into my research and as an educator I have experienced the theory and framework which supports the area. In

conjunction with this as a researcher I have been armed with the skills to prepare and direct a careful study, which enabled me to approach the important questions I wanted to ask. I knew when I started this journey that I wanted to hear from the students directly, what their educational experience was like with the challenges of their AEN.

There was no question that my research would be anything other than qualitative. I found Braun and Clarke's "Successful Qualitative Research" a valuable guide which lit my path towards conducting rigorous and insightful research. Their comprehensive framework empowered me to navigate the complexities of qualitative inquiry with confidence and precision. (Braun & Clarke, 2013)

I am fortunate to work in a FET college which recognises CPD for staff and I was encouraged and supported by management to approach the learners in the college who I felt could give me a rounded insight into the topic. Because I am a parent of children with AEN there is an element of auto-ethnography in my research, I am acutely aware of the challenges that face learners in both the primary and secondary school environments but lack knowledge on how learners survive in the FET sector. Through a series of recorded audio interviews, I conducted "shared-understanding" structured research interviews. (Walsh & Ryan, 2015, p. 124) Transcriptions have allowed me to interpret the learners stories, which they so willingly shared with me, and consented me to understand their experiences and opinions on what it is like to be an adult learner with AEN in further education. (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 78)

Due to my personal situation, reflexivity is of paramount importance in this research, as it enables critical self-reflection and acknowledgment of the potential biases and perspectives that may arise from my multiple roles, thus ensuring a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in their educational journey. From the outset of this research endeavour, it was emphasised that my role as the interviewer was that of a student, seeking to learn from the expertise and experiences of the participants in their respective fields. This acknowledgement positioned the participants as the experts, their insights and knowledge serving as the guiding force throughout the research process. By adopting this stance, the aim was to create a collaborative and respectful environment, fostering a reciprocal exchange of information and perspectives.

To ensure a smooth and productive interview process, it was also made clear to the participants that any issues that arose regarding their study or assessment could be temporarily set aside, with the understanding that these matters would be addressed after the interview. This approach aimed to maintain the focus of the interview on the participants' expertise and unique perspectives, while also acknowledging and respecting the potential sensitivities or concerns that might arise during the conversation. By providing this reassurance, the participants were encouraged to share their insights openly, knowing that any additional discussions or clarifications could be addressed at a later stage, promoting a more fluid and productive interview experience.

Data collection methods

In preparation for interviews I used Michael Quinn Patton's book Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods to develop a series of questions based around experience and behaviour, opinions and values, feelings, sensory and background and demographics. (Quinn Patton, 2002, pp. 339-427) The matrix of past, present and future questioning assisted me in constructing a framework to approach the interviews. During this process and with assistance from my supervisor, the questions were narrowed down. Interviews were scheduled and held within the college as it suited most students to participate during college hours and to have familiar surroundings. Neutral locations within the college were reserved for students who were part of my own tutor group to try to remove the power relations between tutor and learner. Those candidates who were not part of the tutor group were interviewed in a comfortable class room.

I did not envisage any negative consequences for the participants; however, I did highlight to them that there was a possibility that talking may cause some distress depending on their personal experiences. Following each interview, the transcript and audio file which was downloaded from "Otter", an interactive tool which enables the recording and transcription of a conversation, (Otter.ai, 2023)were emailed to each interviewee, with thanks. The candidates were reassured of their anonymity and advised if any issues arose to contact me directly.

Sampling Strategy

Within the college, learners with AEN give permission at the beginning of the year for their tutors to be made aware of any significant needs they have, which range from areas of

neurodiversity to mental and physical health issues. It's worth highlighting at this point that the majority of students are what are classed as post leaving cert, spanning in age from late teens to early twenties. It is also important to flag that these students education was upset by the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some were unable to complete their leaving certificate, others got predicted grades, all experienced the trauma of missing out on the formative senior years in school and the experience of state exams. Following on from consent from my employer, I approached my colleagues and sought their recommendations on the suitability of any of their learners to participate in my research. I had purposefully selected a number of candidates within my own teaching modules but needed to widen the pool to ensure that I had a balance. I approached the candidates verbally and once they agreed to participate, I sent a Consent and Ethics form to ensure they had an understanding of what my research was about in advance. This was so they could digest and if required, discuss with family or a guardian. All candidates are over 18 however, from an ethical perspective it was best practice to encourage those, especially those on the autism spectrum, to speak with their parents in advance of participating.

Ethics

As mentioned before, my research is qualitative and therefore the information is purely experiential, I was interested in finding out how students transitioned from secondary school education with all the supports it provides, to FET as an adult and how the learner has negotiated the options which are available to support AEN. All the information collected about the participants during the course of the research has been kept confidential and anonymised. No names were identified at any time unless the participant gave explicit consent. All hard copy information has been held in a locked cabinet at my place of work and electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on Maynooth University servers. The only persons with access to the data are, Nicola Maguire-Giles, Dr Michael Murray, Angela McGinn and The Department of Adult and Community Education in Maynooth. I received ethical approval from the ethics committee in Maynooth University on the 15th of December 2022. No information was distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. The data provided by participants has been made available to them. I advised all participants that on completion of the research, their data would be retained as part of my thesis, but that all recordings are to be deleted.

I did not envisage any negative consequences for the participants; however, prior to the interviews, I proactively engaged in a conversation with our on-site guidance counsellor, who had been closely involved with the students throughout the year. During our discussion, I informed her about the research objectives and the specific questions I intended to ask. This proactive approach aimed to identify potential challenges in advance and ensure her availability in case the interviews evoked any emotional responses among the participants. Thankfully, none of the participants became upset at any point and all said that they quite enjoyed the discussion. All the interviewees were over 18 years of age. I felt it was necessary in some cases for the interviewee to speak to their parents in advance and review the consent and ethics forms I provided. I did not receive any questions from parents following this. For those with AEN issues like dyslexia, I read through the consent and ethics forms in advance of the interview in case there was anything they misunderstood.

Data Analysis

I have chosen to use a Thematic Analysis (TA) approach to this data, "thematic analysis "involves the identification of themes and subthemes which capture important information relevant to the research question, based on prevalence and quality" (Braun & Clarke, 2013) The research is qualitative, therefore experiential and critical and "TA provides accessible and systematic procedures for generating codes and themes from the qualitative data" (Braun & Clarke, 2016)

Although Otter.ai (Otter.ai, 2023)is an excellent tool for recording audio and subsequently producing typed transcripts, it does have issues with picking up colloquialisms and accents. Each transcript was listened to repeatedly and the text edited to match the audio, ensuring accurate depiction of the interviewees points. Following the tidy up of the transcripts, each one was printed and the work began on unpacking the data using a coding system by highlighting themes and sub themes. A traditional approach to coding was undertaken, using paper and highlighter pens. Once colour coded, each theme and subsequent sub theme was then dropped into a new word document for further analysis. Although each interviewee was unique in their needs, recurrent topics began to emerge. "Good themes are distinctive and need to make sense on their own; at the same time, good themes need to fit together to form

the overall analysis". (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 231) Once reverted back to digital format, quotes were selected from each candidate and added to the theme or subtheme headings.

Limitations to the study.

The nature of research imposes certain limitations in terms of time and scope. Within the context of a one-year Master's Degree program, the need to restrict the number of research participants for interview became apparent. Due to time constraints, interviews were conducted in a specific timeframe, spanning from the resumption of college after Christmas holidays in January to the mid-term break in February, encompassing a period of approximately six weeks. Although a longer timeframe might have allowed for a larger pool of candidates to be interviewed, given the time limitations, the selection of participants engaged in the study was agreeable.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

"Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world." (Freire, 1968)

This is an opportunity to present to you the real-life educational experiences of the research participants, who kindly gave their time freely to explain their educational journey. The aim was to discover if these learners, who had AEN and SEN, were able to advocate for themselves in a FET setting where they are adults and that they could be supported to a level that they had been used to in an inclusive education school environment. Overall, the participants were having a positive experience in further education.

The qualitative research I undertook with students in a FET college which is also my place of employment, evolved into a chronical of their educational experiences, navigating through their schooling in the past, present, and future. The conversations were rich and varied and covered good and bad aspects of the educational experience. These findings are shaped around themes which emerged from the dialogue, they exhibit the differences in each candidates' experiences depending on their recollection of their school experiences and most importantly how their AEN needs were met.

Their contributions were voiced through in depth semi structured interviews. All participants had declared at the point of registration that they had an additional need and that they were happy to share this information with the teaching staff of the college. When interviewed the participants were all at the halfway stage of varying QQI Level five PLC courses. Some had attended the college in the previous year.

Research Participants

Allow me to present the research participants and provide you with a glimpse into their backgrounds and their respective additional needs. Through their biographies, you will gain

an understanding of who they are as individuals and the specific challenges they face in their educational journeys. Names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Biographies

Pádraig is in his early twenties with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, he completed the leaving certificate before the pandemic. Pádraig found the enforced lockdown very difficult at home. He lives with his parents and has never mentioned siblings. Pádraig had no options after school. He attended a Gaelscoil, (all Irish speaking school) from primary through secondary and is fluent in the language. FET was an outlet for Pádraig, and he participated in a Level Five PLC course. He had to split the year into two as eight subjects were too much in one year. By the end of the second year, Pádraig admitted he was in attendance not to achieve an award but for him to have somewhere to go. His interest waned towards the end of the second year, and he chose not to submit several of the second-year assignments.

Lydia is 19 with a diagnosis of Chronic regional pain syndrome (CRPS) which impedes mobility and causes anxiety. Lydia is very academic but was unable to complete her Leaving Certificate due to her disability and anxiety caused by CRPS. She had some support in school but not enough to enable her to complete her state exams. Since she was a high achiever throughout school before the accident, her guidance counsellor did not discuss the opportunity to attend PLC or FET with her until she was unable to complete her leaving certificate. FET has been a life changing experience for her. She is waiting to hear from the CAO for Classics in Trinity.

Juno also is late teens and had a late diagnosis for Dyslexia and Dyscalculia. Juno is a timid shy girl who struggles with education due to the nature of her needs. She was studying a pre nursing course. She did not receive much support in school, and she explains she did not have a good relationship with the SNA who was assigned to her. She did have reasonable accommodation in state exams whereby she was able to sit in a separate room to the rest of her peers to prevent sensory overload. She has been successful in FET and has the facility to do her exams in a separate centre and has the option of using a reader and scribe. She hasn't expressed an opinion about next steps in her education.

Damien Early twenties, has a diagnosis of Dyslexia, ADHD, Dyspraxia and mentions that he was supposed to be assessed for ASD but never went ahead with the investigations. Damien is currently studying art portfolio preparation but had previously attended the FET college in 2021/22 to study Pre-University Commerce. I was familiar with the student from the previous year, and I was amazed at his transformation. He enjoyed the art course so much and felt it was much better suited to him. His goal was to start a graphic design business. Damien did not have much access to support in school and felt always that his intelligence was being questioned due to his disability. The school experience was not a good one for him.

Christian another in his late teens, diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder since primary school. Christian has difficulty with his short-term memory and needs very clear instructions broken down in small tasks. He had support all through school with an SNA. Christian's parents are still active in his education and have a line of communication open with his art tutor. He has struggled with aspects of the course, especially around directions for tasks, as part of all the Level five modules in the FET centre, Work Experience and Communications are compulsory passes to achieve the major award. Communications is a vast module with multiple written assignments, group work and individual presentations. Christian found this torturous despite his tutors going over and above to help him complete the modules. He did exceed expectations despite feeling very frustrated through the process. Christian did not aspire to continue to third level after the course. Christian loves boats after college he would like to go on a ship somewhere.

A retrospective look at support in mainstream school

All the candidates attended a mainstream school for primary and post primary where inclusion has a very important role to play. I felt that it was important to get a historical account of the learners' previous educational experiences and what their expectations they were bringing with them into the next stage of their journey. At the beginning of the interview, I asked two questions relating to past experiences of education. What was your previous experience like in school with your needs? And what was provided for you in school with regards to support for your AEN?

Individual Education Plan

Any student registered with an AEN has a right to have an Individual Education Plan, a document which is drawn up by a multidisciplinary team (MDT) to plan and track their progress throughout the year and monitor the student, IEP documents should be signed off by the child parents in tandem with the school principal and those providing resource hours and support to the student. (NCSE , 2006) In some schools due to lack of understanding and again training, some principals chose to just produce a Student Support Plan, which every student should have despite having an additional need. When asked, the candidates did not recall having any input into either and IEP or a student support plan.

Pádraig mentioned his parents did have discussions with the school but he wasn't included.

> No, I didn't have any input, it was between the school and my mam and dad. They kind of kept me out of the way. Now and then they would discuss, you have been offered stuff like this.

> Sometimes my teachers and my mam and dad would have a little chat with me altogether, just to make sure I feel comfortable with everything that is going to happen, but it was mostly just the details.

Privilege of Diagnosis

I am acutely aware of the failings of the Irish system to diagnose a child with special needs from my parental experience. As of 30th September 2022, 4,685 children were overdue their Assessment of Need (AON). (Government of Ireland, 2023)

Several of my candidates mentioned that they were either a late diagnosis or thought that they should have had further investigations, but cost or time did not allow for them to be completed. Since the introduction of the Community Disability Networks Teams (CDNT) which saw the integration of therapy providers to those with disabilities, the waiting lists have become vast.

Lydia mentioned the cost involved in getting assessed by a professional, she said,

> I think that I think it was just the diagnosis thing in general and shouldn't hold so much weight because I haven't got a diagnosis, especially like any neurodiversity. It is so expensive. I looked into ADHD or ASD diagnosis about like €600 to €1000. Which I can't afford and that doesn't mean that I shouldn't be able to get some

support. I always think that, you know, if you go and pay that to get a diagnosis and they say no, you don't have this, you don't have anything that doesn't mean that you still don't struggle with your symptoms.

And I think that it should be a broader range of supports available for it for anyone because everyone should be able to make their lives a little bit easier if they're struggling.

Late Diagnosis and Gender Bias

Both the female candidates expressed that they either did not have a diagnosis or were a late diagnosis. Juno was not diagnosed for dyslexia until she was in secondary school. The system is failing girls as they are historically more likely to mask their symptoms as they disengage more quietly than boys, they can compensate with illustrations and hyper organisational skills. (Succeed with Dyslexia, 2022)

Juno was asked "Would you have considered yourself a late diagnosis for dyslexia?"
"Oh, yeah. Yeah, because I got it around. Third year, maybe in secondary school. Yeah."

She was asked did she have any idea that she had dyslexia before her diagnosis.

Not me myself, but in primary school during exams, they did put me by myself at the back of the room with easier words, so they may have thought something, but I was only diagnosed in secondary school.

Damien had a late diagnosis for ADHD, on top of his dyslexia and dyspraxia he recalled, with a hint of sarcasm, "I had to wait till sixth year but was trying to get it [a diagnosis] since primary school, and finally got it in sixth year. I was stoked to get another one, they thought I had autism or something else, but I never ended up getting the test.

Special Needs Assistants

Each of the candidates had experiences with an SNA in some form, not always positive. When asked Pádraig recalled positive experience,

I found it [school], difficult at times with the learning and stuff, because they kind of would feel like I might not be able to learn as quick as the other students in my class. I had an SNA, someone keeping an eye on me, from primary right through to secondary school.

> Secondary school, help was more subject specific organising my books and making sure I have the correct books for class. And as well as in secondary school, you know, she'd go to my locker with me and organise all my books for me, she made sure, you know, I had everything in order.

Christian also had an SNA through primary and secondary school and had a positive experience, he mentioned the people he worked with "I had like three different SNAs. I had two extra ones that would occasionally pop in every now and then."

Juno and Damien both who were older when they were diagnosed with and did not have good experiences with their support.

> They did offer me assistance with a SNA. She wasn't very helpful. She was very nitpicky and strict, so I got rid of her on the first day.

Training for educators

Throughout the interviews, it became noticeable that some students felt that the people supporting them did not understand the disability they were there to support. The frustration voiced by Damien was in relation to his past experiences in his school not necessarily his FET experience. He highlighted the fact that he felt there was a distinct lack of training in how to work with students with specific needs.

> I feel most of them probably went to college got the degree and never really checked back in on it. Because a lot of the things they were telling me were very outdated.

There was tangible frustration in his voice, and referred to the fact that he had the "comprehension" and that he could "read" yet he was constantly diminished by the people who were there to support him.

Ableism and Accessibility

We can sometimes overlook that the trauma of a physical disability might impact the way in which a person learns, in the case of Lydia, her confidence, her concentration, her tiredness levels on top of physical pain and anxiety really affected her experience of education in secondary school.

> I had some like unofficial supports, like I was able to use go leave class five mins early lot longer to get to my next class and so I wouldn't be within the hustle and

bustle because I'm so sensitive. And towards the end, there was a little bit of leniency with my attendance.

Lydia struggled with the physicality of the day-to-day routine in school along with the judgement over what she calls her "hidden disability".

> My main problem was carrying my bag My bag was so heavy Yeah. And the books are so heavy especially like, doing higher level maths, the big exam paper on the book. And I basically had to bribe my friend to help me and those friends that I found out later, didn't believe anything wrong with me and thought that I was just using crutches for attention.

Reasonable Accommodation and Assisted Technology

Reasonable accommodation for state and term exams is something which benefits learners with needs. In cases whereby a child has a diagnosis and receives a recommendation from a professional specifically an Occupational Therapist, they can use assisted technology (ICT) in school. Reasonable accommodation provides time and resources to students with needs, for example allowing them to use a laptop or C-Pen, have a reader or a scribe to assist during exams and to be in a separate exam centre to prevent sensory overload.

Pádraig had a good experience in school with regards to accommodations, he said

> I actually got a bit of support, I will say yeah, I was put in a room on my own. And then I had the teacher was able to read the assignment because sometimes I find it hard trying to understand the assignment or the exam. So, the teacher will just read the exam, but then they couldn't help me with it. Yeah, they would just read it for me.

> I think if somebody reads it aloud to you, it makes it a little bit easier. I actually did find that yeah, because when you're reading to yourself, you're trying to process it all. But when you when you hear someone else read, it sounds completely different to what you hear. So, It's crazy. I have sometimes I will get somebody else to read stuff to me and say, does that make sense? You know, for to make sense in my head as well.

Damien's experience was overall not as supportive as that of Pádraig's, as someone with dyslexia and dyspraxia, he did not have access to a laptop or a C-Pen in school.

> It took almost to the week before the mocks [exams] in sixth year to finally get her to register me for a laptop for exams. I was horrible at exams, like if you told me, like in class, do something quickly, I can get the work done. I probably got 100% on that.

But tell me to sit-down on an exam for like an hour, two hours I'll just stare at the test after the first like half an hour.

Lydia had somewhat of a better experience with requesting the use of assisted technology,

I asked, could I do that on the computer because I find that I get fatigued, and my stamina is just not great when I'm physically handwriting. Hopefully that will serve me well my exams. And I'm also allowed to leave the class if I need to if I have cramps or whatever. I walk up and down or whatever; I need to get extra time and exam as well for that.

There is an available grant for assistive technology, which individuals can apply for and be eligible based on a means test. However, many people are unaware that if they can afford to provide the equipment themselves and have a therapist's recommendation (which can cost up to €500), they can purchase the equipment for their child with the school's agreement. Unfortunately, this option is not feasible for most people.

Damien experienced the issues with applying for a grant to support the financial side of Assisted technology first hand, highlighting cost and the lack of knowledge around the processes and procedures of application.

We had to buy our own equipment, so it's expensive.
They [the school] didn't apply for the assisted technology grant for me.

Lydia's experience of using assisted tech worked to her advantage but she still felt it highlighted her disability.

We had started a bit of talk about using Google Classroom a couple of months before the pandemic started and so we were doing a lot of assignments online, and then COVID happened. And when I came back to school at the end of fifth year, so like last year, I had to say can I use my iPad for notes and for that kind of stuff? And they said yes, but I had to like, get approved by the principal and all that which is fine, but I still felt like I stuck out within my classroom.

Some schools now use technology for the whole school, an evolution in learning, schoolbooks are online, homework and projects are all submitted online. Juno attended what's colloquially known as an iPad school, some schools use Chromebooks or other tablets she said, "In our school, they had tablets for every student, they were iPads".

Further Education Experience

In the wake of the global pandemic, the landscape of education has undergone profound transformations, and the pursuit of education has faced unique challenges. As the world gradually recovers, individuals are navigating a changed educational environment marked by shifting modes of learning, heightened digitalisation, and evolving academic priorities. The impact of the pandemic on prospective students embarking on their journey into FET cannot be overlooked, as they face both uncertainties and opportunities in this new era.

Physical and Mental Health Issues

During my inquiry about the current college experience, many participants expressed the co-occurrence of stress and anxiety, which seemed to intertwine with their academic requirements and learning demands.

Christian stressed that his memory was very poor which resulted in him getting frustrated or lost when it came to work, that, and the fact that he doesn't like to talk to people, were a major stumbling block.

> I guess long term memory in general and the fact I don't like talking to other people. Too many things to pay attention to basically, way too many things. I panic very badly because I don't want to put my hand up and get them [the tutor] to come back, then they have to say the same thing over again, with my classmates its much worse.

Juno also pre-empted issues she felt she would have "I'd say getting work done on time and making friends would be the hardest".

Lydia's physical disability has taken its toll on her mental health, as it's a hidden disability, she struggles with bullies and people not believing she has a chronic pain condition.

> I've struggled with it mentally because of the way my friends treat. Yeah, nobody believes me or understands the severity of it because on the surface like I'm fine, it's so hard to have to go through that somewhere that's supposed to be accommodating, so just you just have to get on with it, you know, and not dwell on it.

Feelings about Further Education

The primary objective of the research was to explore the perspectives of the candidates regarding their further education, highlighting the distinctions from mainstream schooling and examining their overall experiences. While the candidates expressed a generally positive outlook, everyone had distinct motivations for pursuing further education. Some sought a place to be after the pandemic lockdown, while others recognised it as an opportunity to advance towards higher education, leveraging it as a pathway to third-level institutions.

Pádraig said that he was overwhelmed to start with.

> I will say at the start it was a bit overwhelming to, you know, be not in education for a few years, but after I think a couple of weeks I started settling in

Lydia found herself settling easier, as she had had such a negative experience in the last few years of her schooling.

> I'm really loving college and I prefer it to secondary school.

Pádraig said,

> It's a big difference going from secondary school to further education. Your teacher is not on your back all of the time. You have your homework and it's kind of like, well it's not like they don't care but the just say, you know do it at your own pace. They let you go off on your own devices and just get it done in your own space.

Of the five candidates interviewed, Lydia found further education restored her confidence and rekindled her desire to learn. Lydia said "I had to leave school in sixth year. Because of my pain, it was too bad" but when she was asked about learning in FET she added,

> I feel like college is more suited to me, that path is more suited for me to get into higher education then because I struggle a lot with brain fog memory issues, things like that.

> The assignment-based approach is something that I prefer. And because the classes are smaller, we are dealing with less teachers, they're able to get to know us better and to know my needs, and what things might need to be changed or adapted or accommodated to

Damien praised the staff within the FET centre and said that "I was surprised with the amount of effort a lot of the teachers went to."

Self-Led Learning

Majority of the courses on offer are Level five QQI courses which are pitched at leaving certificate level, and the college advertises the course as PLC so there is a certain standard required to participate. In some cases, where AEN is flagged there can be special dispensations made for the learner. Of the two candidates who had a diagnosis of ASD, both struggled with self-led learning. One of the candidates, Pádraig, was able to split the course over two years but this was only after a tutor approached him about the subject.

> It's very stressful focusing on so much at one time. My brain can only focus on one or two things at a time. And if I've got three or four assignments in front of me in my head, I'm trying to process every single one of them at once. I find it so hard to break them down. And it's kind of is overwhelming. Very much. It's very overwhelming.

When Pádraig was able to split the major award over two years he said "it took a huge weight off my shoulders. I could relax a little bit more. Yeah, because I wasn't trying to focus on eight [modules] I'm not dealing with so much at one time".

Christian was participating in a level five Art course, so communications and work experience modules are compulsory. Communications has nine assignments both written and oral which need to be passed to achieve the major award. Christian did not want to participate in work experience either, this raises the issue of suitability for courses for students with this level of need, and if it's necessary for them to have these modules to achieve the accreditation.

> I don't have much of an issue. It's just the fact that I prefer I'm not a very fan of randomly getting told, oh, just do this. I'm like, what am I supposed to do? Like I have no freaking clue. Art itself isn't a problem. Okay, communications on the other hand, communications!

Support in Further Education and Training

What led me to this research was the concerns I had as a parent about the level of support which would be available for a student with AEN when they move to FET and how as an adult, they make the declaration that they need help. I was driven by a need to understand how the students felt they managed with the different support options they had available to them in FET.

Juno said,

> I do. Yeah. There are two teachers who would help me after school on a Monday or Tuesday, okay. They're willing to help me out of it, or there's the [guidance] counsellors.

Pádraig explained,

> She'll kind of ask me what my struggling with this week or you know because every week will be different with a different assignment. And then I'll tell her what I'm struggling with, and today I had her and I was struggling with one of my assignments, concepts and education and training. So, what she did was she printed out the assignment for me and she showed me the layout how the assignment has to be done and just broke down everything that has to be done in order, so you know, like your paragraphs and you know, your line spacing and you're only putting in like Times New Roman and stuff. I found that I found that really beneficial.

Pádraig mentioned that he didn't feel 40 minutes a week was sufficient to meet his needs from a support point of view.

> I would say maybe an extra 40 minutes a week would be a little more beneficial. but like the 40 minutes just goes so quick, very quick before you know it's gone. You're kind of feeling like, well, I wish I could have got through a little bit more than that. Just to break it down what then because then you have to wait a week to wait a whole other week before your next slot.

When interviewed Lydia hadn't experienced the supports, she had discussed on entry to the course.

> Okay, and so some of the supports I actually haven't experienced yet, okay. I've also been appointed like a support tutor, and I can meet with them every week if I'm having trouble with assignments. I haven't had too much trouble and then the times that I did me and my teacher missed each other so obviously haven't had a proper meeting yet.

> I feel more included here really than in secondary school, okay. I feel like all my like needs are accommodated without feeling like all eyes are on me. It's all just very like quiet like, you know, and it was you know, there was teething issues at the start like, when I said that I may need to take a break or take a breather and not answer questions in class and someone said, you know, hold a ruler up if you're not feeling well.

Damien is studying Art this year and was much more comfortable with this module, the previous year he had participated in a business course which had a lot of written assignments.

> Last year, [when I studied business] every week, I sit down with someone, and she would come in and actually helped me with the at she would read the questions that I'd have in business, I had a lot more to write down. She goes through each of the assignments with me and then I like to work it out for myself then finish it. Give it to her, she read it back to me and make sure everything is ok.

His response when asked if he felt he was allocated enough resource time was,

> An hour a week, it was probably enough or me, but for someone else they may need a bit more.

Damien when asked if there was anything he would change about the support he received in FE, he said,

> It would be great if everyone could just get like a one on one, but that's not really possible, this [support] is pretty good from what I've seen of it with the extra guidance stuff and the Learning support department that actually do listen.

Christian,

> I've gotten two classes. I was able to go through her through a third of my normal effort. I guess getting help from like to see if they've had like an SNA I think to help. Since then, haven't heard of single thing back.

Independence and Self-Declaration of Needs

Moving to study in a further education with learning needs is a rite of passage, for many it is their first foray into adulthood. The registration process for courses in the college examined has a simple form, which requires personal information, details about grant eligibility and for the first time, in the year 2022/23 an option to tick a box to declare if the learner had an AEN. A simple administrative step was what kindled the idea for this research. Before, the learners would have to approach a member of staff once the course had begun to discuss resources. Now they had an opportunity to declare in advance. Although this was a positive step for the staff as it means work can begin in advance of the term to meet with learners and discuss their needs, the onus to declare was on the student. I asked how the students felt about this process of declaring for themselves their needs.

Pádraig said the following "It was a no brainer, because I felt like it would benefit me greatly and that really has."

Damien was a little more apprehensive, "it was a bit strange because I've never done it before, but it wasn't too bad."

Juno's opinion on the box ticking exercise,

> Yeah, this is very welcoming, if they don't know that you need extra help, you might fall behind, and they wouldn't know why you're falling behind. They just kind of assume you're not understanding.

Lydia raised the issue that she felt that initial enquiries into learning supports were centred around neurodiversity.

> I didn't mind [ticking the box] I've had to deal with a lot of things like that. What I noticed though, was that there was all of these like, neurodivergences and stuff listed. And then there was just one box for physical disability, but it felt subconsciously overlooked, but the I mean, I could be wrong because there's so many different types and the way it affects is different. So yeah, but when I was filling out the form, I honestly wasn't sure if I'd even make it past the end of September, because I didn't know how my body would take it after being out of education for a year.

Christian wasn't aware of the process, until a friend mentioned it to him. "I remember going in, I think it was a week after I started. Okay. And I was talking to a friend who is also in the school, from my last school and he said he had about a page, so what page is it? I mean, I don't know I didn't get it, I saw the box. Okay, and then we ticked it off."

Self-Advocacy and Negotiating with Teaching Staff

As part of the interview, I asked did the candidates feel as an adult learner, could they stand up for themselves and for their needs. I felt it was important as in most cases negotiations around needs in school do not always include the student. I needed to know if they could ask for help if they felt they needed it, not just expect a tutor to pick up on it.

Damien was quite straight with his responses to this question saying "College has been a lot more approachable than school" he was very eloquent when he spoke of his challenges, he does not see them as a disability. He stated on more than one occasion "I'm not ashamed of being dyslexic, I look at words differently than most people."

Juno said, when asked the same question about self-advocacy with staff,

> Here yeah, it's much simpler to do than before. Okay, like, everyone is just so much more open minded, and they sort of understand what I'm trying to tell them.

Padraig was a little apprehensive about asking for help.

> I think, I don't know if I'd be a bit too nervous to mention it or maybe I might be able to say I just be afraid of coming across as being too out there with it.

Friends and Socialisation

Fitting in and making friends can be difficult when you feel like you are different to everyone else. The candidates talked freely about the social aspects of their college experience. School had been difficult for some on so many levels including their sociability.

Juno responded with "Well college here is actually much, much nicer, the people here great, like I understand what they're teaching me majority of the time".

Pádraig said,

> Yeah, I have to say I get along really well with some people in the course, and it's really, it's a really awesome positive environment, because I'm really loving it. Everyone's really nice!

Christian is not a talker, he does not feel comfortable talking to people unless it's about gaming. He mentioned that in his first year in school, he doesn't recall speaking to any of his peers. He talked about the difficulties he has communicating.

> When you try talking or you speak in your head, but then it just doesn't come out at all? And you try saying it over and over again and just nothing comes out. But you start panicking. That's me a lot when I talk to people.

Lydia was selected after interview to participate in the college Erasmus Plus Programme, whereby students travel to Malaga in Spain for a two-week period as part of their work experience module. It was an opportunity for Lydia to gain some independence and stretch her abilities in a way she had not done before.

> I'm going on Erasmus next week and the needs assistant [assigned support teacher] is one of the teachers on the trip. So, she's aware of everything, all of my needs, and they've sorted all of that and accommodate everything that I've asked, or I've wondered about, which was great because I haven't had a good track record with class trips before. I'm very excited there is a girl in my class going as well. So, I have some company and then I also have the rest of the people I get to make new friends.

Progression

Of the five candidates interviewed Lydia and Damien had concrete plans to move on to Higher Level education after their PLC course and have applied on the CAO. Juno was undecided and Pádraig and Christian did not know what was next for them.

Lydia - "I've applied for Classics, archaeology, and ancient history in Trinity College. That's my top choice and then applied to every other Classics and Archaeology course, in the country. But I'm hoping for Trinity".

Damien - "I just didn't want to stand around in the house, because I generally just can't work most jobs, because of stuff at home with my ma [mother] So, okay, so it's like, let's go to college, rather than trying search for a job that probably doesn't even exist. Yeah, I'd like the NCAD [National College for Art and Design] or somewhere you go into, I want to do illustration."

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS

"Realisation is the bridge between ignorance and understanding,
paving the way for growth and enlightenment." – Unknown

Introduction

Although the five learners I had the opportunity to interview share the common characteristic of having additional needs, it is important to acknowledge the uniqueness of their disability. Each person's requirements and challenges can manifest in diverse ways, making it impossible to categorise them under a single umbrella. Despite this individuality, several concurrent themes emerged from the research findings. The primary focus of the questions revolved around the learners' experiences and perceptions during this new phase of their education. I inquired about the support they received during their time in secondary school and whether they felt their voices were heard and valued during that period. I explored their current experiences in college and whether they perceived any need for changes in terms of support and the process of expressing their support needs compared to the past. "When you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism" (Shore, 2020)

This chapter aims to delve into the multifaceted aspects of educational experiences in further education. By employing a two-pronged approach, it will initially examine the positive and negative encounters of students under the following thematic headings: Labelling and creating subjectivities, care and governmentality and self-regulation and autonomy. Then look at policy and training for educators in a micro context.

I will explore the impact of labelling and the construction of subjectivities on students with additional needs in further education. Drawing upon personal narratives, the chapter will discuss instances where labelling has either facilitated or hindered the educational experiences of these students. The dynamics of care and governmentality within FET and the effect on students is discussed. It will explore how institutional structures and practices influence the provision of care and support for students with AEN, the chapter will analyse the power dynamics embedded within the system, focusing on the role of disciplinary mechanisms, surveillance, and the regulation of student behaviour. By examining case studies and research findings, the chapter will explore how students navigate their education,

the challenges they face in developing self-regulatory skills, and the impact of autonomy on their overall experiences. It will shed light on the barriers and facilitators to fostering self-regulation and autonomy within FET.

Subsequently, the focus will shift to analysing the existing policies and training provided to educators within the further education. Shifting the focus to the educators within FET, this section will critically analyse the existing policies and training programs designed to support students with learning needs. It will evaluate the efficacy of current policies in addressing the challenges faced by students and assess the adequacy of training programs provided to educators. Furthermore, the chapter will highlight best practices and recommendations for policy development and training enhancements.

In conclusion the findings are synthesised from the thematic analysis of educational experiences and the examination of policies and training. I have also included some unexpected results and areas for further learning. The insights gained from this analysis will contribute to the ongoing discourse on improving educational experiences and support systems within the FET environment.

Labelling and Creating Subjectivities

The creation of subjectivities refers to the process through which individuals develop their sense of self and identity within a social context. It involves how individuals come to understand themselves and perceive their place in the world based on various factors such as societal norms, cultural influences, and interactions with others. In an educational context, the creation of subjectivities refers to how students' identities and self-perceptions are shaped within the system. This process can be influenced by various factors, including the labels and categories assigned to students, the expectations placed upon them by teachers and peers, and the opportunities and limitations they encounter in their educational journey.

For example, if a student is consistently labelled as "underachieving" or "learning disabled," it can shape their self-perception and contribute to the formation of a negative subjectivity. On the other hand, if a student is recognised and supported for their strengths and abilities, it can foster a positive subjectivity and enhance their self-confidence and motivation. The

creation of subjectivities is a complex and dynamic process that can have a profound impact on students' educational experiences and outcomes. Understanding how subjectivities are formed and influenced within the educational context is crucial for promoting inclusive and supportive learning environments that empower students to develop a positive sense of self and reach their full potential. One of the key areas that Foucault examined was the social construction of disability and the ways in which it is labelled and stigmatised within society.

Throughout the inception of this study, I feared that given the opportunity, students would choose not to disclose their learning difficulty and break free from the label society had placed upon them. This would be easier for those who would be able to mask and perhaps had masked their needs in the past. From a parent and an educator's perspective a label can be a very positive outcome for a student, it means they have access to resources, funding, supports, time, which only come as part of the toolbox for working with an additional need. (Allan, 1996) Having a label is not always perceived as a blessing as Lydia mentioned in the interview, from a social perspective she was treated badly by her peers in school who felt that she was not being truthful about her disability and the pain she was in daily. She discussed having to bribe her so called friends for help. This led to her being isolated from her peers and destroyed her confidence in her abilities in school leading her to eventually leave before completing her Leaving Certificate. Not having a label can also cause issues for the students, especially with a late diagnosis. Some of the students had negative experiences in school as there was no explanation why they were not performing to the standard they were expected to. Foucault said that disability is not an inherent trait of individuals, but a socially constructed category imposed upon them through systems of power and knowledge. (Foucault, 1972) Foucault's work on the relationship between power and knowledge suggests that disability is not a fixed or essential characteristic of individuals, but rather a result of societal norms, values, and mechanisms of control. He argued that the labelling and stigmatization of individuals with disabilities serve to reinforce dominant power structures and maintain social hierarchies. (Foucaut, 1967)

One of the significant findings that deeply impacted me was the recognition of the privilege associated with receiving a diagnosis. The scarcity of professionals and the extensive waiting lists for assessments have resulted in a broken public sector disability service . As a result, the burden of supporting individuals with AEN has become overwhelming, even for the

private sector. Families, eager to provide assistance and support to their children, are forced to wait for years to obtain a diagnosis, leaving them in a state of desperation. (Reilly, 2023) Lydia highlighted the financial barriers associated with seeking a diagnosis, which she personally could not afford. She expressed her frustration with the excessive emphasis placed on possessing a formal document. Despite having a noticeable physical impairment, she faced challenges in accessing support due to the absence of a detailed letter specifying her exact condition while being in a transitional phase between consultants. She was emotional when discussing this and said "Why do I have to jump through hoops to prove my need for help?" She did manage to communicate her concerns through the guidance counsellor's assistance and eventually received some allocated time and AEN resources. When we initially pursued the assessment, the approximate cost was around €800. However, considering the impact of inflation and increased demand, the expenses have escalated to over €1000 at present. (Adult and Child Therapy, 2023)

There is a corelation between a late diagnosis or none at all and gender. Lydia had an underlying concern that she had a learning difficulty prior to her CRPS diagnosis and the subsequent anxieties which stemmed from that. Juno was in third year in secondary school before she was diagnosed with dyslexia. In 2021 the dyslexia association of Ireland (DAI) briefed the Oireachtas with real life research on dyslexia from those directly affected, students and their parents and also teachers working in the Irish education system. Over 761 members of the DAI were questioned and a staggering 79% had to wait more than two years for a diagnosis and 23% surveyed were diagnosed within the public system (NEPS,HSE) The same report questioned teachers in the Irish education system and 100% claimed that they had at least one student if not more in their class with undiagnosed dyslexia. (Dyslexia Association of Ireland, 2021)

The experience the students had with labels in FET had a more positive impact. All interviewed stated they ticked the box on the registration form and were happy to disclose their need, contrary to what was envisaged in the early stages of this research. Students' perceptions of labels in FET have evolved over time, leading to a reduced negative impact on their psyche compared to the past. Several factors may contribute to this shift in perspective.

As students' progress through their educational journey, they often develop a greater sense of self-awareness, resilience, and maturity. With personal growth, they may become less

influenced by external labels and more focused on their own goals, abilities, and achievements. FET often brings together individuals from various backgrounds, experiences, and traumas. This diversity can create an inclusive and accepting atmosphere where students realize that everyone has their unique challenges and experiences. This understanding can foster empathy and reduce the stigmatisation associated with labels. "I feel more included here really than in secondary school. I feel like all my like needs are accommodated without feeling like all eyes are on me" Lydia.

FET institutions provide support networks, counselling services, and resources specifically tailored to addressing students' mental health and well-being. These services can play a vital role in helping students cope with any negative impact of labels and promoting a positive mindset. Damien "this [support] is pretty good from what I've seen of it with the extra guidance stuff and the learning support department that actually do listen".

Over time, there has been increased awareness and advocacy for inclusivity, mental health, and reducing stigma in education. This broader societal shift may influence students' perceptions and contribute to a more supportive and understanding environment.

It is important to note that while the impact of labels may have lessened for some students, it may still affect others differently and some students may still face challenges related to labelling or past trauma. It remains crucial for educational institutions to foster an environment that promotes inclusivity, empathy, and supports the well-being of all students, regardless of their backgrounds or labels.

Care and Governmentality in the Education System

Throughout this research it has been clear that all the students have experienced care in some form or another, whether this is sought after or imposed on them as part of a process. Care can be seen as a double-edged sword, the support it offers to those who genuinely need it is welcomed however in some cases it is forced and does not have the desired outcome. Pádraig mentioned that he had an SNA, and it was "someone keeping an eye on me". The learners have been under the surveillance of a powerful system, rarely asked if they welcome the care. While care can be beneficial and supportive, it can also have complex dynamics and outcomes when it is imposed or not adequately aligned with the needs and preferences of the

learners. "We have not bothered to ask if the traditional education, so highly treasured, was ever the best education for all" (Noddings, 1995, p. 365)

Care that is genuinely sought after and provided in response to students' needs can be highly beneficial. It can offer emotional support, guidance, and resources to students who require assistance in navigating their educational journey. When care is responsive and tailored to individual needs, it can contribute to improved well-being, engagement, and academic success. However, when care is imposed or forced upon students without their consent or input, it can lead to unintended negative consequences. In some cases, students may perceive forced care as intrusive, undermining their sense of autonomy and agency. This can result in resistance, disengagement, or feelings of being stigmatised. (Pickett, 1996) Surveillance and limited involvement of learners in decisions regarding care is significant. When learners are not actively involved in shaping the care they receive, it can reinforce power imbalances and inhibit their sense of ownership over their educational experience. Empowering students to voice their preferences, concerns, and needs regarding care is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and student-centred approach. Striking a balance between providing necessary support and respecting students' autonomy is essential. It is important to consider students' perspectives, preferences, and consent when offering care, ensuring that it aligns with their individual needs and goals. This approach promotes a sense of agency and encourages students to actively engage in their own learning and support processes. "In trying to teach everyone what we once taught only a few, we have wound up teaching everyone inadequately" (Noddings, 1995, p. 365)

Care in the educational context can be a double-edged sword, offering support to those who genuinely need it while potentially causing unintended negative consequences when it is imposed or lacks student agency. Recognising the importance of student voice, consent, and autonomy in the care process is essential for creating a supportive and empowering educational environment. Care in education as outlined by Noddings, has the potential to foster meaningful relationships and promote positive outcomes, but it can also create dependencies and perpetuate unequal power dynamics if not practiced critically and authentically. Noddings argues that care in education holds great potential for nurturing students' well-being, fostering empathy, and establishing supportive relationships. She also highlights the importance of critically examining care practices to avoid inadvertently reinforcing unequal power dynamics or creating unhealthy dependencies between educators

and learners. She emphasises the need for care to be practiced genuinely and ethically to ensure that it promotes students' autonomy and empowerment. (Noddings, 1992)

Self-Regulation and Autonomy

The findings highlight the positive aspects of further education for students with AEN, including the promotion of independence, autonomy, self-declaration of disabilities, learner-centred pedagogies, and preparation for higher education. The support provided in FET may offer a false sense of security, as the conditions and support systems in higher education differ significantly.

The primary objective of the research was to examine the learners' perspectives on taking personal responsibility and advocating for themselves within the college setting. As part of the registration process, there is a straightforward tick box where individuals can indicate if they have additional needs. With the exception of Lydia, who does not have a formal diagnosis for AEN , all the participants expressed no concerns with the registration form and found the self-declaration process favourable.

Students transitioning to higher education need to take on a greater level of responsibility for their learning and well-being. They may need to proactively seek support, access resources, and navigate a larger and more complex system independently. Pádraig still found the structure of the college intimidating, the teacher student relationship for him was still the same as it was in school, he was very hesitant about asking for help but Juno could see the benefits "if they don't know that you need extra help, you might fall behind, and they wouldn't know why you're falling behind." I was interested to see how they felt about working out the best options for them within the course structure, previously this would have been done at IEP meetings or parent teacher meetings, without their involvement. Pedagogical approaches in further education differ from school and third level. Students encounter different teaching styles, assessments, and learning environments that require them to adapt and develop new strategies to succeed academically. Damien was very happy with the fact that college was more approachable than school. Juno was equally happy with the more relaxed nature of further education, she felt everyone was more approachable and openminded.

Progression

While FET can provide a nurturing and supportive environment with smaller class sizes, dedicated tutors, and a strong focus on student success, it is important to acknowledge the potential challenges that students may face when transitioning to higher education. Higher education often involves larger class sizes, increased academic rigor, and complex expectations for independent learning. The support structures and personalized attention that students may have experienced in FET might not be as prevalent or readily available at the university level. The false sense of freedom arises from the initial excitement and optimism of entering further or higher education, only to be confronted with the harsh reality that the familiar and vital support structures they relied upon are no longer readily accessible. This can be disheartening and demotivating, as individuals realize that their disability-related needs may not be fully understood or accommodated in this new context.

While FET can provide a valuable foundation and preparation for higher education, it is important to ensure that students are aware of the potential differences they may encounter. Equipping students with the necessary skills, resources, and support to navigate these challenges is crucial.

FET can offer significant support and preparation for students with AEN, it is essential to acknowledge the potential disparities between FET and the progression higher or third level education. By fostering a holistic and comprehensive approach to support, including transition programs, guidance, and resources, students can be better prepared to navigate the demands of university academics and maintain a realistic understanding of the challenges they may encounter. During the interviews, the candidates openly shared their aspirations for the future and discussed their plans for progression. With the exception of Pádraig and Christian, who were uncertain about their next steps, the remaining participants expressed their intentions to pursue higher education or enter the workforce. However, I could not overlook the limited options available to these two individuals, which I feel overshadowed the positive outcomes of the research. It became apparent to me that the colleges lacked the necessary resources and support to assist individuals with more complex needs in their transition to the next phase of their lives. I often find myself pondering about their future now that their time in FET has concluded. While they may have the option to enrol elsewhere, it is worth considering that progressing from a level five qualification to a level six might present

challenges for them. Despite the exceptional guidance we provide regarding educational transitions, I believe that there is a lack of adequate support for individuals seeking employment opportunities that cater to their unique requirements.

Policy in a micro context

The academic year 2022/23 saw policy changes implemented within the FET centre which have had positive effects. The introduction of a self-declaration of AEN on the registration form demonstrates a proactive approach to identifying and supporting students from the onset of their educational journey. By allowing students to self-declare their AEN, the policy change promotes transparency and encourages students to actively communicate their support requirements. This can lead to improved personalised support and accommodations tailored to their specific needs. Lydia said she "didn't mind [ticking the box] I've had to deal with a lot of things like that. What I noticed though, was that there was all these like, neurodivergences and stuff listed. And then there was just one box for physical disability, but it felt subconsciously overlooked".

The policy change also highlights the consideration of administrative efficiency and resource allocation. By streamlining the process for applying for support hours funding from SOLAS, the centre aims to reduce administrative burdens and ensure timely and appropriate allocation of resources to support students' needs. It is worth noting that the success of policy implementation and its impact on student experiences may vary across different contexts and institutions. However, based on the data from my research, the policy change within the micro context of the FET centre seems to be working adequately, with potential benefits for both students and administrative processes. Continued monitoring and evaluation of the policy's effectiveness, along with feedback from students and staff, can further inform future policy improvements and ensure ongoing support for students with AEN within the FET centre.

The application process for AEN tutor support hours for students is facilitated through SOLAS. However, there is a delay between the start of the academic year, when registrations are completed and retentions are secured, and the allocation of funding for AEN tutor support hours. This delay may result in a significant gap of time before the funding is allocated, potentially extending into the following year. Experienced members of the teaching staff are

using the paperwork including reports from MDTs, provided by students to assess whether they are likely to be successful in securing funding. This proactive approach allows them to identify students who may require additional support and attempt to implement it as soon as possible, even before the funding is officially allocated. While the initiative shown by the teaching staff is praiseworthy, the delay in funding allocation can still pose challenges for timely and consistent support for students. It may result in a period of uncertainty and potential gaps in support during the transition period between registration and funding allocation.

It would be beneficial for FET centres to explore potential improvements in the funding application process and the timeline for allocation. This could involve working closely with SOLAS to streamline procedures and expedite the assessment and allocation of funding to ensure that students receive the necessary support in a timely manner. Ongoing communication and collaboration between teaching staff, the care team, and SOLAS can help identify opportunities for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the funding allocation process, ensuring that students' support needs are met without significant delays.

Unexpected Results

From the outset I named my bias and have found the duality of this research difficult at times. It has been hard to draw a line between the parent/educator and the researcher and I have found on occasion, that I have been embroiled in a battle between both camps. I had a preconceived opinion that the students I interviewed would be vehemently critical of what seems like a lack of support in FE compared to what they were used to in school. However, it didn't take long for them to quash that notion. Each student interviewed described in one way or another a sense of autonomy when asked how they felt about the self-declaration of theirs. A concurrent theme was that they managed in the assignment based environment of FE better than the strict structure of school curriculum and homework. They also did not feel judged by their peers and the staff because of their differences. Most found the opportunity in college to become more independent and make friends at the same time. No one had an issue declaring their disability, something which I was completely wrong about in my predictions. I anticipated that they would chose anonymity over self-declaration of need. All presented with a level of maturity and self-awareness that I did not give them credit for. The students spoke

of the support systems they had in school, those with ASD had more supervision than others and worked well with an SNA.

I found the feedback from the two ASD students I interviewed alarming. Although they had a positive experience in Further Education, they had now reached the end of their educational journey, neither had employment prospects or further study lined up for after the course. Pádraig, in particular, was sad to leave the college which had been a constant in his life for the previous two years. Neither Pádraig nor Christian were overly concerned about the qualifications. They struggled at with the course content at level five. Both students had an SNA all through school to keep them on task and assist with their needs, I felt they would have achieved more if they had been placed at level three or four with options then to progress to level five.

Limitations & Areas for Further Learning

The aim of my research was to listen to the voices of the learners, this research has opened up so many questions for me, far too many questions to answer within the constraints of a one year M.Ed. I have concentrated on one small centre in Dublin, the experiences of the students are only of that one place, I would like to see if the experiences are similar in other centres.

The duality I mentioned before, leads me to query how parents feel about their children at this stage in their education, an option for further learning would be to speak to them and find out what it's like to almost cut the apron strings at this stage in their children's education career. Another possibility for me would be to speak to the management in the FET centres and those in ETB head offices. There have been some recent focus group sessions within the DDLETB with both learners and educators surrounding AEN and next steps in support. Currently no educational information transfers with the student to FET unlike from primary to secondary, there could be a possibility of introducing and educational passport or similar that goes with the student. However this raises many issues around the transference of information at the adult stage, are we taking away the opportunity for self-advocacy and replicating inequality and marginalisation? (Dulee-Kinsolving & Guerin, 2021) Another option for research would be to address how the educators feel taking on the support roles which multiple professionals had undertaken throughout these students educational journeys to date. From my observations as a newly qualified FET tutor it is plain to see that some

educators go over and above their job requirements when it comes to caring for their students, especially those with extra needs. There is always the adage that Adult Education comes with a certain amount of trauma, for some of these students their trauma was not only their disability but also poor previous experiences in the education sector.

I am fully aware that the research I conducted provides only a snapshot of a particular moment in time. If I were to re-interview the same candidates I spoke to in January, I firmly believe they would be in significantly different positions than they were at that time. The nature of a one-year Masters programme imposes time constraints on data collection and analysis. FET students experience a condensed academic year, with most classes nearing completion by the Easter holidays. Consequently, as this time of year approaches, tensions mount, and the imminent conclusion of their courses becomes evident. In addition, educators in the QQI sector face heightened stress during the months of March through May. Alongside the added pressures of preparing students for final assignment submissions and impending exams, teachers must handle administrative tasks such as organising previous assignments and marking sheets, preparing for internal verification, and ensuring readiness for external assessment. This environment engenders elevated levels of stress and anxiety throughout every college, which can be palpable, and students can feel the mounting pressure from various angles.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my research and interactions with learners in further education revealed a mixed picture of their experiences. Initially, many students exhibited positive responses to their newfound autonomy and the structure of further education, finding it to be a better fit for their needs compared to their previous school environment. They embraced the opportunity to take ownership of their learning and appreciated the independence that further education offered. However, as time progressed, it became increasingly apparent that some students were grappling with the absence of vital supports they had grown accustomed to in school. The lack of resource hours and the absence of a close collaboration with an SNA, left them ill-equipped and unprepared for assessments and organisational aspects of their education. These findings highlight the importance of striking a balance between autonomy and support in further education, ensuring that individuals with disabilities have the necessary resources and accommodations to thrive academically and personally. It calls for a

comprehensive approach that acknowledges the unique needs of each student, while fostering an inclusive and supportive environment that empowers them to succeed in their educational pursuits.

I shall conclude with the following quote from the EPSEN act, "It shall be the policy of the State to provide for the education of each person in accordance with his or her ability, and to ensure that the education system is inclusive and that the needs of the students, including those with disabilities or other SEN, are identified and provided for". (Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, 2004)

POSTSCRIPT

It's March in further ed, the busiest time of the year, and following a flood in my classroom I am relocated to the staff canteen to work whilst the carpet dries out. The staff room is a place to vent for teachers, but sometimes it is the place where the most sense is spoken in the whole school. This morning a number of educators, with decades more experience than me had a conversation about how so many students with AEN needs are struggling at this time of the year, and how their tutors are under immense pressure to get them over the line.

One particular class has a higher proportion of people on the autism spectrum than any others. Both tutors are awake at night worrying about their students, some of whom I interviewed as part of my research. These students highlighted very positive experiences in FET, however, their teachers would disagree. They appreciate that the learners have experienced a new found freedom from the surveillance of the classroom in secondary education, but that without those supports the pressure increases for both student and educator at this crucial time of the year.

It is my opinion, that some of these students, although they say they do not want an SNA, need the support of another person trained and dedicated to support them at critical times. Although the college provides one on one support for students who declare through registration that they need extra help, the limitations of the box ticking and the administration of the support fails the learners at the most crucial times of the year. The support they are used to is not there at this time of the year. Half the students I interviewed had access or were offered access to an SNA in secondary school. Depending on the severity of their needs, I feel SNA access for students is something that needs to be addressed in Further Education.

SNAs in Third level are called Personal Assistants and they can help those who have the requirement. There is an application process through DARE. (DARE, 2023) However this is something which is not available at Post leaving cert or Further / Adult Education level in our centre at least. Now we are starting to see those students who were part of the inclusion of SEN to mainstream, complete secondary school and now are attending further education. There is no official support system there for them. No interaction with their parents, no SNA,

only those educators who are going over and above their job requirements to provide support to ensure they can complete their modules.

There was also a discussion today of whether we need from a business/administrative point of view, offer these students the ability to participate in the courses over two years instead of trying to complete eight or nine modules in one year to achieve their certification. In some exceptional cases, there have been students who have divided the major award over two years, however this is still overloading some who do not have the capacity to work under pressure and deliver the number of assignment is required for each minor award. An example of this is the Communications Module 5N0690 which has nine assignments and along with Work Experience, requires a compulsory pass in order to pass the major award. It has been suggested that these students could participate in the full course over two years and deliver the material over the two years, i.e. split the nine assignments over the two years of that module and still participate in the classes for two years.

Interestingly enough, through this research I was asked to participate myself in a focus group of FET educators by the ETB I am employed by. The aim of the research is to identify gaps or needs within the sector for people with AEN, including those which I have highlighted above. Across the board, the dedication of teaching staff was highlighted due to the fact that there is not enough available for those in FE. A number of people mentioned that they felt people with AEN should skip FET altogether and try to get into Higher Education on an Access programme which are specifically designed to cater for learners with AEN. The will is there and the issues are being identified but it will be a long slow process. I am not without hope, however, and have offered to volunteer my time to discuss my research with the team.

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