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The impact of a universally designed, inclusive third level education programme for adults with intellectual disabilities in a Dublin college

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Introduction

The right to an inclusive education is explicitly stated in Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD 2016). The term *Inclusion* is significant, and it has replaced the preceding term *Integration*. Where integration may simply involve a student with a disability being placed in a mainstream setting, inclusion involves a focus on the experience of that student, removing barriers and supporting the student to participate in the educational process in the same way as their non-disabled peers*. Integrated education* in Ireland has been part of education policy since 1993 when a report recommended *'as much integration as is appropriate and feasible with as little segregation as is necessary'*. (Department of Education and Science 1993, p.22) At around the same time The Salamanca Statement (Unesco 1994) put *Inclusive education* on the international stage claiming that .... *"those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs"* (UNESCO 1994, p.viii). Ireland's policy has moved towards inclusion with many references to '*Inclusive education*' in the Education for People with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) This move towards inclusive education has been reflected in the allocation of increased resources (teaching hours and special needs assistants) to children with various disabilities in mainstream schools. In 2015/16 over 29,000 students with special educational needs were supported by Special Needs Assistants and almost 53,000 students received additional teaching supports within mainstream schools. (NCSE 2016, p.13) While many may argue that the supports remain insufficient, there is no doubt that the resources for *inclusive education* have increased significantly over the past three decades in school settings.

Students with Disabilities in third level education

Going to college is widely accepted in Irish society as a normal and desired path for adults to take post secondary school. An article in the Irish Times (O Brien 2017) indicates that Ireland has one of the highest proportion of school leavers going to college within the OECD, with over 60% of school leavers accessing a third level course in Universities or Institutes of Technology. Further students access QQI level 5 and 6 courses and many adults return to college and further education as mature students. Numerous international reports (Ma et al. 2016; Pew Research Centre, 2014; OECD 2017) indicate that college graduates have higher income, are less dependent on state support, have greater job satisfaction and higher levels of health.

The Department of Justice and Equality has noted that '*people with disabilities have poorer educational participation and outcomes than their peers, thereby reducing their economic prospects*' (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017, p.7). The National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 states that it will '*promote participation in third level education by persons with disabilities.*' (Department of Justice and Equality 2017, p.23). It is of note however, that out of 11 action points on education, only two of these explicitly relate to third level education.

Annual surveys since 1993/94 highlight a year on year increase in participation rates of students with disabilities, with most recent figures showing that 5.7% of all students have a disability. (AHEAD

2018, p.12) However, as intellectual disability is not included as a category in these surveys, there are no official records relating to third level students with intellectual disabilities. Neither do intellectual disability or general learning disability appear on the list used by the Higher Education Authority ((HEA) to determine eligibility for support. A review of disability support by the HEA (2017) points to the fact that General Learning Difficulty / Intellectual disability are not included due to '*an expectation that such students would be unlikely to satisfy the entry requirements in terms of points or other academic achievement for access to Higher Education'.* (Higher Education Authority 2017, p32) It appears therefore that Higher Education is not seen as a viable option for people with intellectual disabilities and that the ideal of inclusive education provision does not stretch to higher education. The Irish system is at variance with both the FAFSA scheme in the USA and the DSP scheme in Australia, where General Learning Difficulty is included as a category of disability eligible for support. (HEA 2017, p.72 p.76) Data from the USA in 2013 indicated that there were almost 200 programmes for people with intellectual disabilities in a range of higher education settings. (Papay & Griffin 2013, p110) Indeed in the USA, there has been government support for such programmes since 2008. (Vanbergeijk,E & Cavanagh,P 2015, p38)

Research carried out in Dublin by the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities into the transition of young people with intellectual disabilities from school, noted that their options and opportunities at third level are limited.

> *One of the challenges in Ireland is that although progress has been made in including students with disabilities in primary and second level schooling, there has been little progress at the third level for students with intellectual disabilities.* (O Brien et al. 2009, p 286)

Under New Directions, the national strategy on Day Service provision for people with intellectual disabilities in Ireland, one of the options to be made available is *'Support in accessing education and formal learning'*. (HSE 2012, p15) New Directions makes many references to supporting people to access mainstream third level education, however it remains unclear what support is being provided to enable people with intellectual disabilities to participate in mainstream third level education.

The National Intellectual Disability Database Report 2015 estimated that 13 people would require third level education upon leaving school. This accounts for only 1.7% of people with intellectual disabilities aged 16-19 who are in school (HRB 2016, p17). This relatively low figure may again indicate that third level education is not seen as an option for people with disabilities in Ireland.

Models for education programmes within Third Level institutions

Despite the lack of national policy in this area, numerous examples of programmes in individual Universities and Institutes of Technology have emerged in the last 10 -15 years. These programmes cater for adults with intellectual disabilities and in general have emerged on an ad-hoc basis across the various colleges. There appears to be a wide variation in the level of inclusive educational experiences on these programmes.

Noonan (2012) presents three models which have emerged to provide third level education for people with intellectual disabilities.

1. **Substantially separate model –** students take part in classes only with other students with intellectual disabilities and are often taught by staff who only work with students with intellectual disabilities. There are little or no opportunities for students to mix with students

without intellectual disabilities in social and other college settings. There is a separate base for students within the college campus where classes are run.

2. **Mixed / hybrid model –** students take part in classes with students without intellectual disabilities, but follow a separate curriculum, students have opportunities to mix with students without intellectual disabilities in social and other college settings. There is often a separate base for students on campus.

3. **Inclusive individual support model –** students attend classes in college along with the general student population. There is no separate curriculum or separate base on campus. Students access a range of individualised supports to assist them in pursuing the course, classes, programme of their choice within the college. These supports are driven by the student's vision and plans for their future. (Noonan 2012, p.110)

Impact of including people with intellectual disabilities in college programmes

Research has found evidence of positive outcomes for people with intellectual disabilities who attend inclusive third level programmes, including a *"stronger sense of self-esteem, increased confidence; defined work aspirations, improved employment and better friendships".* (McDonald et al. 1997 cited in O Brien et al. 2009, p.259) Research on the outcomes for participants of the Trinity programme indicated '*that inclusion within a university setting led the students to see themselves more alike than different to their peers*'. Participants also spoke about feeling more accepted, more competent and having stronger social networks. Indeed, the theme of friendship was highlighted frequently with participants talking about making friends with students with and without intellectual disabilities. (O Brien et al 2009, p.285)

However, as Noonan (2012, p.112) points out, the benefits of such a programme extend beyond the students with intellectual disabilities to faculty members, other students and other people. The outcomes for students without intellectual disabilities is not something which has been widely researched and there appears to be a gap in the literature in this area.

Learning Together Programme

The Learning Together Programme is a joint initiative between the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown and the Daughters of Charity Disability Support Services in Dublin 15. The programme commenced in 2009 and has an intake of 6 learners every two years on a QQI level 3 programme. One of the features of the programme is its inclusive nature. Students with intellectual disabilities participate in modules in Social Care, Horticulture and Sports Management courses. They attend tutorial classes and take a full and active part alongside their peers without disabilities. Within these tutorial classes, lecturers aim to deliver a universally designed learning experience, which is accessible to a wide range of learning styles. This often includes an element of experiential learning.

In this sense the Learning Together programme can be seen as a mixed hybrid model as described above. (Noonan 2012, p.110) As a lecturer in the Department of Humanities in ITB, I have had students with intellectual disabilities in my creative studies module for the past 7 years. In this time, I have noticed many social care students readily and naturally support their peers with intellectual disabilities, I have seen relationships develop between both sets of students and I have witnessed students with intellectual disabilities included in various social and extra-curricular college activities. When asked to document their most significant learning of the module, many social care students

cite their key learning as stemming from the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in their tutorial group.

Research

It was thought to be important to capture some of the experiences of the social care students and to document their thoughts and views about the impact of the Learning Together programme. It is not proposed to draw any conclusive findings from this piece of research but rather to open a space for students to talk about and explore their experiences. Taking a narrative approach, students tell their stories of being part of this inclusive learning experience, detailing their observations, their views and their opinions on what the programme has offered them in ITB.

Methods

To this end two focus groups were held with Social Care students. 16 students took part, 14 from first year and two from second year. It proved difficult to recruit 2nd and 3rd year students due to them being on placement off campus. The focus groups members cannot be taken to be representative of the entire student body in any of the three programmes as students were selected as a convenient sample (Lopez and Whitehead 2013, p.123) based on their availability and willingness to take part in the research. No students from either Horticulture or Sports Management took part in the research, again this related to their limited availability due to academic work pressure. Taking a semi-structured approach, students were asked to talk about their experiences in sharing their tutorial classes with students with intellectual disabilities. The discussion was allowed to flow with students contributing throughout the focus groups. The focus groups were recorded and later analysed to identify the emerging themes. Transcripts were read repeatedly to identify key concepts and themes. Using a General Inductive Approach (Thomas 2003) allowed meaning to flow from the raw data. Six main themes emerged which are discussed below, I also present information about the participants previous contact with people with intellectual disabilities. For confidentiality reasons the comments are not attributed to individual students, but are presented to highlight the discussion during the focus groups.

Thematic Analysis / Findings

6 main themes arose in the focus groups and these are discussed below. Information about participants' prior experience with people with disabilities is mentioned briefly.

Previous experiences with people with intellectual disabilities

There was a wide variety in how much prior contact students had had with people with intellectual disabilities. Some students had no little or no prior contact. Other students described meaningful and significant contact from their own personal life or from various work experience or employment. Two students spoke of their experiences as children or young people, of being aware of people with intellectual disabilities, but feeling that they were often segregated or kept away from society.

Theme 1: Students initial reaction upon learning that there were to be students with intellectual disabilities in their tutorial classes.

Students mentioned being surprised "*I wasn't expecting it", "I had never heard of anything like this before in college".* For one student who is a parent of a child with a disability it was an emotional

realisation "*I felt emotional that day, the thought that there (could be) something like this available for (my child) ...... It brought tears to my eyes and it was heart-warming*".

Many students spoke positively about realising that people with intellectual disabilities were going to be in their tutorial classes*. "I thought it was fantastic and a great experience", "I thought it was brilliant", "I saw it as an opportunity to have direct contact and to learn from it".*

Theme 2: Whether students should have information about the students with intellectual disabilities

While practice may vary from lecturer to lecturer, it is not common practice in ITB to discuss the programme or its participants with social care, horticulture or sports management students in advance. There was some discussion within the focus groups as to whether further information would be helpful. Some students suggested that knowing that students with intellectual disabilities were to be part of the tutorial groups would have helped them to welcome the students with intellectual disabilities into their groups. "*No one told us – we thought we were in the wrong room, or they were in the wrong room, so we just waited for the lecturer. It would have been better if we knew so we could welcome them.*"
Another student who spoke about subsequent difficulties with communication within her team said that information about the abilities and level of understanding of the student with intellectual disabilities on her team would have been helpful. *"Maybe we should get more information on their ability and their level so we know how far we can go with things, and how we can avoid a breakdown in communication."*
One student spoke about the rocking behaviour of one of the students with intellectual disabilities, saying that this behaviour was unusual to her and she was unsure how to react. This student suggested that knowing about this behaviour beforehand and getting some advice on how to react to it may have helped.

Other students however did not agree that any information on students with intellectual disabilities should be given. One student argued that information regarding students without disabilities would never be shared by a lecturer and that people with intellectual disabilities should be respected in the same way. "*I don't think we should be told anything, should you be warned that there were going to be travellers or Chinese people in your tutorial group? No!*"
More students agreed with this view point stating that confidentiality could not be broken.

Theme 3 – Changing attitude / perspective about people with intellectual disabilities

Students spoke about how their attitudes, views, ideas and perspectives on people with intellectual disabilities have been changing and developing. One student described being "*cautious and nervous*" at the beginning to now feeling "*confident and natural*" around people with intellectual disabilities. Another student made a similar point "*Normally I used to feel sorry or very sensitive towards people with disabilities, but after one semester of working with the Daughters of Charity group it makes me feel more comfortable, less sensitive less nervous around them.*" This view was echoed by another student who stated "*This gives you a different perspective, years ago I might have had a different sense- thinking about these unfortunate people. If I heard someone feeling sorry for them now I would go against that, I would share my experiences, I would explain how talented they are. Its only when you get involved with people directly, it changes your ideas*".

Other students spoke about being surprised by the ability of the students with intellectual disabilities and having old assumptions about disability challenged. One student assumed that a young person with Down Syndrome would not be able to read or write, in class when working in a small group the person with Down Syndrome said that he would do the writing for the group *"I suddenly realised that people with intellectual disabilities can read and write. It was like wow! - it was just strange, a really good realisation".* Students also spoke about being struck by the abilities of the adults with intellectual disabilities. "*They are all very well capable, that surprised me with some of them, I was struck by their intelligence".*

Students spoke about the disability becoming less apparent as they got to know their classmates with disabilities. "*Some of the disabilities were visible, like Down Syndrome, so that is what you see first, but after a while you stop seeing it." "A... was just A..., his disability didn't come into it."* Another student talked about stopping noticing behaviour linked to one student's disability. "*At the start I noticed the rocking and was a bit unnerved by it, but then I noticed that if I talked to him he rocked less, and after a while I stopped noticing it at all. You see less of the disability and more of the person".* It has been found previously (Keith,J, Benetto,L and Rogge,D 2015, p14) that meaningful, genuine and quality contact with people with disabilities has a positive effect on decreasing prejudice, and may improve students' attitudes towards peers with disabilities. (Schwab 2017, p160) (Smith & Forrester-Jones, 2014, p110)

Many students spoke about how their experiences in learning alongside people with intellectual disabilities has changed their perspectives on working in disability settings within social care. "*I've done a full 180-degree turn. I totally did not want to work in disability, it was not for me, but now since this class and building friendships with the group, I've ended up doing a placement in a disability service.…. being in class with the group was the start of the process, it made my path into my placement a lot easier".* Another student agreed with the sentiment here "*I agree, I didn't want to go into disability either, but this was the best semester we ever had".*

Theme 4 – Learning from the students with intellectual disabilities

A significant theme which emerged from the discussion is that students are learning from their classmates with intellectual disabilities. One student talked about how seeing the students with intellectual disabilities getting involved in activities with confidence spurred her on and encouraged her to be more confident herself. "*Their confidence, their lack of consideration of what other people might think of them, I think this gave us the opportunity to be free with our own self-esteem, so if you were a bit unsure or slightly lacking in self-confidence, it reminds you that we are all in it together. I've found that a couple of times,……. it took the emphasis off me just dancing or doing drama or whatever to it being a group of us"*
This point came up again later "*They are happy in themselves and they put themselves forward when we were doing drama where some people without disabilities would hold back."*

Another student spoke about being impressed by the students with intellectual disabilities' dreams for their futures. This student was inspired by the dreams and aspirations some of the group have and how they have worked to make these dreams a reality. "*I'm amazed by their dreams. B…. wanted to work in a creche and he has now realised that dream and has been doing work experience in a creche.*"

<u>*Theme 5 – Friendship and Barriers to friendship*</u>

All students agreed that they have become friends with their classmates with intellectual disabilities. *"Yes, they are absolutely my friends.", "I see them as friends, there really is no difference disability or not". "Absolutely we are 100% friends, you can see their personalities, you only get that through time and of course you build relationships".* This sense of people being equal regardless of disability, was also found by Schwantes and Rivera (2017).

However, there was a long discussion in both groups about barriers to continuing or developing friendships with the students with intellectual disabilities. Two students talked about their wishes to maintain contact and friendships with two of the group who live in a community residential service. They said they contacted the service to enquire about this, but they reported being asked how much of a commitment they could make, and why they only wanted contact once a month. They were also asked to undergo garda vetting by the organisation. "*They weren't happy to accept our college garda vetting, they told me to ring back in 3 weeks as the person dealing with it was going on holidays and at the time I was just about do my exams …… I didn't want to do a piece of work, I just wanted to meet a friend for lunch or the cinema every few weeks. It was all red tape, its like the organisation talks about inclusion and not being segregated but then they put up barriers*". There was an acknowledgement that organisations must follow policy and that people can be vulnerable, but there was a sense of frustration among students that this was putting their friendship with the group on a different footing than their friendship with any other students. "*No one would have anything to say if I was meeting X… (student without disability) for a coffee." "Within college we are all the same, it doesn't matter about disability, but outside college there is a greater challenge there, there is red tape."*

Other students spoke about how they have been invited by one of the group to his birthday party and they are unsure whether it is appropriate for them to go. "*I would love to go to celebrate his birthday with him, but you don't know if that is appropriate, would we be asked to leave? you don't know if you are doing right or wrong."*

One student spoke about the way friendships were formed between the students with and without intellectual disabilities. "*You would think you had to build the relationship with them (students with disabilities), but actually I found it was the other way around, they were coming forward to me and they were the ones building the relationships."*

Ironically several students mentioned that when student mentors were allocated to the students with intellectual disabilities, they became less likely to mingle and interact with the wider student group. "*Since the mentors were allocated they have been less included, in the canteen they are not mingling as much as they did"*

<u>*Theme 6 – Benefits for students without intellectual disabilities of being part of the programme*</u>

Students pointed out some benefits to the group of students with intellectual disabilities. These included being part of society, being included in a big diverse group, being independent, gaining work experience, growing in confidence.

Students also pointed to benefits they perceived for themselves from being part of the programme. Some of these benefits were career focused: "*It helps you to develop as a social care worker" "It is good to learn that this is what it will be like in the real world, it was a great way to learn what it would be like to work with people with intellectual disabilities"*

Other benefits included a greater understanding of the diversity among people with intellectual disabilities. "*It helps you see that everyone is different and there is no stereotypical person with intellectual disabilities*".

Other students simply mentioned enjoying the company of the students with intellectual disabilities. "*I'm glad they were in our tutorial group*", "*They are part of our group, I miss them when they are not in*" "*I love working with them and interacting with them and actually its good*" "*It was lovely to get to know them through creativity and it was really enjoyable*".

Two students spoke about the creative input of one of the students with intellectual disabilities into a drama production which lead to a sensitive powerful piece of drama. "*It was about refugees and a little boy's body had recently been found on a beach. C….. was directing the drama and was telling us what to do. She brought the emotion out and she took it really seriously*".

Two students mentioned how students with intellectual disabilities had reached out to them and had shown concern for their wellbeing, this highlighted the positive effect the students with intellectual disabilities were having on their peers.

"*I came in one day and I was really angry and not in the mood. D…. noticed and asked what's wrong? She noticed, and she put a smile on my face. No one else noticed; they were getting on with their day, but she noticed and took the time to ask if I was ok. It was lovely to meet someone who cared.*"

Another student spoke of a time she was on her own in the canteen. "*I am happy being on my own, but three of the group came in and sat with me, they didn't want me to be on my own and we had a great laugh*".

Discussion / Recommendations

Emerging findings from this research indicate that social care students describe an overwhelmingly positive experience when students with intellectual disabilities are included in their tutorial classes. Students considered it a privilege to learn in such a diverse group and it appears that this experience will be of benefit to them as they progress in their careers as social care practitioners.

This research clearly points to people with intellectual disabilities as an asset to the college community in ITB. When students describe learning from and being encouraged by their peers with intellectual disabilities, this tallies with my own experience of noting higher levels of attendance and participation from social care students when the group is of mixed ability. ITB should seek to further include people of all abilities both within the classroom setting and across campus. The current programme has potential to expand with greater numbers and into further programmes and learning experiences. With the correct support, individuals could be included in lectures, laboratories and other learning experiences. In this way, the programme could move towards an inclusive individual support model as described in this paper. (Noonan 2012: p110)

An important finding is the experiences of students facing difficulties in maintaining links with their friends with intellectual disabilities outside of college. The phenomena of protective measures, such as Garda vetting or other safeguarding procedures, actually serving as a possible barrier to inclusion is something which warrants further research. Safeguarding procedures should be underpinned by principles such as human rights, empowerment and person centeredness (HSE 2014), however it could be argued from the participants experiences, that the practice in some services could be hampering these principles in favour of safeguarding and protection. The question of whether an increased focus on safeguarding is leading to a paternalistic approach in some services, which then

limits individuals' choices and possibilities for inclusion, is a complex issue without a straightforward answer. This needs ongoing research and discussion.

Conclusion

The Learning Together Project in ITB is one of many programmes for adults with intellectual disabilities in a variety of Institute of Technology and University settings across Ireland. Numerous examples of such programmes also exist internationally. While much has been written about these programmes, the experiences of students without intellectual disabilities has received limited attention.

This paper has highlighted the experiences of a small group of Social Care students in ITB. The purpose of the research was to begin exploring some of their experiences and give students space to reflect on and talk about their experiences.

The students who took part in this research have had overwhelmingly positive experiences of being involved in this inclusive programme and although they identified some challenges, many of these challenges are not related to the college setting. Students have high hopes for the continuation and expansion of this and other programmes into the future with one student stating "*I would hope that this programme is just the initial pathway towards full inclusion for all individuals who chose third level education, I'd like to see more of this*".

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