
Achieving Social Inclusion for Students with Non-visible Disabilities: a case study of a student studying for ITE with an anxiety-related disorder in an online higher education institution

Introduction

Although Irish legislation and policies provide frameworks for inclusion, the number of students in college with a disability still lags behind those without a disability. To date there has been little research regarding the social inclusion of students with non-visible disabilities such as those with anxiety, agoraphobia or other mental health issues. This research will address this lacuna. This paper presents a case study of a young man (Mark - pseudonym) diagnosed with agoraphobia who dreamt of becoming a teacher but was unable to attend mainstream college because his disabling condition made it impossible for him to attend face-to-face lectures and classes. He had already tried and failed in two colleges because he had not been provided with reasonable accommodations before he applied to College A where he was accepted into a teacher education programme. This paper identifies the learning points for social inclusion in teacher education for students with non-visible disabilities.

Background

There are many types of supports available for students with physical and sensory disabilities. However, less obvious are the supports that are required for students identified as having nonvisible disabilities such as mental health issues. Research carried out in 27 HEIs estimated that 10.9% (n=1,054) of students with disabilities have a mental health difficulty (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability 2015). Given the recognised stigma attached to mental health issues, the real number of students with mental health difficulties is possibly much higher. The Irish Government requested the Central Statistics office conduct a National Disability Survey (NDS) following the 2006 Census of Population with the aim to discover the severity and impact of disability (Central Statistics Office 2008). People disclosing a psychological or emotional condition represented 34% of the overall population, 19.2% reported using an aid such as a support group, drop-in centre or helpline (Central Statistics Office 2008).

Methods

A case study approach utilising qualitative methods was taken (Sarantakos 2013) (Yin 1991). Three in-depth face-to-face interviews were carried out: one with Mark, the student in question, one with the College Registrar and one with the Director of School Partnerships. Two sets of documents were analysed, the College's Quality Assurance documents and the Teaching Practice Assignment Form. Ethical permission to conduct the research was granted by the College's Ethics Committee. The British Education Research Association guidelines on ethics (BERA 2011) were complied with and ensured that respondents gave informed consent and were not hurt or harmed in any way. Pseudonyms are used for the College and the student. The data was analysed and the findings are presented within a framework that corresponds to Lincoln and Guba's structure (1985 cited in Creswell, 1998 p.35). The first step is the identification of a problem (Creswell 1998).

The problem

The problem as stated by the student was that he could not sustain an Initial Teacher Education programme because of his disabling condition. Mark's dream was to be a teacher.

I've always wanted to be a teacher from a really young age. My grandfather was a teacher and he was a Principal of a technical school and then he taught in secondary school. I have an uncle who is also a teacher, also a Principal; and my three sisters are teachers as well, so there is a long tradition of teaching in the family.

He tried to become a teacher but it did not work out for him.

When I did my Leaving Cert, I got enough points [to be accepted to a Teacher Training College], I went to Dublin and I was really enjoying the course and I was delighted to be fulfilling my dream to qualify as a teacher. But unfortunately while I was there, I developed a panic disorder, which got worse and worse. Agoraphobia was diagnosed by my GP. When I explained the symptoms of chronic panic, feeling of extreme anxiety, nausea, getting violently sick, especially this was triggered by kind of crowded enclosed type areas; a feeling that I couldn't breathe, claustrophobia and hyper-ventilating. I was diagnosed with a chronic panic disorder, it would escalate out of control, I was finding it very difficult to sit through lectures; to sit on buses; to travel from home to college; and I was finding that the whole college experience was just too difficult for me. So after the first year, I took a year out to try and see could I sort out difficulties with my panic disorder. And I returned then but I only lasted a couple of weeks because I felt that it was just too much for me. I was just feeling sick all the time and dizzy and just having constant panic attacks.

He left the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) college and enrolled with an online college that provided general degrees rather than ITE. However, the Teaching Council, which governs the teaching profession in Ireland, decreed that in order for teachers to be registered they needed a recognised accredited teaching qualification (Irish Statute Book 2001). He then began investigating if he could apply for an ITE programme.

I looked into it and I emailed all the different programmes in relation to applying to do a HDip, but they all told me that, 100% attendance was vital and I didn't get much of a positive response, I felt that I got very little support or felt that they just thought I was being ridiculous. There was no way that I could qualify unless you met every single requirement with that. So that June, I found out that College A were now offering the HDip (Higher Diploma) in Education. I was so happy because I felt this is the one 'lifeline' or the one thing that can give answer to my prayers, if it worked. I didn't know if College A would be able to make their course any way accessible to someone like me who couldn't travel or suffered from panic attacks, some kind of agoraphobia.

The next steps

He telephoned the college and explained his predicament to the Admissions Officer, who put him straight through to the Registrar.

I remember ringing the College and I spoke to the Registrar; I remember that conversation with her, I remember just from the word go she was kind and caring and nice and told me that College A would see me like every other student and that they would let me do an interview, actually over the telephone, they would record it and that they would then base my acceptance on whether or not, just like everyone else, just if I was right for the course, that they wouldn't discriminate against my disability. They said, 'take one step at a time' and they would first of all see how I got on with the interview and then if I was successful we'd talk again.

The college's response

The Registrar describes what happened:

Now that was an instance where the student was very aware of the reality of his condition, and the need for the college to be able to meet his needs in order for him to succeed. He did declare it even in advance of applying. So he spoke to someone in the Admissions Office, they put him into direct contact with me. I had a conversation with him where he outlined what his condition was and how it presented itself and what he experienced as a result, and he also outlined how he attempted to undertake one of these programmes of study previously, and how that had impacted him because it was a traditional face-to-face provider and going into that physical location wasn't somewhere that he was familiar and comfortable with, created further anxieties for him. So there was no 100% commitment given and I basically outlined our stances as an institution, in terms of, wherever we can make reasonable accommodation we would.

The College Registrar described how the interview was conducted online:

Well it was straight forward - as an online college it was very obvious solution for us that we would use Skype; so it was felt that he would still be able to satisfy all the requirements in terms of providing his ID, and meeting the panel and engaging with the panel through video, but as much as an interview is a false environment anyway and can present challenges for anybody, there was no way that this particular applicant was going to ever be able to even get past that first hurdle if we didn't make those accommodations. So we discussed that as an option with him in mind that obviously I'd still need to discuss it with the panel and ensure that they were also comfortable with it.

The Director of School Placement also recalled Mark's enquiries, application and interview:

I received a phone-call from Admissions; they said they had somebody who couldn't come to interview because of this condition, for a 'special reason'. But he had a very fine application, I received a phone-call from the gentleman later on that day, and he just sounded so, ordinary, warm, but he said he could not come to an interview. So I asked him: 'Why did he want to become a teacher?' Then it all came out about the agoraphobia, and I was like, 'Well how do you manage?' and he said, 'Well actually I manage. I'm in a very nice school and I've held a teaching position for a number of years. Now it wouldn't have been a Department [of Education] recognised (qualification), however, he had practice at teaching, he was accepted into the school and very happy; he had his degree but he didn't have a teaching qualification.

College quality assurance guidance

The college staff were supported by existing QA guidelines. College A's position on the social inclusion of students is encoded in the quality assurance policy entitled, **Procedure for the Management of Students and Assuring the Quality of Student Support** in section 1.4 Learner support: Access and inclusion Policy. This section outlines the College's obligations and responsibilities towards students with disabilities:

College A adopts the AHEAD Charter for Inclusive Teaching and Learning (2009) and reflects this in quality assurance policies and procedures and the teaching, learning and assessment practices of the College. The College is committed to promoting access for people with disabilities and additional needs. The College supports and enables students with physical disabilities... special psychological needs and medical conditions that can have an impact on day-to-day activities, to participate in and successfully complete College programmes, as far as is reasonably practicable and within any constraints laid down by HETAC or relevant professional bodies.

The learning point for social inclusion here is that colleges need to be cognizant and explore a range of ways they may meet their legal obligation to provide reasonable accommodations at all stages of the journey into college, through enquiries, admissions, interviews and teaching practice context.

The teaching context

College A delivers web-based blended learning programmes for students in Initial Teacher Education. Although many of the lessons and tutorials are accessed online, students also attend onsite meetings and are also required to undertake three teaching placements as part of their teaching qualification. Mark did not have any problems or challenges with the teaching practice aspect of the programme. He recounts:

The teaching practice was the part of the course that I enjoyed most and I would have really prepared and really worked hard for that part. I just love teaching and I just get a buzz from it. I felt that throughout the course that I learned so much, even though I had been teaching and qualified for a number of years, in relation to the documentation, lesson plans, resources, I just learned so much. I got fantastic advice from lecturers and mentors and I know it really enhanced my teaching. And I think that the classroom situation is

kind of my own environment in that, and I will always feel extremely calm and I suppose in control in a classroom, so I felt that my condition definitely doesn't affect my professional capacity as a teacher or that. And I felt that if you know first-hand for yourself what it might be like to suffer from any type of disability; it definitely made me so much aware that there's so much going on in our students' lives; like outside the classroom, and even within it, you have to be so much more aware of and compassionate towards that; different students have different limits, different situations and health problems mean that they can't participate in classroom activities like other students.

His mastery at teaching was demonstrated by the feedback he received from the Teaching Practice Assessment Form which showed his work was of a high standard and that he was committed and dedicated to his work and the pupils. The Director of School Partnerships noted how Mark at excelled at teaching practice.

He topped the class in what we call School Experience of Professional Practice, we don't call it teaching practice because people are in the school all day so it's an entire experience and they're examined, while they're examined on their classroom teaching, they're also examined on, you know, their portfolio which includes how they participated within the school; but this man was heading to the top from early on.

The College Registrar also commented:

There is a requirement to undertake teaching practice and it's a specified period of time on the programme he was applying for; that wasn't an issue for him at all because he was already employed by a school that he was able to use. He had the full support of his school Principal for this programme. The references that came for him were extremely impressive, so there was no issue whatsoever with him being able to undertake his teaching practice

The programme also requires students to attend 'on-sites'; these are face-to-face teaching and learning sessions in a college setting. Some of these are subject-based and some of them are based in regional centres throughout the country. In this instance, the student was facilitated by ensuring that he could attend an onsite that was close to his home rather than having to go to a large city. The Registrar explained:

There was an educational centre close by that he was very comfortable with, familiar with visiting and would have had no issues with attending, and the idea was if we did use that education centre he would then be able to attend the majority of the on-sites. It worked out well because the majority of the on-sites he was able to attend because they were in the educational centre that he was familiar and comfortable with.

Recommendations

This paper identifies learning points for social inclusion of students with non-visible disabilities, in this case with agoraphobia, in a HEI that uses an online blended approach to teacher education. These include:

- ensuring admissions and faculty staff are aware of their responsibilities and can identify flexible options for students with disabilities which enable the student to demonstrate competence;
- liaising with placement providers to prepare for a diverse range of students entering ITE and agreeing principles assessing competence standards for these students, in this case ensuring that his teaching practice was conducted locally in a school that he was familiar with, to the selection of sessions in his region;
- quality assurance policies are in place to ensure that reasonable accommodations are available at each stage of the learning journey from the initial interview;
- providing inclusive teaching, for example, programme content involving accessing online pre-recorded lectures, contributing to online forums in each subject and participating in synchronous tutorials and webinars.

AHEAD has also identified research in the UK by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU, London, 2015) which recommends continuous professional development for placement staff, for example workshops with tutors, placements mentors and disability services to discuss the issues of competence and accommodations.

It suggested students may need direct support from disability services whilst on placements. This can be simply re-assurance that their needs are accepted. Where student placements are at a distance, Smart phones and Skype can assist in college and student staying in touch.

Evaluation, such as this case study, should be documented and made available, for example in course reviews, and student feedback can provide vital information on whether accommodations are effective.

Conclusion to the case study

When the final results for the programme were released, Mark had achieved the highest marks in his class but was not able to attend the graduation due to his anxiety issues. The College was in compliance with legislation and also followed a social model of disability in that the college changed the education environment to suit the needs of the student. As a result, this young man achieved his lifelong dream of being a teacher, got a permanent, pensionable job and is a great asset to the teaching profession because of his sensitivity to the issue of the social inclusion of students with special education needs in particular those students who may have mental health or anxiety issues.

Mark was unusual in that he already had considerably teaching experience as an unqualified teacher. Applicants to ITE with nonvisible disabilities will need open minded support in negotiating school placements.

The Teaching Council Ireland set out requirements for teacher registration and criteria and guidelines for programme providers (www.teachingcouncil.ie).

References

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Webinars on a range of subject areas are also available on the ECU website www.ecu.org.uk

Information on teacher registration and guidelines on school placements are available at www.teachingcouncil.ie



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